Patrick Deneen’s criticisms of liberalism are both penetrating and persuasive. Yet, Deneen does not adequately address liberalism’s strongest arguments. Deneen’s concept of “liberalism” is problematic because it minimizes the significant distinctions between classical liberalism and progressivism. Certain principles of classical liberalism, such as the free market and an increased awareness of human beings as rights-bearing individuals, are compatible with the Catholic faith. Progressivism, on the other hand, is not. Progressivism’s moral failings are far worse than those associated with classical liberalism. Although classical liberalism is itself flawed, it remains viable to the extent that it may be integrated with core Christian teachings.

Patrick Deneen begins Why Liberalism Failed with an insightful epigraph from Barbara Tuchman’s history of the fourteenth century, A Distant Mirror. Tuchman warns, “The gap between medieval Christianity’s ruling principle and everyday life is the great pitfall of the Middle Ages.” Deneen’s choice to begin with this memorable quote is inspired. It not only protects him against the incorrect charge that he wants to return to medievalism but, more importantly, it outlines how failure occurs. Ideas and ages fail when their ideals no longer correspond with everyday reality. In this regard, the failure of liberalism is not unique. It is simply another example of a political order whose actions no longer corresponds with its original intentions.

According to Deneen, liberalism is an ideology with several premises. It assumes that human beings are rights-bearing individuals who are rational enough to choose for themselves what is right and wrong. Government, in accordance with justice, must be limited in scope and grounded on a social contract through the consent of the governed in order not to violate individual autonomy, human freedom, and the right to privacy. Hence, liberalism promotes freedom of religion, speech, and press. Its faith in rationality fosters trust in continual self-correction and in the inevitability of progress. Nature, in this view, is not static; it can be conquered and controlled. Capitalism and the free market mirror the conquest of nature, and they are the way through which the world has been transformed in liberalism’s image. The transformations that liberalism inspires, moreover, are not limited to the economic or technological spheres; liberalism seeks
drastic social change, spreads egalitarianism, and weakens the great pre-modern institutions of the Church, family and marriage, local and regional traditions, and centuries-old organic communities (1, 5, 25, 32, 35–37).

Liberalism, Deneen continues, unravels because the achievements of liberalism only flourish in societies rooted in pre-liberal principles, such as natural right, moral virtue, sacrifice, and the common good. Liberalism’s fruits and victories eventually wear down these Classical and Christian values, causing its own foundation to buckle. To better explain this transformation, Deneen makes the distinction between first-wave liberalism—often associated with the conservative emphasis on limited government and capitalism—with second-wave liberalism, or progressivism. Second-wave liberalism shares in the first wave’s disdain for pre-modernity, but rejects the ideological foundations of the first wave. While the first wave asserts that freedom is achieved in the absence of arbitrary interference in one’s life, the second wave believes that such a *laissez-faire* approach to governance only leads to social stratification and inequality. The second wave, therefore, requires a robust and powerful State that is needed to distribute freedom to the citizenry. While the first wave grounds its conception of human nature in the universal desire for self-interest, the second wave argues that self-interest only leads to division, oppression, and war. Progressivism asserts that human nature is more perfectible and plastic. While the first wave believes that human autonomy and rationality lead to limited government and free markets, the second wave rejects several of the principles of capitalism and limited constitutionalism. Ultimately, Deneen argues that the titanic shift from the first to second wave demonstrates how the fruits of liberalism veered from its original intent. Deneen asserts that first-wave liberalism *inevitably* morphs into the second wave. The former’s epistemology and understanding of human nature collapse when divorced from pre-liberal Christianity (35–37). Liberalism, in the final analysis, is a self-liquidating proposition.

Deneen’s argument is formidable and thought-provoking, but his division of liberalism into two waves is problematic. Liberalism properly understood is classical liberalism, or what Deneen coins the first wave; the second wave is progressivism. Classical liberalism and progressivism are two different species. Although there cannot be progressivism without liberalism, as there cannot be a son without a father, they remain two separate and distinct entities. Deneen is correct in identifying both problems in classical liberalism and progressivism. After all, all things fail, as Tuchman and Deneen suggest. But not all things fail equally. Classical liberalism divorces freedom from virtue, fosters a rugged individualism contrary to man’s real nature as a political animal, and spreads a *laissez-faire* capi-
In Defense of Catholic Fusionism

talism that can lead to human abuses, such as child labor and sweat shops. Yet, from a Catholic perspective, these problems are not nearly as serious as the ills issuing from progressivism.

Classical liberalism does not give up on reason. Its understanding of reason is skewed and utilitarian, but through argument and persuasion, Christianity’s more robust understanding of reason and intellect can be integrated with classical liberalism’s great achievements. For example, Christian principles can keep the capitalism but get rid of the child labor. Progressivism, on the other hand, is unsalvageable. It is rooted in Rousseau’s remodeling of human beings as primarily sentient, instead of rational, animals. The progressive emphasis on the senses, feeling, and emotion does not adequately distinguish human beings from the other animals; it leads human beings to become like animals. Progressivism questions human freedom, spreads perspectivism and relativism, embraces nihilism, teaches conflict theory, and fosters totalitarianism and tyranny. It subverts limited government and emboldens bureaucracy to interfere with the citizenry. Progressivism pushes abortion, divorce, and contraception. It encourages transhumanism. It preaches tolerance, but is fundamentally intolerant. It disdains religion, especially Catholicism.

The problems that derive from classical liberalism and progressivism are not equal, and Deneen should have delineated their differences more clearly. Consequently, he does an injustice to classical liberalism. Despite its flaws, it is compatible with Christianity in a way that progressivism can never be. Classical liberalism can still be friendly to the pre-liberal values that Deneen supports: the liberal arts, rights and protections against arbitrary rule, localism, and customs grounded upon natural right. Therefore, justice demands that a mild defense of classical liberalism be made.

CLASSICAL LIBERALISM VERSUS PROGRESSIVISM

Deneen is correct in pointing out the dangers embedded in classical liberalism. Inherent in it are dangerous late medieval, pre-liberal tendencies, such as nominalism, radical individualism, and voluntarism. There is a tendency in the liberal tradition to minimize virtue and aggrandize the role of self-interest. The Baconian conquest of nature often leads to violations of natural law. Yet, these faults do not constitute adequately the full portrait of classical liberalism. Deneen makes classical liberalism too abstract, and he does not adequately wrestle with what it got right. These achievements include the abolition of slavery, the elimination of feudalism and primogeniture, the historic rise of private property and the creation of the middle class, the curtailing of religious warfare, the articulation of natural (as opposed to mere civil) rights for all of the citizenry, the raising of at least a
billion people out of poverty through capitalism and the free market, public education, the drastic increase of universities, the expansion of citizenship, universal suffrage, popular sovereignty, scientific advancements that have eradicated diseases and plagues, the lowering of child death rates, the ability to move, to emigrate, and to travel, and the freedom for children to not be bound by their father’s professions, among many other positive things. Some of the achievements of liberalism are purely hedonistic (e.g., the luxury of eating a banana year-round in the American Northeast), but many of them are achievements that have a strong moral element (e.g., the abolition of slavery and the defense of property rights). Deneen does not adequately address how an ideology that he perceives to be so misguided can produce such great and noble things.

Deneen, like many conservatives, attempts to address this problem slightly by arguing that many of liberalism’s achievements have pre-liberal roots. This argument allows one to assert that the moral achievements of liberalism derive from what came before it. After all, slavery declines drastically in the early Middle Ages until it resurges in the Classical-inspired Renaissance. The history of rights begins with Roman law. Christianity provides the seeds for many ideas often considered modern, including respect for women, human equality, individualism, and the advancement of science.³

Yet, there is a significant danger in overplaying this narrative. Although many of the achievements of liberalism do have a pre-modern heritage, it takes the union of the Christian world with liberalism for them to be universalized. Put another way, it is the intersection of Christianity and liberalism where these great achievements materialize; without liberalism serving as part of the equation, I am genuinely hesitant about the extent to which these moral breakthroughs and technological marvels could have developed.

Deneen’s argument could have been strengthened, and slightly qualified, had his definition of liberalism not relied solely on the typical canon of secular modern thinkers singled out by Leo Strauss: Niccolò Machiavelli, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Stuart Mill, among others. Nowhere in his index, however, does Deneen tackle the Christian thinkers who provide ideas that attempt to integrate Classical and medieval thought with modernity: Thomas More, Erasmus, Francisco de Vitoria, Bartolome de las Casas, Domingo de Soto, Francisco Suarez, Hugo Grotius, Johannes Althusius, Henrich Bollinger, Edward Coke, William Blackstone, and many thinkers found in the Liberty Fund’s excellent Natural Law and Enlightenment Series. These thinkers, admittedly less famous than those whom Deneen references, point to
interesting ways in which Christian thinkers wrestle with the challenge of modernity. Vitoria and Grotius articulate a robust international law theory grounded on natural law, the Salamanca School outlines many principles of capitalism, the Calvinists draw out the implications of federalism, More shows the danger of utopian thinking, and seventeenth and eighteenth-century thinkers attempt to bridge natural law and natural rights. For the last five hundred years, there have been forms of synthesis that can make many aspects of liberalism palatable to Christians. Before rejecting liberalism in toto, this Christian proto-liberalism needs to be revisited.

In the present day, the possibility of a Christian liberal order is still possible through what Frank Meyer coined “fusionism” over fifty years ago. Fusionism is an attempt to bridge social conservatives and libertarians; in other words, it brings together pre-liberal moral and social concepts with the economics of classical liberalism. Adherents of fusionism recognize that there are points of tension between Christianity and secular liberalism. It is an uneasy alliance; like tectonic plates rubbing against each other, there is bound to be turbulence. Yet, the occasional turbulence is worth the subsequent peace because the alliance is centered on what is common among them. Fusionism advocates that the alliance’s gaze should be directed to its key enemy: progressivism, which gets everything from human nature to economics wrong. Fusionism is not a “band aid” (xiii), as Deneen pejoratively calls the attempts of liberalism to reform itself. Fusionism is based upon the realistic expectation that a more perfect political order is not possible. There will always be a subset of American society moved by progressivism. Therefore, the key political virtues of prudence and justice demand that allies work together to curtail the spread of progressivism.

**DENEEN AND PROGRESSIVISM**

Another frustrating aspect of the book is that, despite its repudiation of liberalism, broadly defined, too many of Deneen’s arguments derive from liberalism itself. In the second paragraph of the book, Deneen highlights some of the ills that beset contemporary Americans—the fear and reality of economic stagnation, lack of popular trust in institutions, questionable elections, economic inequality, social stratification, and a decline in the social fabric. The lesson that Deneen draws from this litany of woes is that liberalism does not live up to its promise. The more interesting observation to be drawn, however, is that both Deneen and his fellow Americans want what, historically, only classical liberalism has provided so generously and consistently: continued economic progress, popular trust in institutions, fair and free elections, and protections of equality. Deneen’s ex-
pectations about life are fundamentally molded by liberalism. He takes its achievements for granted, as the progressives do, and he demands more, forgetting how arduous the development of liberalism was.

Deneen is certainly not a progressive, but he is too sympathetic to progressivism’s criticisms of classical liberalism in his discussion on economic mobility and the Constitution of the United States. When Deneen introduces the topic of economic mobility, he cites the opinion of one of his students, “We are meritocrats out of a survivalist instinct. If we do not race to the very top, the only remaining option is a bottomless pit of failure” (12). Deneen quotes this student favorably, as if there is wisdom to simplistic conflict theory. Interestingly, the student’s argument, intended to be a refutation of liberalism, reaffirms one of its most important premises: the assumption of economic mobility and material comfort. There is the firm faith even among the students of Notre Dame that, through the work of one’s labor, one ought to live a good life that is at least slightly better than one’s forefathers. Neither Deneen nor the student outrightly rejects the liberal conception of progress, equality, freedom, mobility, and prosperity. In this regard, Deneen remains a liberal.

The second way in which Deneen employs progressive arguments is in his criticisms of the United States Constitution. Whereas friendly critics such as Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss had faith that America was the best socio-political order that modernity could produce, Deneen asserts that the problems of liberalism are too embedded in the fabric of America. Deneen shares in the progressive critique of America: that the government seeks “to minimize electoral influence” of the people (162). He strikes at the heart of Federalist 10: that Madison’s “extending the sphere” unfairly minimizes the influence of the people, that America’s reliance on self-improvement creates “haves” and “have nots,” and that self-interest entirely replaces virtue (162–65). Deneen’s retelling is an uncharitable view of the Founding. The pre-Seventeenth Amendment American Constitution strikes the perfect balance between the rule of the many and the rule of the few. While the Founders did mistrust the many (as did Socrates), they balanced it with their mistrust of the few through electing different officials in different manners and with different terms of length. The Constitution, in and by itself, does not create “haves” and “have nots”; human effort and ingenuity, or the lack thereof, do. The Constitution simply allows those who can succeed to do so. Third, while there is a substantial emphasis on self-interest in the Federalist, there are classical themes in the Founding, such as the role of like-mindedness and community in Federalist 2 and the Antifederalist emphasis on a virtuous middle class.
At the end of the book, Deneen outlines his post-liberal vision. He begins by stating that “we must build upon these [liberal] achievements while abandoning the foundational reason for its failure. There can be no going back, only forward” (182). In these sentences, Deneen continues to display two frustrating flaws of the book. First, he acknowledges that there are liberal achievements, but he does not substantively address exactly what they are. Second, the whole concept of “going forward” is one of the most quintessentially liberal concepts, and it is a dangerous one considering its vagueness. Deneen then calls to abandon all forms of ideology; here he safely invokes the danger of -isms. He concludes by stating, “From the cauldron of such experience and practice, a better theory of politics and society might ultimately emerge” (183). This sentence hinges far too much on the word “might.” It is a gamble to find something better than liberalism because things do not inherently get better. Such a faith in progress is, admittedly, one of the problems of liberalism broadly defined.

Deneen’s book concludes with a synthesis of Rod Dreher’s The Benedict Option and Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America. Like Dreher, Deneen suggests that individuals and families should become more self-reliant and self-sufficient. Through an emphasis on household economics, ranging from building to cooking, families ought to develop a healthy culture that can counter consumerism. Via Tocqueville, Deneen calls for a resurgence of voluntary associations and an emphasis on local township governance. These projects are worthwhile, but they do not represent a radical alternative to classical liberalism. Rather, it seems to me that Deneen, Dreher, and Tocqueville provide the beginning of a solution to bring us back to the original premise of classical liberalism, in which rights-bearing individuals and communities become self-reliant and virtuous by freeing themselves from overreaching institutions through the fruit of their own labor.

Notes

1. Patrick J. Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018), epigraph. In future references, the page number will be given in the text.

2. Ibid. Deneen’s argument that first-wave liberalism morphs into second-wave liberalism is also the theme of the second chapter, pp. 43–63.

3. For a discussion on slavery, see Lewis Hanke, Aristotle and the American Indians (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959). For the pre-liberal articulation of rights, see Brian Tierney, The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law, 1150–1625 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); and Richard Tuck, Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development (Cam-
Thomas F. X. Varacalli


