

Why Liberalism Failed: Opportunity and Wake-Up Call

| BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Although publicists for the Enlightenment continue to rave (often with good reason) about its triumph over religious prejudice, thoughtful resistance does here and there sound forth and get a hearing. Contemporary culture has mostly consigned theologians proper, the people credentialed for seminaries and college or university religion departments, to its margins, along with the books they write. But when such distinguished literary figures as Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson raise a protest concerning what the Enlightenment has bequeathed us, they command attention. Now political theorist Patrick Deneen, invoking the name for Enlightenment political philosophy, has published a book called *Why Liberalism Failed*, and it's getting notice on mainstream bulletin boards like *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*.

I was thinking about this book during a half-day meeting in San Diego some weeks back. As part of a focus on Christ—the “One” of what became the well-known One Project—several pastors had, over the past eight years, organized worship and preaching festivals that were held in various hotels on three continents. These two-day “gatherings,” the last one having occurred just before my half-day meeting, had attracted anywhere from 100 to a thousand or more participants, and the pastors behind them were now moving to a new initiative. If their energy was, after all, limited, their passion and vision were, like the sea breeze, fresh and robust. They were calling their new initiative the Global Resource Collective, and were convinced that if Christ is the center of a viable church life, individual congregations are its most important manifestation.

The Global Resource Collective would be the “next chapter” of these pastors’ service to the wider church. The point would be to re-energize what is “local” and to do so through the “working together” of engaged and

adventurous congregations. The half-day consisted mostly of presentations on the basic idea and on some of the details it would involve. Speakers said that congregations need each other, that by working together they can be better together, that the support envisioned would be “global” in scope. One said hierarchy “suffocates” the “democracy of ideas.” The Global Resource Initiative is meant to enhance it.

All this conversation would transpire with the aid of an Internet platform for collecting sermons, Bible curricula, experiments in children’s ministry, and the like. These would become available to planners worldwide. Ideas from everywhere would improve local Adventist cultures everywhere.

Actually, the word “culture” did not, at least in my recollection, come up. But that word does come up in *Why Liberalism Failed*, and it underscores what a fine opportunity and wake-up call may be a-borning. The Global Resource Collective could freshen and invigorate our Gospel work of addressing the world’s pain, self-deception and indomitable yearning. It may sound a wake-up call for the larger church, the spiritual community, precious to most of us, whose resilience and mission suffer today under both the hostility of surrounding elites and the pathologies that plague us from within.

But let me say more about the book.

Patrick Deneen has written a jeremiad, and some critics have faulted his work for invective so unrelenting that it overlooks the positive good the Enlightenment has brought. But you could grant a reproach like that and still allow that something truly insidious has crept into conventional Western thought, and that Deneen has put his finger on it. He does not aim at either the “left” or the “right,” but instead at central aspects of the political “ideology” that underlies them *both*. Symptoms anyone can see, from the rise of unaccountable oligarchies to

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the waning of norms and institutions essential to personal and political self-governance, suggest the need, he says, for such analysis as he is offering.

What, then, is wrong with “liberalism”? The basic thing is that liberalism re-defines freedom, or liberty, as “the most extensive possible expansion” of the sphere of autonomy. Freedom liberates the populace from the authority of cultures and traditions, and removes so far as possible all limiting conditions; the ideal to which freedom speaks is the “self-fashioning expressive individual.”

We have mostly forgotten that both the Greek and Christian traditions took freedom to be quite different from this. In their light, Deneen points out, freedom is something you *achieve*, or achieve by God's grace. Through “habituation in virtue” you conquer self-preoccupation and “the slavish pursuit of base and hedonistic desires”; for the sake of the common good you work toward self-rule and embrace self-limitation.

But liberalism's hostility to authority tends to eviscerate the very institutions—the very *cultures*—from which we learn the moral priorities and virtues that enable us to look beyond self toward the needs of others. Cultures comprise “customs, practices, and rituals that are grounded in local and particular settings.” Liberalism has tended to undermine such cultures, to think of them as oppressive rather than sustaining. But human beings are in fact situated—located in—particular places, linked with particular families and communities, and this means that if you weaken local cultures and their authority, you threaten the very support system moral development requires.

Now consider this: a congregation is a prime example of a local, sustaining culture. As small, local communities embedded in the tradition associate with Jesus Christ, they question the ideal of sheer autonomy and attempt to inculcate the virtues and character that Jesus Christ embodied. They are thus a key part of the solution to the breakdown of relationships

that today must count as a main symptom of liberalism's failure. That is why I suggest that the Global Resource Collective may be an important opportunity; precisely by strengthening local congregations it could strengthen our witness to the flawed and often clueless wider world. Direct effort to deal with pain, self-deception, and yearning falls more to local communities than to abstract bureaucracies, whether ecclesiastical or political.

One piece of the vision set forth in San Diego was that of helping congregations to develop curricula of Bible study that would touch every age group at the same time. The preacher's sermon, the teen group's discussion, the children's memory verse, could all be coordinated around the same passage of Scripture. Kids in the lobby would be ready to tease the adults about whether they could recite the “Words to Remember” for the week. The preacher would try to address the very sorts of questions teenagers had, that very day, been thinking about.

To me, that seemed like a powerful enhancement of the congregation's effort to inculcate a moral and spiritual tradition. But someone might want to put a reminder into play. The Enlightenment's embrace of critique—of asking questions and raising doubts—was not all bad. And that is true. After the example of Jesus himself, traditions have to be not only inculcated but also refined. Local congregations can lead out in that process, too. Such a thing is what the Holy Spirit is *for*, and the Holy Spirit is a gift God keeps giving.

I mentioned a wake-up call. Everyone knows that Adventism is highly “organized,” or centralized. Considerable authority resides at, or is thought to reside at, the top. The Global Resource Collective, together with the prompting of *Why Liberalism Failed*, helps us see that a substantial part of that authority—not all, but a substantial part—needs to shift away from centralized bureaucracy. The real impact of church life, and the most important conversation, is local. ■

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum.