

# The Future of Liberalism

Christian Perspectives  
on the Sustainability  
of the Liberal Order



*A Compilation of Essays Presented at the  
2019 Values & Capitalism Faculty Retreat*

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## Foreword

The United States, and the West broadly, have experienced a period of peace and prosperity under the modern liberal order that is unparalleled in human history.<sup>1</sup> And yet, liberalism has increasingly come under fire from critics, including many Christians,<sup>2</sup> receiving blame for growing political, social, and economic inequality; crumbling families and communities; emptying churches; ongoing moral decadence in the form of consumerism, materialism, and hedonism; and more.

These issues are real and serious, and liberalism may indeed be a part of the problem. But I agree with Richard John Neuhaus, who, in a helpful essay on this subject, wrote, “Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me say that I find myself in warm agreement with the indictment of a certain kind of liberalism. The contention turns on what we mean by liberalism.”<sup>3</sup>

By liberalism do we mean a totalizing philosophy of freedom or, should we say, license? Or is it merely structural—a political framework of limited government and individual liberties and an economic framework of free exchange?

The answer to this question is a fundamental starting point. If liberalism is an all-encompassing philosophical and ethical system of unrestraint and self-interest, it would seem to be antithetical to the Christian way of life, which values objective moral boundaries and selflessness. If not, then perhaps Christians can appreciate liberalism’s gifts, acknowledge its ills, and advocate for marginal political, economic, social, and moral reforms that attempt to further the former and rectify the latter.

Written by members of the Values & Capitalism Academic Network, the following essays take various approaches to these questions and come to different conclusions. In general, the

authors are *hopeful* about the liberal order, though *not uncritical* of it. That alone is an important point. The discussion of liberalism's demise has had one unequivocal benefit: the reminder that the uncritical triumphalism of any political, economic, or social ideology—yes, even liberalism—can be idolatrous. While defenders of liberalism can justifiably argue that it has not failed, they should never expect it to bring the true, lasting happiness and peace that we all desire. Only God can do that, and He has promised that He will, which gives us real hope.

Tyler Castle  
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### Notes

1. For evidence, see the appendix of Jonah Goldberg, *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Nationalism, Populism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2018).

2. The essays in this compilation assume at least general familiarity with the arguments in Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* and Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option*, as well as Alasdair MacIntyre's work. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); and Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017). I particularly mention Goldberg and Deneen in these notes because they both spoke at the 2019 Values & Capitalism Faculty Retreat, where these essays were presented.

3. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Liberalism of John Paul II," *First Things* 73 (May 1997): 16–21.

# How Economic Liberalism Can Undermine Moral Norms

*Steven McMullen*

It has become common to note that liberalism has succeeded on a grand scale. Even if we are not at “the end of history,”<sup>1</sup> few credible movements worldwide are seeking to roll back democracy, and market economies continue to grow in scope and scale. Even the socialists these days are *democratic* socialists. Moreover, ideological battles aside, liberalism has succeeded in fulfilling many of its promises. Democracies have proved to be the most stable and successful governments, and market economies have delivered wealth, high standards of living, and reductions in poverty. This is a historically unique achievement.

Nevertheless, the success of liberalism is not perfect. Liberal institutions tend to push against traditions and practices. As a result, liberalism crowds out illiberal morality. Moral commitments that run counter to individual freedom are difficult to maintain in a liberal social, political, and economic system, partly due to a push toward individual mobility and weak commitments and partly due to a market discipline that punishes uncompetitive priorities. The result is an unintended hollowing out of public language and practice, as we all move slowly toward the caricature of the worst stereotypes of the West: amoral, detached, and individualistic.

While many excellent scholars have made arguments of this kind before,<sup>2</sup> the focus here is on the ways in which market economic systems push against certain kinds of moral practices. Moreover, to avoid attacking a straw man, I focus only on elements of market economies that are important to the success of the market

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system. Two such elements stand out. First, geographic and vocational mobility can undermine accountability and solidarity. Second, competition can undermine moral norms in production. Both elements exemplify the ethos of the liberal order: individual freedom and initiative aimed toward a productive social end. Both elements also push against restrictive moral norms.

Before proceeding with this argument, it is important to define “liberalism,” particularly because this term has come to mean different things in different contexts. In this case, liberalism is the social order that includes democratic government, market economics, and culture that celebrates freedom from traditional social boundaries. What these elements have in common is a devolution of power to individuals: political power through voting and representative government, economic power to consumers deciding what to purchase and producers deciding what to produce, and finally the freedom of conscience that grants individuals the power to support, reject, or construct social norms. While there have been times and places when these three elements of liberalism have been separated, they have a mutually reinforcing tendency that gives the combination a kind of social gravity.

For most citizens of Western democracies, liberalism is not an identifiable camp with which we agree or disagree. It is, instead, a description of our entire social world. Yet, we can still identify it as a broad ideology, if only because it is historically new and still not entirely universal. Moreover, a host of critics of liberalism, from both the right and the left, force us to try to step outside our setting enough to ask questions about our ideological assumptions.<sup>3</sup> However, the literature questioning liberalism tends to fly at 10,000 feet and rarely engages economic practices in enough detail to satisfy my own demands. This essay picks up where they have left off, by sketching a description of the economic mechanisms behind some of the pernicious effects of liberalism. Hopefully, the reader will see this essay for what it is: an intentionally provocative reflection from an avowed lover of capitalism and democracy, not a call for some kind of broad revolution.

### **Liberated from Solidarity**

Of all the liberties we celebrate, one of the most fundamental is the freedom to choose one's community, affiliations, and vocation. The possibility of exiting a relationship, a community that is oppressive, or a job that is unpleasant is one of the most fundamental freedoms. The possibility and practice of moving, physically or institutionally, is also part of what makes modern market economies work. Job turnover, or "churn," generally increases economic performance, as it encourages workers to move toward more productive matches in the labor market.<sup>4</sup>

Mobility is also a cure for economic ills. A central hallmark of market dynamism is that capital and labor can move away from communities with few opportunities toward communities with good opportunities. It is not just that mobility is good for markets. Markets also encourage mobility. Opening economies to global markets tends to increase wealth and leads to more turnover and volatility at the firm level.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, employment restrictions and protections for workers tend to decrease movement in and out of jobs and increase unemployment.<sup>6</sup>

Even if a lack of constraint on movement and contracts is efficient, it also undermines some elements of community health. Robert Putnam, in his provocative book *Bowling Alone*,<sup>7</sup> documented a broad decline in social connection across the United States. Community participation, club membership, religious participation, volunteering, and even social trust all decreased over the second half of the 20th century. Civil society, that odd hallmark of American culture, is in decline. The cause of this decline is complicated. Putnam argues that it is partly due to technology, partly due to the way we build communities, partly due to labor market participation, and partly due to demographics.

A case could also be made that the way we work has imposed serious pressure on community involvement. Hours worked per person in the labor market increased in the US since the 1970s, particularly as women entered the labor force in greater numbers. This was balanced by a decrease in labor force participation by

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men. This militates against community involvement. Those out of the labor force tend to be less involved in the community than those who are employed, and those households that are most likely to engage in the community are increasingly committed to longer work hours and have two earners, rather than just one.

Social mobility, in which children of poor or middle-class parents enter a higher socioeconomic status, is unambiguously a good thing. However, in a large national economy, it probably does not help create stable engaged communities. In one of the most poignant parts of Patrick Deneen's book *Why Liberalism Failed*,<sup>8</sup> he notes that our elite college system has a way of "strip mining" the rest of the country for talented, ambitious young people. By and large, students who leave Minnesota for a Harvard degree do not return home and become leaders in their hometown. The market rewards the collocation of talent, and right now that talent seems to be drawn into financial and government centers.

In fact, the place we live also seems to matter a lot. There is increasing evidence that the move toward cities is not just a change in preferences. Employment opportunities in rural areas have diminished, and cities are increasingly important clusters of specialized talent and knowledge spillovers.<sup>9</sup> In a service economy, the specialization that produces wealth requires population density.

This does not mean, however, that the way we organize cities promotes healthy community among people who know each other. Residents of large suburban and urban communities are less involved and less trusting. Even relatively rich, stable communities, if they are homogenous suburbs, tend to have low levels of civic participation. Putnam notes that increased commutes are strongly tied to decreased community engagement.<sup>10</sup> In fact, for every 10 minutes of daily commute, he observes a 10 percent decline in involvement in community affairs. The causal mechanism is probably complicated, but the association is not. People who work far away from where they live are less likely to have an employer that is invested in the community or have coworkers who live in the same area, and they have less time in the proximity of people that

they live near. The result is residential communities where no one knows or cares much about each other.

Deneen observes these trends and argues that civil society has been squeezed on two sides by the government and the market.<sup>11</sup> His argument has some plausibility but is difficult to parse in any detail. Certainly, the broad thrust of the labor market pushes against stable communities, and increased government bureaucracy and provision can diminish the degree to which we depend on each other. I am far more interested in the second half of the argument he makes: that, as social connection declines, we become more dependent on the market and the government. It is worth considering that this decline in community (described by Putnam as a decrease in social capital) diminishes what Catholic thinkers might call *solidarity*. As people are less connected to each other, the possibility of local efforts to care for each other is reduced.

Many conservatives are concerned with the increasing scope of government action and worry that the welfare state crowds out community. It is common, for example, to prioritize local care for those in need.<sup>12</sup> This only works, however, if people know each other. Without local connections, there is less local knowledge, and the possibility that private charity could better meet people's needs becomes less plausible. So while this essay might sound like a nostalgic plea for a return to the small-town Mayberry of *The Andy Griffith Show*, strong communities are the only thing preventing us from retreating to national political solutions for local problems, and some of the most basic forces of a market economy are constantly pushing against the kind of long-lasting local relationships that make this kind of local solidarity possible.

### **Competition, Technology, and the Ethical Race to the Bottom**

The second broad concern about market economies is that over time uncompetitive norms are pushed out and replaced. Freedom is a limited good in and of itself, but freedom gets channeled into productivity and prosperity through competition that disciplines and encourages innovation. In economic terms, competition is the

secret sauce that aligns the incentives of producers with the desires of consumers. Competition consistently motivates people to act in ways that increase profit, sometimes for the better and sometimes for worse.

The cases in which market competition drives people to act more ethically are numerous. One of Adam Smith's most important insights is that markets tend to incentivize the unremarkable feats of faithfulness and productivity that keep households and businesses running.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, a number of recent scholars have done a good job documenting the kinds of virtues that markets encourage.<sup>14</sup> In short, markets often force people to be faithful, precise, industrious, and considerate of others' preferences.

On the other hand, market competition can drive out some traditions, norms, and virtues, particularly if they constrain people in a direction that is counter to the profit-consciousness that competitive markets demand.<sup>15</sup> For example, consider pig farms. The competitive pressure in agriculture is strong, and the past 75 years have been brutal for many different kinds of animal farms. Changes in technology, transportation, and biology have forced a dramatic change on an industry that had depended on strong traditions and supported stable communities.

As of 1978, over 500,000 farms were raising hogs in the United States. By 2012, that number had declined to around 63,000—more than an 87 percent decline in the number of farms. Moreover, the location of hog farming changed, moving to different parts of the country as firms and slaughterhouses consolidated. You have probably heard about the death of the family farm. This is real. Almost none of the hog farms that existed when I was born are still operating today. Hog farms have become relentlessly efficient and much larger. In 1978, only 3 percent of farms had more than 5,000 pigs; in 2012, 83 percent did.<sup>16</sup> A series of changes made the large industrial farms more profitable, including developments in manufactured feed, increased labor costs, and advances in supply chain management.

For our purposes, what is notable is that these new farming systems gained efficiency at the expense of the environment,

agricultural workers, agricultural communities, and—most dramatically—the animals. Pigs are intelligent, highly social, exploratory, and territorial animals. To control them with minimal labor cost, pigs are confined in barren spaces without a natural environment or interaction with other animals. They are subject to painful procedures well before slaughter. Due to environment, diet, and breeding, they grow so extraordinarily fast that, even living a life with almost no movement, many are injured and have lung, bone, and joint problems by the time they are killed at four months to a year old. Even the generally pro-animal agriculture economists Bailey Norwood and Jayson Lusk estimate that for many pigs their treatment is bad enough that their lives are probably not worth living.<sup>17</sup> Similar confinement methods are now common for chickens and turkeys as well, with a similar industry dynamic.

Pig farmers did not embrace these new animal agricultural systems for principled reasons, but because they had no other choice. Given the tight competition and massive turnover in farms, farmers had no room to innovate in any direction that did not reduce costs, and there is no room in the market for farmers to adopt higher-welfare methods. Costly ethical norms are driven out of the market in periods of intense competition, just as competition drives out costly unethical norms and encourages profitable ethical norms. This same dynamic is replicated in theories of racial discrimination: Costly discrimination was predicted by Gary Becker to diminish with competition, whereas profitable statistical discrimination may not.<sup>18</sup>

The mechanisms here are not a mystery. In the face of a market push toward a different business model, those who resist the change for ethical reasons are the first to go out of business, or at least they fail to grow while their competitors do. Once the change has taken hold, potential entrants into the industry choose to enter only if they are willing to follow the industry trends. Finally, even those who might resist and stay in business find that the new production methods can be imposed on them through a contract with their vertically integrated patrons (e.g., Smithfield) looking for uniformity and predictability in their supply chain. By attrition, selection, and imposition, traditions of animal husbandry and care for

the land have, for pig farming at least, been replaced by a different ethic and culture.<sup>19</sup>

This story about rapid change in animal agriculture could also be told as a victory of market economics. Everything worked the way we hope it does when we teach principles of economics to first-year students. Technology and innovation changed quickly. Producers, with little individual market power, were forced to rapidly adopt the most efficient methods. Prices steadily fell as these gains were passed on to consumers at the grocery store. In short, this is a story of freedom, channeled by appropriate institutions, serving the public good. Yet, these same changes undermine the norms that connect farmers to their animals, encourage farmers to care for the environment in their communities,<sup>20</sup> and support family traditions of commerce and vocation. I tend to disagree with Wendell Berry whenever he starts talking about economics,<sup>21</sup> and yet there is a reason why people who love what Berry loves might be suspicious of markets.

It is worth attending closely to the demise of the family hog farm, not to turn everyone into vegetarians, but because it forces us to confront a real conflict. The need for government regulation grows as moral norms and moral practices break down. Yet, the same competitive market that improves productivity and wealth undermines those practices and the communities that sustain them. In the face of devastating creative destruction such as we have seen in animal agriculture, community norms cannot stand. The industries in question have long proved that they are unwilling to adopt binding codes for animal welfare and environmental care. Just as Deneen predicts, the only option left is a stronger, more activist government.

### **Is Liberalism Neutral?**

This all leads to the conclusion that market economies are not morally neutral. Because they create a whole landscape in which people live and act, market economies subtly and dramatically change the way we live, often for the better and sometimes for worse. The

direction of change is predictable. Markets thrive on innovation, productive work, clear communication, carefully defined property protections, and mobile individuals. Markets are also constantly in conflict with traditional sources of religious authority, long commitments to stable communities, and uncompetitive norms. Because market economies do not coercively prohibit these norms, it is easy to ignore the conflict. Markets do not change culture by coercion. Instead, they alter the economic landscape, making some traditions more costly and commitments to a kind of amoral individualism easier, and then people make “free” choices.

Over time, as a result, some of our communal norms limiting markets have slowly broken down, such as expanded markets for pornography and diminished norms against excessive credit. These norms used to exist in communities where people could hold each other accountable, but today such communities are hard to find, and producers can easily locate elsewhere. If the critics of liberalism are correct and if markets do slowly undermine the kind of community necessary for solidarity and accountability, then we have replaced one set of institutions that encouraged a high moral standard with a different set that has no moral center beyond freedom. That change is not a change for the better.

As a final note, it is worth reiterating that this is not a call to scrap market economies. There is no credible debate about whether we should embrace liberalism. The only question is what *kind* of democracy and what *kind* of capitalism we will create. The challenge of the future of liberalism is whether we can figure out how to institute some kind of moral authority right in the center of society, something to counter the amoral individualism that currently has the center of gravity.

### Notes

1. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *National Interest* no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>.
2. These kinds of arguments feature heavily in Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 20th ed.

(Boston: Beacon Press, 1980); and Albert O. Hirschman, “Rival Interpretations of Market Society: Civilizing, Destructive, or Feeble?,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 20, no. 4 (December 1982): 1463–84, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2724829>. Similar or related arguments show up in Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, reprint ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). For an efficient summary of much of this literature, see Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy, “Moral Views of Market Society,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 33, no. 1 (August 2007): 285–311, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131642>.

3. The conservative critics of liberalism will most likely appreciate the argument here. In addition to those already mentioned, some important examples include scholars such as Patrick Deneen, Rod Dreher, Bob Goudzwaard, and some of the authors in the volume collected by Doug Bandow and David L. Schindler. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017); Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979); and Doug Bandow and David Schindler, eds., *Wealth, Poverty, and Human Destiny* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003).

4. Edward P. Lazear and James R. Spletzer, “Hiring, Churn, and the Business Cycle,” *American Economic Review* 102, no. 3 (May 2012): 575–79, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.102.3.575>.

5. A. Kerem Coşar, Nezhil Guner, and James Tybout, “Firm Dynamics, Job Turnover, and Wage Distributions in an Open Economy,” *American Economic Review* 106, no. 3 (March 2016): 625–63, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20110457>.

6. David H. Autor, William R. Kerr, and Adriana D. Kugler, “Does Employment Protection Reduce Productivity? Evidence from US States,” *Economic Journal* 117, no. 521 (June 2007): F189–F217, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2007.02055.x>.

7. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

8. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*.

9. Zoltan J. Acs, David B. Audretsch, and Maryann P. Feldman, “R & D Spillovers and Recipient Firm Size,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 76, no. 2 (1994): 336–40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2109888>.

10. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 201–15.

11. Interestingly, Putnam mostly rules out both the market and the government as reasonable explanations for the change he observes. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*.

12. Robert Sirico, “The Moral Basis for Economic Liberty,” Heritage Foundation, July 13, 2010, 18, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/07/The-Moral-Basis-for-Economic-Liberty>.

13. There are many good summaries of Smith’s work, but I particularly like the chapter on Smith in James Halteman and Edd S. Noell, *Reckoning with Markets: The Role of Moral Reflection in Economics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 54–88.

14. Rachel Kotkin, Joshua Hall, and Scott Beaulier, “The Virtue of Business: How Markets Encourage Moral Behavior,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 45–58, <https://www.marketsandmorality.com/index.php/mandm/article/view/108>; Deirdre N. McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Sirico, “The Moral Basis for Economic Liberty”; and Radu Vranceanu, “The Moral Layer of Contemporary Economics: A Virtue-Ethics Perspective,” ESSEC Business School, <http://ideas.repec.org/p/ebg/essewp/dr-07006.html>.

15. Andrei Shleifer, “Does Competition Destroy Ethical Behavior?,” *American Economic Review* 94, no. 2 (May 2004): 414–18, <https://doi.org/10.1257/0002828041301498>.

16. Stephanie Mercier, “The U.S. Hog Industry—Then and Now,” AgWeb, December 22, 2016, <https://www.agweb.com/blog/straight-from-dc-agricultural-perspectives/the-us-hog-industry-then-and-now/>.

17. F. Bailey Norwood and Jayson L. Lusk, *Compassion, by the Pound: The Economics of Farm Animal Welfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

18. Gary S. Becker, *The Economics of Discrimination*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); and Jonathan Guryan and Kerwin Kofi Charles, “Taste-Based or Statistical Discrimination: The Economics of Discrimination Returns to Its Roots,” *Economic Journal* 123, no. 572

(November 2013): 417–32.

19. This closely follows Deneen’s observation that liberalism often contains a technocratic resistance to natural limits. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 91–109.

20. Linda Lobao and Curtis W. Stofferahn, “The Community Effects of Industrialized Farming: Social Science Research and Challenges to Corporate Farming Laws,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 25, no. 2 (June 2008): 219–40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-007-9107-8>; and Pew Environment Group, “Big Chicken: Pollution and Industrial Poultry Production in America,” Pew Charitable Trusts, July 26, 2011, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2011/07/26/big-chicken-pollution-and-industrial-poultry-production-in-america>.

21. Wendell Berry, “The Idea of a Local Economy,” *Orion*, 2001, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-idea-of-a-local-economy/>.

# A Christian Defense of Liberalism

*Sarah M. Estelle and John Lunn*

Classical liberalism is a political philosophy that promotes a particular social framework for its ability to create a social order that is both spontaneous and advantageous in its potential to enhance human flourishing. The framework includes a market economy and a democratic polity and places value on the most basic building block of society: the individual. The defeat of two major alternatives to liberalism in the 20th century, fascism in World War II and communism circa 1990, appeared to establish the preeminence of liberalism.

However, whatever victory liberalism experienced was short-lived, as it remains under attack, by not only these resurrected ideologies but also other worldviews, with some ostensibly rooted in the Christian faith. While critics often define liberalism broadly—in some cases painting with one broad brush what is known today as classical liberalism and progressivism<sup>1</sup> or simultaneously condemning “economic-political liberalism” and “social-cultural liberalism”<sup>2</sup>—we will retain the original meaning of liberalism, as does Jonah Goldberg in *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Nationalism, Populism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy*.<sup>3</sup>

Some of liberalism’s attackers are Christian scholars who claim it is not compatible with Christianity. For example, in their *Politics of Virtue*, John Milbank and Adrian Pabst title the first chapter “The Metacrisis of Liberalism.”<sup>4</sup> They argue that liberalism is in crisis because of its emphasis on individualism, negative liberty rather than positive liberty, and a false anthropology. Louis Groarke’s article featuring the subtitle “Why Christianity and Liberalism

Cannot Be Reconciled” similarly rejects liberalism’s conception of freedom and takes issue with its principle of noninterference and insistence on “amoral autonomy.”<sup>5</sup>

Echoing many of these concerns is perhaps one of the most popularly known critiques of liberalism, Patrick Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed*. Although not writing explicitly as a Catholic in his book, Deneen builds on Catholic social teaching and ultimately argues that liberalism has failed by becoming more of what it inherently is.<sup>6</sup> Like many others, one of his chief concerns is liberalism’s basis in individualism and voluntary choice, which provide no glue to hold society together. Unlike most others, though, he personifies liberalism.

He characterizes liberalism as an “insidious” ideology that “pretends to neutrality, claiming no preference and denying any intention of shaping the souls under its rule.”<sup>7</sup> He is no more complimentary of “liberalism’s architects,” claiming that they intentionally selected liberalism “precisely because they anticipated being its winners.”<sup>8</sup> Specifically, he asserts that liberalism “generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom.”<sup>9</sup> We share some of Deneen’s concerns with the current state of affairs, particularly the breakdown of civil society. However, we would ascribe causality in a different way and argue that Deneen is confounding postmodern thinking, technological advance, and the challenges that come with immense wealth and prosperity, just to name a few, with the principles of liberalism.

In this essay, we elucidate the key principles of liberalism and compare them with both the concerns of critics and orthodox Christian perspective. The aforementioned sources and others like them often misunderstand and sometimes grossly misrepresent the paradigm of liberalism as asserted by liberals. As Christian liberals ourselves, we sometimes struggle to recognize the caricature of liberalism as resembling anything like the nuanced positions of scholars such as James Buchanan and Friedrich Hayek.

While these and many of the most well-known liberals in our discipline of economics do not write from a Christian perspective, we find that their writings, when taken as a whole and engaged in detail, are not just consistent with a Christian anthropology but also supportive of a Christian end: human flourishing. In what follows, we address some of the same topics as liberalism's critics—individualism and autonomy, anthropology, and negative and positive liberty—from our vantage point as Christian liberals and argue that liberalism, at least as characterized by some of its most well-known champions, is not inconsistent with orthodox Christian teaching or living. It may be, in fact, a necessary condition for human flourishing, even if not its guarantor.

### **Individualism, Rightly Understood**

Individual choice is a central feature of liberal thought, but individualism can have many meanings. Its critics often choose a meaning that is not the same as liberals' meaning. Critics complain that liberals aim to advance a "rugged" individualism premised on the idea that a person both can and should be totally autonomous and need not exercise much regard for others. But this is a caricature in two ways.

First, liberals recognize that human beings are inherently social animals, raised in families but also incapable of living in isolation at all stages of development. In fact, liberals understand that cooperation is an essential part of the modern economic order in which the division of labor is extensive. Adam Smith notes, "In civilized society [man] stands at all times in need of the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes."<sup>10</sup> He also notes that the woolen coat of a common laborer is the product of the actions of myriad people.<sup>11</sup> In today's world, the number of people cooperating to provide goods and services for us is much greater. As Goldberg says, "The market system is so good at getting people—from all over the world—to work together that we barely notice how much we're cooperating."<sup>12</sup>

Second, liberals generally do not aim to promote or advocate a particular degree of self-consideration but accept as a constraint of human nature that people are self-interested. Liberalism's take on individualism—to the extent it is an “ism” at all—is one that has little to say about “shoulds” for the individual and more to say about how the state or “society” should relate to the individual person.

To liberals, the individual matters. A particularly compelling narrative outlined by Christian liberal P. J. Hill connects the value liberal societies place on the individual to its foundations in Christian ideas. Hill explains it was the Christian conception of the *Imago Dei* and the consequent universal nature of human dignity that eventually gave rise to the open-access order that characterized the Institutional Revolution and the birth of liberalism.<sup>13</sup> That each individual matters may appear to be a purely value-laden assertion of liberalism, albeit one that is consistent with reality as understood by orthodox Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

Setting the normative aside, individuals matter methodologically. An individual acts as an individual, even when acting with some corporate purpose or objective beyond himself in mind. The individual is not merely a part of some greater collective. Thus, liberal economists often employ a logic known as methodological individualism such that individuals are the starting point of the analysis of human behavior. This reasoning is behind liberals' skepticism about a notion of “society,” particularly when personified or understood as an organism with some kind of collective will or agreed-upon purpose.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, liberals consider the individual central to an effective social order because individuals who are free to pursue their own purposeful actions often unintentionally benefit others. Empowering the individual to act in his sphere is crucial, in Hayek's view, because knowledge is inherently local, and an individual “cannot know more than a tiny part of the whole of society and that therefore all that can enter into his motives are the immediate effects his actions will have in the small sphere he knows.”<sup>16</sup> Consequently, even well-intentioned, other-minded individuals are at a disadvantage at aiming to benefit others the more distant the relationship.

This is magnified at the level of central planning and, for liberals, represents a fatal flaw for illiberal orders. It is a fascinating paradox of liberalism that the order that for society makes the best use of dispersed knowledge will recognize and empower the individual.

Maintaining social order is a central concern of liberals. In fact, Hayek considers individualism to be “primarily a theory of society.”<sup>17</sup> If individuals act, then to understand social phenomena is to understand the interplay of individuals’ behavior. In Hayek’s model of cultural evolution, institutions develop because of human action, even if not by human design.<sup>18</sup> In practical terms, order requires a shared set of traditions and morals, which serve as a means by which individuals form expectations and commitments such that disagreements among people do not lead to disorder.

Moreover, according to Buchanan, a moral tie binds the individual to the social order. A liberal order must ensure that “persons are treated as *persons*, as reciprocating human beings, deserving of mutual respect.”<sup>19</sup> This notion of reciprocity, therefore, implies that a moral social order inevitably involves community. Careful attention to the words of 20th-century liberals actually brings us quite far from the caricature of individualism as a person standing alone with no concern for or connections to anyone else. In the liberal view, man is both individual and social.

### **Freedom by Constraint**

Individualism, rightly understood, does not imply anarchy, and liberals do not equate anarchy to freedom.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps because they recognize that human beings are flawed and limited creatures (note how this view of human nature leaves room for error, selfishness, greed, and even a Christian conception of sin), liberals argue that only a social order with appropriate constraints can provide freedom from coercion and disorder; that is, escape from the Hobbesian “state of nature.” In Hayek’s lexicon, the constraints are called law—not to be confused with the narrower idea of legislation—and include morals and tradition that men discover over time to be effective. While claiming that rules and tradition are generally

“hated” whenever they constrain,<sup>21</sup> he ultimately argues that “virtually all the benefits of civilisation [*sic*], and indeed our very existence, rest, I believe, on our continuing willingness to shoulder the burden of tradition.” In the next paragraph he names as “the most ironic benefit of all . . . our very freedom.”<sup>22</sup>

Once we understand what the liberal notion of freedom is and is not, it is relatively straightforward to see that voluntary individual behavior can align with constraints. Catherine Pakaluk largely reconciles a Christian idea of freedom with liberalism using the idea of obedience understood in its two senses. She argues that “human liberty is characterized by both . . . *aligning of the will* (first sense) *with the laws that we find ourselves involuntarily subject to* (second sense).”<sup>23</sup> For example, liberals willingly submit to the physical laws of nature, for it would be foolish to behave as if gravity were fiction. Liberals are also generally open to an unchanging human nature characteristic to what Thomas Sowell calls, “the constrained vision.” Christian liberals might differ from liberals in general in their understanding of the scope and source of law. Nonetheless, liberals in general would likely agree with Pakaluk that “the free man rightly discerns the laws that govern him, and wills to be subject to them.”<sup>24</sup>

Where laws are established through legislation, there clearly must exist some coercion in society. But the rule of law is no “respector of persons.”<sup>25</sup> It sets the boundaries within which all individuals pursue their objectives in any way desired so long as they are not coercing others. Another moral dimension of the social order, therefore, is that it treats all equally and shows no favoritism. Buchanan argues that “the generality principle implies nondiscriminatory treatment of all persons in the relevant community—treatment that must necessarily be impersonal.”<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, that the law is impersonal gives considerable scope for individuals to choose wisely or unwisely, pursue virtue or vice, and act with others’ best interest at heart or with selfish intentions. While “freedom by constraint” is necessary for a liberal social order, it is not sufficient for human well-being or Christian notions of flourishing.

### The Necessity of Negative Liberty

Still, a liberal society permits each individual to select—Christians might prefer the word “discern”—their own goals and ends and to determine the best way to achieve those ends. This negative liberty, in practice, means everyone need not agree on the ends, nor do we need a mechanism by which we implement a common end for all people. People of faith, particularly Christians who believe that both the consequences of and the motivations for one’s actions are important, should recognize negative liberty as essential since without it an individual cannot act according to his natural right of conscience nor pursue higher forms of freedom.

With state authority, there are clear trade-offs between positive and negative liberty; the state cannot provide both. To guarantee positive liberty would require that some people know about the true end of each individual and humanity collectively and that those enlightened ones could arrange institutions to effectively promote these ends. If everyone is not in this position (knowing each individual’s end), then there is an inherent inequality in pursuing positive liberty through central planning, with the sages set apart as superior to the rest of humanity. (If everyone is in a position of this type of omnipotence, then the state need not actively pursue positive liberty; allowing individual choice would be sufficient for achieving it.)

But negative liberty can exist for everyone. Critics frequently portray the liberal defense of negative liberty as primarily about achieving choice for oneself. For example, Groarke says, “To insist on negative liberty is, in effect, to demand that society leave me alone, so that I may pursue my own self-chosen purposes.”<sup>27</sup> But Buchanan sees it differently: “Equal liberty is a two-way street. The putative libertarian who claims maximal liberty for himself but places others lower in some hierarchical ordering, simply does not qualify for membership in the clan.”<sup>28</sup>

Christian critics of liberalism argue that negative liberty allows that an individual still can be “enslaved” to his own selfish desires or lack information about his true telos, or end. As Christians, we

(and many other liberals) share that concern and would argue that, even if the ability to choose is good, not all choices are good. That liberal parents discipline their children and liberal professors implement incentive structures for their students indicates that even those who do not share a Christian perspective of holiness judge some behaviors to be more beneficial to an individual than others. Taking the view of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and many theologians, one might argue that the end of the human person is the perfection of the virtues and, therefore, the social order should encourage and enable individuals to learn to behave virtuously. Liberals can simultaneously maintain the importance of virtue while asserting the state is in no position to manufacture it.

### **Is Liberalism Incompatible with Christianity?**

According to Groarke, liberalism and Christianity are irreconcilable because theoretical liberalism asserts noninterference as the essential “good,” while religion, if faithful to its tenets, is often restrictive. Groarke further asserts that liberalism requires “indifferentism” such that citizens “believe that their views about the good are no better than opposing views.”<sup>29</sup> This, he argues, makes liberalism incompatible with any religion involving doctrinal commitments. We disagree.

First, we do not accept Groarke’s distinction between theoretical liberalism and practical liberalism. We are classical liberals on the basis of practical matters, including the role of liberal social orders and market economies in human flourishing and the practicable approach to living in a pluralistic society. We also agree with liberalism in theory, as it is consistent with challenges and opportunities inherent in Christian anthropology and a traditional understanding of the created order.

Second, as we have described above, liberalism allows—nay requires—individuals to voluntarily submit to constraints. Groarke, and we fear many other Christian critics of liberalism, have made a false dilemma of liberalism and Christian living. Finally, we would emphasize that, as an aspect of the negative

freedom we discuss earlier, citizens of a liberal society cannot be prevented from being involved in a particular church or sharing their faith, nor will nonbelievers be forced underground where we would struggle to know them.

Accordingly, negative liberty provides a real opportunity for Christians to live out their callings, individual and communal. As Christians, we accept that there is a telos for us as individuals and for the Christian polity—the church. The activities of church life, including worship services, sacraments, and service to others, can lead us to living lives of value and meaning. This is a key part of human flourishing. But coercion and state paternalism are not part of human flourishing.

We accept that a church we attend may have practices that we are to follow or avoid and that church discipline is a means God has granted the church for our good. To voluntarily join a group of people and accept the disciplines of the church is not the same as coercion by the political structures of society. We believe individual Christians and the church have an important role in the marketplace of ideas and civil society to shape and enlighten our communities about the laws to which we should voluntarily submit ourselves, including the natural law and created order of our God. In short, our liberty has a purpose.

We further believe that the rights of conscience must be guaranteed by the rule of law to people of other faiths or no religious faith at all. If the state is powerful enough to further what we want as Christians, it is also powerful enough to coerce us at some time in the future. Still greater, our most important choices—what or whom to love and trust—cannot be coerced. Even if the state coerces what appear to be virtuous behaviors, it cannot coerce any of us to follow the two great commandments to love the Lord our God and our neighbor as ourselves. Moreover, to place our trust in Christ involves the Holy Spirit and, mysteriously, our free will.

Practically, it is infeasible to agree on the proper ends for individuals and society as a whole in a modern, pluralistic society. The yearning for a society with a great degree of social cohesion and agreed-upon goals, as many of liberalism's Christian critics express,

seems more possible in a homogenous society but especially difficult among more economically developed and diverse nations.<sup>30</sup> A liberal social order that provides negative liberty both in the marketplace of ideas and for human action allows individuals to hold convictions about both means and ends, put them into practice, and work to promulgate their ideas and values. To move toward the common good, where there is disagreement about what the good is, is only feasible in a liberal society.

### Notes

1. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).
2. John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016).
3. Jonah Goldberg, *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Nationalism, Populism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2018).
4. Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*.
5. Louis Groarke, "What Is Freedom? Why Christianity and Theoretical Liberalism Cannot Be Reconciled," *Heythrop Journal* 47 (2006): 257-74.
6. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 3.
7. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 5.
8. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 135.
9. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 3.
10. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), 26.
11. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 22.
12. Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 12.
13. P. J. Hill's narrative also notes that the Institutional Revolution, in setting the environment for the more-famous Industrial Revolution, played a key role in the massive improvement in human well-being that followed. P. J. Hill, "Economic Growth and the Image of God" (lecture, Hope College, Holland, MI, February 18, 2016).

14. The Catholic principle of subsidiarity, for example, describes the family as having as one of its purposes support for developing each individual person. Even the family, which is revered across Christian traditions, is not the most basic building block of the created order.

15. One significant weakness of many critiques of liberalism is not the presumption that the common good exists, but that the alternatives suggested are often nonspecific or unhelpful in figuring out how we might in practice discern the common good, let alone organize diverse individuals in pursuing it.

16. Friedrich Hayek, "Individualism: True and False," in *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1948), 14.

17. Hayek, "Individualism," 1–32.

18. Friedrich Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

19. James M. Buchanan, *Why I, Too, Am Not a Conservative: The Normative Vision of Classical Liberalism* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2005), 76.

20. Adam Ferguson puts it this way: "Liberty or Freedom is not, as the origin of the name may seem to imply, an exemption from all restraints, but rather the most effectual applications of every just restraint to all members of a free society whether they be magistrates or subjects." Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: A. Strahan T. Cadell, 1792).

21. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, 13.

22. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, 63.

23. Catherine R. Pakaluk, "Dependence on God and Man: Toward a Catholic Constitution of Liberty," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 19, no. 2 (2016): 227–52, 228.

24. Pakaluk, "Dependence on God and Man."

25. Acts 10:34.

26. Buchanan, *Why I, Too, Am Not a Conservative*, 74.

27. Groarke, "What Is Freedom?," 258.

28. Buchanan, *Why I, Too, Am Not a Conservative*, 69.

29. Groarke, "What Is Freedom?," 264.

30. Even among people who agree on ends, reaching consensus about what that requires in practice will be insurmountable. For example,

consider the large number of Christians who accept the primacy of Scripture and the numerous biblical commands to care for the poor. Christian critics of liberalism generally eschew coercion as the means to the common good, but to come to “consensus,” *even sharing a vision of proper ends* would require an unresolvably complex popular discourse. (What does it mean to care for the poor? Who is poor? What shall we do? Who should do it or pay for it?)

# Prodigal Nation: Modern Liberalism and the American Soul

*Darren Guerra*

“Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.”

—Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address

**A**mong important and insightful critics across the political spectrum today, there is a strong opinion that the answer to Lincoln’s question in the Gettysburg Address is that a nation conceived in liberty cannot long endure, that liberalism that seeks to promote the special dignity of the human being by establishing political equality and maintaining political liberty is a foolish project. It is probably not worth laying down one’s life for. It is a project doomed to failure; indeed, it has failed. Furthermore, the American founders and Lincoln were either fools or frauds for having us believe that a nation so conceived could last long at all.<sup>1</sup>

If critics of American liberalism are right, just for the sake of argument, if the noble ideals of the founding were a fraud or the founders were fools, we must decide what to do now. Do we stop trying to preserve a crumbling edifice that, apparently, was corrupted from the beginning? Is American liberalism something that can even be saved?

Alasdair MacIntyre asks us to wait for the next Saint Benedict.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Rod Dreher counsels us to form monastic communities to wait out the coming Dark Age.<sup>3</sup> Patrick Deneen suggests we abandon the liberal project in favor of local communities and seek a new way forward.<sup>4</sup>

The debates over the decline of modern American liberalism have quickly produced a large and growing literature. Rather than wading through this literature, which is nigh impossible in the time or space given, I want to try something different. In addressing these questions of liberalism's desirability and sustainability, as well as the source of our liberal crisis, I want to start where critics of modern liberalism end, which is in the search for deep and lasting moral, perhaps even Christian, communities. I also want to suggest that perhaps liberalism has been ill-defined and that the cultural decline is not simply due to liberalism but rather a larger spiritual and philosophical malaise.

### **Creating and Preserving Moral Community**

What if the critics of American liberalism are right and the only way forward is to focus on building and forming smaller, more meaningful local communities devoid of the corrupting influences of liberalism? If they are correct, then the way forward is to build or preserve what might be called "thick" moral and religious cultures and communities. Such communities are formed in pursuit of a shared common good and the "highest goods," such as spiritual salvation.

These communities would have a shared telos, rooted ideally in a shared religious or moral vision. Such commonality and commitment helps create webs of human relationships that provide deep common bonds and deep friendships; such communities would nourish the soul. They would cultivate a freedom aimed at human excellence by accepting the authority of community norms and practices ultimately rooted in a profound metaphysical moral order. In a nation formed by contemporary philosophical liberalism, these communities would be countercultural. Amish

communities are one visible model, but there could be many other forms or models.

These thick communities are contrasted with the “thin” culture of liberal communities of self-interest or convenience, the types of communities where individual autonomy or unrestrained capitalism and market forces rule the day. Critics of liberalism might expect to find thin communities in a modern liberal society that rejects most forms of authority and seems incapable of fostering relational webs of depth and complexity.

### **Provide for the Common Defense?**

Let us then, for a moment, engage in a thought experiment. Imagine that the critics of American liberal democracy have found a way to create these deep communities they recommend and have done so in a place free from the tribulations of modern liberalism. Given this thought experiment, one of the key questions is: How would they preserve these communities in a dangerous and fallen world?

Preserving small, close-knit communities in a world rife with conflict is a fundamental, practical, and real historical challenge. While the human scale and spiritual depth of these communities may be highly desirable, their smaller size and limited material resources make them easy prey for larger and more aggressive political societies.<sup>5</sup>

For example, I once visited Venice, Italy, and Dubrovnik, Croatia, within a single week. Both are beautiful and wonderfully preserved cities. Walking the enchanting streets of each, I reflected on what life must have been like in their heyday. When examining their histories, the record recounted their thriving roles as flourishing independent republics on both sides of the Adriatic Sea. They were prosperous and influential communities for many years. However, their independence and prosperity were quickly and brutally ended by Napoleon, who marched through each region and put each of them under his boot in succession. (Venice fell in 1797, and Dubrovnik fell in 1808.)

Now, if relatively powerful and prosperous cities such as these can suffer such a fate, one wonders what would become of our new local, moral communities. The lesson of Venice and Dubrovnik, along with countless other small communities in history, illustrates the real political necessity of preserving one's way of life by being able to militarily defend one's way of life.

To prevent destruction or colonization, these thick human scale communities might need to be under the protection of some larger power or form an independent alliance with similar communities of size and scope. At some point, it might be prudent for the proposed alliance to be strengthened by creating some larger formal structure to help in the common defense of these communities. One would think such measures would be of absolute necessity in this dangerous world.

If this larger alliance or federal project were a necessity, what might it look like? Certainly, it would need to be a political structure that permits and preserves local control over politics, especially since preserving local communities is the entire point of the alliance in the first place. Thus, allowing each community to preserve its own distinct qualities is a necessity. This means that the larger political unit must demand a pretty thin communal commitment to not compete with or usurp the authority of the smaller, deeper communities.

Likewise, this new federal association would need to have a strong enough military to defend itself from becoming a colony of some larger, more aggressive power. Strong militaries do not grow on trees, so the federal republic would need to generate the economic wealth to fund and field a strong military, should the need arise. How might one generate enough economic outputs to fund such a military? Perhaps a commercial republic operating within free-market structures would be the best way to generate the economic wealth to protect the newly formed union and provide for a common defense. To do otherwise might risk becoming subject to the next Napoleon or a future Alexander the Great.

Surely, one can see where this is heading. It just may be that critics of American liberalism, in simply seeking to preserve their thick

religious communities, might well have to construct a political and economic structure that is strong enough to provide a common defense but thin enough at the federal level to allow for a great deal of local autonomy. If done well, this federal structure might suspiciously look like the federal republic that the American founders built. The thin liberal nature of the federal structure is in service to the local communities, where the fullness of life is really lived. The commerce of the young republic is able to generate enough wealth to fund a military strong enough to fend off larger nations looking for prey.

In other words, the American experiment sought to embrace the minimal amount of national-level shared moral principle necessary to provide the ground and boundaries for liberty, without imposing a uniform theological structure on the deep and varied local communities. By creating a larger structure meant to serve the smaller communities, the founders inherently limited the scope of the new structure. The American experiment had to sustain a community that was large enough, pluralistic enough, and strong enough to protect smaller, thicker local communities from foreign threats and still allow them to function on their own. As we have seen, thick cultural communities that pursue the highest goods in life are limited in their scope, size, and ability to protect and sustain themselves. It just might be that only a large “liberal” superstructure can maintain the economic and military capacities to protect the ordered liberty of the smaller, thicker communities to allow them to survive.

This reality also reveals the moderation of the American experiment as the founders conceived it. They never intended the national government to become an instrument for cultivating thick religious community on a continental level. As John Courtney Murray points out, “the American thesis is simply political” in contrast to the European Jacobin thesis, which “was basically philosophical; it derived from a sectarian concept of the autonomy of reason.”<sup>6</sup>

Most critics of American liberalism rightly expose the emptiness of “liberalism” as a philosophy or worldview, yet they misread the American project as if it were born of the same lineage as the

Jacobin tradition of Continental Europe. If American liberalism is correctly viewed simply as a political project to limit the power of government in the interests of ordered liberty, then we may rightly view the American founding as a resource for finding our way forward rather than the source of our problems.

### **American Liberalism vs. European Jacobinism**

As suggested by the thought experiment above, the American political experiment was never meant to embrace a totalizing philosophy rooted in the rejection of nature and the primacy of human reason. The American founders rejected unlimited human autonomy as the telos of the regime.

This American tradition must be distinguished from the European Jacobin tradition, which was a “deformation of the liberal tradition.”<sup>7</sup> While the deformed liberalism of Europe asserts the “primacy of the political, the principle of ‘everything within the state, nothing above the state,’”<sup>8</sup> America asserts one nation “under God.” The liberalism of the American founding sought to ground human freedom in submission to “natural law” or “nature and nature’s God.” According to Harry Jaffa, “the blessings of liberty” are a clear statement that liberty is necessarily bounded by our Creator, for the meaning of blessing is what is “good in the eyes of God.”<sup>9</sup> The American Revolution, guided by the natural law tradition, was “less a revolution than a conservation. It conserved, by giving newly vital form to, the liberal tradition of politics, whose ruin in Continental Europe was about to be consummated by the first great modern essay in totalitarianism.”<sup>10</sup>

In America, religion was to supersede the state in importance. The universal natural law, known by reason, can provide a sound basis for shared moral commitments without dragging the national state into theological debates or pronouncements.<sup>11</sup> American liberalism removed the state’s jurisdiction over religious matters due to the state’s lack of authority or competence to pronounce on such matters; nevertheless, the state must still preserve a moral basis and moral boundaries for legitimate law.

Again, Murray points out the problems with losing a moral basis for law and governance:

Political freedom is endangered in its foundation as soon as the universal moral values, upon whose shared possession the self-discipline of a free society depends, are no longer vigorous enough to restrain the passions and shatter the selfish inertia of men. The American ideal of freedom as ordered freedom, and therefore an ethical ideal, has traditionally reckoned with these truths, these truisms.<sup>12</sup>

The non-establishment of religion, while not demanding a thick theological commitment to be a citizen in America, still led to religion flourishing in America, in contrast to Europe and its dying and empty established churches. In the place of an established church, the American founders sought to encourage the flourishing of religious belief as one of the key ways to promote virtue among the citizenry, which was essential if ordered liberty were to be preserved.

If Murray, Jaffa, and others are right and the American founders rejected the primacy of the state and a totalizing “liberal” philosophy that sought radical human autonomy—and in turn built a political system that sought to reject such notions—then perhaps American liberalism as a *political* project is not the problem. Perhaps the problems in American culture and politics are ultimately rooted in the corruption of the American soul through foolish *philosophical* projects.

Talk of the human soul is well within the best practices of political philosophy. If we learn anything from Plato’s *Republic*, it is that the condition of the human soul is intimately tied to the health of the polis. For Plato, well-ordered souls create a well-ordered republic. This is a fundamental lesson of politics.

Ancient Greece, Ancient Israel, Christian Rome, the various medieval polities, England, the American founders, Alexis de Tocqueville, and others all believed in a metaphysical reality that does and should shape human society. It was modernity and

its postmodern turn that led millions to dismiss the reality of a human soul and objective morality rooted in something beyond the human will.

### **Spiritual Malaise of the West and a Way Forward**

America and the West in general seem to be caught in a deep spiritual malaise. This malaise is not new, but it is indeed taking its toll on our culture and, in turn, our politics.

For example, one must consider George Weigel's haunting account of the terrible slaughter and political malfeasance of World War I. In asking why the slaughter continued so long and was so vicious, Weigel points out that Europe had abandoned the one true God for the fickle and dangerous gods of the age: "Social Darwinism, Nietzschean irrationalism, xenophobia, and historical fatalism were acids eating away at notions of honor that had long tempered European politics and war making."<sup>13</sup>

For Weigel, the dangerous cancer lay in the prodigal tendencies of European societies, primarily European elites: "In the Europe of 1914, biblical understandings of the human condition and the moral life had been under assault for well over a century, from both within and without the churches."<sup>14</sup> From within, under the spell of liberal theology, European churches saw the intellectual substance of Christianity, "evacuated of substance" and replaced by "ethnic and national" identities, all of which were "exacerbated by the subordination of many European Christian churches to state power through the mechanism of religious establishment."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Weigel argues that from without, Comte's positivism, Feuerbach's subjectivism, and Marx's materialism all "meshed with Nietzsche's will to power to erode any biblically or theologically informed understanding of public life and political responsibility."<sup>16</sup>

Weigel's account is chilling and, at the same time, all too familiar. Europe had long abandoned the God of Israel for empty philosophical human projects, and, as a result, they paid a heavy price. Might the United States be reenacting a similar prodigal tale?

Leo Strauss observed mid-century that the *relativism* of German thought had thoroughly colonized the modern social sciences in America. In observing this, Strauss asserted:

It would not be the first time that a nation, defeated on the battlefield and, as it were, annihilated as a political being, has deprived its conqueror of the most sublime fruit of victory by imposing on them the yoke of its own thought.<sup>17</sup>

Despite its victories in World War I and World War II, has America foolishly adopted the worst of Continental European philosophy as its guide into the abyss of nihilism?

Might it be that America, like Europe, like the prodigal son of scripture, is abandoning its birthright? Is America, like Europe, like the prodigal son, squandering its immense inheritance of land, security, wealth, and political liberty in an excessive pursuit of pleasure, power, and money? Is America caught in a spiritual torpor that is much deeper and more dangerous than modern liberalism alone could effect?

The problem is not the tradition of the American founding nor its properly ordered liberal political institutions; the real problem is that the political liberalism of the founding has become the host of a malignant and metastasizing cancer of nihilism clothed in the promise of autonomy and freedom. In the midst of a deformed liberalism now animated by nihilism, what is a way forward?

First, if the core problem is *philosophical* and not America's *political institutions*, then it makes no sense to abandon political liberalism of the American institutional variety. Rule of law, constitutionalism, federalism, separation of powers, civil rights, and politics generally rooted in higher law—all must be sustained. Spiritual and philosophical problems must ultimately have spiritual and philosophical solutions.

One way forward is a general spiritual awakening. America has seen two great spiritual awakenings in its history. Might there be a third in the offing? The gods of wealth, pleasure, and power will ultimately prove impotent and empty. When American society has

hit rock bottom, millions may well seek the depth and ultimate purpose of spiritual salvation.

In the meantime, American churches must learn tough love. In love, they must reject the infiltrations of postmodernism, especially in the realm of human sexuality, for these attacks necessarily erode the authority of God and the church, as embodied both in Scripture and tradition. The church must hold firm to orthodoxy and await for the bankruptcy of postmodern culture, all the while treating the inevitable casualties of the culture war. It is nearly an iron law that people cannot live in social and political chaos. The American church must stay strong and await its prodigal sons to come home.

Another way forward is through a philosophical awakening. It is no secret that American universities are largely running toward the abyss, and there seems little to stop them from spiraling into an empty vortex. Those colleges and universities that have not abandoned the Western and Christian intellectual tradition must hold firm. Schools that seek truth, goodness, and beauty must continue to teach virtue and contribute to the larger moral order. Patrick Deneen's chapter on the American university is a masterful diagnosis of the problems and the challenges of postmodern "education."<sup>18</sup> The tradition of the "university" rather than the fragmented modern "multiversity" must be preserved to thrive again in the future.

In the political realm, the battle must be waged to sustain the political institutions that have served America well for more than 200 years. Discarding them now seems itself a page from a consumerist spirit of the age that has little patience for products or projects that become damaged or difficult to manage.

The malaise facing America ultimately resembles the traditional vice of sloth, which is more properly known as the vice of acedia, an "anxiety or weariness of heart."<sup>19</sup> It is a spiritual condition ultimately rooted in a lack of hope. The solution for acedia is a form of perseverance or rededication to one's work or purpose. One must not abandon one's post.

If America is experiencing something akin to a national form of acedia, then rather than abandoning liberalism or political

engagement, Americans as a people must seek to preserve the best of the American project of ordered liberty. They must persevere, and they should not abandon their post in this regard.

In other words, there must be a continued battle to preserve the “edifice of liberty” proclaimed by the young Abraham Lincoln in his Lyceum Address in 1838.<sup>20</sup> Lincoln spoke not long after the last of the great founders had died. In his eloquent telling, they had been living histories. They had been a “fortress of strength” in maintaining ordered liberty in America. Yet “what invading foeman could never do the silent artillery of time has done: the leveling of its walls.”<sup>21</sup> With the Founding Fathers gone, Lincoln called for the American people to forge new pillars for our “edifice of liberty” to prevent it from falling prey to decay or usurpation.

The pillars Lincoln called for were “general intelligence, sound morality, and in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws.”<sup>22</sup> These pillars can still serve the project of ordered liberty and resist the siren vice of acedia, but only if Americans have the hope and the courage to preserve their heritage and not abandon their posts in the heat of a culture war. This prodigal nation must restore its soul and renew its liberal institutions, not abandon them, if it is to regain the conditions for genuine human flourishing.

### Notes

1. The term “fools and scoundrels” is borrowed from Robert R. Reilly, “Fools or Scoundrels? A Response to Patrick Deneen,” *Public Discourse*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/10/20245/>.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 263.

3. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2018).

4. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

5. Plato’s “city of sows” comes to mind here.

6. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2005), 78.

7. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 47.
8. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 78.
9. Harry V. Jaffa, "The American Founding as the Best Regime," *Claremont Review of Books*, July 4, 2007, 2, <https://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/the-american-founding-as-the-best-regime/>. One might note that Murray and Jaffa disagree in some fundamental ways about the founding, but they both agree that it is ultimately limited by "nature and nature's God," among other things.
10. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 46.
11. Similarly, Harry Jaffa argues that part of what makes America the "best regime" is its solution to the theological-political problem by recognizing that religion represents the "highest things" and that the state has no jurisdiction or competency over religious matters. This allowed for "different . . . forms of worship which . . . were pleasing to God, [and] there was a common understanding of morality underlying—or transcending—religious differences." Jaffa, "The American Founding as the Best Regime."
12. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 51.
13. George Weigel, "The Great War Revisited," *First Things*, May 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/05/the-great-war-revisited>.
14. Weigel, "The Great War Revisited."
15. Weigel, "The Great War Revisited."
16. Weigel, "The Great War Revisited."
17. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2.
18. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*.
19. Sisters of St. Benedict, "Fighting the Noonday Devil," <https://www.smm Sisters.org/who-we-are/sister-stories/86/fighting-the-noonday-devil>.
20. Abraham Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" (speech, Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838), <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>.
21. Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions."
22. Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions."

## Navigating the Shoals of Liberalism

*Kevin Brown and Steve Clements*

In his now-famous Kenyon College commencement speech, the late author David Foster Wallace opened with a parable about two young fish who encounter an older fish swimming in the opposite direction. “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” asks the older fish. Swimming away, one of the younger fish turns to the other and asks, “What’s water?”<sup>1</sup>

Wallace’s talk—titled “This Is Water”—warns against the unreflective certitude that can characterize our experience of the world around us. As we ingest our environment, it registers on a cognitive level in a manner that appears clear and indisputable. What we see is what we see. Yet, like the young fish, we may be strikingly unaware of the very water we swim in—the “social imaginary” that guides, sustains, evokes, and impels human understanding, impulse, and action.<sup>2</sup>

Donald Trump’s unexpected rise to the presidency—with his peculiar mix of populist rhetoric, anti-elitism, gender- and race-baiting tweets and utterances, and disdain for the legislative and judicial branches of government—as well as a resurgence of nationalism and authoritarianism elsewhere around the world, has prompted fresh doubts among American intellectuals about the viability of our liberalism, the water in which we swim. From venerable magazines such as the *Atlantic*<sup>3</sup> to numerous recent books,<sup>4</sup> writers from across the political spectrum are grappling with the state of the world nearly 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although the post-Cold War commercial order has produced a staggering growth in wealth, propelling global gross domestic product from approximately \$20 trillion to \$60 trillion and lifting

at least two billion people out of poverty, this prosperity has yielded discontent at home and abroad with political liberalism.<sup>5</sup>

Properly assessing the liberal arrangements that mark our modern context requires a systematic appraisal of the philosophical underpinnings of liberal modernity and an ontological account of the humans who inhabit it. In this essay, we address several of the much lengthier critiques of liberalism that have recently appeared and embrace their claims that liberal institutions—while seemingly neutral toward incommensurable conceptions of the good—facilitate their own stories and practices that aim toward something ultimate. We also affirm that humans—whom we assume to be rational, reasoning, thinking beings—are far more belief- and narrative-driven than we might understand or care to admit. And hence, humans fail to understand the water in which they swim.

After exploring this context in the first half of the essay and arguing that we cannot exchange the water of liberalism for a more efficacious emulsion, we devote the latter half to suggested improvements in the practice of liberalism and how to appropriately navigate its currents.

### **The Dilemmas of Liberalism**

Let us note at the outset that disgruntlement about the state of the liberal American political experiment has flared since Vietnam, urban riots, domestic terrorism, and high-profile assassinations helped shatter the governing consensus of the post-World War II era. The viability of our chief executive model itself came into question during the doldrums of the late 1970s, amid concern about several consecutive “failed” presidencies and a diminished US role in the world. The 1980s brought economic renewal and optimism to the US but also massive deficit spending, heightened fears of nuclear war, and a merger-and-acquisition mania that alarmed workers. The sudden end of the Cold War in the early 1990s kindled hope for an era of democratic liberalism that would usher in a new world order. But even as global commerce mushroomed, American disenchantment with politics remained high with our leaders fighting an

impeachment, the shock of 9/11, the protracted wars that followed, and the long-term fallout from the 2008 recession. Not surprisingly, a near-permanent fixture of our landscape is the consensus among Americans that the country is on the wrong track.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, such concerns are not new, but merely recurrent. In 1996, for example, Harvard professor and communitarian Michael Sandel argued that a “procedural liberalism” had replaced a “republican liberalism” as a civic philosophy in the US. The former is a Rawlsian, pluralist approach to the political order. It encourages every individual to pursue his or her own vision of the good life and enables this by suppressing the larger society’s desire to embrace a particular telos, or purpose, for itself. The latter, older approach to our public philosophy, which dominated in the US through World War II, expects citizens to work collectively to define the common good for society and institutions in turn to inculcate the civic virtues necessary for such an order to function.<sup>7</sup>

We are unlikely to return to republican liberalism, Sandel averred, but the procedural liberalism we are saddled with breeds discontent in our society because it inspires no sense of community or civic engagement among self-seeking individuals. The challenge for politics, therefore, is to foster civic virtues in smaller communities that ensure a viable social order while doing so within the context of a nation that has no ultimate shared telos—a tall order indeed.

Patrick Deneen recently revisited this argument, charging not simply that modern American liberalism generates disgruntlement but that it has failed as a civic creed. For Deneen, what amounts to Sandel’s “procedural liberalism,” a philosophy in which the state exists to enable individuals to pursue any goals they choose, is the water in which we all swim. “What we call liberalism today,” posits Deneen in an interview about his book, “is in fact a transformation from a classical and Christian definition and understanding of liberty to one where liberty is understood as capacity to live one’s life in the absence of external constraints.”<sup>8</sup>

Deneen asserts that political progressives and conservatives both pursue policies that enhance the state as protector of the

individual while diminishing (if not destroying) mediating institutions—or any element of society that seeks to strengthen individuals' attachment to families, communities, traditions, religious commitments, and so forth. Progressives do this, not surprisingly, by promoting expansion of a centralizing state apparatus that can enable individuals to live without reliance on others. Conservatives, on the other hand, do the same thing, albeit unwittingly, by supporting an unfettered free-market economy.

Large-scale capitalism, in operation, has corrosive effects on the traditional social order, Deneen suggests, as its creative destructiveness disrupts jobs and communities, fosters inequality, and monetizes all human transactions.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, free-market capitalism requires an extensive state to regulate and manage a \$20 trillion economy and stabilize the global commercial order. Thus, for Deneen, American political dynamics under liberalism lead inexorably to an expansive and impersonal state, resource inequality, deteriorating conditions among the lower classes, and a monoculture that denigrates all forces opposed to unfettered individualism—and hence it fails to promote a life intelligible for the founders of the *novus ordo seclorum*.

What Deneen, Sandel, and other critics of liberalism acknowledge, in differing terms and contexts, is that while liberalism claims to provide a sociopolitical context that is neutral toward all human purposes, and thus a suitable environment in which individuals can develop and engage in self-fulfillment, it is in fact not neutral, but embodies a narrative character that must be understood. You might say that “nature abhors a(n) [ultimate] vacuum”—and liberal institutions such as markets or democracy foster their own directional vision of the good, albeit implicitly.

For example, for centuries, education was designed to cultivate within individuals not merely the ability to make choices but the ability to make the most virtuous or noble choice within a specific context—and acknowledging that a non-virtuous choice might be harmful to the chooser's welfare. But the liberal paradigm renders the expression of choice a virtue in itself and has almost nothing to say about the nature of choices. Robert Bellah, for example, writes,

“For most of us, it is easier to think about how to get what we want than to know what exactly we should want.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, liberalism reconstitutes choice itself as a virtuous act (not virtuous based on the object or end that is chosen, sought, desired, or pursued). In this narrative, individuals are defined by their choices and preferences—a “central value of liberal modernity.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, choice and autonomy are given primacy since the good is constructed—not apprehended, pursued, and embodied.

Similarly, within liberalism, freedom is liberation from ties that bind individuals—religious commitments, familial ties, community relationships, and so forth. In this narrative context, liberty thus becomes a non-teleological concept. Freedom *from* obligations of any sort is emphasized, rather than freedom *to* undertake activities wherein individual pursuits are secondary or tertiary to other commitments. As generation after generation of Americans swims in the water of this narrative, so this argument goes, we lose our ability to cultivate traditional virtues such as self-sacrifice or devotion to extended family and instead become fixated on unfettered choice itself. As famed poet Matthew Arnold writes, “Freedom is a very good horse to ride, but to ride somewhere.”<sup>12</sup>

### Is There a Liberal Alternative?

Dating roughly from when John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* was released a half century ago, liberal critiques have been advanced from a variety of scholars and backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> While these critiques are compelling, Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that there is no ready alternative for the liberal sociopolitical order we inhabit. “We are all liberals,” observes Hauerwas.<sup>14</sup> In recognizing that liberalism distorts our narrative understanding of the world, how do we respond if we cannot escape this paradigm?

One common response relates to virtue promotion. That is, liberalism lives and thrives off the “borrowed capital” of thickly constituted, virtuous citizens who resist the excesses of liberalism. Moreover, liberalism’s penchant to bracket out moral and spiritual considerations—that is, considerations of the

ultimate—will, ironically, diminish the very virtue it presupposes. Sandel summarizes this position well: “The public philosophy by which we live cannot secure the liberty it promises, because it cannot inspire the sense of community and civic engagement that liberty requires.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, it makes intuitive sense to address these shortcomings by fortifying the moral and spiritual dimensions of civil society and to “thicken” liberalism’s otherwise “thin” conception of the good.<sup>16</sup> The sentiment is right, but the manner by which it is realized matters greatly. Indeed, liberal ideology is itself a response to history’s bloody and unsavory despotisms committed in the name of “virtue.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, one form of virtue cannot be instituted from a ruling political authority.

Disfigurations of “virtue” and its imposition have led many, such as Isaiah Berlin, to famously conclude that negative liberty (noninterference) and pluralism remain “a truer and more humane ideal” since they help avoid the despotisms of attempting to harmonize human ends *via fiat*.<sup>18</sup> Put differently, to outline a thick conception of the good—a distinct vision of the end of mankind—risks coercion.<sup>19</sup> To coerce another, writes Berlin, is to treat that person as subhuman.<sup>20</sup>

However, virtue can be pursued without coercion. Among other things, there are epistemic reasons for the pursuit of virtue and “the good.” For one, people may be equal, but ideas are not. (To disagree with this assertion is to prove its point.) Moreover, liberal democracy and its institutions were built for disagreement, not in spite of it. “Deliberation is a pale thing,” says Sandel, “if it does not go with the idea that some people may be right and others may be wrong.”<sup>21</sup>

As Jean Bethke Elshtain notes, the “orienting framework” for citizens in a liberal society is the political ethic of toleration.<sup>22</sup> She posits that toleration, in its classical form, did not require one to suspend judgment, beliefs, or identity when confronted with contrasting ways of being.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, scholar John Inazu describes tolerance as “a willingness to accept genuine difference.” But he is quick to point out that

tolerance “does not require embracing all beliefs and viewpoints as good or right.”<sup>24</sup> That is, the opposite of coercion is not passivity, blind acceptance, or relativism.

We submit that fruitful solutions to liberalism’s less appealing qualities can occur from within the liberal framework, not in spite of it. If there are objectively desired states that are intimately tied to human flourishing and teleology, what story do they draw upon? What liberal institutions can pull us into this narrative?

### **A Way Forward: Liberal Institutions and Alternative Narratives**

We propose that our energy is best served not by lamenting liberalism or constructing its replacement but by incubating alternative stories within liberal institutions to shape and guide human action. Our modest suggestion here is that society under liberalism can be best rehabilitated by greatly strengthening the ability of two crucial institutions, educational entities and churches, to foster alternative narratives of virtue and human flourishing.

For many Americans, the *raison d’être* of today’s schools is instrumental in nature. Indeed, popular commentary regarding pre- and postsecondary educational institutions suggests that curriculum exists for the service of larger marketplace labor demands and professional considerations.<sup>25</sup> Put differently, education facilitates our reflex toward careerism, and an educational experience’s value is predictably captured in cost-benefit terms: Does the net-present value of future earnings from degree completion exceed its cost?

This is a significant contrast, though, from a more classically oriented approach to education. In *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggested that the purpose of education is to engender ordinate affections among students.<sup>26</sup> Or, as C. S. Lewis writes, “[making] the pupil like and dislike what he ought.”<sup>27</sup>

This is reflective of Saint Augustine’s definition of virtue as *ordo amoris* (“ordered love”). In *The City of God*, Augustine writes:

Because we do well to love that which, when we love it, makes us live well and virtuously. So that it seems to me that it is a brief but true definition of virtue to say, it is the order of love.<sup>28</sup>

Implicit in this understanding of both education and virtue is the idea that humans are teleological in their makeup. That is, they have end states associated with fulfillment, satisfaction, and flourishing.<sup>29</sup> As William Cavanaugh writes, there are true and false desires, and “we need a *telos* to tell the difference between them.”<sup>30</sup> This perspective makes possible an educational project that can transcend learning as a means to merely achieve a “self-authoring mind”<sup>31</sup>—advancing students toward “the pursuit of an end that is objectively valid.”<sup>32</sup>

Our suggestion here is not that schools, colleges, or universities adopt the classical curriculum of previous eras. Rather, the current curriculum should be situated in an educational framework that is palpably more intentional about inculcating within students a *telos* for their lives and teaching the virtues necessary to achieve that end. We believe most Christian colleges and universities already do versions of this, as do many Christian K–12 schools, although all these entities might see a renaissance if they undertook this task with renewed vigor.

The greater policy challenge lies in appropriately supporting secular universities and K–12 public schools in pursuit of such a reorientation. The university problem could likely be dealt with by establishing a host of independent *telos*-promoting communities on the periphery of campuses, where students could live and imbibe narratives that differ from those offered in dormitories, fraternities, and sororities. The K–12 school system could build on the charter concept to create “*telos* academies.” But doing this will require higher levels of funding and a new attitude toward allowing educators to create such learning communities. Interestingly, cultural critic Neil Postman anticipated a version of this idea a generation ago.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to classically oriented classrooms, this vision for educating the sentiments and the paradoxical freedom it assumes (“What can I give myself to that makes me free?”) can be

inculcated, developed, and realized through a broad array of other liberal institutions as well.<sup>34</sup> One such institution is the church. As Will Willimon writes, “The church is a school of desire, teaching us what things are worth wanting, what desires are worth fulfilling.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, institutions such as the church are particularly relevant since they possess the DNA to challenge “the liberal assumption that a just polity is possible without the people being just.”<sup>36</sup>

This challenge is fostered through the narratives and liturgies of the church—a meta-story that burrows its way into our imaginative landscape, coloring our perspective of the world, and informing our practices that, in turn, come to form us. It is liberal in that it need not seek to impose the beliefs, values, and traditions of the Judeo-Christian faith onto others (through coercion or manipulation). Describing the church as a “contrast model” for secular polities, Hauerwas writes:

We know that the story of God is the truthful account of our existence, and thus we can be a community formed on trust rather than distrust. The hallmark of such a community . . . is its refusal to resort to violence to secure its own existence or to insure [*sic*] internal obedience.<sup>37</sup>

Yet unlike the liberal ideological foundation that buttresses freedom of religion, the church does not take a neutral posture toward competing conceptions of the good. Indeed, the church is illiberal and undemocratic, says Hauerwas, “if by democratic we mean that no one knows the truth and therefore everyone’s opinion counts equally.”<sup>38</sup> It is also illiberal in the sense that human free agency, and the liberty it provides, has a teleological trajectory. As Saint Augustine famously writes, “For you have made us for yourself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you.”<sup>39</sup>

Ironically, then, the church teaches that our freedom is discovered and realized in the giving of one’s self over to God. In stark contrast to modernity’s conception of the autonomous self, the Christian faith tradition teaches that our liberation is discovered, not diminished, in its relinquishment to God.<sup>40</sup>

Like educational institutions committed to a classical notion of identifying and habituating ordinate affections, the church, both liberal and illiberal in its constitution, need not “shrink from hoping to bend our policy and public rituals in the direction of rightly ordered love, not so we can ‘win’ or ‘be in control,’ but for the sake of our neighbors, for the flourishing of the poor and vulnerable, for the common good.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Conclusion: Liberalism’s Currents, Liberalism’s Vessels**

Returning to David Foster Wallace’s “This Is Water” speech, the commencement speaker suggests that there is no such thing as unbelief; all of us tilt toward something perceived as ultimate. “Everybody worships,” says Wallace. Similarly, sociologist Christian Smith asserts that humans are moral, believing, narrative animals. He writes:

Human cultures are everywhere moral orders. Human persons are nearly inescapably moral agents. Human actions are necessarily morally constituted and propelled practices. And human institutions are inevitably morally infused configurations of rules and resources.<sup>42</sup>

If Smith’s account of the human situation is true, then it explains why liberalism and the institutions it conceives seldom remain penultimate and neutral. Institutions are not merely practical arrangements that exist for a specific function (e.g., to provide health care, make political decisions, or distribute scarce resources). Rather, Smith suggests that our social institutions are “always morally animated enterprises” rooted in “narratives, traditions, and world-views of moral orders.”<sup>43</sup>

In this sense, liberalism is like a *current*. The picture of the autonomous self that liberalism paints is, says Smith, an illusion—a “sociological absurdity.”<sup>44</sup> Rather, liberal democratic politics or free-market structures unwittingly guide their participants into stories, rituals, and liturgies that shape our longings, stain our conception of reality, and animate our action.

Yet, while liberalism may be a current—unconsciously guiding us along a particular path, colonizing our imagination, and liturgizing its members into “embodied scripts that form our loves and shape our devotion”<sup>45</sup>—liberal institutions, ironically, may also be understood as *vessels*. This is true in both meanings of the word: a receptacle and a ship. Regarding the former, liberal institutions arise around and can be sustained by various conceptions of the good. Consider, for example, Rotary Clubs, religious places of worship, Parent Teacher Associations, the American Legion, or even Pastafarianism—an anti-religious movement whose “deity” is a flying spaghetti monster.

So liberal institutions may be an open container for any range of beliefs, values, and judgments. However, they are also like a ship in that they serve as a vessel aimed toward some final destination or end. Many institutions (family, church, school, etc.) are teleological in their makeup. They are established around a certain character, animated by an ultimate vision, and aimed toward a particular end (oftentimes in common). In commenting on North American mediating institutions, Alexis de Tocqueville notes that Americans “carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires.”<sup>46</sup>

To carry the metaphor, under the current of liberalism, we may drift into inhospitable waters. And yet, that same body of water can be navigated by vessels that, ironically, are situated in their narration, teleological in their orientation, and meaningfully persuasive in their influence. We posit that liberal currents can best be navigated by infusing in our institutions the ability to inculcate narratives that counteract the vision of the unattached human individual.

### Notes

1. David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).
2. Charles Taylor describes a social imaginary as “the ways people

imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

3. The October 2018 issue of the *Atlantic* contains a range of articles that address the question “Is Democracy Dying?”

4. For example, see William A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017); and Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

5. For example, a 2009 article from the *Economist* suggests that, amid centuries of increased efficiency in producing food, enlightenment science, industrial growth, technological innovation, and gains in overall wealth among both rich and poor nations, such “material progress” has failed to deliver emotional well-being, satisfaction, better relationships, and overall happiness. The article invites readers to consider a more robust understanding of terms such as “progress” and “prosperity.” See *Economist*, “Onwards and Upwards,” December 17, 2009, 37–40, <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2009/12/17/onwards-and-upwards>.

6. Aggregating a variety of polling data together, RealClearPolitics finds that since the financial crisis, most Americans believe the country is on the “wrong track.” See RealClearPolitics, “Direction of Country,” [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/direction\\_of\\_country-902.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/direction_of_country-902.html).

7. Michael J. Sandel, “America’s Search for a New Public Philosophy,” *Atlantic*, March 1996, 57–74, [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/sandel/files/americas\\_search\\_for\\_a\\_new\\_public\\_philosophy.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/sandel/files/americas_search_for_a_new_public_philosophy.pdf).

8. Patrick Deneen with Brian Dijkema, “Liberty, Equality, . . . Disintegration? A Conversation with the Author of *Why Liberalism Failed*,” *Comment*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/liberty-equality-disintegration/>.

9. To this last point, Michael Sandel has suggested that there is a difference between *having* a market economy and *being* a market society. See Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 10.

10. Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 21.

11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 337.

12. Matthew Arnold in David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

13. See Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and Its Critics* (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

14. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 72.

15. Sandel, “America’s Search for a New Public Philosophy,” 58.

16. This is Rawls’ term referring to his primary social goods of rights, liberties, income, and wealth—or, as Rawls puts it, “things that are rational to want whatever else we want.” See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971), 223.

17. To appeal to virtue and the good is unavoidably political in its nature. This leads to a more pressing concern: If liberalism presupposes virtue, then whose virtue? Moreover, who will enforce its inclusion and practice? Such questions remind us of history’s uncomfortable relationship with imposing a particular vision of the good. Projects in “virtue” risk an affront to autonomy, collapsing the liberty of the individual that has come to mark the free world. Responding to Michael Sandel’s appeal to virtue in matters of justice, historian Niall Ferguson highlighted the bloody realities of moving a pluralistic society toward singular moral ends: “I just see Robespierre every time you use that word [virtue]. At the bottom of republican virtues you send people to the guillotine.” See Corydon Ireland, “Getting Justice Right,” *Harvard Gazette*, September 9, 2009, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2009/09/getting-justice-right/>.

18. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 31.

19. Berlin points out that it may be beneficial to coerce another man to his benefit—but, he says, it is still coercion. He writes: “But to manipulate men, to propel them towards goals which you—the social reformer—see, but they may not, is to deny their human essence, to treat them as objects

without wills of their own, and therefore to degrade them.” Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, 11.

20. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*.

21. Sandel offered this thought as a panelist during a Harvard University justice conference in 2009. Michael Sandel, “Justice Panel,” John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum, September 8, 2009.

22. Jean Bethke Elshtain and Michael Sandel, “Under God? The Role of Religion in Public Life,” Veritas Forum, March 5, 2013, <http://www.veritas.org/under-god-role-religion-public-life/>.

23. Elshtain points to the importance of what she describes as “authentic persuasion”—which is different from coercion and manipulation. “Persuasion,” she says, “begins with a presupposition that you are a moral agent—a being whose dignity no one is permitted to deny, or to strip from you. And from that stance of mutual respect, from that stance alone, one offers arguments or invites your participation, your sharing in a community, and its rhythms.” See Elshtain and Sandel, “Under God?”

24. John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 87. Tolerance is, he says, a “practical endurance for the sake of coexistence.”

25. One such example relates to the cynical statements about higher education made by Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin or Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker. See Eric Kelderman, “Kentucky’s Governor Has Raised Hackles Across Higher Ed. What’s His Plan?,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 16, 2016, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Kentucky-s-Governor-Has/238058>. This also reflects Joseph Pieper’s definition of the “servile arts”—where educational programming is in distinct service to professional or marketplace considerations (contrasted with *liberal* education, which is not). See Joseph Pieper, *Leisure as the Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).

26. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terrence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999), book II, chap. 3.

27. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1944), 16.

28. Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), book 15, chap. 22.

29. To desire, notes Peter Leithart, is to impose a limit onto one’s self,

since desire is by definition ordered to ends. And yet, writes Leithart, “Desire is liberating not *in spite of* its fixity but *because of* its fixity.” This suggestion, while seemingly counterintuitive, relates to the nature of what we desire—what we love. Some loves enslave; others liberate. See Peter J. Leithart, “Educating for Liberty,” *First Things*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/10/educating-for-liberty>.

30. William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 10 (italics original).

31. Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc with Megan Scribner, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 103.

32. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, ix.

33. Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

34. This includes the Christian university that currently employs us!

35. William H. Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980), 80.

36. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 72.

37. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 85.

38. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 85.

39. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Albert C. Outler (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2007), 3.

40. This sentiment is present in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, where he writes: “Thou seemest human and divine, / The highest, holiest manhood, thou. / Our wills are ours, we know not how; / Our wills are ours, *to make them thine*” (italics ours). Lord Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*.

41. James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 34.

42. Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

43. Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 22.

44. Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 156.

45. Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 27.

46. Alexis de Tocqueville, quoted in William Klimon, “Mediating Institutions,” *Religion & Liberty* 2, no. 3 (July 20, 2010), <https://acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-2-number-3/mediating-institutions>.



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