“Faith, Family & Secularization”

Good evening and thank you for that wonderful welcome. Thanks especially to Fr. Dailey, who first invited me here in the first place; to Lore McFadden who arranged all the details; to the clergy in whose presence it is always an honor to stand; and to the Kraft family, some of whose members I was privileged to meet earlier tonight.

It’s particularly apt to be talking about tonight’s themes in the context of this beautiful Salesian campus. St. Francis de Sales is the patron saint of journalists and writers, and having spent a few years in both those non-professions, I can say for sure that it’s hard to know who could need a patron saint more. In sharing this evening and offering you these thoughts tonight, I stand in the warm shadows of both that saint and the wonderfully admirable man, R. Wayne Kraft, in whose name tonight’s lecture is given. May they both guide and approve what follows.
I’d like to begin by explaining how it happened that I gave a few years of my life and thought over to the puzzle of secularization in Western societies. It’s often said that everyone lies about sex. I don’t know about that, but after a few years of research I do know that lots of people lie about the sexual revolution. And to explain why that is such an interesting and important subject, please allow me a few words of introduction. I’m here, first, as a wife and mother – my most important hat. There are a lot of young people in my life, teenagers and young adults included, and that domestic fact explains some of the inspiration for my writing. Over the years, listening to those children and their friends, it became more and more obvious that many young people today live in a disjointed world that they don’t understand, a world distorted, I would argue, by the myths of the sexual revolution. So I acted upon this insight as only a nerd would: I went to the library and internet, and started booking up.

My first book-length stab at examining the real sexual revolution was actually a work of fiction published in 2010 called The Loser Letters: A Comic Tale of Life, Death, and Atheism. It’s a satire that is in some ways the flip side of what I’m going to talk about tonight. It concerns a young woman named A.F. Christian as a character is very much an Every-girl for our time—a stand-in for so many young women (and young men) today who share the common experience of growing up with one set of moral teachings, abandoning those teachings when they arrive at college, and then spending years, often the rest of their lives, in what some experience as an existential wilderness. She apprehends clearly enough, to invoke one of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s most arresting images, that someone has indeed taken out a sponge and wiped away the horizon; but they don’t know what to do about it. Blinded by the sexual revolution, many other people in Western society don’t either.
Two years after that, I revisited those same issues in a work of nonfiction called Adam and Eve after the Pill. That book argued that the sexual revolution has had unexpected and at times catastrophic fallout in our world. It also argued that the secular realm and secular thinkers by and large ignore the varieties of empirical evidence for that claim. Little by little, in trying to map the ways in which the revolution has morally and intellectually and otherwise changed our world, I began to suspect that perhaps the deepest legacy of all had gone almost wholly unexplored in academic and other expert literature. That is the question of the revolution’s effect on secularization itself – in other words, whether there might be a causal connection between the global changes in sexual morality on the one hand, and the well-documented decline in Christianity in some important parts of the world on the other. That was how this current study, How the West Really Lost God, came about. It’s a book that tries to get past some of the academic footnotes on this subject, important though many of them are, to try and say something new and I hope significant about the canvas of the Western world today and how it got that way.

In defense of the book’s intellectual trespassing into various specialized fields, I offer this thought. The puzzle of secularization, i.e., how it is that societies that were once religious have become markedly less so, is one of the most interesting puzzles in the world. If there is such a thing as Western civilization -- and most people including everyone here tonight would say there is -- then its laws and customs and arts and literature have owed more to Judeo-Christianity than to any other single tradition for many hundreds of years. So what happened to change all that? How did significant swaths of the Western world go from being societies that widely feared God to societies that in some places now widely jeer him? This is a puzzle not only figuratively but literally. Many times during the years that went into this book, it felt as if the pieces of an enormous jigsaw symbolizing different trends of modernity were spread out on a table.
Industrialization, falling fertility, rationalism, feminism, atheism, new atheism, urbanization – where did each of these separate forces that are obviously part of the big picture of secularization really fit? And little by little, the conclusion emerged that the conventional storyline of secularization, though full of truth in some ways, had in other ways gotten something pretty big wrong. It was as if modernity had pressed together all the pieces of this great puzzle in a way that looked all right from a distance, but that a closer glance revealed to be forced, not the right fit.

Tonight I’d like to sketch briefly some of the reasons why the pieces of that puzzle don’t fit together the way modern sociology says they do. Then I’d like to explain what seems to have gone missing, and give evidence for that claim. And finally, I would like to say a few words about where hope for the future might lie – because there is not one but several reasons to believe that this world we’ve become used to, this world in which Christian thought and Christian practice is often sent to the back of the figurative bus, is not inevitable or permanent. At all. Let’s start at the beginning. So what’s wrong with conventional ways of explaining what some people call the death of God in the West? First, a few statistics illustrating what we’re talking about here. (fn. P. 219) Leaving aside the fine points of scholarly debate, numbers like these do go to show that the common impression is correct: significant parts of the Western world are indeed less religious, less observant and less practicing, than they used to be.

So what’s behind that large trend? Here’s where the argument starts to get interesting. Secularization has been understood by most great modern thinkers and for that matter by plenty of mediocre ones, as a linear process in which religion slowly but surely vanishes from the earth – or at least from its more sophisticated precincts. As people become more educated and more prosperous, the collective story goes; those same people come to find themselves both more
skeptical of religion’s premises and less needful of its ostensible consolations. Hence, somewhere in the long run — perhaps even the very long run; Friedrich Nietzsche himself predicted it would take “hundreds and hundreds” of years for the “news” to reach everyone — religion, or more specifically the Christianity once dominant on the European Continent, will die out.

Exactly which feature of modernity would put the final nail in the Diety’s coffin has been unclear, but a representative list would include technology, education, material progress, urbanization, science, feminism, and rationalism, among the usual suspects. Once again, this process has been supposed by many to be inexorable. Like lit candles on a birthday cake, it has been conjectured, the religious faithful, too, will sooner or later wink out one by one till no more are left. On inspection – and this is good news, at least for everyone here -- there are several logical problems with this commonly accepted idea, including insurmountable ones.

First, it does not describe, predict, or otherwise illuminate the historical reality of Christianity’s persistence. American sociologist of religion Rodney Stark, who is a contrarian in these matters, once opened a classic 1999 essay called “Secularization R.I.P” with an entertaining review of predictions of the demise of Christian faith dating back to 1660 and continuing on up to the present day –including but not limited to such secular soothsayers as Thomas Woolston, Frederick the Great, Thomas Jefferson, Auguste Comte, Freidrich Engels, A.E. Crawley, Sigmund Freud, anthropologist Anthony F.C. Wallace, sociologist Bryan Wilson, and other notables. As Stark wryly implies, all seem not to have grasped the ironic fact that their own obituaries would be written long before the rest of the world stopped believing in God. Plainly the Almighty has not expired on the timeline predicted by his would-be eulogists.
Second, and also important, neither has secularization been synonymous with material progress, as a great many other people have supposed. Consider the significant variables of social class and education. Christianity, in the minds of many sophisticated secular people, is Marx’s famous “opiate of the masses” — a consolation prize for the poor and backward. Everyone “knows” that better-off people have less use for God than poor people, and that smart and educated people have less use for religion, frankly, than do duller heads. Certainly that is a stereotype to which many people would assent -- one rather flagrantly displayed, for example, in a somewhat notorious piece in the Washington Post in 1993 that described the followers of leading American evangelicals as “largely poor, uneducated and easy to command.”

Everyone “knows” these things -- yet in actual fact few people, especially those who use stereotypes like these to explain the weakening of Western Christianity, seem to know the empirical truth. Once again, if the conventional account of secularization were sound -- if it correctly predicted who was religious, and why -- then we would reasonably expect that the poorer and less educated people are the more religious they would be. So the fact that these stereotypes are not correct, and that the opposite has been the case in some significant instances, would appear in and of itself to falsify conventional accounts of what happened to the Christian God.

Consider British historian Hugh McLeod’s painstaking work on historical London between the 1870s and 1914. As documented in his Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City, for example, 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.” Put differently, “the poorest districts thus tended to have the lowest rates of [Church] attendance, [and] those with large upper-middle-class and upper-class populations the highest.”
words -- and in contrast to the perhaps Dickensian image of the pious poor morally and otherwise outshining a debauched and irreligious upper class -- reality among the populace seems to have been the opposite in Victorian London. “Only a small proportion of working-class adults,” he observes, “attended the main Sunday church services” (Irish Catholics being the sole exception). British historian Callum G. Brown, another expert on the numbers, makes the same point about religiosity in the U.K. during those years: that contrary to common wisdom, “the working class was irreligious, and that the middle classes were the churchgoing bastions of civil morality.”

Much the same pattern can be found in the United States today – and it is one more pattern subversive of the idea that economic and intellectual sophistication are somehow the natural enemies of Christian faith, or that personal enlightenment and sophistication explain the current condition of Christian practice. A prominent book published in 2010 by sociologists Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell called American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, for example, similarly refutes the notion that religiosity in the United States is a lower-class thing. During the first half of the twentieth century, the authors observe, college-educated people participated more in churches than did those with less education. This pattern changed during the 1960s, which saw church attendance fall off most among the educated. But following that “shock” there emerged another pattern, according to which attendance tended again to rise faster among the educated than it did among the less educated (or depending on how one looks at it, the falloff in attendance then became more dramatic among the less educated than it was among those with college degrees). As Putnam and Campbell 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.”
Similarly, in research summarized in another wide-ranging recent book on American social class called Coming Apart: The State of White America, political scientist Charles Murray makes a similar point. The upper 20 percent of the American population, data from the General Social Survey show, are considerably more likely than the lower 30 percent to believe in God and to go to church. Among the working class, 61 percent – a clear majority – either say they do not go to church or believe in God, or both; among the upper class, it is 42 percent. “Despite the common belief that the white working class is the most religious group in white American society,” Murray summarizes, “the drift from religiosity was far greater in Fishtown [his imaginary working-class community] than in Belmont [a better-off suburb].” As a headline on msnbc.com once pithily summarized related work by American sociologists W. Bradford Wilcox and Andrew Cherlin, “Who is Going to Church? Not Who You Think.” So as Victorian England and the United States today go to show, Mammon alone does not necessarily drive out God.

All right, let’s try another common explanation. Is secularization then the inevitable result of increased rationality and enlightenment, as the new atheists and other theorists claim? Here again, the empirical fact that the well-educated Mormon, say, is more likely to be someone of faith would appear to confound that theory. And still another one: is secularization then the result of the world wars, as still others have supposed? If so, it is hard to see how countries with different experiences of those wars – neutral Switzerland, vanquished Germany, victorious Great Britain — should all lose their religions in tandem, let alone why countries untouched by the wars should follow suit. And on it goes. Modern sociology can tell us many things, but about the elemental question of why people stop going to church — or for that matter, why they start — the going theories have all come up short. Contrary to what secular soothsayers have believed, evidence suggests that secularization is not inevitable, and neither is it a linear process according
to which decline is an arrow pointing ever downward. Rather, and crucially, religion waxes and wanes in the world — strong one moment, weaker the next — for reasons that still demand to be understood.

Hence secularization remains to be explained – the more so because it also appears to be accelerating. Across Western Europe, as indicated earlier, church attendance has gone over a cliff during the last quarter century especially. Just a few months ago, a report made headline news across Britain, because it showed that self-professed Christians will be a minority of the population there even sooner than supposed — in fact, within the decade. Nor, contrary to what some believe, is this just a Protestant thing. Something like 15 percent of the population of “Catholic” Venice attends Mass every Sunday — which is particularly emblematic since Catholics are taught that missing it for any but the gravest of reasons is a mortal sin. “Catholic” Spain doesn’t measure up much better. On it goes across the Continent and into Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and more — including the United States, where a steady rise in “none of the above” has been documented, especially among younger Americans. And beyond just showing up — or not — there are other measures of secularization to consider too: the commercial success of the new atheism, the growth in public animosity toward Christianity in many parts of the West, changing legal norms, and other examples touched on in the book.

So if the conventional accounts have been wrong about what’s driving this movement away from the churches – money, education, personal enlightenment – why are the chapels and cathedrals of Europe as empty as they are? Why do increasing numbers of young people in the West identify themselves as “none of the above”? What is the real causal force turning a civilization that once widely feared God into a civilization that in some places now widely jeers him? What really happened? The answer, I believe, has to do with a variable so seemingly
humble as to have been overlooked by the titans of sociology no less than by their many
descendants. That variable is the human family – more specifically, the relationship between the
health of the family and the health of Christianity. To study the historical timeline 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. Titans of sociology such as Emile Durkheim
and Max Weber understood in their own ways what most thinkers today, including the new
atheists, do not – namely, why religion might, from a secular perspective, exist in the first place.
But neither they nor their contemporary heirs gave satisfactory attention to this other question:
what causes it to come and go? In all likelihood, most of them did not believe it could wax as
well as wane. Yet the evidence shows that Christianity has done just that.

To study the timeline, for example, is to see that the years of postwar religiosity overlay
perfectly with another phenomenon of those years that was much-studied in the years since: the
Baby Boom, which in turn was preceded by a boom in marriage. Across the Western world, and
again, including the war was followed by an increase in marriage and babies. Is it not just
common sense to think that the Baby Boom and the religious boom didn’t just go hand in hand,
but fueled on another– indeed, that each trend powered and reinforced the other in a way highly
suggestive of this overlooked aspect of what makes Christianity tick? Consider once again the
remarkable vibrancy of Christian practice across the West in the years following World War II –
the religious boomlet much remarked upon by sociologists of the time, and still within living
memory of some Western people today. That boomlet was 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. So what explains it?
So what I am proposing is the idea is that something about families (and in all likelihood, more than one “something”) increases the likelihood that people will go to church and believe in God. And as the book argues at greater length, this is so for all sorts of reasons. One, 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. No wonder so many seek a community to help them with it. As a Baptist pastor said to me recently, almost every new person who enters his pews is a mom or dad with a baby in arms. In this prosaic way, as in others, the creation of a family literally drives some people to church – and conversely, what has not been so well studied but is obviously also true, the lack of a family can be assumed to have the opposite effect. There’s another way, less prosaic, in which becoming a mother or father appears to have an effect on religiosity. The very experience of birth, of simply being mothers and fathers, transports many people into a religious frame of mind because the primal bond between parent and child is for most people the most powerful they will ever experience. Its unique force is reflected in some of the masterpieces of human history, not to put too fine a point on things. That’s why King Lear is nearly universally recognized as Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy, whereas, say, Romeo and Juliet for all its pathos is not – because the predeceasing of Lear by daughter Cordelia represents the worst tragedy life can hand a human being, at least as far as the mothers and fathers are concerned. In these ways as in others, one can argue, communal life within the family might incline people toward religion generally, and specifically toward Christianity.

We do know from social science that people who are married are more likely to go to church than not, and that people who are married with children – especially married men – are far more likely to be found in church than single people. My point is to connect those dots to
explain why these trends don’t appear to be mere coincidences. Now let’s consider an example from the converse end: What’s the most secular territory on Western earth today? Scandinavia. Who pioneered the postwar unmarried Western family and its close ally, the welfare state (whose arguably critical role in secularization is also part of this picture)? Scandinavia. What is arguably the most atomized place in the Western world today, as measured by, say, the number of people who don’t live in a family at all? Scandinavia again. Almost half of Swedish households are now singletons, for instance, and in Norway it’s something like 40 percent. The book argues these things are related — that family is a driver of faith, not just vice versa — and enumerates the reasons why this might be so. That’s just one example of what I dub the “double helix” of family and faith at work. What’s happened in the Scandinavian family is also affecting the Scandinavian churches. The causal relationship isn’t only the other way around. Each institution needs the other to reproduce. Looking at matters this way makes the “puzzle” of secularization less of a puzzle — and also casts doubt on the going secular notion that the fall-off in religious observance is just a matter of people progressively coming to their senses about the God racket. That caricature is what many secular people believe, but it’s not what the record shows.

There is also the potent fact that can only be mentioned in passing here but that is also obviously part of this picture. Christianity as a religion is itself intrinsically familial, meaning that it both privileges the family and tells its own story via family metaphors time and again. This is a religion that begins, after all, with a baby and a Holy Family – a mother who suborns herself to the child completely and a loving, adoptive father. How could a story like that NOT cause confusion in a time of fractured and atomized families like our own? How can you even explain a concept like God the benevolent father to a teenager who’s never known such a figure?
That’s just one example among others available of how the way many of us live today makes the Christian religious story seem more incoherent or remote than it did for many centuries before. The decline of Christianity in the West, in sum, is not incidental to the change in Western family patterns. The two are joined at the root and entwined there in more ways than one. But the bottom line is that conventional thinking on the subject has gotten rather a big thing wrong: there is nothing inexorable about Christian decline after all. Family, like faith, fluctuates throughout the historical timeline, and the real end to either institution has yet to be written.

And that is just one reason to believe that the future is not foreordained the way secular historicists have suggested. Here’s another. Unseen by most secular eyes, we live in a time of extraordinary religious revival. Religious campuses like this one were probably fine, insulated one assumes at least somewhat from the fallout of the sixties and seventies and eighties. But out there on the secular quads during those years, in many places and in all the most supposedly sophisticated places, Christianity was barely spoken of at all -- unless to deride it. Yet today, in a way that no reporter or researcher has yet done justice to, the situation on American campuses across the country is astonishingly and invigoratingly different. On the Protestant side, for example, organizations like the Christian Union and Intervarsity and others now have active ministries in many places where once they had barely a foothold. Similarly, the Catholic group FOCUS, Fellowship of Catholic University Students, has grown in just ten or so years to a dynamic presence on 70 campuses across the country -- including almost every campus in the Ivy League. Then there are interdenominational groups like the Anscombe Society at Princeton, or the increasingly important Love and Fidelity network, which has also grown to bring students from all over the country to its annual conferences. Nobody, repeat nobody, would ever have thought collegiate revival possible on this kind of scale, even a couple of decades ago. And all of
this spiritual flourishing, remember, is just on the campuses. It has counterparts in
interdenominational efforts of all kinds that are far too numerous to count.

From the national level on down, Protestants and Catholics and Mormons and others are
working together as people of faith on various fronts of mutual concern. The same aggressive
secularism that is having the dark effect of sidelining or discriminating against people of faith
has also ignited the unexpected spark that is now growing into a fire warming all of them with a
unity they haven’t known before. The result is that they make common cause in a way hitherto
unimaginable.

Once again, this isn’t the kind of religious news that makes headlines. But it is more enduring
than headlines, and it will re-shape the world your students enter as Catholic men and women.

A third and final source of light in what many people today spy as religious darkness is
this: nothing more or less than what might be called Christianity’s secret weapon, or the simple
power demonstrated across history of the faith itself. For two millennia, after all, there’s been no
shortage of converts, martyrs, and other witnesses who embrace the faith for exactly the reason
that so many today despise it: exactly because it is believed to be the one force on earth
containing a truth that stands against untruth from one age to the next. In his classic work A
History of Christianity, first published in 1953, the great Yale historian Kenneth Scott Latourette
pondered a genuine conundrum concerning the origins of Western civilization. He asks this
question: “How shall we account for the fact that, beginning as what to the casual observer must
have appeared a small and obscure sect of Judaism, before its first five centuries were out had
become the faith of the Roman state and of the vast majority of the population of that realm and
had spread eastward as far as Central Asia and probably India and Ceylon and westward into far
away Ireland?”
Of course there’s no single answer to all that. But this master historian himself cites Christianity’s surprisingly strong combination of flexibility and inclusivity on the one hand and “uncompromising adherence to its basic convictions” on the other. “In striking contrast with the easy-going syncretism” of the time, he emphasizes, “Christianity was adamant on what it regarded as basic principles.” Ironically, therefore, at least from the point of view of today, what many modern people take to be the biggest weakness of Christianity – its insistence on what can be a tough and challenging personal moral creed -- proved early on to be perhaps its greatest strength. This is a point made elsewhere by Baylor University sociologist Rodney Stark. He has put these same pieces together in his own explanation of how Christianity grew from a small sect to a world religion— because, he argues, Christianity’s prizing of marriage and its banning of infanticide and abortion all contributed to a demographic advantage for believers. The faith’s tough creed has bolstered and strengthened families; and families in turn appear to have been bolstered by faith.

What was true as Christianity took the Greco-Roman world by storm remains true today. The more an age forthrightly rejects the Christian code, the more does the forceful insistence that there is a right and wrong exert a gravitational pull all its own, with or without the demographic advantages of living according to the law. That power has been one experienced by converts from St. Paul onward, to many millions more. And as such, it’s the biggest and warmest of several sources of light in our times -- especially for Christians, including and especially those of you here at DeSales University. However conscious you may be of it – or not – what you do here every day amounts already to studying and thinking and working your way to brighter days ahead for all of us.
1 Hugh McLeod, ibid., p. 28.
1 Brown, The Death of Christian Britain, p. 149.