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5. From the “Culture of Death” to the “Crisis of Liberalism”

Recent Shifts in Catholic Politics

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Abstract

This article identifies and assesses some of the shifts that have occurred in conservative Catholic politics in the United States over the last twenty years. For much of the late 1990s and early 2000s, a politics focused on denouncing “the culture of death” predominated in U.S. conservative Catholicism. In recent years, this political and religious framework has lost ground to a politics addressing “the crisis of liberalism.” I examine this new political agenda by looking at two of its leading exponents, journalist Sohrab Ahmari and political theorist Patrick Deneen. The article closes by raising three points for consideration regarding the relationship between the critique of liberalism and the magisterium of the Catholic Church, the place of LGBTQ persons in the critique of liberalism, and what this means for the future of politics in the Church in the United States.

Keywords: Roman Catholicism, politics, liberalism, LGBTQ, theology

Introduction

For much of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the contours of conservative Catholicism in the United States were fairly clear. A “culture war” mentality unified most of the Catholic Right, imbuing the battle against liberal progressives with religious fervor. During these years, the conservative Catholic agenda aligned closely with that of the Republican Party, most notably on social, economic, and military issues. While this arrangement had the appearance of solidity, the religious and political alignments of the Catholic Church in the United States shifted along with the wider changes in the political landscape that culminated in the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016. What emerged was a contestation over liberalism, the political tradition which takes as its central commitments human freedom, equality, pluralism, and democratic deliberation. Until recently, political liberalism was the unquestioned ground upon which debates between conservatives and liberals in the United States took place. In recent years, however, a growing number of conservative Catholic intellectuals have called for a critical examination of the order of political liberalism itself.¹

In this article I narrate and assess several of the shifts that have occurred in conservative Catholic politics in the United States over the last twenty years. I first describe the waning of a politics focused on denouncing “the culture of death” and the rise of a politics addressing “the crisis of liberalism.” I then examine this new political agenda by looking at two of its leading exponents, journalist Sohrab Ahmari and political theorist Patrick Deneen. I close by raising three points for consideration regarding the relationship between the critique of liberalism and the magisterium of the Catholic Church, the place of LGBTQ persons in the critique of liberalism, and what this means for the future of politics in the Church in the United States. My analysis reveals both continuities and discontinuities between the old and the new politics; for all that has changed, many of the same rhetorical tropes and often the same villains persist in the ascendant conservative politics today. What is at stake is more than shifting allegiances in a culture war, but a larger questioning of how the Catholic Church relates to the political order itself.

Shifting Political Frameworks in American Conservative Catholicism

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, much of the conservative political commentary in U.S. Catholicism was directed at denouncing something called “the culture of death.” This phrase along with its correlate, “culture of life,” received its most notable exposition in John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical letter, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life). In this letter, John Paul II frames the ethical debates surrounding what are termed “life issues,” with a specific focus on abortion and euthanasia, in terms of a battle between two cultural forces, “the culture of life” and “the culture of death.” The former is based around the commitment that “human life, as a gift of God, is sacred and inviolable” (1995, 81) and much of the discussion in the encyclical focuses

¹ Liberalism is a complex intellectual and historical tradition, finding its first mature formulation in the philosophy of John Locke. As I will elaborate in my discussion below, critiques of liberalism do not devote much attention to the diversity and complexity internal to the liberal tradition itself. The most salient aspect of liberalism that comes up for critique is its emphasis on individual liberties, although historical instantiations of liberal politics show that there are multiple ways of balancing individual freedom and the common good within the tradition.

on what it would mean to renew or build an authentic culture of life. By contrast, the culture of death is described as “a war of the powerful against the weak.” He describes it as “actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency” (1995, 12). He presents for Catholics a choice between which culture they will foster, and he does not refrain from indulging in the sharply dualistic frames of thought that often haunt Christian thinking. He writes, “we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the ‘culture of death’ and the ‘culture of life’” (1995, 28). Taking up the summons issued by John Paul II, theologians, clerics, youth ministers, and popular Catholic speakers would go on to articulate Catholic engagement with politics and culture in terms of the battle between the culture of life and the culture of death.²

This framework shaped much of the conservative Catholic political and social commentary following the publication of *Evangelium Vitae*. While the enemy was often targeted as “liberalism,” in the sense of a generally progressive political ethos aligned with the Democratic Party in the United States, liberalism as the broader political philosophy underlying American politics was not targeted or taken to be problematic. We can see examples of this dynamic by looking at two of the most prominent voices in U.S. conservative Catholicism in the 1990s and early 2000s – George Weigel and Robert George. Both were outspoken critics who made use of the rhetoric of a culture of life/death, and both were staunch defenders of the American liberal democratic imperium.

Described in a 2009 *New York Times* profile as “The Conservative Christian Big Thinker,” Robert George was for a time the most prominent voice of conservative Christianity in the U.S. academy (Kirkpatrick, 2009). As a philosopher and as a Catholic intellectual, he has advanced the New Natural Law theory of ethics associated with his mentor, John Finnis. As professor of politics at Princeton University, he is the director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions. These associations indicate the fundamental compatibility between conservative Catholic morality and American liberal democracy in George’s thinking. He has mobilized this fusion of Catholic morality and American politics to speak out on a variety of social issues, most notably abortion and same-sex marriage in the early 2000s (see George et al. 2010). Advancing what John Gehring has described as a “distorted political theology,” George sets up an opposition between “life issues” – those concerning abortion, euthanasia, marriage, and sexuality – and “social justice issues” – those concerning health care, living wages, and social welfare (Gehring 2016, 17). He has used his influence with Catholic bishops to encourage concern about the former set of issues at the expense of the latter. Even as the liberal political tradition has come under fire in ways that I will describe below, he has continued to advocate for a conservative politics within the framework of the liberal political tradition. While he is deeply critical of American progressivism, he has recently argued against his postliberal critics that doing away with liberal democracy because of the ills of social liberalism would be akin to “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” (George and Anderson 2019).

² For an example of how this framework found its way into literature distributed by the United States Council of Catholic Bishops, see Doerflinger n.d). On the more popular level, the language has been used by pro-life activists such as Lila Rose (see Cone 2013).

George Weigel is notable for aligning his vision of Catholicism with a neoliberal economic agenda and American military intervention abroad, most notably in the case of his defense of the war in Iraq. In the 1990s and 2000s, his Catholic politics fit very comfortably with the broad social, economic, and military goals of the Republican Party in the United States. So firm was his confidence in the compatibility of American conservatism and Catholic morality that he infamously suggested that all of the passages in Benedict XVI's social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* that are critical of capitalist economics do not represent the authentic thought of Benedict but can be attributed to a rogue Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. American economic interests determined the hermeneutic through which to interpret papal writings on Catholic social teaching (2009).³ Like Robert George, he has continued to espouse this same basic moral-political framework, even after its popularity in the U.S. Catholic church started to wane. As recently as 2017, in an article bluntly titled "It's a Culture War, Stupid," he spoke witheringly of "those who persist in denying that the Church is engaged in a culture war, the combatants in which are aptly called the 'culture of life' and the 'culture of death.'"

Both Robert George and George Weigel represent the style of conservative Catholic politics that predominated for the first decade-and-a-half of the twenty-first century. John Gehring has described their political program as one which "filtered church teaching through an ideological prism that baptized the Iraq war, made an idol of unfettered markets, and narrowed Catholic identity to a checklist that aligned neatly with the Republican Party's agenda" (2016, 17). There was no fundamental contradiction between being a good Catholic and a good American, as they argued that Catholic citizenship not only entailed championing the social issues of John Paul II's culture of life against the culture of death, but also entailed an endorsement of American economic might and military imperialism. At the height of their pro-life activism, both figures wrote editorials providing justification for the invasion of Iraq (George 2002; Weigel 2003).

Several events in the last decade contributed to shaking the hold that this brand of conservative politics held in the U.S. Catholic church. On the political front, the years of Barack Obama's presidency brought defeats to conservatives on several social issues. Following *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015, the ban on same-sex marriage was found to be unconstitutional according to the Fourteenth Amendment, and the judicial rulings in favor of same sex marriage were buoyed by a rise in public opinion that clearly supported acceptance of LGBTQ rights. In the Catholic Church, Pope Francis was elevated to the papacy following the resignation of Benedict XVI in 2013, and Francis' public pronouncements marked a noticeable shift away from the sorts of culture war politics endorsed by John Paul II and, to a lesser extent, Benedict XVI. Finally, the election of Donald Trump in 2016, even if it was a victory for conservatives, signaled that a very different, more pronouncedly illiberal, form of conservatism was ascendant.

While many Catholics continue to espouse some variant of the older politics, anti-liberalism or post-liberalism is increasingly becoming the primary idiom in which many

³ The conceit of the piece is that one could go through the document with a gold marker to highlight the authentic words of Benedict XVI and one could go through with a red marker and highlight the spurious contributions of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

conservative Catholics interpret their politics.⁴ Evidence can be found in several places. One might look at the recent editorial shifts expressed by *First Things* magazine. A 2019 editorial entitled “Against the Dead Consensus” renounced the political agenda that characterized conservative Catholicism in the United States for decades (Various 2019). The signers of the statement reject the individualism and economic excesses of the old conservative order, and in response embrace a vision colored by populism and nationalism. Recently, a think tank named “New Polity” started up as part of the Institute of Political Philosophy and Theology located in Steubenville Ohio, a bastion of American conservative Catholicism. Dedicated to constructing a “Christian postliberal worldview,” the project responds to what it understands as the exhaustion of the liberal project by arguing that “postliberalism is a solution to the crisis of Christian conservatism.” Many young Catholics on the internet, tired of the old politics and increasingly concerned with issues of economic inequality, have been quick to adopt the critique of liberalism. As a generation that came of age during decades of endless war, theological defenses of military intervention abroad began to look sinister. To them, the capitalist apologetics and militarism of figures like George Weigel look positively passé. This brings to their conservative politics a veneer of cultural relevance; instead of calling Hillary Clinton an agent of the culture of death like they might have done in the year 2000, today a young Catholic can log on to Twitter and respond to Clinton, “OK Boomer!”

Catholics Contra Liberalism: Sohrab Ahmari and Patrick Deneen

The most outspoken critic of the liberal order in U.S. Catholic politics today is Sohrab Ahmari. He is a journalist and convert to Catholicism who writes about religion and politics in the *New York Post* and various Catholic publications, and he maintains a large following and active presence on social media. He catapulted himself to the center of the discussion on Catholicism and liberalism in May of 2019 when he wrote a piece in *First Things* magazine critical of conservative commentator David French, who represents the sort of approach to religion and politics outlined above with respect to Weigel and George. In this piece Ahmari argues against conservative Catholics who have a misplaced faith in liberal democratic politics. The wave of cultural defeats faced by many conservatives in the last decade prove to him that the political work of making arguments, seeking to persuade others, and working to transform the culture are insufficient. He admits, “the overall balance of forces has tilted inexorably away from us” (2019). Playing according to the rules of political liberalism will only lead to further defeat and humiliation, and so he suggests that a tougher plan of action is needed. In militant

⁴ By framing the essay this way I do not overlook the fact that many, perhaps even a majority, of U.S. conservative Catholics still subscribe to the free market/militaristic/social conservative politics represented by figures like George Weigel. There are also variants of conservative politics that I do not have space to address in this essay. Libertarian Catholics (vocal today in debates over free speech on college campuses) are a significant presence. On the far right, extremist conservative Catholics represented by websites like Church Militant (www.churchmilitant.com) and LifeSite (www.lifesitenews.com) have gained notoriety, along with Integralist Catholics who call for the end of democracy and the establishment of a Catholic confessional state. Both of these groups deserve attention in their own right, but they can be seen as extreme variants of the postliberal politics discussed in this essay. The boundaries between these groups can be blurry. A neoconservative, a postliberal, and a far-right Catholic might all work alongside each other because of a shared opposition to abortion, for instance. What I am suggesting here is that postliberalism is an emerging political current that is beginning to eclipse older frameworks, especially in journalism, social media, and in the intellectual spheres of the U.S. Catholic Church.

terms, he calls upon his fellow Catholics “to fight the culture war with the aim of defeating the enemy and enjoying the spoils in the form of a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good” (2019). He rejects the liberal aspiration that a political order can or should be neutral with respect to any one vision of the Good Life, or that competing visions of the Good could be fostered in a pluralistic society. Instead, politics is a winner-take-all game, and his rhetoric is uncompromisingly blunt when he suggests that conservatives better gird their loins and get ready to take it all. He writes:

Progressives understand that culture war means discrediting their opponents and weakening or destroying their institutions. Conservatives should approach the culture war with a similar realism. Civility and decency are secondary values. They regulate compliance with an established order and orthodoxy. We should seek to use these values to enforce our order and our orthodoxy, not pretend that they could ever be neutral. To recognize that enmity is real is its own kind of moral duty. (2019)

Now, one might rightly be curious as to what sort of cultural catastrophe could have inspired his impassioned plea for destruction, victory, and the enforcement of orthodoxy. And the answer to that question is: drag queens reading books. One of Ahmari’s recurring obsessions is Drag Queen Story Hour, a program featured in a handful of public libraries in which men dressed in drag read stories to children. This is what he takes as outrageous proof of civilizational decline and the inability of the liberal order to protect the common good. A since-deleted Twitter thread on the topic of Drag Queen Story Hour led him to proclaim “To hell with liberal order” (quoted in Serwer 2019). His wider reflections on liberalism share a similar concern over questions of gender identity and expression. When he summarizes the perspective of those who he calls the “libertines” that embody the liberal worldview, he writes that they protest: “*For us to feel fully autonomous, you must positively affirm our sexual choices, our transgression, our power to disfigure our natural bodies and redefine what it means to be human, lest your disapprobation make us feel less than fully autonomous*” (Ahmari 2019, italics in original). For Ahmari, the transgender person is the figure who typifies the subject of the liberal order, and the mere acceptance of transgender persons represents cultural capitulation.

So, in his critique of liberalism we get a call for conservative Catholics to adopt more aggressive and authoritarian methods for achieving their desired ends. He remains vague on what it would mean to “enforce order and orthodoxy,” but he applauds Donald Trump and what he describes in a foul turn of phrase as his “animal instinct” and his ability “to shift the cultural and political mix, ever so slightly, away from autonomy-above-all toward order, continuity, and social cohesion” (Ahmari 2019). Ahmari reveals that, for conservatives of his ilk, the commitment to liberal norms of tolerance, persuasion, and democratic procedure were purely expedient. When liberal means can no longer be counted on to deliver the desired political outcomes, then other methods become attractive if they look to be more effective – even if they are more sinister. Sure, the thinking goes, we had all previously agreed that politics should work through persuasion and not coercion. But when it becomes clear that you are not persuading anyone anymore, maybe coercion does not look so bad after all.

While Ahmari might be the most bellicose of these critics, the work of Notre Dame political theorist Patrick Deneen provides a more subtle and intellectually serious Catholic

critique of the liberal order. If Robert George was the leading Catholic intellectual of the George W. Bush presidency, one could argue that Deneen is the Catholic intellectual of the Trump era. In many ways he has made Catholic conservative politics intellectually respectable. Discourse about “the culture of death” is not likely to engage scholarly attention beyond a small circle of Catholic academics. But talk about “the crisis of liberalism” has merited attention from secular scholars at elite institutions (and even a qualified endorsement from President Obama!).⁵ There are some continuities between Deneen’s critique of liberalism and the critique of the culture of death. The “us vs. them” rhetoric that John Paul II employed still makes an appearance here, and opposition to progressive sexual morality still looms large over these discussions. Much like John Paul II, Deneen frames his position in terms of a political struggle between the “strong” against the “weak” in society. But crucially, the target of critique is not simply persons who identify as liberal progressives, but the order of political liberalism itself.

In his 2018 book *Why Liberalism Failed*, Deneen portends that liberalism is an exhausted project, which has failed precisely because of the successes of the ideals that motivated it. “Liberalism failed – not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself” (2018, 3). He looks at the United States and sees a culture of gross inequality, crass materialism, sexual libertinism, and lonely, isolated individuals. He argues that we cannot look to liberal democracy for a solution because our situation is precisely the sort of state of affairs that liberalism strives to bring about. With its emphasis on the choices of the autonomous individual, more liberalism can only further fragment society and erode any and all forces that threaten to put a limit on individual choice, especially such forces as nature, place, and tradition. Deneen argues that liberalism is thus not neutral with respect to other traditions of thought; it is designed to undermine Christian conceptions of liberty, tradition, and belonging.

Now, none of this is particularly surprising as far as conservative cultural commentary goes. What makes Deneen interesting is that he attempts to join his critique of liberal social values to a critique of liberal capitalist economics. Generally, advocates of progressive social issues are opposed to the economic agenda of free market capitalism, while defenders of the free market are often proponents of conservative social morality. So, an advocate of abortion rights is likely to support socialized economic policies, while opponents of abortion are more likely to be aligned with free market economics. Deneen argues that both sides have incoherent allegiances; the free market and free love belong to the same cultural worldview insofar as they both adhere to an understanding of freedom that liberates the person and the economy from any sort of ordered restraint or limit. His work aims to expose the false choice that he identifies in contemporary liberalism. “The insistent demand that we choose between protection of individual liberty and expansion of state activity masks the true relation between the state and the market: that they grow constantly and necessarily together” (2018, 17).⁶ In response, he

⁵ In a Facebook post of his recommended reading, Obama wrote: “I don’t agree with most of the author’s conclusions, but the book offers cogent insights into the loss of meaning and community that many in the West feel, issues that liberal democracies ignore at their own peril.” Part of the quotation was excerpted on the back cover of the paperback edition of *Why Liberalism Failed* (see Foran 2018).

⁶ Responding at length to this aspect of Deneen’s argument would take me beyond the scope of this essay. Briefly, I do not find his case convincing. There are better ways of accounting for the complex relationship between individual freedoms and economic freedoms. For instance, Deneen presents corporate support for same-sex

advocates an embrace of limits – on both self and state – in order to return to a more holistic understanding of freedom. In practice, this would involve joining socially conservative morality with a form of economic organization that would restrict the free market and escape the rapacious grasp of global capitalism.

The incisiveness and clarity of Deneen’s critique of liberalism largely falls away when he ventures to make proposals about political alternatives to the liberal order. Although he is quite critical of economic liberalism and the inequalities that it has produced, he stops short of endorsing anything resembling socialist or Left politics – he cannot do so because of the Left’s commitment to social issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, and because he argues that we cannot turn to the state for a solution to social and economic issues. Instead he recommends fostering small communities and local marketplaces, and developing what he calls a “household economics” to resist the atomizing forces of liberalism. Responding to criticisms of the first edition of his book, Deneen states that it was intellectual humility that led him to refrain from providing an outline of a political program that might come after liberalism. The result, however, feels like a notable mismatch between the bold force of his denunciations and the modesty of his recommendations, and it is difficult to see how his suggestions might challenge the alliance forged between conservative Catholicism and the Republican party in the last several decades.

The opacity of Deneen’s position here is not anomalous. It can be difficult to assess the proposals of these critics because it is rarely clear exactly what they want, what they are for. Matthew Sitman has argued that it is not unreasonable to ask critics of liberalism what possible alternatives to the liberal order might look like.⁷ The question was previously much easier to answer. What comes after the culture of death? A culture of life! What comes after liberalism? That is a much harder question to answer, and its critics do not have a clear response or a unified front on that matter. Daniel Luban has suggested that “attempts to sketch a post-liberal program often bounce between rote communitarianism and empty theatrics” (2020).⁸ That is, they either retread familiar cultural proposals about the importance of community or they indulge in visions of separatist communes and Catholic confessional states that are unlikely to be realized. Neither option holds much promise of mobilizing a transformation of existing political frameworks.⁹

marriage as evidence of an ideology that supports freedom from all limits in both the personal and the economic spheres. A more likely explanation is that major corporations have supported same-sex marriage because it is in their financial interest to do so, and that this support might just as easily be revoked if it began to hurt their bottom line.

⁷ In response to Deneen, he writes: “I understand the impulse to avoid constructing just one more ‘ideology,’ but surely setting forth political principles and suggesting what institutional arrangements might sustain them is not too much to ask. I want anti-liberals to describe what the world they want to live in would actually look like” (Sitman 2018).

⁸ He elaborates: “none of liberalism’s current critics have pointed to an alternative that is both normatively attractive and entirely non-liberal, and I doubt that we should hold our breath for the emergence of one.”

⁹ One of the most notable offshoots of the critique of liberalism is the revival of “Catholic Integralism.” A small number of Catholic intellectuals, most notably Harvard Law School professor Adrian Vermeule, have argued that the most promising alternative to liberalism is a Catholic confessional state where political power is subordinated to religious authority. While this movement offers a fascinating experiment in contemporary

Observations and Assessment

In the remainder of this essay I will make three observations about what I have described above. The first concerns the relationship of the critique of liberalism to magisterial teaching. The second concerns the way transgender persons have been targeted by these critics, and the third observation reflects on the significance of postliberal critique for the future of the Catholic Church in the United States.

My first concern is to draw attention to the gap that exists between the way that critics of liberalism talk about politics and the way that the Bishops of the United States talk about politics. The critique of the culture of death was able to appeal to the words of Pope John Paul II himself, repeated so many times in his encyclical and adopted by bishops and prelates. It is much more difficult to find recent magisterial sources to support the critique of liberalism. Even if many of these critics have close ties with priests and bishops because of their positions on social issues, it is difficult to see much evidence that the critique of liberalism as a form of political organization has been embraced by the teaching authorities in the U.S. Catholic Church. To take one example, the 2019 revision of *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, while not a document of political theory, gives no indication that there is anything wrong with the American political order itself (USCCB 2019). In the document the bishops repeat the affirmation that participation in political life is a moral obligation. There is implicit faith and trust in the operations and institutions of the American liberal order. It treats of individual topics and the stances that political parties take on those issues, but there is nothing that could be seen as a critique of the basic form of politics that underlie those issues, upon which both parties agree.

The closest recent magisterial ally of these critics might be Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. Deneen has expressed his affinity with Benedict's thought, and in Benedict's last encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* we can see something approaching the sort of cultural critique that has been embraced by the postliberals. Where George Weigel could only see contradiction and confusion, other conservative Catholic intellectuals see a promising fusion of traditional social morality and concern for economic injustice. Yet even here there are difficulties with branding Benedict XVI as a straightforward postliberal; his positive attitude towards democratic socialism goes farther to the left in the economic sphere than most postliberals are willing to embrace (Benedict XVI 2006), and others have convincingly argued that Benedict XVI is more properly understood as an internal critic of the liberal order rather than an enemy of liberalism *tout court* (Reinsch 2018). While the postliberal critics perhaps attempt to extend Benedict's unfinished legacy, they are largely at odds with the concerns of Pope Francis' pontificate.¹⁰

political theology, I agree with Luban's assessment that, practically speaking, calls for integralism are no more than empty theatrics.

¹⁰ Pope Francis has used the term "Throwaway Culture" to diagnose the social ills of contemporary society. While there are similarities to John Paul II's "culture of death," there are differences that separate Pope Francis from both the conservative politics of the 1990's and the postliberals as well. His sharp critique of capitalism and embrace of socialist alternatives separates him from both the free-market apologists and the postliberals, and the attention that he has devoted to care for migrants is a challenge to the nationalistic strain of postliberalism in the United States (see Francis 2013).

Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is probably a more directly influential source of inspiration. For decades, MacIntyre has directed critical attention to what he calls the false choice presented in modern American politics. Whether Democrats or Republicans govern, we are stuck operating within a liberal, capitalist order where the freedom of the autonomous individual reigns supreme. However, despite the widespread appreciation for MacIntyre in the Catholic intellectual world, he and his followers constitute something of a minority report in Catholic politics.¹¹ This is not a criticism per se, but it is worth noting how out of sync these critics are from the magisterium of the U.S. Catholic Church, and how much of a departure they represent from the politics of recent decades. While Deneen criticizes liberal decadence, there is still a close alliance between the bishops and figures like the millionaire philanthropist Timothy Busch who annually hosts a gathering of elite Catholics and bishops in Napa California (see Morris Young 2014). These figures, who wield much power and influence in the Catholic Church, are very invested in maintaining the social status quo, and so it is difficult to imagine the U.S. Catholic bishops making any deep challenge to our country's political order any time soon.

My second observation concerns the troubling way that transgender persons have figured in the new Catholic critique of liberalism. In the 1990s and into the 2000s, gay marriage was a central issue in the critique of the culture of death. Both the legalization of gay marriage and widespread cultural acceptance of gay and lesbian persons has shifted the debate, although discrimination against gays and lesbians certainly persists. Now, the center of the cultural target has moved to transgender persons and issues of gender expression. We have already seen how Ahmari was ready to overthrow the liberal order because of Drag Queen Story Hour. In Deneen's work too, transgender persons are central to his critique of the liberal order. In *Why Liberalism Failed*, he repeatedly invokes transgender persons – either directly by name or as a shadowy specter representing what he sees as a pernicious liberal anthropology. For Deneen, transgender persons *embody* liberalism. The word “embody” here is meant in the most literal sense; their bodies themselves en flesh and express the sort of radical autonomy and breach of natural limits that he takes as definitive of liberalism. At one point he couples together “unfettered immigration” and “transgenderism” as shared instances of a kind of “borderlessness” (preface to the paperback edition, xiii). The transgender person and the immigrant are coupled together as dangerous threats to the body (the human body or the body politic) and its natural limits.¹²

This ought to be extremely worrying. Deneen is continuing the strategy of using the fears and prejudices surrounding LGBTQ persons in order to motivate his politics. Despite all the differences between the old conservative Catholic politics and the new critique of liberalism,

¹¹ For a good example of MacIntyre's intellectual prowess *and* his distance from current magisterial teaching, see his brief essay “The Only Vote Worth Casting in November,” written in advance of the 2004 presidential election. Here he argues that, when faced with no real alternative to the current political order, Catholics should not vote at all. Whatever merits his argument might have, the USCCB has consistently contradicted it in affirming the moral imperative to vote.

¹² The invocation of immigrants here draws attention to the troubling way that Deneen addresses issues of race. The nationalism and latent racism behind many critiques of liberalism is a topic in need of greater scholarly attention.

they are united in demonizing LGBTQ persons and turning them into the threat that their politics must resist. The new emphasis on trans issues is particularly sinister given the precarious position that transgender persons have in the United States today. In a 2015 report, 50 percent of transgender persons experienced rejection by their families (James et al. 2015, 65). They routinely experience discrimination in the workplace and are disproportionately subject to police violence. In 2019 in the United States at least 26 transgender or gender non-conforming persons were fatally shot or killed by other violent means (Human Rights Council 2019).

Deneen caricatures transgender persons as the representatives of a libertine lifestyle that knows no boundaries. A serious encounter with the lived experiences of transgender persons would reveal a different picture. While there is no single way to characterize the choices and perspectives of all transgender persons, one might more accurately understand gender transition as a complex engagement with embodiment and limits rather than their outright denial. Many transgender persons talk about confirming the gender that they already are rather than assuming a disengaged, voluntaristic stance of absolute control over themselves.¹³ Deneen might still ultimately disagree with the way transgender persons engage bodily limits, but it is important to understand them on their own terms, especially when they are a vulnerable population all too frequently subjected to stereotypes, violence, and discrimination. It is dangerous and irresponsible to make them the villain in one's cultural critique, especially when Deneen's analysis of trans issues is so far removed from the lives, experiences, and perspectives of actual transgender persons. The Catholic Church should unequivocally denounce violence against transgender persons and resist the way that their lives have been weaponized in the critique against liberalism. But given recent magisterial pronouncements on "gender ideology," it is not clear that the Catholic Church in the United States is in a good position to respond to this urgent situation (see Congregation for Catholic Education 2019).

My third and final observation concerns the future of U.S. politics and the Catholic Church. One way to analyze what is going on with the Catholic critique of liberalism is to see it as a response to the failures of cultural conservatives to secure victories through liberal democratic means. Journalist Adam Serwer (2019) has suggested, "What they describe as a crisis of liberal democracy is really just them not getting exactly what they want when they want it." I think Serwer is right to see that one aspect of liberalism critique in American Catholic politics today is an outsized response to the loss of cultural and political influence on the part of conservative Catholicism. But I think it would be wrong to see it as nothing more than this. The critics of liberalism ought to be taken seriously insofar as they are speaking to a political situation where many of our previously held certainties about the stability of political institutions and the place of the church in the modern world are no longer so clear. One thing they get right is that in the United States we are at a critical juncture. Faith in democratic institutions has eroded under the Trump presidency at the same time as faith in ecclesial institutions has eroded following the seemingly endless revelations of sexual abuse and cover-up. In response to growing economic inequality, the rise of autocratic rulers around the globe,

¹³ In his review of *Why Liberalism Failed*, Ross McCullough (2018) makes a similar point about how Deneen's criticism of "expressive individualism" overlooks the richer account of authenticity elaborated by Charles Taylor.

and in face of the urgent challenge of anthropogenic climate change, business cannot go on as usual.

For those who want to defend aspects of the liberal democratic tradition, it is important to be clear about what is worth defending and why. Samuel Moyn (2018) has argued that the social ills identified by Deneen as products of liberalism might more accurately be attributed to the neoliberal economic regime, and he suggests that “remedies are possible within modern liberalism to bring out its virtues and contain its vices.” He elaborates: “this task involves figuring out how to distinguish among different forms of liberalism in order to save the best of these forms from the worst, focusing on the Christian message liberalism brought down to earth for the sake of a less conformist and prostrate form of individual and collective existence” (2018). According to Moyn, Deneen’s critique paints liberalism with too broad a brush. One can share a concern about economic inequalities or excessive individualism while still appreciating the valuable social contributions that the liberal political tradition has made. Discerning what is good and what is bad in liberalism might be more profitable than launching a jeremiad at the tradition while offering no clear alternative.¹⁴

Developments in the economic sphere might prove to be the most determinative for the future of Catholic politics in the United States. Economic uneasiness among many younger Catholics represents a shifting of political allegiances that could alter the face of both the Catholic Left and the Catholic Right in America. On the Right, some postliberal conservatives argue that the future of their movement lies in a fusion of populist economics and social conservatism.¹⁵ On the Left, the presidential candidacy of Bernie Sanders was able to attract some support from Catholics who had previously identified as Republican.¹⁶ If either major party were to embrace a progressive economic platform, a significant shift in political identification among Catholics could result. Thus far, Democrats have been timid about making such a move, and it remains even more doubtful that the Republicans would rethink their alliance with free market economics. The persistence of economic inequality and the rise of socialist politics in the United States, however, will continue to be a relevant factor in the future of Catholic politics.

What my analysis shows is the necessity of thinking about politics anew in the situation that the U.S. Catholic Church finds itself in today. The critics of liberalism raise serious questions about the relationship between religion and politics, but I contend that they offer unserious visions of the future. Whatever the future of Catholic politics in the U.S. may hold, it should not take the form of the illiberal bullying favored by Sohrab Ahmari. It should not demonize or seek to control transgender persons and other vulnerable communities like

¹⁴ At the end of *Why Liberalism Failed* Deneen acknowledges that there have been some worthwhile contributions made by the liberal tradition. While this is a welcome admission, it is difficult to see how the concessions he makes to liberalism can be squared with the univocally negative analysis he presents throughout the rest of the book.

¹⁵ One of the leading intellectual figures associated with this movement is Gladden Pappin, professor at the University of Dallas and co-founder of the *American Affairs* journal (see Oppenheimer 2021).

¹⁶ For a prominent example, one might look to the popularity of *New York Times* opinion columnist Elizabeth Bruenig. A Catholic and an outspoken pro-life advocate, she was a notable public voice in support of Bernie Sanders, and maintains a large following on the political Left.

Patrick Deneen. What is needed is a more charitable politics able to address the crises of a hurting humanity in a fragile world.

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