RELIGION

We Killed God, Family, And Community — And Now It's Killing Us

We have discarded social institutions that have helped people understand their value and place in the world for thousands of years. And their decline is not just mirrored in the rise of mass shootings.

Once upon a time, you had meaning. You knew you had meaning because you had a mom and a dad who told you so, a God who loved you, and a community that needed you.

Once upon a time, if something happened to you, a significant number of people would mourn your death — not only because you were a good person and a good friend, but also because the community would suffer without your presence and skills. Now, the vast majority of people can barely count on one hand the number of people whose life would be truly altered by their passing.

For the most part, it can easily feel like no one cares about you anymore. Your skills are ubiquitous, you have no true community, and God doesn't exist. So what, you may ask, is exactly the point?

We have created a society that now offers almost none of the things that make people truly happy. Family, community, spiritual belonging — these are the foundational and primal building blocks of human happiness, and they are rapidly disappearing.

With the destruction of the family, the church, and the community, the reasons people have traditionally had for their very existence are in danger of receding into the past. And the outcome is predictable: isolation, depression, anxiety, despondency, drug abuse, and death.

When we talk about gun violence, just about no one talks about these root causes. It is not as if we haven't had large numbers of powerful semi-automatic weapons in this country for many decades. In fact, when I was in high school, my classmates regularly kept rifles in their truck gun racks in the school parking lot.

In light of these facts, the only sensible question to ask is, what has changed? Instead, politicians and pundits ask all the wrong questions. Do we have too many guns? (We always have.) Are video games and movies too violent? (They always have been.) Do we need more laws? (We have more than we can keep track of.)

Discarding Institutions

No, the thing that has fundamentally changed is that we have discarded those regulating social institutions that have helped people understand their value and place in this world for thousands of years. Their decline is not just mirrored in the rise of mass shootings, but more broadly in a host of statistics that reveal an epidemic of despair.

For example, between 2000 and 2017, the rate of deaths due to drug overdose increased 400 percent, from 3 per 100,000 to 15 per 100,000. The suicide rate has increased from 10.4 per 100,000 in 2000 to 14 per 100,000 in 2017. These horrific increases have literally reduced the life expectancy in the United States from 78.9 in 2014 to 78.6 in 2017.

These statistics mirror the death of the family and the decline of faith. Children born out of wedlock increased from 20 percent in 1985 to more than 40 percent in 2013, with crime statistics tracking this trend almost exactly. Church membership declined from 70 percent in 1998 to 50 percent today. Taken together, these statistics of despair demonstrate what happens when people feel they have no place, no purpose, and no value in our world.

Inevitable Isolation

Technology exacerbates this phenomenon by allowing and encouraging us to isolate ourselves. Technology allows people to live their lives completely alone. People can sit in front of video games and indulge in violent fantasies. They can view endless pornography or isolate themselves into ideological bubbles that reinforce their desperate ideas.

The only antidote to this toxic brew is to engage with other people in ways that are beneficial for human flourishing. The only remedies are the institutions that have satisfied the human condition over millennia: family, community, and faith. And we are losing them. In fact, we are killing them.

Human beings are not designed for isolation. We require deep and meaningful connection. We need family and community. We are desperate for life and the love of others. We need people and institutions to help us navigate the world, to help us see that we have purpose, to help us understand right from wrong, and to imbue us with a sense of moral clarity that will hold us up during the desperate times we will all face.

Why would anyone be surprised that when we take away the foundational social structures that have allowed for the flourishing of humanity, bad things will happen? We all know very well what happens when more and more children grow up in single-parent homes. Increased suicide, drug use, drop out, teen pregnancy, and mental disorders.

We know what happens when communities deteriorate. Isolation, loneliness, and a decline in social norms. And when we destroy the church, the very institution that has been our bedrock of values, morality, and redemption for thousands of years? Despair, immorality, desperation, and evil.

Combine all three, and we know exactly what happens. An opioid epidemic so severe that it has literally reduced our average life expectancy. A suicide rate that continues to climb for almost all demographic groups. Mass shootings.

Destroy the family, abandon the community, raze the church to the ground. What could go wrong? Everything.