



*The end of Liberalism?
The Renaissance of the natural
family?*

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Resumen

En el presente artículo se argumentará que el sistema familiar liberal, tal como fue concebido por el teórico-político británico John Locke a finales del siglo XVII, gozoso de un aparente éxito a fines de la década de 1960, se encuentra actualmente en ruinas. Tres contradicciones internas que derribaron el sistema pueden ser identificadas: 1) una comprensión deficiente de la naturaleza humana, la cual denigró la imagen del varón y colocó una carga familiar excesiva sobre la mujer; 2) la falta de funciones de la familia liberal, provocando su desintegración económica y material; 3) su dependencia de la ingeniería social coercitiva, que minaba los valores religiosos fundacionales que permitieron la funcionalidad del sistema conocido. La “autorrealización” y la “teoría de género”, muestran Carlson y Hurtado, son la consumación lógica de dicho sistema familiar liberal, atentando directamente con la esencia de la familia natural. También se pone de manifiesto cómo y por qué el ideal liberal de tolerancia ha fallado en las últimas décadas.

Palabras Clave: Liberalismo, Familia, Paternidad, Tolerancia, Cristianismo.

Abstract

The article argues that the liberal family system, as crafted by late 17th Century British political theorist John Locke and enjoying apparent success as late as the 1960s, is now in ruins. Three internal contradictions which brought the system down can be identified: the first was a faulty understanding of human nature, which denigrated males and placed too great of the real family burden on women; the second contradiction was the liberal family's lack of functions, which led to its material and economic disintegration; the third was its reliance on coercive social engineering, which undermined the very religious values which allowed the known system to work. “Self-actualization” and “gender theory,” Carlson and Hurtado show, are the logical consummation of liberalism, and fatal to its natural family order. They also reveal how and why the liberal ideal of tolerance has failed in recent decades.

Keywords: Liberalism, Family, Parenthood, Tolerance, Christianity.

1. Introduction

Fifty-six years ago [1964], the family system of Lockean Liberalism seemed to have achieved complete triumph in the United States, in Western Europe, even in Australia. This system was the legacy of British political philosopher **John Locke**, who was active in the 1680s and 1690s¹. Embracing a marital contract between equals –while allowing fathers to take on the “soft patriarchal” roles of breadwinner and nominal head-of-household; focused on the *procreation* and *rearing of children* as free and rational beings, preparing to manage their own economic affairs; and freed from the onerous productive functions found in the pre-modern family–, this model had gained new vindication through the “marriage booms” and the “baby booms” of the 1940s and 1950s. Sociologists such as Harvard University’s **Talcott Parsons** gave optimistic, supportive assessments of Western family life². Capping this celebration was **William Goode’s** 1963 book, *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, which argued –with a big dose of John F. Kennedy’s New Frontierism– that the “conjugal family” grounded in Lockean Liberalism, in association with Protestant asceticism, was the rapidly spreading norm found in both the industrialized West and in the decolonizing, developing world (Goode, 1963)³. Regarding the family, all was well.

Today, of course, all lies pretty much in ruins. The Lockean family model has now delivered: low fertility and depopulation; a massive retreat from marriage (among heterosexuals at least); cohabitation in place of marital bonds; among those children who do appear, a surge in what we once quaintly called “illegitimate births”; a growing horde of fatherless, unemployable, and unmarriageable young men; the complete triumph of sexual radicalism, evidenced in aggressive contraception, abortion, and even infanticide; and a new totalitarianism, imposing the recently strange ideas of “gay marriage” and transgenderism on all, especially children (Andrews & Hurtado, 2020). The speed of this transition has been staggering. What went wrong? The answer, we believe, lies within *three contradictions* found in the Liberal ideology itself.

The first contradiction: a faulty understanding of human nature. **John Locke** held a quite dim view of the human male. Each man’s strongest desires, he said, were “self-preservation” and “copulation.” As he wrote: “What Father of a Thousand, when he begets a child, thinks further than satisfying his Appetite?”⁴. With men driven by what historian **Scott Yenor** has called these “almost useless” social

1. Cf. John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (New York: Mentor Books, 1965).

2. Cf. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: The Free Press, 1951); T. Parsons, & and W. White, «The Link Between Character and Society». in Lipset, S. M. & Lowenthal, L. eds. *Culture and Social Change* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 89-135.

3. Cf. William J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

4. Locke, *Two Treatises...*, 54.

traits⁵, what might entice males into family life? Locke acknowledges that the institutions surrounding the old *Patriarchy* succeeded in luring men into *hearth* and *home*, but only by giving them complete –and often abusive– authority over wives and children. Since his overall project demanded an end to Patriarchy at the political level (so as to undermine the claims of kings), Locke deemed it necessary to bring an end to Patriarchy within the family as well. His alternative was the “liberal” marriage –of limited purpose and authority– where men might find compensatory satisfactions in friendships with a wife and children. While running against his premise of gender equality, Locke understood that he still needed to cast the father as the presumed head of the family, which in industrial society evolved into the *breadwinner* role.

However, this soft patriarchy proved to be vulnerable. Locke did hold that women had a natural instinct to be attached to and to protect children. While men must in effect be tricked into family living, it comes naturally to women. In Locke’s scheme, women accepted soft patriarchy as the price they must pay to keep a man in the house. However, some in the liberal order eventually saw that as too great a price. To gain the promised equality, they said, women must instead overcome their maternal instincts and break their affective ties to children and to nature itself. At that point the contract breaks down. As women renounce their innate purpose, men lose their artificially created one, and the liberal marriage system dissolves. While **John Stuart Mill**, writing in the mid-19th Century, was among the first to describe this *feminist imperative*⁶, its roots lay in Locke. Indeed, he readily acknowledged the validity, in certain societies, of the *single-parent family*, where *the children are left to the Mother, follow her, and are wholly under her Care and Provision*. So also with *polygamy*: systems of one man with multiple wives or one woman with multiple husbands. These too, he said, could serve as household forms adequate to the tasks of rearing children as “free and rational creatures.” Such matters were subject solely to cultural acceptance, what Locke called “fashion.” Such shifts in “fashion” we now observe.

The second contradiction: its lack of functions. Locke’s “Conjugal Society” rested on a “voluntary Compact between Men and Women” that was limited to the “things of their common interest and [common] Property.” Under Patriarchy, the economic lives of men and women had been merged, wholly and complete. As expressions of pre-industrial life, such households were also characterized by a great array of productive activities. The sexual and the economic merged fully here. From his perspective, Locke aimed at families stripped of most functions, economic or otherwise. Property could be held separately, by husband and wife. Since the purposes of marriage were only procreation

5. Scott Yenor, Scott, *Family Politics: The Idea of Marriage in Modern Political Thought* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 20-23.

6. Cf. John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*. Consulted on the 21 of June of 2022 at: [gutenberg.org/files/27083/27083-h/27083-h.htm](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27083/27083-h/27083-h.htm)

and the socialization of small children as rational creatures, and since marriage was always provisional, a strong home economy was neither necessary nor desirable. While Locke probably did not see the full implications here, his limited family model would prove to be admirably suited –in some ways– to the future capitalist industrial economic order.

In the 1950s, again, **Talcott Parsons** –channeling **John Locke**– celebrated this Liberal family for having become much “more specialized than before.” It no longer produced goods of any significance. Following female *suffrage*, it had ceased to be a unit in the political system. With the demise of the extended family, the new family model no longer played a role in integrating its members into the larger society. This allowed the nuclear family to focus solely on its two “basic and irreducible” functions: *the socialization of children &* and *the stabilization of adult personalities*. Yet there is no apparent reason why such an institution “must” continue, as Parsons [following Locke] implied. Indeed, this exclusive focus on psychological tasks easily became both enervating and boring. As **Philip Abbott** summarizes in his fine book, *The Family on Trial*: “Complete social disintegration is a reality that [was] beyond the scope of Parsons’ vision” (Abbott, 1981: 126-30)⁷. Alas, we now live in the time of such complete social disintegration.

The third contradiction: its reliance on coercive social engineering. In his project to reshape the political order, Locke concluded the family would have to be re-engineered as well. Humans were not born “rational and free”. They had to be made so. Locke invented what we now call “the nuclear family” to shape individuals suited to the Liberal order. In its fundamentals, the task actually resembled later efforts to mold the “Soviet Man” or the “Fascist Man.” Indeed, lurking within the project was a latent totalitarianism. **John Stuart Mill** took the first step in this direction, replacing the goal of a “free and rational child” (which implicitly assumed that all persons would reach the same conclusions) with the modified liberal quest for “individual development” (which could move in a multitude of directions)⁸. In his quest for “perfect equality,” Mill also took steps toward coercion. Once the egalitarian family model had been put forward as the *only* desirable one, and given that it is not natural, it must be imposed. As Mill concluded: “The family, *justly constituted*, would [then] be the real school of the virtues of freedom”.

2. The End of Liberalism?

The liberal philosopher **T.H. Green** took the next step, suggesting that the “institutions of civil life” –that is, the State– could “render it possible for a man to be freely determined by the idea of a

7. Phillip Abbott, *The Family on Trial: Special Relationships in Modern Political Thought* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 126-30.

8. Cf. Stuart Mill, *The Subjection...*

possible satisfaction of himself”⁹, muddled language elevating “self-actualization” into the core or final liberal principle. It was the American philosopher **John Rawls** who brought the argument home. His quest for “distributive justice,” “fair opportunity,” and self-discovery for each individual always floundered when it reached real families, not the family of liberal theory. As he famously concluded: “Is the family to be abolished then? Taken by itself and given a certain primacy, the idea of equal opportunity inclines us in this direction”¹⁰. In sum, we can affirm that *Liberalism undermined the one force that actually allowed its family model to work*. The Lockean marriage and family system operated tolerably well only within what political scientist Scott Yenor calls “an atmosphere informed by Christian faith.” However, another abiding liberal principle is that every social practice should be subject to rational critique. Such practices under scrutiny have most certainly included religious faith, giving rise to a Skepticism that worked relentlessly to deconstruct Christianity. Liberalism has now consumed almost all of the moral capital provided to it by Judaism and Christianity. In consequence, its flaws and internal contradictions have been set loose, with the dire consequences described earlier.

So, what should we do? Ironically, the first common instinct is to reach out to still another presumed principle of liberalism: *Tolerance*. The positive reasoning goes something like this: *accept the disappearance of the former Christian family and sexual codes as a necessary adjustment to a new pluralistic era*. Embrace the liberal project which mandates that each individual chart out his or her own meaning of life and the universe. Instead of insisting on a fixed moral code applied to all, allow parents to raise their children in their own way; allow religious communities to teach their distinctive values to their own members, without their being allowed to impose such values on any others. In short, embrace personal autonomy, parental rights, and religious liberty, that all might flourish in a pluralistic paradise.

The problem here is that few contemporary liberals now believe in tolerance. More specifically, most quite strenuously reject both parental rights and religious liberty. Why? Because these get in the way of what is now the primary, and in some ways the only, liberal principle: *self-actualization*. As political theorist **Patrick Deneen** writes in his recent book *Why Liberalism Failed*, this idea system can be understood as the consequence of a dual revolution: first, the triumph of “anthropological individualism” and the quest for self-actualization over the historic Judeo-Christian order devoted to faith, tradition, place, duties, and kin; and second, a “scientific revolution” bringing “human separation from and opposition to nature.” In this war against nature, “gender theory” is the logical extension, even the consummation, of the liberal idea¹¹.

9. Thomas H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 32-33.

10. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 511.

11. f. Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

In such an order, parental rights cannot be allowed, for they would surely cramp and distort the fundamental right of every child to find “its” gender identity through proper enlightenment and personal experimentation. Religious liberty cannot be allowed, for the same reason. This circumstance has led to a curious result:

1. Contemporary liberals, as represented by the sexual left, are quite ready to fix their values into law and state regulation, to force everyone to live by those values, and to indoctrinate *all children* into those values, as matters of justice and truth.

2. Contemporary Christians appear to be embarrassed by their values today to some degree. They accept the collapse of Christian-inspired family and sexual legal codes as inevitable, a change perhaps even to be welcomed. Most Christian leaders in the West now sound *demoralized*: in both senses of that powerful word. At best, they come across as losers, eager to withdraw from the culture wars, asking only to be left alone.

3. Even more curious is the contrast here between **Muslims and Christians**. By and large, Muslims are still quite ready to impose *their* social, familial, and sexual values, wherever and whenever they get the opportunity. Why? They believe that their faith is true, just, and universal, and they act accordingly¹².

Regarding these matters, the Muslims may be better at reading our current times. As the totalitarian nature of contemporary liberalism reveals ever more clearly, Christians –and other faith communions– will *not* be left alone by the liberal regime, especially when it comes to children. Indeed, once you understand that modern liberals hold to “gender theory” and “sexual enlightenment” as quasi-religious tenets, they can be expected to behave in no other way. In their minds, the children *must* be liberated from the chains of traditional religious bigotry and superstition.

3. The Christian Novelty: “One-Flesh” Unions.

How then should Christians *who hold to the truth and universality of their faith* live today, and move into the future with confidence and joy? How might they build a new society based on the natural family? I suggest that answers might actually be found by first moving 2,000 years into the past. Here we find the pagan Roman Empire, a place and a regime marked by great sexual and marital disorders. The family-centered virtues of the old Roman Republic were long gone. As historian **Robin Lane Fox** writes in his book *Pagans and Christians*, “accepted sexual practice in the... Empire had a

12. Cf. Kevin Andrews, *Maybe “I do.” Modern Marriage & the Pursuit of Happiness* (Victoria: Connor Court, 2012).

range and a variety which it has never attained since”¹³. The poet **Horace** argued that “young men should drop in there, rather than grind some husband’s private mill.” At the high end of the trade were dancers and musicians; at the low end, “two-penny” women who worked the street corners and graveyards. At the same time, the Roman marriage system was a shambles. When pagan marriages did occur, the females involved were commonly quite young. About twenty percent involved child brides of ages eleven or twelve. Up to half of females who did marry did so by age fourteen¹⁴. The men were, on average, nearly twice as old. Custom dictated, nonetheless, a quick consummation of the marriage, even with these pre-pubescent girls¹⁵.

Roman marital relations were badly strained. Adultery was widespread, and socially acceptable for men. It was common among the women, as well. The age gap between husbands and wives, the access by the men to prostitutes and slave women, the confinement of Roman wives within their dwellings, and a male culture that celebrated cruelty and violence and held marriage in low esteem: as one can imagine, these patterns rarely produced happy homes. Not surprisingly, divorce became common, sought by men and women alike. Preborn and infant life faced enormous risks. If determined by the *pater familias*, abortion was legal and common. Illicit abortions by wives seeking to cover up an adultery were also frequent. The *fetus* simply had no legal standing. While the poet **Ovid** and several other pagan voices did raise objections to abortion, their concern focused on the rights of fathers and the needs of the Empire, but they were indifferent to the unborn child. Abortion kits—some of which have survived—contained the usual blades, hooks, needles, and spikes; diluted poisons were also used. These procedures left many Roman women dead or permanently sterile.

Infanticide appears to have been even more common. Legal under *pater potestas* (paternal power), male babies with imperfect form and girls were the usual victims. The destruction of baby girls was so common that for every hundred females in 100 A.D. Rome, there were 131 men; out in the provinces, 140. Even in relatively large Roman families, “more than one daughter was practically never raised.” Finally, efforts at contraception were widespread, even if often ineffective. Herbs, ointments, and “medicines” were employed, alongside charms and primitive condoms formed out of animal parts. In

13. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1986), 341.

14. Tim G. Parkin, *Demography and Roman Society* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 110-130; Sandison, A. T. «Sexual Behavior in Ancient Societies». in Brothwell, D. & Sandison, A. T. eds. *Diseases in Antiquity* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1967), 734-743; Arthur Boak, *Manpower Shortages and the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1955), 109-129.

15. For example, the practice of “Greek Love”—sexual relations between a man and an adolescent boy—received frequent literary praise. The early Christian *Tatian*, who resided in Rome for several decades, reported that the Romans “consider pederasty to be particularly privileged and try to round up herds of boys like herds of grazing mares”. Adult homosexuality was idealized as well, and often associated with the theater. In the major Imperial cities, male prostitution was common and deemed acceptable. Evidence exists of transvestite practices in Rome, as well, often with a religious veneer, such as the cult of *Elagabalus*. The cults of *Cybele* and *Dionysius* featured flagellation rituals, with sexual intent. Also, female prostitution was widespread and socially approved

short, Imperial Rome featured normalized sexual disorders, marital malfunction, and a deep hostility to new human life. Not surprisingly, these characteristics led to a low level of fertility, well below the generational replacement level. Both **Julius Caesar** (in 59 B.C.) and **Caesar Augustus** (in 19 and 9 B.C.) proclaimed laws that would punish the childless and reward fathers with three or more children. The measures did not work. “Childlessness prevailed,” the historian **Tacitus** lamented.

It was into this setting of moral darkness and deep hostility toward procreation that the followers of **Jesus of Nazareth** stepped. Their number was small: still well under 50,000 by 120 A.D. Early Roman observers often saw these Christians as merely another burial society, a sort of community fund for burying the dead, with its own ritual meal. Nonetheless, it soon grew apparent that this Palestinian sect held to startling ideas on sexuality, marriage, and family life: concepts radical in their implications. These derived, in part, from a broad acceptance of the pronatalism of the Hebrew Scriptures, friendliness toward a “full quiver” of children. The direct teachings of Jesus on *the sanctity of marriage, the sinfulness of divorce, the value of women, the importance and meaning of children, and the sweeping affirmation of life strengthened this attention to procreative marriage*. The letters of the **Apostle Paul** and other early Apostolic writings –especially the Pastoral Epistles– expanded this revolutionary new Christian sexual and marital ethic.

Its earliest summary appears in *The Didache*, a remarkable manual on church life and discipline now reliably dated to the late First Century. Using a rhetorical style of Jewish origin labelled the “Two Ways,” the *Didache* vividly contrasts the path of “Death and Darkness” with the path of “Life and Light.” Focusing on the Second Great Commandment –Love your Neighbor as yourself– the document features a list of prohibitions that go well beyond the Ten Commandments. Condemnations of theft, murder, and magic appear together with forthright condemnations of fornication, adultery, sodomy, infanticide, and abortion. The Way of Death also includes the use of *pharakeia*, or potions. Evil men on this path were “killers of offspring, corrupters of the plasma [or mold] of God.” It is clear that the items being condemned were drugs employed as contraceptives and abortifacients.

Linked to this was a fresh sanctification of the marriage bond, involving a radical – indeed, an unprecedented– form of sexual equality. Unlike the Romans *and every other ancient culture*, the new Christians denounced promiscuity among men as well as women. Paul’s exposition in *1 Corinthians* 7:2-7 showed a symmetry in conjugal rights that –in historical sociologist **Rodney Stark’s** words– “was at total variance, not only with pagan culture, but with Jewish culture as well”¹⁶. In moral and practical terms, this represented the Fulfillment of the “one flesh unions” summoned in *Genesis*, chapters One and Two. Reflecting a new equality, the average age for first marriages rose to eighteen for Christian women, compared to fourteen for the pagans.

16. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 95-128.

Where the Roman pagans faced a great shortage of fertile females –due to infanticide and botched abortions– the Christian movement had an abundance of young, fertile women: an estimated sixty percent of early believers were female. Even after accounting for early practitioners of celibacy, this was a community open to the propagation, protection, and rearing of children. This openness to new human life had consequences. While hard numbers on differential fertility do not exist, circumstantial evidence affirms that a novel Christian family and sexual ethic, tied to the abundance of young women, produced a significantly higher number of births and the survival of more offspring to adulthood. Along with conversions (particularly among pagan men married to Christian women), this accounts for the growth in Christian numbers from a negligible figure in 100 A.D. to 32 million by 350 A.D., representing half of the Empire’s population. As Stark concludes, “superior fertility contributed to the rise of Christianity”¹⁷.

Observers of the time certainly noted the difference. For example, **Minucius Felix**, a Christian apologist of the late Second Century, wrote a tract involving a debate between a pagan and a Christian. At one point, the latter states “that day by day the number of us is increased,” which he credits to “[our] fair mode of life.” Or, as **Tertullian** wrote in a passage to his wife: “To the servant of God, forsooth, offspring is necessary. For our own salvation we are secure enough, so that we have leisure for children! Burdens must be sought by us for ourselves which are avoided by the majority of the [pagans], who are compelled by law [to have children], [but] who are decimated by abortions”¹⁸.

In truth, during these centuries we find Christian communities subject to frequent persecutions – ranging from the confiscation of property and imprisonment to death in The Arena and other terrible ways– living in fidelity to a radically new marital and sexual ethic. It is one that placed the *family*, not the individual, at the center of an emerging new social order. In being faithful to these expectations, especially in the hard parts, the early Christians eventually overwhelmed their persecutors... in a way by sheer numbers. Put crudely, for all the right reasons, the Christians outbred the Roman pagans of the Western Empire, who disappeared from history.

5. Conclusion

What can we learn from this dramatic turn at the origins of our Western Culture? One thing for sure: the followers of **Jesus of Nazareth** introduced within the Roman Empire a radically *new (sexual) and family ethic*: one that elevated marriage in social esteem and rested on an equality and complementarity between wife and husband that was unique within the whole of prior human

17. Cf. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity...*

18. Arthur Cleveland Coxe, *Fathers of the Third Century* (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Group, 1885), 39-49; 176-198.

experience; one that focused sexuality exclusively on marital love and the procreation of children; one that protected preborn and infant life from harm; one that carried small communities of virtue through periods of systemic persecution by the pagan state; and one that led to the Christians' ultimate social and political triumph, as the fruit of their family system –an abundance of children– simply replaced the empty homes of the sterile pagans.

What does this episode mean for us today? One parallel between then and now lies in the cultural setting. As quoted earlier, **Robin Lane Fox** reported that “accepted sexual practice in the [pagan Roman] Empire had a range and a variety which it has never attained since.” Now he wrote that thirty years ago. Since then, it seems likely that accepted sexual practices found in our secularizing Western world have in fact equaled those of the old Roman Empire, or perhaps even surpassed them. Moreover, as the pagan Romans fairly quickly turned toward official persecution of Christians, we witness the early rumblings of a similar persecution arising in our time within the misnamed human rights councils of the modern, pagan, liberal states. This means that believing Christians must fundamentally reset their minds: *push that resent button*¹⁹.

The easy Christianity of, say, 1955, is largely gone. Moving smoothly between workplace, tennis or football club, political party, school, and church is no longer possible. The new culture created by self-actualizing liberalism marks the end of fashionable Christianity. Just as nineteen centuries ago, active, believing Christians must see themselves and act as counter-cultural. In living a Christian life involving distinctive family and sexual ethics, Christians will once again be a scandal to their pagan neighbors and to officials of the pagan regime. For the good news in our situation is that everything is becoming clear now: the threats; the opportunities; and the certainty of victory, once again, of the Way of Life and Light over the Way of Death and Darkness. The early persecutors who loathe infant life, one-flesh marital unions, and child innocence are here again, just as they were two thousand years ago. Let's remember, though, *who won that contest and why*.

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