Why at the Ethics & Public Policy Center?

Mary Eberstadt:

Ed Whelan and George Weigel, and Michael Cromartie, and just about everybody else here has been a friend since time immemorial. I don't want to think how far back. So in a way, it just seemed logical that I would end up here sooner or later, and I'm very happy to have them as colleagues. I think my work is much improved by being able to bounce it off people like that.

Why from a professional point of view?

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, I think most of the people here share my general intellectual interests and general point of view, which is not an ideological point of view, but a point of view that's biased toward conservatism, small-c, that has a certain respect for the traditions of the generations before us, and a certain humility in the face of Western civilization. And above all, an understanding of what Judeo-Christianity has bequeathed to the world, which is a legacy that in different ways, I think, the scholars here are interested in protecting, defending, and putting out there.

Why I Turned Right, Home Alone America, The Loser Letters, Adam and Eve After the Pill

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, why I turned right was an anthology. It was sort of like giving a dinner party really where I had a dozen people talk about themselves and their political journeys. And in each case, these were people who had moved from left to right, including people who are pretty-well known authors, P.J. O'Rourke, Stanley Kurtz, other people whose names would be familiar to baby boom conservatives especially.

Mary Eberstadt:

And I was interested in that because I've always been fascinated by the question of why people believe what they believe. And this is one of the themes that unites my otherwise disjointed seeming work. My first book was called Home Alone America. And it was about what's happening with kids in America as a result of what are called family changes, which is a sort of umbrella term for the way we live now. It's an umbrella term for what has happened to the family after the sexual revolution.

Mary Eberstadt:

And the argument of that book is that the burdens of the way we live now are falling heavily on the most vulnerable shoulders. So there's a chapter in the book on childhood health problems that didn't use to exist that I trace to the parentless home. There's a chapter on popular music where I sit down and listen to things like Eminem and the kinds of things that most parents don't want to listen to. But what I take to that is look, look what they're saying. They're talking about coming from dysfunctional places. And that's nowhere as true as it is of Eminem the biggest rap rock star of the past 20 years, 15 years anyway.

Mary Eberstadt:

So I try to get under the skin of some of that stuff and see what kids are saying about themselves. This same theme that we are not treating well the most vulnerable among us was also the theme of my only

work of published fiction, a book called The Loser Letters: A Comic Tale of Life, Death, and Atheism. And in that book, I try to go at these same themes from a different direction by getting into the head of a fictional character, a woman in her mid-20s who is in rehab. And as she tells her story, we realize that what's brought her to rehab is a series of events that are really common to people in the years after the sexual revolution.

Mary Eberstadt:

So I can't say much more without giving her story away and it is a story of fiction, it's not didactic it doesn't beat people over the head. But in that case, I was trying to explore some of these same themes from a fictional point of view hopefully to reach other people than the people my non-fiction tends to reach. I hope it was a modestly successful experiment because it's a book that teenagers and people in their 20s seem especially interested in, and I'm grateful for that.

Mary Eberstadt:

The next book, Adam and Eve After the Pill is a look at the fall of the sexual revolution. And it's a countercultural book as you might expect from the title, because it marches through the secular empirical evidence of what's happened to society in the years since the pill was approved. 50-plus years ago, we had this momentous thing happen in our world. And I think everybody who's candid looking at the results whether they think is a great thing or a bad thing would agree that this is one of the most seminal events in human history.

Mary Eberstadt:

So what I try to do in that book is to say, "Okay, what is the result? What's going on with kids? What's going on with men what's on with women?" And again, I think the case I make is a contrarian case, but it's one that's made with strictly empirical evidence. And this is something that I really would like to stress in all my work. And I'm not a bias-less observer. None of us are. We all bring our things to the table,

Mary Eberstadt:

But in all of my work I use evidence, most of it amassed by perfectly secular people. I use empirical evidence and data, and I don't go near theology because that's not my area. What interests me is the way that secular evidence affirms some pretty unpopular things that the churches have been saying for a long time. And so that's one way of looking at what weaves my work together. I realize it can look pretty random as the kids like to say if you just look at the book titles, but there are certain themes that are consistent in there.

Why did Christianity thrive in the West? Rodney Stark and Kenneth Latourette

Mary Eberstadt:

Yes, Rodney Stark. Rodney Stark, wonderfully entertaining writer as well as wonderful scholar, makes the case that Christianity thrived, despite all odds against it in the ancient world, because it just did things better. It was just a better organization of human beings. It played to their talents more. And I think there's a lot to be said for that argument. And without pretending to be a historian, I can tell you that Rodney Stark's not the only historian to have made it.

Mary Eberstadt:

I like to quote from a great historian, late historian from Yale, named Kenneth Latourette, who makes a similar point. Part of what protected Christianity, in a way that other religious sects back in the late Roman Empire were not protected, was that it had a way of protecting its own people. And that was one thing that lent it strength. It's emphasis on the family, on how we are all brothers and sisters, including figurative brothers and sisters. We're supposed to take care of one another.

Mary Eberstadt:

Again, that sacrificial message, that you get in Christianity, really helped the fledgling religion. Another thing that helped, I think Rodney Stark would agree with this too, is the history of martyrdom. When people outside the church looked and saw what people inside the church would put up with to call themselves Christians, it was unbelievable. And it still is unbelievable, if you think about the penalties for being Christian, not where we are in the comfortable advanced West, but elsewhere in the world; there have been more Christian martyrs in the last hundred years than in all the centuries preceding them.

Mary Eberstadt:

And there are plenty of places today where Christians are persecuted. So I think, throughout history, as Rodney Stark and Kenneth Latourette would both say, people looking at the examples of those martyrs have said, "Hey, what is it about this religion that exerts such a pull?" And that's the sort of deep thing that plays into religious belief that the new atheists and radical secularists can't make any sense of. It's just not even on their radar screen. But it's part of why they don't understand Christianity and why it is still a potent force, even in a secularizing world.

How the West Really Lost God

Mary Eberstadt:

In the beginning of the book How the West Really Lost God, I talk about what a mental obsession this whole question of secularization became. And that was how I experienced it for several years. I had been to Europe, I had seen some of the great cathedrals there. I had also seen the modern empty churches. And the whole question of how societies grounded in Western civilization came to dispense with Christianity or sideline Christianity, I think is and was one of the most interesting questions in the world. And that's what led to my writing How the West Really Lost God. It was a personal intellectual journey. It was a quest that I was on. Over the years I amassed evidence this way and that way. I went systematically through the explanations for secularization in Western society. And little by little, I came to conclude that something was missing from the picture and that was how that book came into being, it was a long process.

HTWRLG's The Double Helix: Family and Church

Mary Eberstadt:

In the book I played with and discarded various images for what was really going on in the relationship between religion and the family. And the one I finally came up with, or rather plagiarized was the image of the double helix, the double helix of DNA that Watson and Crick discovered.

Mary Eberstadt:

Now in borrowing, plagiarizing that image, I don't pretend to know anything about science. All I know about the double helix is this, it's two spirals joined by rods and each spiral needs the other spiral to reproduce. One side is only as strong as the other. And that's what I get into in applying this to the relationship between the church and the family.

Mary Eberstadt:

Because if you look at the periods of history where religion has been strong, and I can give an example of that, that's actually in the lifetime of some people hearing these words, you see that this is a time when the family is strong. And what I have in mind is the great period of religious revival that happened after World War II. Most experts did not see that coming. Nobody expected that from the ashes of World War II, there would arise this phoenix of religious vibrancy, but this happened Doug.

Mary Eberstadt:

It happened in the United States, but not only in the United States, it happened in places that are very secular today, in Australia, in Western Europe and places like Denmark and Canada, there was a religious revival from 1945 up until the early 1960s. And in the book I cite various historians who can give the numbers on all of this stuff. So my point in raising that is okay, there was a big revival but what else was going on during those same years?

Mary Eberstadt:

A much more studied phenomenon, the baby boom. You didn't have religious revival taking place in a vacuum. You had simultaneously a marriage boom and a baby boom in all of these same societies. So to me, this is a very powerful example of the point of the book, which is that there are things about living in families that encourage people to go to church, to be religious, and to bring their children to those institutions.

Mary Eberstadt:

There are things about living in families that incline people toward religiosity. And we can talk about those specific mechanisms if you like, but to me the baby boom, an era of family boom and religious boom side by side is proof that the double helix really exists.

Family and Religion

Mary Eberstadt:

Yes, that goes to the question of what is it about living in families that inclines people toward religiosity. And I think there's not one mechanism, but several, and we'll start with a very basic one, having a baby. Now, this is a very ordinary experience in the sense that many of us are fortunate enough to have it. But if you were to ask most people, what was the most important thing that ever happened to them? Most people who have had children would say it was having a baby. And this translates for many people into the idea that there's a whole realm out there, that I'm suddenly connected to, whether you want to call it a cosmic realm, a religious realm, many people experience birth as a religious event. And we see this ratified again in the social science statistics, which I cite in the book and which I like very much because they bear this point out in spades.

Mary Eberstadt:

We know from sociology that people who are married are more likely to go to church than people who aren't. And we know that people who are married with children are way more likely to go to church than people who are not. And this effect is especially pronounced for men, interestingly enough, that someone who's a married dad is far more likely to be found in the pews on Sunday, than somebody who isn't. So thus far, sociology has looked at that relationship and pretty much said, "Well, that's just what happens. People who go to church are more likely to have families." What I'm saying is no, turn that relationship around, because it looks like what's happening is that people who have families are more likely to go to church and the transcendental experience of childbirth, I think, is one of the things that does this. And I'll give a quick anecdote about this because I think it's a powerful one.

Mary Eberstadt:

There's a great book called, Witness, written by Whittaker Chambers, the great cold war figure who started off as a communist, atheist, and eventually made the trek back toward Christianity and in his case, Quakerism. And in his memoir, Witness, he writes about what did that for him? And the pivotal moment was when he was sitting in the kitchen, looking at his infant daughter in her highchair. And he describes being taken over by this feeling, as he's studying her ear, such a mundane thing, but he realizes he could never have created this thing. He realizes he is a witness to something much bigger than he is. And he says, "At that moment the hand of God was laid on my head and I began my trek back toward Christianity." Actually he says the finger of God. I don't think you have to be an atheist or a communist to have that story resonate.

Mary Eberstadt:

I think a lot of people experience childbirth and having children in the same way. And that's one powerful thing that drives them to church, or as a Baptist minister said to me on the radio recently, "I know that every new parishioner I get is a young man or woman who shows up with an infant in arms." So what I'm trying to do is explain how that works, but that's just one of the things that drives people to church once they have families, there are other things. Again, perfectly pedestrian things, but it all adds up to a bigger whole. So for example, you know if you've had children that it's an awesome responsibility, it's a staggering responsibility. This again is an ordinary experience to look at a three year old or a six year old and think, "Ah, what am I going to do about this? I'm not up for this?"

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, of course, part of the reason people go to church is that they want to situate their children in a like-minded moral community. They want other people around them, a clan, if you will, a parish, a congregation, to affirm what they're trying to teach those children. So, that's another way in which the mere having of a family inclines people towards church. And I think there are other things going on. If you have ever been married, if you've ever had children, you know that family life is based on sacrifice, right? Sacrifice and self-sacrifice. And we don't say that to scare the kids, but it's true. And the words of a sacrificial religion like Christianity that emphasizes laying down your life for another, are words that make a lot more sense to people who live in families than they do to people who live on their own or by and for themselves.

Mary Eberstadt:

Christianity just resonates that way. And when Christianity says, "You're right to make those sacrifices, because the highest end is not to live for yourself, but to live for others." That's something that makes a lot of sense to the families of the world, especially the mothers and fathers of the world. So, you have a

congruence there, where the messages of Christianity make more sense to people living in families than to people living on their own. And I'm not saying this is always an everywhere true. We can all think of families full of non-believers. We can think of individual people who are holy and faithful Christians. The history of monasticism, for example, makes that point. But in general, in general, we know from social science that people are more likely to be religious and to go to church if they are living in families. And I'm trying to explain what that's about.

Doug Monroe:

Good.

The Modern Welfare State or The Modern Harmful State

Mary Eberstadt:

Well in the United States, and I do think this applies to Europe as well, one very large elephant in the middle of the room is the modern welfare state. And in the book I cite scholars who believe that the welfare state is itself the engine of secularization. And what do we mean by that? Well, there's something really interesting and unheard of in human history that's been going on with the modern welfare state. And this is why I think it is fair to bring in Europe because the situation is even more extreme there. For most of our lives, the welfare state has been the wallpaper. Right? It's been the thing that's always there. It makes this cradle to grave promise that it will take care of us, modern Western people. And what's interesting about that is that it means that the welfare state in many ways is competing with the more organic relations of family, and church and community and the things that are closer to us, literally and figuratively.

Mary Eberstadt:

So one of the things that's happening I think is that if the welfare state becomes untenable, which is something that economists among other people are starting to say will happen, then you're going to see a realignment of all of these institutions, church, and family and state. If the welfare state which has been bankrolling the fractured family and acting as a father substitute is not able to do that anymore, it seems to me one likely result is that you will see a reconsideration of the importance of fatherhood, motherhood, again, these organic family connections. And I don't think this is an abstract thing, by the way.

Mary Eberstadt:

If you look at the great renewal movements of history, if you look at something like what happened under John Wesley in England and how that cleaned up the gin alleys of England, if you look at The Great Awakening, you see that these great spiritual and other sorts of moral renewal movements come from the grassroots. They come from people looking around and saying, "Hey, the way we're living, it's untenable." And I think that the more evidence accumulates about the harms of the way we live now, the more people will reach that conclusion. So to the general question that people always ask, "Are you an optimist or a pessimist about these things?" I actually think the case for optimism is stronger.

More on The Welfare State

Mary Eberstadt:

The welfare state has a complicated role to play in all of this, because on the one hand, the fatherless home could not exist on today's scale without the welfare state bankrolling the thing. I mean, somebody has to and it's the state. But at the same time, the welfare state has inadvertently contributed to family dysfunction and family breakdown. And obviously this is especially true for the poorest people. We see very low rates of marriage, historically, in the lower part of the socioeconomic ladder and the reason for it is the welfare state.

The Welfare State (continued - restated)

Mary Eberstadt:

But at the same time, the welfare state has inadvertently contributed to family dysfunction and family breakdown. And obviously this is especially true for the poorest people. We see very low rates of marriage, historically in the lower part of the socioeconomic ladder. And the reason for it is the wealthier state.

Doug Monroe:

That's good.

Class and Religion

Doug Monroe:

Okay.

Mary Eberstadt:

The relationship between social class and religiosity was one of the eye-openers of the research that I did on secularization. And what I mean is this, we all have this idea, or at least I had this idea that religion is basically a lower class thing in general, that poor people are more likely to be religious than better off people. Well, the interesting thing about this stereotype is that the numbers don't bear it out and lots of numbers don't bear it out. The truth is actually the opposite of what most people suppose. Whether they're for religion or against religion, most people have this stereotype in mind of the religious believer as being the pious poor or the worse off it. It isn't true. In the United States today, if you are in the top quarter of the socioeconomic latter, you are more likely to say that you believe in God and to go to church than if you are in the bottom quarter.

Mary Eberstadt:

This is born out by all kinds of numbers. And this counter-cultural truth was also the case elsewhere in time in Victorian England. A number of British historians have documented that in Victorian London, again, the truth was that the churches were bustling with upper class people and attendance numbers show that the poorest and worst off were the least likely to be found in church and in the United States today, less likely to get married as well.

Mary Eberstadt:

So it's an interesting thing that what appears to be reality is the opposite of this stereotype in fact. And to say that isn't to dump on the lower quarter of the socioeconomic ladder, it's just to say that it's important to look at the numbers in these situations to see what exactly we are talking about. Because if

religion isn't just a lower class thing, which is what a lot of people have supposed, then you're not going to wipe it away with rising prosperity. And that's one way in which the conventional narrative about secularization really falls down because it's been supposed that if we just make people richer and better educated, they'll lose their interest in religion. But if you look at the numbers about who's going to church, it's not going to happen.

Fallout in the Mainline Churches

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, if you want to talk about shooting yourself in the foot, that is essentially what happened with the mainline churches. And the fact that they didn't intend it to come out that way doesn't mean that isn't what happened. So what happened was this. Little by little, trying to move with the times, the churches edged away from the importance of the family. And they sort of forgot to tell people that, "If you don't get married and have families, then we're not going to have anybody in our pews." So part of the fallout to them was just demographic because that was what happens 40 years into that kind of message.

Mary Eberstadt:

But I think there was also a fallout in morale too because if you empty Christianity or any other religion of a code that tells you to be disciplined and be serious, then if you're just saying Christianity is about being nice, sooner or later, people will understand they can just be nice by sitting in their living room them on Sunday morning. And so if you tell people they don't have to do anything to be Christians, you should expect your churches to decline because you haven't given them a reason to show up. And I think that's part of what's gone on with the decline of a certain kind of Christianity.

Mary Eberstadt:

At the same time, what we see looking at the Protestant evangelical movements, is that the stricter the churches, the more successful they have been. And this is also true in Africa, for example, where the Evangelical Africans, whether Catholic or Protestant, are the people who have standing room only churches. Those people aren't losing ground. It's the people who wanted to throw that unwanted church dogma about the sexual moral code who have lost ground. And it turns out that I think they threw out the baby with the bath water there.

The Feminist Critique and the Judeo-Christian Moral Code

Mary Eberstadt:

There is a kind of superficial feminist critique of the Bible that points to the fact that it was written by men and that it seems to be men through whom God spoke if you believe in God or if you don't believe in God that it was just some trumped up conspiracy to keep women down. I call that a super official critique because I think on inspection, you should ask women whether they're better off under something like a Judeo-Christian morality or the kind of morality we have now. And in one of my books, I posed the question, who would you rather have your teenage daughter, dating somebody who's hooking up with a different girl every night or a nice Christian boy who's trying to put the breaks on himself? I don't think that's a trivial question. And I think if you were to ask the secularists and the atheists of the world that question, if they were giving an honest answer, it would be a pretty obvious one. So that's one way in which Christianity has benefited women.

Mary Eberstadt:

It gave men something to live up to and it insisted that there were rights and wrongs that went beyond who was the stronger party. It called things sins that are now commonplace things that hurt girls, like taking them home and dumping them in the morning. So if you really look at who's benefiting from a secularist mindset or that is from de-Christianizing world, I think it is predatory men. They're the clear winners in this. Men who no longer have fathers and brothers and girlfriends, fathers and brothers telling them, "No, you can't do this." Men who no longer answer to any kind of sexual moral code. Those are the guys who are making out like bandits in all of this. But the girls, there's a lot of sadness out there. And the fact that a record number of American women are now on drugs for depression and anxiety, I think is a telling fact.

Mary Eberstadt:

And to say that isn't to say that medications don't have their uses, but it's to say that there's a lot of free floating unhappiness out there that I think we trace to the fact that the Judeo-Christian moral code has protected women better than what has replaced it.

Knocking Down the Nuclear Family

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, from the sixties onward, there's been a lot of dumping on the idea of the traditional family, traditional religion, all of that. I mean, that's no surprise. Poor Ozzie and Harriet have been knocked around the block so many times that they must be having concussions by now, but there's a sad side to all of that, which is okay, go ahead and make fun of the together nuclear or extended family. Nowadays, there are millions of people who would give anything to be in one. Again, getting back to the idea that something about the way we live now puts the heaviest burden on the smallest shoulders. I think we see that all the time and sociologists who want to have non-traditional families, who are cheerleading for non-traditional families, for maximum freedom of family breakup, et cetera, those sociologists are not looking at the world from the point of view of a seven year old, who is being asked, "Is your daddy home?" It's heart rendering, but it's true. And in saying that nobody's trying to guilt trip anybody, but the whole revisionist idea from the 1960s onward, that everything about the 1950s and traditional arrangements was somehow toxic does not hold up if you look at those arrangements from the point of view of the smallest and most vulnerable among us.

Fallout Since the 1960’s

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, for instance, you had in the '90s, the phenomenon of Murphy Brown, the television show about the successful, beautiful woman who had a child on her own. And Vice President Quayle took a lot of flack for saying, "That's not a good model," the idea of having a child on your own. And that was judged to be just completely politically incorrect. But you know what? Most women who have a child on their own are not in her position. Most women who have a child on their own would love to have a husband in the house and they say so. So there's this real disconnect between the abstract idea of maximum libertarian freedom in these matters and the actual reality on the ground of what people want.

Helicopter Parents

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, there's this interesting phenomenon that Time Magazine dubbed, the helicopter parent. Meaning the way in which many parents today seem to shepherd their children at every single stage, worry about them constantly, and don't let them fail, essentially. I think that's one more fascinating, unseen fallout of the demise of Christian thinking, frankly. Because, under a Judeo-Christian ethic, what's a man for? I mean obviously he's for defending, right? He's for defending and providing. And he's for being a brother and a father.

Mary Eberstadt:

And if you denigrate or downgrade the importance of being a brother and a father, then I think you're taking away the idea that men have challenges to me. And in protecting all children at all times from the consequences of what they do, I think part of what we're seeing is that we're not raising them up to be adults who are in an organic relationship in a family as husbands, as fathers, et cetera. And you could say that some of the same is going on with girls too.

The Church Supporting Individuals through Marriage

Mary Eberstadt:

Yes. And once again, the Christian conception of marriage was different and radical in ways that it's easy to lose sight of. But so, for example, there were contractual marriages, I think, especially among the aristocracy of Europe from the Roman Empire onward. Consent didn't really mean much. Marriages were arrangements made for political gain, but there is the church standing in the background saying, "That's not what we mean. That's not what we mean by marriage." It's a radical sign of...

Christianity, Marriage, Consent, and Equality

Mary Eberstadt:

Yeah, one of the most revolutionary things that Christianity did was to insist on a radical notion. And that notion was that marriage required the consent of both parties, that both parties were equal moral actors. Now, when the church was saying this, in many places women couldn't own property, they were not treated as equals under the law or in any other aspect of life. But the church said, "No, these souls have equal weight in the sense that their consent is mutually required for a valid marriage."

Mary Eberstadt:

I think that's a revolutionary idea. I think it's one of many examples in which the teachings of Christianity don't get the moral credit they deserve because everyone who likes the idea of women's equality ought to like the church's early insistence on both parties having free will and joining in marriage that way.

Mary Eberstadt:

So that's just one example of how monogamous marriage, the idea that the church had of marriage, contributed to Western civilization in unseen ways because there's a profound idea of freedom that underlies that notion of consent, and it's percolated into our society in all kinds of ways that we aren't even aware of anymore.

Equality between Men and Women

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, as a university educated woman, of course I'm pretty aware of the good that is involved in leveling the playing field, say, educationally. As a matter of fact, women now are more represented on campuses than are men. There are things about women, the fact that they fewer self destructive behaviors in general, the fact that they are more rule abiding in general, that obviously make them better at school.

Mary Eberstadt:

Please understand I'm saying in general. I'm not saying everywhere and at all times, but anyone who's had daughters and sons will have observed this difference. So of course good things have come out of that. Of course, by the way, the church never said that women didn't have brains. In fact, the idea that women have consciences and are equal moral agents implies that they have brains equal to men's.

Mary Eberstadt:

As a matter of social science, if we need that, the interesting thing is that male and female IQ are basically the same. The only qualification is that men are slightly more likely to be geniuses, slightly more likely to be severely retarded. But what I'm saying is there is that radical equality that in our time plays out in the marketplace, in the workplace, et cetera.

Mary Eberstadt:

Now, that's been a mixed bag, especially for women who want to have families. There's been a debate for many years called having it all. Can women have it all? I see a different debate that needs to happen, which is what's going on with women trying to do it all, because the idea that to be equal with men is to do every everything men do and then to do everything that women do, too, if they're mothers. That's an idea that obviously stretches some human beings to the limit. I think we see a lot of that in the quite legitimate complaints that women have about, "Well, I'm in the workplace 24/7, except that I'm home 24/7, and I'm balancing all these things and I can't do it."

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, yeah, because you can't wear the Timberland boots and the pants and the skirt and the Santa Claus hat all at the same time. Nobody can. So I think the more we see of this, the more we'll go to a place where these things are more balanced, at least for women who are fortunate enough to be married and have help mates like that. It's the single moms, so often heroic, who are really dealing with this in a way that it's hard to see the way out.

The Simplest Definition of Capitalism on Record (with comments on consumerism)

Mary Eberstadt:

Well, I'm not an economist or any other kind of expert when it comes to talking about markets, but to me there's a pretty obvious confusion out there between the word capitalism and the word consumerism. To me, capitalism is just the absence of constraint. It's what happens when you don't put outside burdens on economic transactions. It's what people will do if they're left alone. Pretty simple definition. But then we have consumerism. Consumerism is like any other ism. It's something people do that can get out of control if they're not disciplined. And when Pope Francis and other moral authorities tell us to be mindful of how much we are buying and how well we live compared to how badly most other people do, I think those are moral calls that everybody should be listening to, starting with myself.

Mary Eberstadt:

But I regard those as calls against undue consumerism. So consumerism is just like any other kind of gluttony. Maybe it's even a subset of gluttony. You can eat too much. You can drink too much. You can indulge yourself too much in lots of ways and consumerism is one of those ways. But what I find interesting is that when people go talking about how bad capitalism is, first of all, they're not distinguishing capitalism from consumerism, but also they never apply that sort of reasoning to another realm, which is the realm of what you might call sexual consumerism, where we're told that unlimited choice is the best thing. So there's this interesting, again, disconnect where the people who are total libertarians in the sexual moral sphere really don't want other people being total libertarians in the economic moral sphere. And I find that really interesting.

Consumerism and Freedom

Doug Monroe:

Yeah.

Mary Eberstadt:

I think reigning in consumerism is like reigning in any other thing that people do, that could be bad for them. It starts with individuals. It's really one conscience at a time. You know the fact that we have pretty cheap food in America, is a good thing. It's especially a good thing if you're poor. But the fact that we have cheap food means that it's easier for people to overeat. That happens, too.

Mary Eberstadt:

So I think it's a case by case. I think it's a kind of discipline that can't be imposed from above, but that has to be imposed from within on a case by case basis, about everything. But people come up with that internal discipline. We find the willpower to go to the gym. We try not to smoke. We are able to reign ourselves in, in various ways.

Mary Eberstadt:

And again, I think what's most interesting in this is the double standard. The people who knock the traditional Judeo-Christian moral code, because it's supposed to be so repressed and because the idea of complete sexual freedom is supposed to be what we're all striving for, are the first people to see that if we have untrammeled access to all these other things in life, then Americans are going to get fat, and Americans are going to get sick, and Americans are going to be bad for the environment. It's only in that one area that they don't apply the logic. I think that's really interesting.

American Business and Consumerism

Doug Monroe:

Is that what you mean?

Mary Eberstadt:

Yeah, I don't have any take home for businesses per se, in this. Maybe if the churches did a better job of purveying rules about what Christians could, should, and shouldn't do, that would help. To me, business

does what business does in the absence of someone constraining it and there's a moral hazard to any kind of constraint that you could impose on it too. I don't have a dog in this fight, but I do know, just from studying about poverty here and there, that although it always stinks, American business has done a lot for poor people. It stinks to be poor, but if you're going to be poor, you would rather be poor here. So it's not just the welfare state that steps in.

Pope Francis

Mary Eberstadt:

To the extent that I can figure out Pope Francis, and figuring out Pope Francis has become a national pastime, maybe even a global pastime, but from reading his words seriously, I think he is a radical traditionalist. If you read him, and you don't even have to read him carefully, in no way is there daylight between him and the proceeding Pope, the proceeding Pope, and Pope John Paul II, on these matters of doctrine that certain progressive elements would love for the church to change. So there's no difference on abortion, there's no difference in on marriage.

Mary Eberstadt:

So how is he different? The atmospherics are very different, as we can see. We all come from particular places. He comes from Latin America. He comes from the third world, the developing world. He has a different view of poor people, he is been surrounded by many more of them. He's right to call the conscience of the Western world to task about this. I think he brings a lot that obviously the world warms to. But, if you're looking for big changes in church teaching, they're not going to come from this pope. In a way that a lot of people don't understand the popes aren't free to just rewrite the teachings as they choose. The popes are not CEOs, they're coming out of a very different tradition.