

Beyond Jeremiads: Signs of Cultural Revival, Circa 2025

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*C*hristianity is today being rejected because it is more demanding than people weakened by the sexual revolution's indiscipline want it to be. Yet living in outright opposition to religion—as both the Nietzschean radical Right and the Marcusean radical Left do—is not liberating people. It is making multitudes miserable and lonely. Their troubled voices do not rage in vain. They bear a message for the rest of society, whether they know it or not: They amount to primal screams for a world more ordered than many of today's people now know—including a world ordered to some of Christianity's essential principles, like mercy, community, and redemption.

Much of my work during the past 15 years has been aimed at trying to understand what is happening to our country beneath the surface of the news cycle and other distractions. Books including *Primal Screams* and *How the West Really Lost God* have explored questions such as “What’s causing secularization? What’s causing something obviously related to secularization—widespread family breakdown? Why are so many of today’s kids suffering so? Why are ancient religious moral teachings under attack, and what should be done about that?”¹ Necessary though this work has been, and continues to be, it enters into dark territory. One cannot tackle questions like those without also talking about cultural decline, familial collapse, and other signs of a civilization trending downward.

Yet it is no paradox to observe that decline and revival often go hand in hand. Social dissolution repeatedly gives rise by virtue of its very toll to reform and correction. That truth is not only comforting, but apt. To shut oneself off from national politics for a moment, and to focus on developments elsewhere around the country, is to encounter something welcome and unforeseen. In some unexpected corners of the culture, signals of moral progress are flashing at a steady rate—signals that will certainly guide America and Christianity into the future.

This essay examines six such signs in detail. To sound the inevitable caveat: The existence of these signs does not mean that Christian or conservative triumphalism is in order. Nor does their existence mean that today's re-paganization, as I named it seven years ago, will reverse in the lifetimes of anyone reading this.² Maybe it will not. Maybe man is indeed somewhere on the road to what Pope Benedict XVI famously predicted in 1969, a "smaller, holier Church."³ But even a smaller, holier Church—or, for that matter, a larger, holier Church—will have been sustained through its trials by *something*. That is what this paper attempts to discern: a reality that may seem elusive—the positive signs of religious vibrancy, and moral vibrancy, in this moment.

Sign One: The Rise of Social Conservatism

Begin with one such unexpected sign. Young people today may be more unchurched than their elders were. They may be more likely to call themselves socialists. But a significant number are also, on balance, more socially conservative than their parents' generations. This is a remarkable fact that demands more attention than it has yet received.

As noted in July 2024 in a fascinating piece in the *Wall Street Journal*, for example, voters under the age of 30 have been stalwart members of the Left since the late 1980s—but that uniformity is no more.⁴ Young men, in particular, are now leaning rightward, including on social issues. Among other surprises in the report, consider this one: The survey's men were almost *20 percentage points* more likely to oppose abortion than its women. Given that young men are often the instigators of abortion itself, this low regard that many apparently have for abortion is both unexpected and worth a moment's thought.

What does this mean? From a philosophical perspective, perhaps, one could argue that a reassertion of the primacy of natural law is afoot, or the triumph of inner conscience. After all, many of these young men are not picking up pro-life views in church; judging by the statistics on "nones,"

many of them are not even believers. But from a more practical perspective, something else also looks to be unfolding. At least some people appear to be learning from experience—including the experience of sonograms, and the demise of the perfidious, bad-law *Roe vs. Wade*, and perhaps even the reassertion of sanity that is *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*.⁵

De-Radicalization. Or consider this: A survey of Zoomers in 26 countries found support for same-sex marriage among them has been declining.⁶ No one in 2015, the year of *Obergefell vs. Hodges*, would have predicted that outcome.⁷ A sense seems to be growing among at least some younger Americans that the predominant *laissez-faire* consensus about sex is missing something. This is the generation that has had pornography at its fingertips since childhood. It is the generation that has grown up under rules that amount to nothing more than, “So what?” And yet many members of that generation now lean more toward social conservatism than their predecessors since the 1960s.

The same *Wall Street Journal* piece also reveals another surprise. Many young women are being radicalized in the opposite direction. Some 53 percent of them in the same survey favor legal abortion.⁸ And they also diverge dramatically from the young men on several other measures. Men are evenly divided about forgiving student loans. Women are overwhelmingly in favor of it. The women were more likely to favor what is called “gender fluidity.” (They are also, of course, more likely to be attending college, where intellectual viruses like gender theory escape from the ivory lab into the general population.)

To repeat, what is intriguing here is not the profile of the women. They are following the same path that the young have taken since the end of Ronald Reagan’s presidency—namely, the one that veers left. What is noteworthy, and in need of explanation, is that many young men are diverging from that journey. They are moving in a direction more congruent with Christian teaching, whether they recognize it as such, or not. To be sure, that same transformation sometimes takes a dark turn, like misogyny in the so-called manosphere and the adulation of toxic figures like Andrew Tate. But for those who would guide young men in a positive rather than destructive direction, it matters to know, first, what is driving that overall divergence.

The New Right. For as it turns out, the findings in the *Journal* essay are neither isolated nor boutique. They are one microcosm of a wider reality out there: Young men are tired of being told (to reverse Henry Higgins) that a man should be more like a woman. Much has been written, for example, about the spectrum of what is called the New Right. Yet no one has done definitive justice to one of its most noteworthy features.

The younger members of this movement are not only socially conservative, but they are also markedly more so than their libertarian-leaning Boomer elders.

The New-Rightish organization American Moment, for example, distills its mission into three pillars, one of which is “strong families.”⁹ The 2022 Statement of Principles of National Conservatism emphasizes the same key thought: “The traditional family is the source of society’s virtues.”¹⁰ It further states that stable families with children are “priorities of the highest order.” *The American Conservative* magazine, whose mission is advancing what it calls “Main Street conservatism,” likewise promotes “the flourishing of families and communities,” as its founding editorial put it in 2002. In fact, this observation can be taken a step further. The disparate factions of today’s political right differ on many points. But if they are united by anything, it is the conviction that *something* about the family has run badly amok, and that this systemic disorder now injures society at large. Such is true even on the neo-pagan, Nietzsche-leaning end of the New Right in the cult figure of Bronze Age Pervert, for example. He, too, indicts the establishment right, once more, for what he calls its “powerlessness when it comes to stopping the destruction of the family.”¹¹

Global Populism. These same themes echo across today’s populist resurgence, whose rank and file is, again, young men. And the sounds carry outside the United States. In Germany, one of the right-wing Alternative for Germany candidates, Maximilian Brah, is famous—or notorious, depending on one’s view—for having said this: “One in three young men in Germany has never had a girlfriend. Are you one of them?... Don’t watch porn, don’t vote green, go outside into the fresh air. Be confident. And above all don’t believe you need to be nice and soft.... Real men are patriots. That’s the way to find a girlfriend!”¹²

In Italy, President Giorgia Meloni regularly engages crowds with rhetoric about the importance of family and faith. Last year, she gave a speech in which she deplored what she called “a widespread cultural approach that is generally hostile to the family.”¹³ She also said, “our government has made the birthrate and the family a top priority.”¹⁴

In the United States, Vice President–elect J. D. Vance is one of several younger populists unafraid to tackle social issues that earlier generations of politicians have shunned, including the connection between fatherlessness and social dissolution. He also sees a relationship between declining marriage and birth rates and increased consumption of pornography. Vance has observed:

We know that at least one cause of this is that we have allowed, under the banner of libertarianism, pornography to seep even into our youngest minds through the channels of the internet.... [W]e made a political choice that the freedom to consume pornography was more important than the public goods, like marriage and family and happiness.... We can't ignore the fact that we made that choice and we shouldn't shy away from the fact that we can make new choices in the future.¹⁵

This list could go on. Of course, one could dismiss such rhetoric as political posturing. But the posturing is exactly the point. Today's successful populist politicians understand that there is an audience for acknowledging suppressed truths about manhood, womanhood, and family life. Wherever one finds today's populism, one also finds insistence about the need to protect the traditional family.

The Tipping Point. Why is this happening? To venture a theory, it may just be that the West has reached a tipping point in the personal and social chaos fomented from the 1960s onward. Perhaps a critical mass of young people, especially young men, have concluded from observation and experience that *some* kind of cultural restoration is needed.

Consider one more sign: the legions of young men creating traffic jams in one city after another to attend talks by Canadian psychologist and trend-setting phenomenon Jordan Peterson. His followers line up for messages they cannot find in today's secularist orthodoxy. This contrary movement signals something. Secularist triumph, woke triumph, anti-Christian triumph: *None of these outcomes is inevitable*. The claim to inevitability is being falsified before our eyes—even as evidence of social decline also accumulates.

Sign Two: Increasing Skepticism of the Sexual Revolution

Turning to a second, related sign of life: At least one other major feature of the post-1960s social status quo has changed, this one during the past decade alone. It is no longer forbidden to wonder aloud about the downside of the sexual revolution. To repeat: The sexual revolution is no longer a subject of social omerta. It is no longer exempt from public inspection. And much of that newfound inspection is ensuing from outside people of the Book.

This, too, is an amazing turn—including for those who have questioned the post-revolutionary disorder over the years, only to be met with silence or ridicule. This is one sign that I have been privileged to witness up close, as the following story shows.

Evidence Against Sexual Consumerism. In 2012, Ignatius Press published *Adam and Eve After the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution*.¹⁶ Its thesis was that contrary to the secularist, triumphalist view dominant since the 1960s, evidence has been mounting year by year, decade by decade, that the revolution has been a net loss. The material gains made by women in the paid marketplace, the book argued, have to be balanced against other, material consequences, like the ongoing disruption of families on a scale never seen before.

In a nutshell, the book presented evidence that sexual consumerism has complicated relations between the sexes more than any other force since Eve took the figurative apple; that the results are documented through the instruments ranging from social science to popular culture; and that the toll of the postrevolutionary era has fallen heaviest on the weakest of shoulders—from the unborn sacrificed in its name, to the children, women, and men scarred by it.

To say that this book disputed the going consensus is to understate. As expected, and as was gratifying, *Adam and Eve After the Pill* was discussed across religious and religious-friendly media. Also, as expected, it was roundly ignored in the secular press and nonreligious academia—despite the fact that its argument required no religious or theological assumptions, and despite an open appeal to all readers regardless of sectarian leanings. Back then, this silence came as no shock. “The *New York Times* will never review a book from a religious publishing house,” one knowledgeable friend counseled, adding that the book had been a career mistake.

A dozen years later, a dramatic turnaround unfolds. Today, new shoots of revisionist research are breaking through this same stony ground. What was once considered unsayable has become less so. Evidence considered explosive until just recently is now under examination in not one, but several quarters.

Challenging the Narrative. Within the ranks of moral traditionalists, books and essays have proliferated during the past decade that challenge the dominant secular narrative about sex. Of particular note was a landmark symposium held in Washington, DC, in 2018, co-sponsored by four Catholic organizations from around the country: the University of Notre Dame’s Center for Ethics and Culture; the Catholic Women’s Forum at the Ethics and Public Policy Center; the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.; and the Catholic Information Center. Titled “The #MeToo Moment: Second Thoughts on the Sexual Revolution,” it featured testimony by physicians, attorneys, therapists, and other scholars, led by thinkers like Mary Rice Hasson, Jennifer Roback Morse, and Helen Alvare.¹⁷

As Mary Rice Hasson summarized in an interview about the conference, “#MeToo created space for more honest—and long overdue—conversations, not only about sexual harassment but about related harms, and their common roots in the sexual revolution.” In addition to that conference, other powerful voices have also emerged to question today’s postrevolutionary chaos, including at conferences of National Conservatism and in the pages of influential journals such as *First Things*, to name just a few. Adding their voices to those noted earlier are legal scholar and Ethics and Public Policy Center fellow Erika Bachiochi; theologians Carl Trueman, Charles Camosy, and Deborah Savage; professor Scott Yenor; and religious journalists including Brandon Showalter and Jonathon Van Maren.

In another unexpected development, writers from outside religious orbits have lately produced skeptical analyses quite compatible with the main lines of argument in *Adam and Eve After the Pill*. Writers Mary Harrington (contributing editor at UnHerd); Christine Emba (author of *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation*); and Louise Perry (author of *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*) now make their skeptical cases to a wide audience, even, at times, in the pages of mainstream journals and magazines—platforms that, to repeat, were unavailable to questioners of the status quo just a decade ago.¹⁸

Houellebecq. To these examples may be added another indictment of the revolution’s legacy, and perhaps the most significant: the brilliant French novelist Michel Houellebecq, whose deadened, desperate postmodern men and women amount to poster children for the claim that the West took a disastrous turn on sex during the 20th century. Houellebecq may yet become to the sexual revolution what Charles Dickens was to the Industrial Revolution—a truth-teller whose fictions help to spark reform.

Pornography’s Harms. One more point about this second sign of life: A dozen years ago, a near-total omerta reigned about the harms of pornography. It was enforced by a coalition of libertines and libertarians that silenced and intimidated would-be critics. Yet today pornography is disparaged not only by religious conscientious objectors but a growing list of politicians, as mentioned, as well as celebrities and other witnesses. Fightthenewdrug.com, for instance, keeps a running list of Hollywood stars who have bravely taken a stand against smut—including and not limited to such headliners as Hugh Grant, Juliet Binoche, Chris Rock, Emma Thompson, and Terry Crews.¹⁹

If this is not the face of changing mores, nothing is.

Sign Three: Educational Entrepreneurship

A third sign of life was also practically non-existent until recently. We live amid an explosion of educational entrepreneurship as many parents of faith, and some parents of no faith, seek escape hatches from institutionalized schooling and its toxic dogmas.

Already steadily increasing from the 1990s onward, homeschooling rose sharply after the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2021, 5.4 percent of American students were being homeschooled.²⁰ Another model, also proliferating, is hybrid homeschooling, in which students spend part of the week at home and part of the week in a co-op with other homeschooled students. Then there is the K–12 classical education movement, operating under such rubrics as Great Hearts, Founders Academies, American Leadership, and Classical Academies. Between 2019 and 2023, 264 new classical schools took root.²¹ By 2024, according to the consulting group Arcadia, the annual growth rate for these schools was 4.8 percent, with an unknown number of students waiting in the wings for new schools to appear.²² Charter schools have also surged.

What is happening here? In a word, parents wised up. As it turned out, the 2020 lockdowns, and the consequent turn to screen schooling, delivered an unexpected benefit: They made it harder for mothers and fathers to ignore what their kids were being taught. And some of what they saw over their kids' shoulders repelled them. According to a January 2024 survey by the National School Choice Awareness Foundation, a whopping 72 percent of U.S. parents considered new schools for their children in the previous year.²³

That constitutes a lot of mothers and fathers seeking alternatives to the downsides of woke, secularist schooling—problems like indoctrination into the gnostic esoterica of gender studies programs, racist and anti-religious hostility bullying, and worse, by growing numbers of unacculturated children and teenagers. Moreover, given the quality gap between average public schools and the alternatives, the children and teenagers who are fortunate enough to opt out will be disproportionately represented in social and political leadership tomorrow.

Sign Four: A New Religious Solidarity

This brings us to a fourth sign of cultural renaissance that is easy to miss in an age when religious liberty cases continue to rise, and the country's most prestigious institutions remain captive to anti-religious zeal, gender delusion, and rising antisemitism. Despite and because of those powerful

currents, a counterculture is growing among Americans of faith, centered on a fascinating departure from religious history: Serious Catholics, Protestants, and Jews are in fellowship as never before.

The hostility toward the faithful entrenched in legacy institutions has unwittingly, but truly, produced a forcing crisis. And because of it, serious believers are cooperating with one another and expressing solidarity with one another in unprecedented ways.

The future of religious liberty in the United States is being written daily by this very coalition. I have seen it in action on too many occasions to count: on visits to flagship evangelical institutions like Houghton University and Roberts Wesleyan University in upstate New York; in conversations with tradition-minded American Episcopalians and African Anglicans across the years; at the National Religious Broadcasters Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2024; during time spent with Evangelicals and Catholics Together under the aegis of *First Things* magazine in New York; and in many podcasts, interviews, conversations, and e-mails exchanged with tradition-minded Protestants.

A Post-October 7 Solidarity. And not only Protestants. In October 2023, following the murders by Hamas in Israel, it was my privilege to be part of a conference at Franciscan University in Ohio that launched a new group, the Coalition of Catholics Against Antisemitism.²⁴ In a speech that day, I shared the following thoughts summarizing the reality behind that fourth sign of life:

Since October 7, 2023, many universities in the United States and elsewhere have disgraced themselves. Some students sided openly with the murder of innocents. Some administrators stayed mute out of cowardice. As is more visible with each passing day, it is not the atheists or agnostics of the world who can be counted on to “have the backs” of Jews (or others) needing aid and solidarity. Rather, it is other people of the Book.²⁵

Solidarity with one’s older brothers and sisters in faith is not a fast-track to affirmation. Solidarity may never win likes anywhere. But as the historian Norman Davies put it in his introduction to a book called, *The Righteous!*, “There are ‘righteous Poles,’ who are known to Yad Vashem, and others whose names are known only to God.”²⁶ It does not matter whether one’s good deeds are inscribed for all to see or whether they are known only to God: It only matters that people do them.²⁷

The Jewish people were, and are, on the front lines in the battle between those who seek to worship God and those who would defy his laws. Sometimes, that battle is literal. But for Christians, above all, understanding and standing by predecessors in faith is a moral have-to. To abandon them is to

engage in the most perverse self-hatred because so much of what aspiring, law-abiding Christians believe comes from Judaism and is shared by Jews. Inescapably, Jews, Catholics, and Protestants are divided by serious theological issues, in some cases existing for millennia. But it does not scant theology to point to the story of the Good Samaritan as the model of how Christians should behave toward Jews—or anyone else.

Sign Five: Recognizing Christianity's Cultural Role

A fifth sign of modern cultural revival is of a different order entirely. The problems of a secularizing, re-paganizing world are increasingly making themselves visible. And the more that Americans and other Westerners come to understand that re-paganization is the root cause of some of their most formidable social problems, the more do the odds of cultural reversal increase. The more believers convincingly tie these formidable problems to the recession of Christianity, the more their voices will be heard.

This is not just an observation, but a proposed strategy. Consider three examples of how Christianity has recently received incremental, but real and unexpected, attention.

1. **Dawkin's "Cultural Christianity."** In March, 2024, a short video featuring Richard Dawkins went viral.²⁸ Small wonder. In it, the Western world's alpha atheist confessed an affinity for at least some aspects of Christianity in a way that shocked followers and detractors alike. He said, "I feel at home in the Christian ethos. I count myself a cultural Christian.... It's a fundamentally decent religion. I like to live in a culturally Christian country." Dawkins went on to declare that given a choice between living under Islam and living under Christianity, he would choose Christianity any time.
2. **Murray's Catholic Revelation.** Also recently, another leading British intellectual, Douglas Murray, gave an interview that surprised in a different way. Murray, who describes himself as an "uncomfortable agnostic," noted that several serious people of his acquaintance, people he respected, had recently converted to Catholicism. He further noted that they were opting for the strictest forms of observance, including the Tridentine Mass, also known as the Traditional Latin Mass. Reflecting on some current conditions in the Church, he said, "It saddens me...that a religion with its inheritance and all it has to offer would offer the most watered-down version of itself."²⁹

3. **Lilla's Uneasiness.** Columbia University professor and leading liberal thinker Mark Lilla recently published an essay that contained this surprising admission: “In the past decade interest in Catholic ideas and practice has been growing among right-leaning intellectual elites, and it is not unusual to meet young conservatives at Ivy League institutions who have converted or renewed their faith since coming to college.”³⁰ His piece goes on to express his uneasiness about this very turn, and his fear that these students will be corrupted by nefarious integralists. Though his misgivings do not surprise, their deeper meaning might: Today, conversion and observance are no longer unheard-of on Ivy League campuses—and are in fact on the increase. This, too, cannot help but signal a strengthening of commitment and courage among the outnumbered, faithful young.

Here is a theory that only time will prove or disprove: Maybe, just maybe, these passing nods to Christianity by three prominent minds in the Anglosphere are ahead of their time. Maybe even non-believers are beginning to sense what believers have been saying all along: Christian decline is making the world worse.

After all, it is not merely quaint buildings, dinner blessings, and Latin prayers that will go missing as Christianity recedes from the West. Other goods are also at risk, including social goods. Consider two examples that might help believers to make this case: the love deficit and the baby bust.

A Love Deficit. First, the post-revolutionary, simultaneous weakening of both family and faith is producing atomized, socially maladjusted individuals on a scale that defies easy solution. In *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics*, I argue that the legacy of the sexual revolution, the single most formative revolution of modern lifetimes, can be summarized in a single word: *fewer*. Fewer brothers, sisters, fathers at home. Fewer cousins, aunts, uncles, and other extended family. More and more people are born into a post-revolutionary disorder whose signature is fewer people to love, to trust, to learn from, to connect with, whose society one can simply enjoy.

That love deficit is deepened by the unchurched of the young. When Christianity was robust in this country, it meant, among other things, that even if one's family was dysfunctional, one could still find refuge in religious community—one whose Founder taught that all are brothers and sisters in faith, united under a loving Father.

Many young people across the West no longer have access to either way of answering that eternal question: Who am I? Their earthly families are

volatile. Their place in a supernatural order is unknown to them. More and more young people do not have either a robust religious identity or a robust family identity. The decline of the churches and the shrinking of the family have seen to that. This widespread identity crisis—which is at bottom, to repeat, a love crisis—pushes many to seek ersatz community in the only way left to them, identity politics.

That is not only a personal problem, but a social problem. Why? Because identity politics says, in effect, that everyone is a victim. People cannot trust others except for victims like themselves. Identity politics declares peaceful coexistence with the wider community to be somehow unwanted, even impossible. It produces cancel culture.

All of these propositions are antithetical to a functioning society—or even a society that is pleasant to live in. In place of a Christian creed that tells people to love their enemies, forgive those who harm them, and welcome straying members back to the fold, identity politics says instead that its adherents should hate their oppressors, use power against those who harm them, and ruin the lives of those who have transgressed. Which of these creeds makes for a more amicable society, a less rancorous politics? The question answers itself. To repeat, *secularization and re-paganization are not net neutrals*. Both are undermining the ability of many Western people to live peaceably with their fellow citizens.

Consider another example of how the flight from God is making our world worse: the baby bust.

The Baby Bust. Furor descended on the airwaves for weeks during the recent election season over then-Senator J. D. Vance’s (R-OH) wisecrack from several years ago about “childless cat ladies.” A few tempered voices managed to point out that babies matter to some large outcomes important to society, like fiscal solvency and national security. That is true. But what is also true is something that got lost in that ideological shuffle. As Matt Mehan demonstrates elegantly in his paper, “The Higher Purpose of Children in American Society,” babies are good, period.³¹

In other words, beneath today’s passing arguments over rising sterility lies a metaphysical struggle between people who think creation is self-evidently good, and that it is good to participate in it—call them Christians and Jews—and people who think otherwise. It is an iron law of demography that religious people have larger families, and secular people have smaller ones, if they have families at all. A world in which the joy of babies and children is ever less present is a world diminished and crabbed, a mismatch for the loving side of human nature. But that is exactly the world that the secularist “no” to creation will usher in.

To weigh the case for hope against the case for ongoing decline, a few more facts from history should enter the ledger. One is that moral renaissance happens—and it happens in unexpected places and times.

The Second Great Awakening. An ongoing research interest of mine is the history of rural upstate New York, where I grew up. In the early 1800s, as today, it is a wildly beautiful, forbidding, largely empty stretch of the world. Whoever would have predicted, in the years before the “burnt-over district” was named, that several global religions would rise in tandem from the rocky ground around Rochester and the mostly uninhabited rolling hills of Western and Central New York? Yet this, among the most unlikely tracts of the New World, was where the Second Great Awakening was born—and with it quintessentially American reform movements, including abolitionism and suffragettism.

The Oxford Movement. Or consider another unlikely cultural reclamation that occurred in waves beginning in the late 1800s, continuing through the mid 1900s: the Oxford Movement. Led by artists and intellectuals, this religious and intellectual renaissance flourished on and off for decades. And in the category of “unlikeliest winner,” recall this all happened at Oxford, an institution that Catholics had for centuries been forbidden to attend.

Yet it was here that the fabled society known as the Inklings was born, the intellectual and social club home to C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and other greats.³² The ranks of converts during those years swelled enough to fill a large book, professor Joseph Pearce’s *Literary Converts*.³³ And if religious and literary renaissance were possible at Oxford following centuries of persecution and discrimination, what might that suggest? It suggests that something like another Oxford awakening lies in the future—maybe even in the Ivy League.

Sign Six: The Phoenix

A sixth sign of life in our midst is this. Illuminated by the very chaos of the day, something else is becoming more visible here and there across the culture: It is a phoenix, and its name is Vindication. In a way that is not widely understood yet, and someday will be, the turmoil common to today’s Western nations tells us something crucial. It amounts to implicit vindication of core teachings of peoples of the Book.

How? Because living without the Book, as more and more Western souls do, is diminishing people. It is crippling them. It is making them not only miserable, but small. Christianity and Judaism teach that the family is sacred, and that women are co-participants in the sacred act of creation.

The secularist creed says that family is optional at best, a hothouse of pathologies at worst, and that women are its victims. Christianity says that men are brothers and sisters on earth with unique eternal destinies in the cosmos, made in the image of nothing less than God. Secularism says that they are random collections of molecules, to be tolerated or disposed of however the strongest in society see fit—from killing in the womb to killing in the nursing home.

In this struggle between two visions of how to live, there is no contest about which is the more magnanimous, transcendent, and beautiful.

Conclusion

Many Christians are discouraged these days. Everyone knows the reasons why; many can recite them in their sleep. Perhaps the time has come to set aside jeremiads. Perhaps the time for recitation is over, and the time for joyous defiance has begun. As people of faith embark on that less familiar path, it is crucial to hold fast to a truth that sometimes slips away.

Contrary to the secularist creed, Christianity is not in decline because science has overruled it, or because people today are smarter than their more religious ancestors, or because its rules have been somehow superseded. It is not in decline because anything about its teachings and creed is wrong. No, Christianity today is being rejected in large part because it is more demanding than people weakened by the sexual revolution's indiscipline want it to be. And it is rejected not by the best and brightest, but by those who "think through their pants," as scholar (and impish wit) Scott Yenor has put it.³⁴

Living in outright opposition to religion, as both the Nietzschean radical Right and the Marcusean radical Left do, is not liberating people. It is instead tearing some individuals apart. It is making people miserable and lonely. Today's troubled voices do not rage in vain. They bear a message for the rest of us, whether they know it or not. They amount to primal screams for a world more ordered than many of today's people now know—a world ordered to some of Christianity's essential principles, like mercy, community, and redemption.

Someday, more souls to come will understand, and reject, today's spiritually impoverished status quo. Someday, another, less-quoted observation of Pope Benedict's may come to pass, something he noted in that same interview cited earlier: that "when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church."³⁵ When that happens, those people of the future will look backward for the signs

that preceded such unexpected renewal. And they will find, for the reasons enumerated, that some are already flashing in the here and now.

Mary Eberstadt is a Senior Research Fellow at the Faith and Reason Institute. This essay is adapted from a speech delivered to The Henkel Conference at Ascension Lutheran Church in Madison, Tennessee, in August 2024.

Endnotes

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