American law is, of course, highly limited. Catholics were a tiny minority in the American colonies and took many decades to find their full voice in American public discourse. But the United States is a carrier of the Western Tradition and, as such, has a legal system and culture deeply indebted to Catholic institutions, beliefs, and practices. As is rightly pointed out in more than one essay, here, our very understanding of human rights is rooted in the Church’s teachings on the dignity of the person. In practice, American understandings of individual rights, along with the role of government in promoting the common good, rest on principles—and legal practices—of rule by consent and the due process of law developed through debates within and between the Church and various secular powers. One would have wished that the vast literature on this topic, including the writings of Brian Tierney, R.H. Helmholz, and Kenneth Pennington, might have been used to lay a solid historical foundation for this volume, instead of being ignored in its brief, highly reductionist preface. That said, this remains a highly useful sourcebook, especially for non-specialists seeking greater understanding of American law from a Catholic perspective.

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John Safranek’s book is a welcome addition to contemporary discussions of liberalism. Liberalism, though, means different things to different people. Christopher Wolfe, for example, has defended what he calls Natural Law Liberalism, which is a union of what he identifies as the core principles and tendencies of liberalism with natural law theory. Safranek’s target is what he calls “modern liberalism,” and it is clear that the modern liberalism he critiques is increasingly influential in American culture.

The modern liberalism that Safranek has in mind is perhaps best encapsulated by the (in)famous “mystery passage” from the United States Supreme Court’s 1992 decision in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* in which the joint opinion stated: “Matters involving the most intimate and personal choices a person may make in a lifetime, choices central to personal dignity and autonomy, are central to the liberty protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human
This understanding of the nature of liberty led the Court to protect the right to abortion (*Roe* and *Casey*), homosexual sodomy (*Lawrence v. Texas*), and same-sex marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*).

These exercises of liberty must, the Court concluded, be unconstrained by the majority’s view of morality. The Court stated that its “obligation is to define the liberty of all, not to mandate our own moral code.” Majoritarian views of morality were not adequate state interests that could justify state restrictions on autonomous choices. In fact, these majoritarian views of morality were properly understood as exercises of bigotry. These exercises of freedom could only be constrained by the harm principle.

It is this form of liberalism that Safranek addresses. He begins by tracing its roots in Hobbes, Bentham, and Mill. He then explores the critical concept of autonomy. According to Safranek, other key concepts such as equality, rights, dignity, and interests are essentially indistinguishable from autonomy. This is also clearly seen in *Obergefell* where the Supreme Court relied on ideas of autonomy and equality to invalidate laws banning same-sex marriage. In fact, the Court merged the ideas by referring to equal dignity. It was clear, though, that the use of equality was a rhetorical flourish—autonomy was doing all of the work.

The idea of autonomy embedded in modern liberalism is that individuals have the right to pursue their choices without constraint. The state can’t restrict choices because it disapproves of the choices the individual makes. The state must be neutral about the good.

Safranek’s book is an effort to critique this understanding of personal liberty. His critique is sweeping. Liberalism is defective, he argues, because it is self-contradictory. In fact, liberalism, as the title of his book states, “is a myth successfully propagated by social and political authorities to conceal their imposition of a distinct set of goods that undermines the traditional Western ethos.” It is not “a coherent philosophy but a collection of causes advanced under the rubric of personal liberty by powerful social and political interests. They mask their imposition of these causes on democratic republics by emotively potent rhetoric” (xiii). Despite protestations to the contrary, “liberal scholars advocate a state-imposed morality and a distinct theory of human nature, both of which violate fundamental liberal tenets and are smuggled into political discourse without any defense or justification” (xiv).

In opposition to modern liberalism, Safranek offers a pre-modern understanding of freedom expressed in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. This understanding reflects a view of human nature and an explicit account of morality that offers a conception of the good that freedom ought to be oriented towards. In this pre-modern view, reason and truth are es-
sential components and are opposed to the skepticism and moral agnosticism of modern liberalism. The pre-modern view also values freedom; in the pre-modern perspective, Safranek contends, freedom is linked to truth and to right order reflected in the law. He maintains, echoing Pope John Paul in *Veritatis Splendor*, that “freedom and rights can be guaranteed only if there is law; law requires morality, and morality depends on a proper understanding of human nature” (223).

Safranek’s account of the pre-modern alternative emphasizes the importance of tradition and the value of social relationships. Tradition is often denigrated in modern liberal thought and relationships such as marriage and family are undermined by an exaggerated emphasis on individual freedom. Safranek particularly emphasizes the value of marriage and family, “the nurseries of moral, intellectual, and spiritual virtues” (249). In fact, he contends that “[t]he new aristocracy is intact families” (250).

Modern liberalism tries to exclude all of this from the public debate. Safranek’s book is an effort to understand and critique modern liberalism and eventually to promote “a more fruitful public discussion of the disputed views of the good that underlie our political and social disputes” (xvii).

This book is a valuable contribution to debates about liberalism. Safranek is a medical doctor who works as an emergency room physician and who also has a doctorate in philosophy. As suggested above, the work covers a range of topics: expositions and critiques of the philosophical origins of modern liberalism (Hobbes, Bentham, and Mill), devastating descriptions of the inadequacies of liberalism’s contemporary proponents (such as Rawls and Macedo), discussions of key concepts (e.g., liberty, autonomy, equality, rights, dignity, and Mill’s harm principle), and very subtle analysis and critique of Supreme Court cases on abortion, assisted suicide, and same-sex marriage. This work is marked by technical sophistication. His critiques of utilitarianism and of the harm principle are particularly insightful. But the book is not just written for philosophers. It is clearly written and would be accessible to those without specialized training in philosophy. Readers of this journal would profit from a careful engagement with Safranek’s critique of liberalism.

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