

Symposium: Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* and the Crisis of American Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

This is the third in a series of symposia addressing the far-reaching—indeed, radical—transformation American culture has undergone over the past half-century and its implications for the future of our public order and of the Catholic Church in America.¹ As Ryan Barilleaux pointed out in the first of the three:

At the opening of the century, federal and state laws protected the institution of marriage, religious institutions were able to conduct their affairs with a minimum of state interference, and no one seriously questioned which bathroom a male or a female should use. Since then, however, each of these facts had changed or were seriously challenged: following passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010, the Obama Administration mandated that all employers in the nation—secular or religious—provide free contraceptive and abortifacient drugs to their employees; in 2015 the U.S. Supreme Court discovered a right to same-sex marriage in the Constitution; and in 2016 the Obama Administration tried to require schools across the nation to allow transgender students to use the bathroom or locker-room that corresponds to each student's "gender identity." Along with these legal and regulatory changes, public opinion had changed: in 2001, fifty-seven percent of Americans opposed same-sex marriage; by 2016, fifty-five percent supported it. What had once been the mainstream view in American society and public policy was increasingly being defined as a "fringe" position.²

At the institutional level, this new order has taken the form of a highly centralized state in which the powers of the national government are seen

as essentially plenary in nature, and in which governmental power is concentrated in the executive and judicial branches, as well as in what has come to be called “the administrative state,”³ a multiplicity of administrative agencies that simultaneously exercise executive, legislative and judicial power. In this new order, government by the people has been largely supplanted by government by executive, administrative and judicial fiat; and governmental power has become not only highly centralized, but all-encompassing. Indeed, we seem to be drifting toward the soft despotism famously predicted by Tocqueville in which the state “extends its embrace to include the whole of society” covering “the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform.” By doing so, “it enervates, stifles and stultifies so much that in the end” the populace becomes “no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd.”⁴

At the level of public philosophy, this order is rooted in a radically post-Christian understanding of man and society whose most striking features are its individualism, subjectivism, and secularism. While the proponents of this ideology might differ about the proper scope of state action, they are united in their embrace of a distinctive understanding of man, society and the human good whose central values are liberty and equality, and which affords what Charles Taylor describes as “absolutely central importance to the freedom to choose one’s own mode of life.”⁵ At the heart of this vision is what Francis Canavan describes as “the steady choice of individual freedom over any other human or social good that conflicts with it, an unrelenting subordination of all allegedly objective goods to the subjective good of individual preference.”⁶

The public morality that flows from this vision is simple and straightforward: What George Will terms the “moral equality of appetites”⁷ becomes the organizing principle of law and public policy; choice and self-creation are elevated to the status of the human good; toleration and nonjudgmentalism become the highest moral virtues; and the job of government comes to be understood as the creation of a framework of order allowing individuals the greatest possible freedom to pursue their vision of the good life consistent with the exercise of that same freedom by others.

In this new order, this ideology is elevated to the status of our new public doctrine, our new national orthodoxy. Indeed, as Hugh Heclo observes, it functions as our established religion, our “de facto religious creed and commitment,”⁸ proclaiming a gospel of human autonomy, liberation, and self-creation (hence, the missionary zeal, the evangelical fervor, of its proponents). This ideology, it should be stressed, demands not merely an ethic of live and let live, but an ethic of affirmation in which the choices

and values of other individuals are not merely tolerated, but affirmed and celebrated. The refusal to affirm the “identities” of others is viewed as an affront to the demands of freedom, equality, human dignity and justice. In this new order, the price of admission to the public square is the validation of the values, lifestyles, etc. of others. “Normlessness,” as Canavan points out, “turns out itself to be a norm.”⁹

From the perspective of this doctrine, belief-systems that break fundamentally with the ideology of the sovereign self—especially those rooted in what Steven D. Smith calls “strong religion,” (i.e., the type of religion that insists that “some people’s deeply held beliefs are true while others are false” and that “some ways of living are acceptable to God while others are abhorrent”¹⁰)—are both erroneous and dangerous. Indeed, this ethos propels us toward what Neuhaus famously called “the naked public square,” a public square hermetically sealed to “particularist religious and moral belief”;¹¹ and toward a desiccated vision of religious liberty in which this freedom is reduced to the mere freedom of the individual to believe and worship.¹²

In this new regime, Catholicism becomes, in Smith’s words, “a scandal and offense”;¹³ and faithful Catholics are relegated to a cultural and legal status that might not unfairly be described as “a dhimmitude.”¹⁴ In fact, as Gary Glenn observes, at least as far as the public square is concerned, we see in it today: the “nascent suppression” of Catholicism and “Catholic moral teachings.”¹⁵

It is true that there is a long tradition of reflection among Catholics about the relationship of Catholicism to American democracy, about the compatibility of what John Courtney Murray famously called “the American Proposition” with “the principles of Catholic faith and morality.”¹⁶ It is also true that tensions between Catholicism and what might be called “Americanism” are nothing new—and would seem to be inevitable, if for no other reason than the status of Catholics is as a minority in a predominantly non-Catholic society.

Nevertheless, these tensions have been greatly exacerbated by the nature of the new order that seems to be emerging. And, while Catholic thinkers have never fully agreed about the nature of the American political experiment and its compatibility with Catholicism, it is clear that whatever challenges the original American order posed for Catholics and whatever reservations Catholic thinkers might have harbored concerning it pale before the problems posed by its successor.

This new situation thus calls for what Murray once termed “a new work thought,”¹⁷ a new reflection on the nature, origins and implications of this new public order and the relationship of American Catholics (or at

least to those American Catholics committed to remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church) to it.

At first glance, the relevance of this symposium to this “new work of thought” might not be apparent. After all, the symposium concerns Patrick Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed*,¹⁸ a much-discussed and widely reviewed volume that argues that the roots of this transformation, as well as many of our contemporary dysfunctions, are found in the philosophy which informs our civil conversation which Deneen calls “liberalism.” Liberalism, in this sense, designates something broader than what Americans normally mean by liberalism. It designates not an orientation on current public policy issues, but a model of man and society championed by many of the leading figures of modern political thought. In the sense that Deneen is using the term, both American liberalism and American conservatism take their bearings from the liberal model of man and society.

Deneen argues that at the heart of this model are, on the one hand, an “anthropological individualism and . . . voluntarist conception of choice,” and, on the other hand, an “insistence on the human separation from and opposition to nature” that finds expression in a commitment to the conquest of nature via science and technology” (37). The chasm that seems to separate American liberalism and American conservatism “masks a more fundamental, shared worldview,” and is, in fact, for the most part an argument about the best means to advance a shared goal, namely, a society dedicated to “individual liberty and equality” as its highest goods. American conservatives (who are really “classical liberals” or “first wave” according to Deneen) contend that “unfettered markets” are the most effective means to this goal. American liberals (“progressive” or “second wave” liberals, in his terminology), on the other hand, argue that an “extensive reliance upon the regulatory and judicial powers of the national government” is essential to its realization (45). Thus, the ongoing and bitter battle between left and right that dominates American public life is essentially a family quarrel. This is perhaps not surprising given that America was “founded by the implicit embrace of liberal philosophy” (5). Indeed, “our Constitution” was “the embodiment” of liberalism’s vision (101).

Liberalism, furthermore, is not just—as its adherents sometimes claim—a set of neutral procedures for political decision-making. Rather, it “is the first of the modern world’s three great competitor political ideologies” (fascism and communism being the others), and “as ideology . . . proposed transforming all aspects of human life to conform to a pre-conceived political plan,” to remake “the world in its image” (5) thereby achieving “supreme and complete freedom” for individuals though “their liberation from particular places, relations, memberships, and even identi-

ties—unless they have been chosen, are worn lightly, and can be revised or abandoned at will” (16). “Perfect liberal consent,” he writes, “requires perfectly liberated individuals” [190]. Its protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, liberalism is a systematic plan for the reordering of human life—albeit it, a surreptitious one (5).

In reality, however, liberalism has betrayed the noble ideals it professed (e.g., limited government, constitutionalism, equality, freedom, etc.) Indeed, the “pathologies” we now confront—indeed, the “increasingly systemic failure” we see around us—are a sign of liberalism’s “bankruptcy” as a philosophy. In fact, the dysfunctions we see today are not “separable and discrete problems to be solved within the liberal frame, but . . . deeply interconnected crises . . . and a portent of liberalism’s end times.” Thus, we are “nearing the end” of “the fabric of beliefs that gave rise to the nearly 250 year old American constitutional experiment” (4).

Liberalism depended for its viability on the “persistence” of certain “social norms” and authoritative social institutions, whose existence its “founders tended to take for granted” (41) and whose roots were found in the “preliberal” past (29). The problem was that over time liberalism’s own political and moral commitments—above all, its commitment to “the unfettered and autonomous choice of individuals” (31)—acted to erode these norms and subvert these institutions. It has, Deneen argues, “ruthlessly drawn down” the “reservoir” of preliberal social and moral “resources” (18) that had once “sustained” it and which it “cannot replenish” (29). Indeed, as liberalism “becomes fully itself,” as it comes to understand more fully the radical implications of its core commitments and as it more successfully remakes the social world in accordance with its principles, liberalism generates pathologies betokening “systemic failure.” By successfully revolutionizing American society, by remaking it in its own image, it has brought it to the brink of collapse.

From Deneen’s perspective, since liberalism from the very beginning has been the inspiration and intellectual foundation of the American experiment in self-government and ordered liberty, the transformation of the American polity discussed earlier is no accident, but the simple outworking—both in theory and social life—of our founding core commitments, namely, the principles of liberal political philosophy.

In response to this situation, Deneen calls not for a “new comprehensive theory,” but for the formation of “intentional communities,” small-scale, locally based experiments that can provide us with examples of “viable cultures, economics grounded in virtuosity within households,” and authentic “civic life.” What we need the most, he concludes, are “counter-cultural communities” embodying “better practices,” rather than a “better

theory” (197). It is from the experiences of such communities that “a viable postliberal political theory will arise” (196).

Obviously, this volume is relevant to Catholics who are trying to find their cultural orientation in the new social and political world in which we find ourselves. In a certain sense, Deneen is the anti-Murray. Rather than affirming, as Murray did, that the principles “which inspired the American republic” approve “themselves to the Catholic intelligence and conscience” because they are “structural to the Western Christian political tradition,” Deneen insists that these principles are incompatible with “the principles of Catholic faith and morality.” Rather than viewing “the liberal tradition in Western politics” as rooted in the “Christian revolution,”¹⁹ as Murray did, Deneen sees only discontinuity between the two. Far from involving a break with the American political tradition, from involving a sort of “retheoretization” of American democracy along monistic and secularist lines that Murray feared might be underway in his day,²⁰ Deneen maintains that this transformation represents the fulfillment of America’s founding principles.

This, in turn, raises many questions: Is Deneen’s account of the American founding persuasive? What about his account of liberalism and its role in the transformation America has undergone? If he is correct, what does it mean for the posture of Catholics towards American democracy, and, more broadly, towards liberal democracy? Is he correct that Catholicism and “the American proposition” have always been fundamentally incompatible? Does the transformation we have experienced represent a break with the American political tradition or logical development of its core commitments? If Deneen is mistaken, where does the truth lie? How does his call for small, “countercultural communities” relate to the situation of American Catholics? Finally, what does all this mean for the cultural orientation of American Catholics?

It is these questions and other closely related questions that the contributors to this symposium seek to address. This symposium began as a panel at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists at Belmont Abbey College. Three of the four articles that comprise this symposium are revised versions of remarks delivered at that panel. It is our hope that this symposium contributes in some small measure to the much-needed discussion among Catholics about the future of the Church in the new America whose emergence we have been witnessing.

Notes

1. “The Future of the Church in the American Public Order: A Symposium,” *Catholic Social Science Review* 22 (2017): 91–144; and “Religious Freedom and the Future of the Catholic Church in the American Public Order: A Symposium,” *Catholic Social Science Review* 23 (2018): 3–54.
2. “Put Not Your Trust in Princes: Catholics in the American Administrative State,” *Catholic Social Science Review* 22 (2017): 109–21, 109.
3. John Marini, *Unmasking The Administrative State: The Crisis of American Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Encounter Books, 2019).
4. *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), Vol. II, part IV, chapter 6, p. 692.
5. “Atomism,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 196.
6. Francis Canavan, *The Pluralist Game: Liberalism, Pluralism and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 76.
7. George Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 158.
8. Hugh Heclo, *Christianity and American Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 140.
9. Canavan, *The Pluralist Game*, 76.
10. Steven D. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 153.
11. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and American Democracy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 89.
12. See Kenneth L. Grasso, “Whose Religious Liberty? Which Intellectual Horizon?,” *Catholic Social Science Review* 23 (2018): 33–45.
13. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom*, 153.
14. R. R. Reno, “A Dhimmitude of Sorts,” *First Thoughts: A First Things Blog*, <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2013/02/05/a-dhimmitude-of-sorts>.
15. Gary D. Glenn, “Tocqueville, the Pantheistic Tendency of the ‘Democratic Social State’ and Catholicism’s Present Situation,” *Catholic Social Science Review* 22 (2017): 123–35, 126.
16. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), xi, xiii.
17. *Ibid.*, 199.
18. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018). Citations to this book will be given parenthetically in the text.
19. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 57, xiii, 189, 191.
20. John Courtney Murray, “Leo XIII: Separation of Church and State,” *Theological Studies* 14 (June 1953): 145–214, 151.