

Is Corporate Culture Undermining the Common Good?

Introduction

In his many writings on the distinctive nature of Western culture the English historian Christopher Dawson developed a clear and far-sighted analysis of the inherent weaknesses of liberalism. He argued that Western culture would not be able to resist the increase in sophisticated forms of social control now available to governments as well as those of enormous economic power. As the influence of Christianity diminished, something new would necessarily emerge to replace it and Dawson believed that the substitute for the Christian religion would be an ideology that was hostile to core Christian beliefs. Dawson uses the term „secular counter-religions“¹ to describe the forces aiming to replace Christianity in Western culture. The essential point is that fundamental rights and freedoms which are protected in theory, eventually lose any real significance when the culture declines.

One of the many consequences for culture, when it becomes separated from the religion which formed it, is the radical new understanding of marriage and the family. Just as Dawson predicted, governments, in particular the courts, and corporations have succeeded in transforming attitudes toward the institution of marriage and the family. The landmark case *Obergefell vs. Hodges* declared „same-sex marriage“ a constitutional right, thereby overturning the way marriage has been understood in our culture for centuries. The role of the corporate elite in the ongoing „culture wars“ is rightly receiving more and more attention.² Many global corporations submitted *amicus briefs* arguing for the legalization of “same-sex marriage”, thereby taking a position in line with the proponents of revising the definition of marriage.³ To highlight the point, no corporations submitted briefs opposing „same-sex marriage“. This reflects their own policies embracing diversity in sexual orientation in the workplace as a desired good.

¹ Dawson, *Christianity and European Culture*, Catholic University Press, 1998, p. 14.

² See Robert Reilly, *Making Gay Okay: How Rationalizing Homosexuality is Changing Everything*, Ignatius Press, 2014, and Darel E. Paul's *From Tolerance to Equality: How Elites Brought America to Same-Sex Marriage*, Baylor University Press, 2018.

³ Exactly 379 corporations and employer organizations filed *amicus briefs* urging the Supreme Court to rule in favour of “same-sex marriage”.

In effect, the law now simply complies with the opinions that have prevailed in our secularized culture.

The article will explore how the LGBT agenda⁴ has effectively subverted the Christian moral principles that have sustained Western culture and significantly informed the philosophical doctrine of liberalism. This agenda has been recently embraced by the corporate elite which has historically been more conservative in its politics.⁵ Instead of adopting a policy of neutrality regarding such controversial issues, corporations have openly sided with the LGBT agenda, thus winning the approval of advocacy groups such as Human Rights Campaign. However, if the natural family is the foundational unit for every society and best provides for the needs of children, then it follows that it is in the interest of society to defend marriage between one man and one woman. This view has been rejected by many leading corporations who have clearly taken an ideological position and have become a leading force for social change. It remains unclear where this leaves employees who disagree with this policy, but there are signs that dissent will not be allowed.

Weaknesses of Liberalism

The scholarly literature dedicated to the demise of liberalism is steadily growing. Patrick Deneen's latest book *Why Liberalism Failed*⁶ has attracted the most attention and has become the source of vigorous debate. His main thesis is that liberalism, understood as a political ideology developed by the English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, was doomed to fail from the beginning because of their false assumptions about human nature and the good. Deneen argues that Progressivism is the logical outworking of Lockean liberalism in practice and over time. If this is true, then the decline in cultural standards and loss of freedom were inevitable and should not surprise us. To say, as Hobbes, Locke, and other liberal thinkers did, that human beings are mainly motivated by a sense of utility, or a desire for self-preservation, or similar instincts, is a grossly one-sided picture of our nature and does not represent

⁴ See, Libby Adler, "The Gay Agenda", *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law*, Vol. 16, Issue 1 (2009), pp. 147-215. The article elaborates the goals and tactics in promoting the gay agenda. The normalization of homosexuality is listed as a top priority in the "culture wars", as well as promoting the idea of a sex-family distinction. The principle of equality is to be reinterpreted with the aim of making "same-sex marriage" a matter of justice.

⁵ Corporate elites have traditionally been closely allied to the Republican Party which has consistently backed more pro-business policies.

⁶ Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Yale University Press, 2018.

the Western tradition from ancient Greece onwards. However, it was precisely this one-sided picture of man's nature which prevailed and imbued America's institutions from the founding, according to Deneen.

Liberalism emerged as an attempt to resolve the problems which had arisen in Europe after the Protestant Reformation when it became clear that religion could no longer serve as the primary source of civil unity and peace.⁷ Deneen and other critics of liberalism argue that the same institutional arrangements that initially solved the problem which arose from the failure of confessional Europe actually created the conditions for the eventual failure of liberalism itself. A paradoxical feature of modern liberalism is that it does not prescribe what citizens should believe, how they should live, which hierarchy of goods should be recognized, but it nevertheless depends on the acceptance of widely shared beliefs and values that motivate people's actions. It was Christianity that provided the source for these basic beliefs and values such as personal responsibility, self-discipline, self-denial, duty to one's community, fidelity to one's spouse etc. Much of this has been eroded as the culture continues to decline, but the question remains whether such a development was inevitable.

The metaphysical assumptions of modern liberalism are a result of Enlightenment philosophy which abandoned the classical Aristotelian framework of virtue ethics.⁸ In seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophy, Aristotelian final causes were rejected and replaced by a new conception of nature as a mechanism of efficient causes that encompassed human beings. The rejection of any natural teleology from human life rendered not just problematic but incoherent the concept of moral virtues as precisely those acquired moral habits and practices which enable the realization of the good. If there are no final causes in nature and human beings are simply a part of nature just like everything else, then there is no such thing as human nature conceived teleologically in Aristotelian and Thomistic terms.⁹ Thus, there is no natural human

⁷ This point is elaborated by Christopher Dawson in works such as *The Judgment of the Nations, Progress and Religion and Dividing Christendom*. More recently, Brad Gregory argues the same in *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁸ See Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, 3rd ed. 2006, pp.6-11.

Ibid., p. 52

⁹ This point is elaborated in the following works: Russell Hittinger, *The First Grace: Rediscovering the Natural Law in a Post-Christian World*, ISI Books, 2003, Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism*, St. Augustine's Press, 2008, Benjamin Wiker, *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists*, InterVarsity Press, 2002.

good and no activities that human beings must intrinsically practice in order to flourish and attain happiness.

Misconceived Rights

As we have seen, the metaphysics of modern liberalism rejects the classical Aristotelian and Thomistic understanding of human nature and a universal moral order. The classical interpretation of rights sees them as the means by which persons fulfill their nature and social obligations entailed by that nature. The subjective claim, which a right expresses, thereby coincides with an objective responsibility to the common good of the whole. This is so understood because in the classical tradition nature is inherently social, and the social order is the flourishing of human nature. This means that rights are precisely the indispensable means which allow persons to interact profoundly with others, and thus achieve teleological perfection. It is for this reason that rights must be protected.

The rejection of classical metaphysics and the relativism that logically follows would eventually lead to a new conception of rights not necessarily grounded in a coherent philosophy of human nature. In other words, morality must be invented by us in order to prevent social anarchy. The problem is that this theory denies that we have natural ends and implies that there is no objective good that must be recognized by all. This kind of thinking is reflected in the notorious assertion made by Justice Anthony Kennedy in the *Casey* decision, which confirmed the legality of abortion, that „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 life.” So stated, this „right“ could mean just about anything. A right that can mean virtually anything does not limit government power, but rather authorizes the government to interfere in social relations for the purpose of securing open-ended claims of justice.¹⁰ This very same relativistic philosophy would later serve to justify the *Obergefell* decision which mandated „same-sex marriage“ as a constitutional right.

This new conception of rights is based on the principle of unbounded individual liberty on the one hand, and on the other, a government responsible for enforcing that

¹⁰ See Russell Hittinger, *The First Grace, Rediscovering the Natural Law in a Post-Christian World*, ISI Books, 2003, p.129,

principle in a very arbitrary manner. The „right“ of defining one's own concept of existence, for example, is under-specified, so it is impossible to know exactly who is bound to do what to whom. As long as this situation persists, there is no clear way to limit government power. As Simone Weil said, „To set up as a standard of public morality a notion which can neither be defined nor conceived is to open the door to every kind of tyranny.“¹¹ The central point here is that public morality must be directed towards the common good, but if what is good can be defined by every individual citizen as he or she pleases, then the culture will eventually reach the stage where people will be in constant conflict over competing rights claims.¹² Vaguely formulated „rights“ must inevitably be extremely difficult to adjudicate in a fair, public way.

The framers of the Constitution were keenly aware of the potential problems in interpreting a list of human rights. James Madison writes in *Federalist* 51: „In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this; you must first enable government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.“¹³ As Russel Hittinger explains: „Once government is commissioned to secure the end of generally stated moral desiderata, government will not only claim the power to interpret the scope of these ends, but will also claim the power over the means to achieve them. Since the former are general and indefinite, so too are the latter. Everyone believes that they have rights, but no one actually knows what they are until an organ of the government specifies them.“¹⁴

The framers were also aware that a virtue-based morality was a pre-condition for freedom and self-government. Madison argues in *Federalist* 55 that „if there is not sufficient virtue among men for self-government, nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another.“¹⁵ A free people able to govern themselves must have the moral character that enables them to use their freedom responsibly, and to elect and hold accountable those who govern. They also understood that it was necessary and good to cultivate virtue through public

¹¹ Simone Weil, „Human Personality“, in *Selected Essays*, trans. Richard Rees, Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 9.

¹² For the implications of the modern understanding of rights see Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse*, The Free Press, 1991.

¹³ Quoted in *The First Grace: Rediscovering the Natural Law in a Post-Christian World*, p.128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.128-129.

¹⁵ James Madison, *Federalist* 55, published in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter, Mentor, p.339.

education and that promoting religion was an essential part of this policy.¹⁶ Their thinking about these questions was grounded in a Christian view of the moral life and human nature. There is no question that the dominant attitudes and beliefs in the culture were informed by Christianity and that, despite differences in religious affiliation, the culture was anchored in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This, of course, does not mean that America was without grave moral deficiencies.¹⁷

Cultural Change

As previously explained, the political philosophy of liberalism initially intended to protect us from State power, but has over time actually made us vulnerable to the forces it meant to hold in check. Liberalism suffers from internal contradictions which make it susceptible to becoming a force *against* freedom and true human flourishing. This is especially true if the culture is separated from the religious roots which sustain it. Dawson examined why liberalism had historically failed and been replaced by collectivist, and in some cases, totalitarian ideologies. Although circumstances have changed since the 1930's and 40's when Dawson wrote on the failure of liberalism and decline of Western culture, his description of the modern attitude towards religion remains remarkably up to date. He writes: „The majority of men, whatever their political beliefs may be, are prepared to accept science and democracy and humanitarianism as essential elements in modern civilization, but they are far less disposed to admit the importance of religion in general and of Christianity in particular. They regard Christianity as out of touch with modern life and inconsistent with modern knowledge.“¹⁸ He adds that the practice of religion would be tolerated in the future, so long as it was treated „as a private luxury.“¹⁹

As for liberalism, Dawson had great respect for the tradition which he believed had preserved individual freedom and prevented the complete secularization of Western culture. He argued that this was possible because liberalism was greatly influenced by Christianity and its moral ideals. However, liberal culture was not able to withstand the

¹⁶ For more on the Founders' view on the importance of virtue and morality, see Thomas West, *The Political Theory of the American Founding: Natural Rights, Public Policy and the Moral Conditions of Freedom*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

¹⁷The most egregious example of moral deficiency was the legal protection and social acceptance of slavery.

¹⁸ Christopher Dawson, *Christianity and European Culture*, Catholic University of America Press, 1998, pp. 118-119.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.119.

forces of tyrannical ideologies in Europe which eventually assumed political power and total social control. Dawson describes this in the following passage: “the spiritual elements in the liberal culture were not strong enough to control the immense forces which had been released by the progress of the applied sciences and the new economic techniques. The advent of the machine, which was in a sense the result of the liberal culture, proved fatal to the liberal values and ideals, and ultimately to the social types which had been the creators and bearers of the culture.”²⁰

One could say that the machine referred to by Dawson has been replaced by the internet and social media today. He saw the rise of new technologies as an inherent threat to personal freedom, since they would facilitate collectivist tendencies and give political and economic leaders the power to control vast numbers of people. In 1942 he detected the potential danger that technology posed for the liberal order and observed that „the conflict we see today between a liberalism which abandoned the traditional social control in an excess of premature optimism and the new collectivism which sacrifices political and social liberty to the ideal of a total organization of society in the interest of efficiency and mass power.“²¹ The key point is that technology is what enables men to increase their power over other men and provides highly effective ways to control public opinion. Accordingly, new ideologies or political movements have the capacity to spread their ideas in society faster than ever before imagined.

When giving an assessment of the present condition of liberal democracy, it is useful to point out that the collapse of constitutional government has occurred in the past and is not unprecedented. Dawson argued that this collapse could not have taken place unless the process of disintegration had been a far-reaching and many-sided one. The main principle underlying his thought is that religion is the foundation for culture and that if the religious impulse of our nature is not fulfilled in traditional religion such as Christianity, it will eventually find fulfillment in „secular counter-religions“. . As Dawson explains, „the civilization that finds no place for religion is a maimed culture that has lost its spiritual roots and is condemned to sterility and decadence.“²² In the next section we will examine how the LGBT movement resembles a „secular counter-religion“, and has developed its own ideology and found effective methods to promote

²⁰ Christopher Dawson, *The Judgment of the Nations*, Catholic University of America Press, 2011, pp.71-72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²² *Christianity and European Culture*, p. 123.

its agenda, thereby subverting traditional attitudes and beliefs, and finally change America's cultural landscape.

Corporate Social Activism

Until quite recently, marriage has been understood as an institution that is both social and natural, supported by a network of laws, customs, and assumptions that guard it as the uniquely legitimate place for procreation and the rearing of children. It seemed very unlikely that children could be reared properly or that most men and women could find fulfillment outside marriage. It was common knowledge what each party could expect from the other, and this understanding kept marriage functional and reliable. However, over the last twenty-five years, a dramatic transformation in the American public's view of marriage has occurred, symbolized best by the movement of „same-sex marriage“ from the position of a fringe few to the pinnacle of morality and a cornerstone of establishment thought. This transformation was made possible only after a new interpretation of individual freedom, equality and human rights had been broadly accepted.

Interestingly, American corporations have embraced the LGBT agenda and have thereby abandoned a position of neutrality on these highly controversial questions. This is a new development, as corporations have historically not taken sides on social issues. Yet today we can see examples of companies ranging from General Electric to the NCAA inserting themselves in the transgender bathroom debate something that would have been hard to imagine only a decade ago.²³ This is a truly remarkable shift in corporate culture that will have far-reaching implications.

As one observer writes: „Traditionally, corporations aimed to be scrupulously neutral on social issues. No one doubted that corporations exercised power, but it was over bread-and-butter economic issues like trade and taxes, not social issues. There seemed little to be gained by activism on potentially divisive issues, particularly for consumer brands.“²⁴ But today corporations have become a powerful ally of the LGBT movement and do not hesitate to wield power, even threatening elected public officials

²³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/major-corporations-join-fight-against-north-carolina-s-bathroom-bill-n605976>

²⁴ <https://theconversation.com/when-did-che-guevara-become-ceo-the-roots-of-the-new-corporate-activism-64203>

who do not share the same views. One example of this is the case of House Bill 2²⁵ in North Carolina, legislation passed in order to protect religious liberty. The Charlotte-based bank of America, Apple, Facebook and 80 other CEOs signed a letter demanding that the governor repeal the legislation, arguing that it sanctioned discrimination and was harmful to business.²⁶ According to these corporate CEOs, in order for a state to be pro-business it must fully embrace gender ideology and all its implications.

The question that must be answered is why public corporations have become agents of social activism. One possible explanation is that social media and the Internet are making it easier for activists to share their opinions and intimidate companies. There is more and more evidence indicating that dissent will not be tolerated by these activist groups. One well known example of this dogmatic approach is the case of the former CEO and co-founder of Mozilla Brendan Eich, who was forced to resign after a public shaming campaign was launched because he donated \$1,000 to the California Proposition 8 initiative, defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman.²⁷ This case demonstrates how modern technology allows for well-organized groups to target and intimidate those with whom they disagree.

As explained earlier, vaguely defined human rights create a condition in which we have competing claims of rights in society. Thus, pressure tactics can likewise be used by groups who are opposed to the LGBT agenda and more concerned with religious freedom. This is already happening, as can be seen in cases such as Hobby Lobby's refusal to include artificial contraception in employee health care packages, as well as Chick-Fil-A decision to promote „Biblical values“. This trend indicates the politicization of society to the point that companies will begin to take sides on the burning issues of the day. Ever since the Supreme Court ruled in *Citizens United vs. Federal Election*

²⁵ The officially called *The Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act* was signed into law in March 2016. The U.S. Department of Justice subsequently sued North Carolina over the legislation. A similar case happened in Georgia where the governor vetoed a religious freedom bill after facing severe pressure from corporations.

²⁶ The letter is written in a moralizing tone and cites inclusion as a value that had been violated by the legislation.

²⁷ Eich stepped down as CEO on April 3, 2014, saying that “under the present circumstances I cannot be an effective leader.”

*Commission*²⁸ that the First Amendment protects the right to make unlimited donations to political causes, corporations have gradually become more vocal on social matters.

These circumstances signify that corporations are not immune to developments in the culture, but are very much affected by changes in attitudes and beliefs. In some cases, they have actually become active participants in the promotion of causes like „same-sex marriage“. Whether these corporations are conscious of it or not, they have accepted an ideology that actually functions like a „secular counter-religion“ in practice. One of the tactical advantages of the LGBT movement is that it conceals what it does, claiming to be a simple matter of tolerance and inclusion, and so it is able to demand a very high standard of proof for opposing principles while avoiding the need to explain its own case. Although it is cloaked in the language of freedom and rights, the ideology relies on coercion, either by the government or corporations, to be implemented throughout society. Just as other ideologies in the past, it does not solve but rather exacerbates the problem of absolute claims of ultimate truth eventually leading to tyranny.²⁹

Conclusion

An ever growing number of scholars are pointing out the inherent weaknesses of liberal democracy, if it is based on a philosophy of moral relativism. If we are to promote the common good, we first need to know what is good. Modern man, however, is reluctant to ask the hard moral questions and thus tends to adopt a relativistic position by default. Good is whatever the majority of free individuals happens to think is good. As society becomes more secular and detached from the religious tradition on which it is based, it must necessarily replace the old moral order with a new one. Historically, liberalism collapsed in Europe before the forces of totalitarian ideologies and one can see a similar pattern today in the form of more recent movements which hold a radical view of the human person.

After explaining the theoretical background of how liberal democracy works in contemporary circumstances, the problem of misconceived rights was elaborated.

²⁸ In a 5-4 decision the U.S Supreme Court held that the free speech clause of the First Amendment prohibits the government from restricting independent expenditures for communications by non-profit corporations, for-profit corporations, labor unions and other associations.

²⁹ See James Kalb, *The Tyranny of Liberalism*, ISI Books, p.95

Western liberal democracies rely increasingly more on judicial decisions to enforce the official orthodoxy on the people. Examples were given to show how activist judges have been using cases to reinterpret fundamental rights and liberties. The underlying philosophy of relativism is revealed in the notorious statement by justice Anthony Kennedy that part of liberty includes „the right to define one's own concept of existence“. So stated, this statement can mean just about anything and gives citizens an immunity from virtually all positive law.

Next, the significance of cultural change was explained by focusing on Christopher Dawson's thought on culture. His insight that ideologies tend to assume the social functions of religion and can become „secular counter-religions“ is relevant when one examines the phenomenon of the rise of the LGBT movement in America. Dawson observed in his lifetime the collapse of Western civilization and detected that liberalism could not protect freedom, if it lost the Christian foundation which sustained it. He clearly understood that society can become inhuman, while preserving all the technical and material advantages of modern life.

Liberal democracy also depends on a strong moral culture in order to maintain fundamental liberties. America's Founders understood this vital connection, as can be seen from their deliberations. They were aware of the possibility of a democracy declining to the point that it can be transformed into a type of tyranny. The danger of democratic tyranny lies in precisely the inability to distinguish between what is good and what is evil. This sort of tyranny is denominated "democratic" because it is based on a theory that denies that there is any objective good valid for all, but rather claims that each individual can determine for himself what is good. Pope Benedict XVI famously called this condition the "dictatorship of relativism".³⁰

Finally, the paper explained how corporations have become active participants in the fight over controversial political issues. When the moral standards in a nation's culture decline, companies cannot remain immune from the deleterious effects. In some cases, corporations are now instruments in promoting certain evils, like „same-sex marriage“. This is a recent phenomenon, but nevertheless leads one to the conclusion that the business community is no longer neutral when certain moral issues are at

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI first used this term publicly in a homily on April 18, 2005, shortly before being elected pope. The exact quote is as follows: "We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."

stake. In the end, outcomes are determined by raw power, not by eternal principles which inform us of what is objectively right and good.

Biography

Stephen N. Bartulica is associate professor of political philosophy at the *Catholic University of Croatia* in Zagreb. His scholarly interests include the relationship between religion and politics, ideologies and constitutional theory. He has served in positions at the highest level of government, first as special advisor for religious affairs to the President of Croatia Ivo Josipovic (2010-2015) and later as senior foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Tihomir Orešković (2016). He is the founder and president of the *Center for Renewal of Culture*, a Croatian NGO designed to educate young professionals in virtue ethics and leadership. This NGO was part of a coalition which successfully organized a national referendum on marriage in 2013. Mr. Bartulica is a native of St. Joseph, Missouri.