

DAVID GREGORY

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *DINNER WITH A PERFECT STRANGER*

THE
LAST

CHRISTIAN



A NOVEL

**THE
LAST
CHRISTIAN**

ALSO BY DAVID GREGORY

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Dinner with a Perfect Stranger: An Invitation Worth Considering

A Day with a Perfect Stranger

The Next Level: A Parable on Finding Your Place in Life

NONFICTION

The Rest of the Gospel: When the Partial Gospel Has Worn You Out

(coauthored with Dan Stone)

DAVID GREGORY

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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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I walked behind the podium and smiled gamely at Abby. I had a job to do. Whatever damage I inflicted I'd try to rectify later. In the meantime...

“Good morning. We have a special guest with us—Abigail Caldwell. Abby, raise your hand, why don't you?”

Abby raised her hand and looked around at the students, who looked at her with blank faces. An endearing start.

“Abby recently traveled to the United States from Papua New Guinea, where she has lived her entire life with the Inisi tribe. The last half of class we'll ask her questions about her experiences there and her beliefs. I think this will give us some insight into the very topic we'll continue discussing this morning: the decline and disappearance of Christianity in twenty-first-century America.”

I forced a smile toward Abby, then purely out of habit looked down at the visiscreen that scrolled my notes. I had delivered this lecture a dozen times and had it essentially memorized. “The most significant cultural development in the U.S. in the twenty-first century has been the fading of the Christian religion from a dominant force in society to a nonexistent one. Although not founded as a Christian nation per se, the United States was always a deeply religious one, and as recently as 2025, a majority of the population in the United States self-identified as Christians. Today, Christianity has disappeared.

“Many reasons have been proffered for this cultural upheaval. I believe five carry weight as primary explanatory factors. We discussed four of these in our last session, which we will briefly review. Can anyone name the first?”

Petrov raised his hand. “Scientific progress in the last two hundred years.”

“Starting with whom?” I asked.

“Darwin.”

“Correct. Contradicting as it did the biblical myth of humanity’s origin, the theory of evolution was vigorously opposed by Christians from the start. A panoply of attacks against evolution were unleashed for the following century and a half. These usually took some form of the design argument, culminating in a late-twentieth-century movement called...what?”

“Intelligent design,” answered Fakhri.

“Yes. It sought to establish what?”

“That the apparent design in the universe couldn’t have arisen by chance and required an intelligent superdesigner.”

“Right. These arguments, however, never gained traction within the mainstream scientific community, and as society itself became more secular, the debate became increasingly irrelevant. The issue was settled—no deity was needed to explain the variety of life on earth. With that, of course, a primary pillar in the belief system of the Christian religion had fallen.”

Vinay, a young man from India, raised his hand. “I don’t understand why there was such resistance to the idea of evolution in the first place. Weren’t people interested in knowing the truth about their existence?”

I stepped from behind the podium. “Excellent question. Only if it didn’t contradict their deeply held religious beliefs. You have to understand that religion formed the way people thought about existence. Anything undermining that belief system was rejected out of hand. We still see this, of course, in some less-developed parts of the world today. Fortunately, most of the planet has outgrown the need for such beliefs.”

I avoided looking at Abby, not wanting to single her out as the one my statement would pertain to—though that conclusion was perhaps unavoidable.

Xin followed up with a question. “Professor Daniels, isn’t it true that developments in cosmology had made the evolution of the whole universe apparent long before the turn of the century?”

“Good point. But whereas evolution played a critical role in the demise of Christianity, the big bang theory did not. Any ideas why not?”

Blank stares greeted me. It was, admittedly, a difficult question. Answering it required the students to think momentarily from a Christian worldview, which was utterly foreign to them. I answered the question myself. “It was because the big bang theory corresponded closely with the biblical account of creation. The Bible says that God created the universe at a specific point in time, starting with light itself. That parallels what the big bang postulates. In fact, its primary opponents were astronomers who disliked the theory’s religious implications. They kept trying to prove that the universe itself had no beginning, which eliminated the need for a creator. Of course, we no longer think in those terms.”

I glanced at my visiscreen. “Let’s get back to the causes of Christianity’s decline in twenty-first-century America. Point one was scientific progress. What was the second cause we discussed?”

Xin raised her hand. “The flame-out of the culture war.”

I nodded. “Starting in the 1980s, conservative religionists began forcing their own moral agenda upon the rest of the country. This encompassed a wide variety of issues ranging from pregnancy removal to homosexuality to freedom of visual sexual stimulation. Religionists insisted that their views, drawn from the Bible, be the legislative norm for society. This movement reached its zenith politically with the election of a conservative religionist to the presidency. Who was that?”

“George W. Bush,” answered Philip.

“Yes. Society grew more secular, however. That affected the culture war in what two ways?”

Sven responded from the back of the room. “Religionists no longer had enough numbers on their side to sway public policy.”

“Right. And do you remember the other?”

“The more strident that religionists became in their attempt to control government, the less others were attracted to Christianity. It was seen more as a political movement than a spiritual option.”

“Exactly. Jesus was a figure who existed at the political whim of conservative religionists, which of course held no appeal to the secular majority. In their political stridency, religionists ended up shooting themselves in the foot.”

I finally looked over at Abby, but I couldn't read her. I forced her out of my mind and glanced at my visiscreen again. "All of this coincided with the third cause of Christianity's decline, which was..."

Theresa raised her hand. "The backlash against religion in general due to Islamic fundamentalism."

I nodded. "The massive destruction and loss of life caused by this movement produced a backlash against fundamentalist religious belief in general, which, because of its dogmatism, came to be seen as dangerous to the healthy functioning of a multicultural society. 'Christian' became a byword for 'dogmatic bigot,' and people didn't want to be dogmatic bigots. You may recall that the Tolerance Act of 2036 was passed during the height of this period, reflecting people's increasing unease with fundamentalist religion."

I glanced at Abby again. She sat attentively, without expression. Given her obvious intellectual ability, I hated to lump her in with religious fundamentalists. She couldn't help how she had been raised or the isolation she had endured.

"All right," I continued. "That brings us to our fourth cause, which we started to touch on last time."

Melinda spoke. "The fourth cause was how our understanding of truth and knowledge evolved."

"Correct. Until the fourteenth century, Western culture had a Platonic view of truth. Knowledge comes through philosophy and divine revelation. Truth doesn't have to be investigated; it can simply be deduced. Thomas Aquinas reintroduced the Aristotelian view: knowledge comes through empirical observation of nature. This birthed the scientific method—promoted, ironically, by religionists like Isaac Newton, who believed in a rational Creator who designed a rational, understandable world. Truth became a set of absolute realities that could be uncovered by human investigation.

"In the middle of the twentieth century, this mindset began to crumble. Philosophers rejected the notion of absolute truth altogether. What people considered to be truth was, in fact, socially constructed. No one could interpret reality in a vacuum; everyone constructed what

they viewed as reality based on their acceptance or rejection of cultural norms. Claims to truth were, in fact, mere power plays designed to perpetuate the control of those in authority.

“By the turn of this century, the notion of absolute truth was crumbling in the popular culture as well. Polls of Americans in the first decade of the century revealed that most no longer believed in absolute truth or absolute morality.

“This philosophical earthquake proved devastating to the Christian religion. Without a prior cultural presupposition of absolute truth to rely upon, Christians’ claims to truth fell on deaf ears. In the absence of absolutes, all that mattered was personal experience. ‘Whatever works for you’ became the prevailing attitude, whether that be Christianity, New Ageism, or no religion at all. The culture, of course, drifted to no religion at all. If claims to truth are all socially constructed, why bother with a religion that’s going to impose demands on you and tell you how to think, as opposed to your making your own free choices in life?”

I paused. “All right. Let’s get to the final cause of Christianity’s demise in America. I label this one lack of distinctiveness. It may be a little hard for us to get our brains around this, because we don’t think in these terms anymore; we don’t expect people to be different based on a set of religious views, but stick with me.

“From its outset the Christian religion claimed that the intervention of the deity in people’s lives would change people for the better. They would have a different character. They would have different morals. They would think, speak, and behave differently. They called it Christlikeness—‘Christ,’ of course, being the title given to Jesus of Nazareth.

“This alleged change in people wasn’t caused just by the religious adherent’s efforts to be good, although that was certainly emphasized as well. Rather, it was also brought about by the presence of something Christians called the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit was supposed to change a person’s character so that others could see them living like Jesus.

“This belief worked as long as the vast majority of people in society were professing Christians, because there was no one to compare

Christians to. The crack in the foundation appeared when people began abandoning Christianity. When a large segment of society became openly nonreligious, an amazing thing happened—amazing to the religionists, anyway. People discovered that religionists and nonreligionists behaved similarly. Sexual behavior, divorce rates, self-reported levels of honesty—none of these varied significantly between religionists and nonreligionists.

“In short, the supposed influence of the deity to change people wasn’t real; it was all a psychological game. As people realized that, more of them concluded, ‘Why should I adopt that belief system? It doesn’t cause a real change in anyone.’

“So this produced a cascade effect in which the younger generation—people born in the 1980s and after—looked at the older generation and didn’t see a difference in their lives. As a result, they didn’t follow in the footsteps of their parents’ religion. What the religionists didn’t know was that, as early as the first decade of this century, only a third of those growing up in Christian homes were, upon reaching adulthood, retaining the faith. And converts to the faith were declining as well.

“The result for American Christianity was cataclysmic. The number of adherents to Christianity spiraled downward as most of each succeeding generation rejected it. By 2030 only half of Americans self-professed as Christians, by 2050 less than a quarter did, and by 2070 fewer than ten percent did. That was its last generation. Throughout the twenty-first century, Christians were trying to pass along their religion to generations who simply didn’t buy it.”

Anderson raised his hand. “But it seems like Christianity in America was thriving in the early part of the century. I mean, I’ve passed some huge buildings that seated tens of thousands of religionists back then.”

I nodded. “Yes, that’s true, but that movement—megachurches, they called them—was the beginning of the end, a last gasp of the Christian religion. Churches got larger in an attempt to appeal more to the masses. They adopted a new marketing strategy, using their gatherings to appeal to outsiders with popular entertainment and practical life

helps. But getting back to our main point, that didn't produce a lifestyle any more distinctive than before, so people ended up seeing through it. They decided that if they wanted to be entertained, they might as well stay home and watch their televisions. That, you may recall, used to constitute entertainment."

The class laughed.

I accessed the time on the Grid. "Let's leave it there for today. In our next class we'll examine the flip side of today's topic: the impact of Christianity's demise on the American culture as a whole."

I switched off my visiscreen. "Now, I'm very pleased to be able to spend the rest of today's class time with our special guest, whom you met earlier. Abby—"

I glanced over at Abby's seat.

She was gone.