



## **Rector's Essay - Liberality, Liberalism, Illiberalism**

By Jarrett Kerbel (05/07/26)

The current conversations about the limits of liberalism and the dangers of illiberalism speak to me on a personal level. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s during a period of social breakdown and rampant relativism, I grew up craving trustworthy guidance, stable communities, and wise, respected traditions. “Free to Be, You and Me” by Marlo Thomas is, for me, a symptom of an excess of relativism and the Boy Scout Oath and Law were symbols of a moral vision that could be feasible.

Why would I be so critical of a beloved children’s book? Because, for me, this book puts a terrible burden on self and identity which I call ‘liberal subjectivism’; the unfortunate idea that my individual subjective thoughts, experiences, and feelings are the final arbitrator of all value, meaning, and truth. We might call this the raw end of the Enlightenment idea that the interior thoughts of the individual are how the person legislates their life and therefore the ultimate source of authority is the individual.

The only problem: this is not actually how meaning, truth, value, and authority actually function. There is no self without a pre-existing tradition that forms the framework we use to navigate the world and understand ourselves. Our interior life is the product of our outer relationships with a culture, family, and traditions that are ongoing, powerful, and determinative of our possibilities. We arrive at our ideas and commitments from a shared vocabulary and a shared reality. We also critique, create, and adapt our ideas out of this existing vocabulary.

The consistent failure of utopian communities created by small groups of idealists who think they can create culture ex nihilo is a good proof of my point. The bloody debacles of the French Revolutions, Maoism and Stalinism are other examples.

On the other hand, the break up of rigid traditional moral codes did create space for crucial liberation movements for women, queer people, and people of color. I would argue that those gains also came with an ongoing need to repair our social fabric into a coherent and substantial ethical code for the good of all.

One final observation, liberalism rubs up against our Christian understanding of the self as divided, broken, fragmented and scattered. We have all fallen short. We are sinners and internally corrupt until God's grace repairs and realigns our attention and will to the righteousness of God's way, truth, and light. Once again this notion of what is right can be used oppressively but it is also hard to love someone without loving what is best for that person. Quite a dilemma!

The idea that I subjectively judge God's ways based on my own internal standards that I derive from something else than God is the height of confusion. The idea that there are no better or worse arguments, theories or conclusions, only my opinion and your opinion, your perspective and mine, is also unfeasible and a recipe for endless frustration. We have felt this frustration first hand when a person disagrees but refuses to give reasons. Or disagrees and gives fanciful reasons such as conspiracy theories. Humans are creatures of a kind that give reasons to one another.

So where do we go from here. For me, I turn to the virtue of liberality as a port in the storm. Traditionally, liberality meant "demonstrating the virtues of a citizen, showing devotion to the common good and respecting the importance of mutual connectedness." I also turn to a renewal of reasonableness, which is the virtue of acknowledging that the most reasonable case does have bearing on my choices and beliefs. There are better and worse cases that govern our thoughts and behavior. We do not like this fact because we prefer unfettered freedom to relational accountability which can feel confining.

Illiberalism can be a huge threat as it proposes a coercive authority that stops all debate in its tracks. This is paralyzing and sterilizing for the pursuit of truth and for life in a robustly pluralistic society. However, churches are actually illiberal in one important respect. We have a core of beliefs that are not up for grabs. The Nicene Creed enshrines these core teachings in a skeleton form. Without a skeleton we are just a pile of mush! As they say, if you don't stand for anything you will fall for everything.