

Article

Autonomous Freedom in Modern Liberalism's Anthropological Project: A Theological Critique in the Light of the Incarnation

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Abstract

This article offers an expository and analytical study of modern liberalism by examining its meaning, socio-political foundations, and economic structures. Rather than approaching liberalism solely as a political arrangement or policy framework, the study treats it as a developing anthropological and moral vision that shapes modern understandings of freedom, autonomy, and the human person. First, the study clarifies the meaning of modern liberalism by tracing its conceptual development from classical liberalism to its modern forms, highlighting its defining commitments to individual autonomy, state neutrality, and pluralism. Durkheim's principle of social solidarity is recalled here, showing how liberalism's emphasis on autonomy weakens collective moral bonds once sustained by religion. Second, modern liberalism is situated within its socio-political context, examining its emergence from the collapse of religious authority, the fragmentation of moral consensus, and the liberal state's attempt to manage diversity through procedural neutrality. Weber's notion of social action is contrasted with liberalism, which redefines human purpose away from transcendent vocation toward secular autonomy, reshaping the meaning of freedom in modern society. The third part analyzes the economic foundations of modern liberalism, focusing on the anthropological assumptions embedded in liberal economics, the role of market logic in reinforcing autonomous freedom, and the ways economic liberalism contributes to moral and social fragmentation. Methodologically, the study employs a historical-conceptual and interdisciplinary approach, drawing from political philosophy, social theory, and economic thought to present a coherent exposition of modern liberalism as a unified project rather than a collection of isolated ideas. The article is primarily descriptive and analytical, aiming to clarify the internal logic and development of modern liberalism before any normative or theological evaluation is undertaken. By exposing the underlying assumptions about freedom, reason, and the human person that unite its political and economic dimensions, the study prepares the ground for further theological reflection on the adequacy of modern liberalism as a moral framework in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Autonomy, Incarnation, Modern liberalism, Social action, Social solidarity*

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Introduction

Modern Liberalism has become the most dominant intellectual and institutional paradigm shaping contemporary political life, moral discourse, and cultural imagination. Frequently celebrated for its emphasis on individual rights, freedom of conscience, and protection against coercive authority, modern liberalism is widely regarded as the moral foundation of democratic societies. Yet, its influence extends far beyond the sphere of governance, informing prevailing assumptions about human identity, responsibility, and the limits of moral obligation. Despite its widespread acceptance, modern liberalism remains a deeply contested framework, particularly when evaluated from a theological perspective.

This article offers an expository and analytical study of Modern Liberalism by examining its meaning, socio-political foundations, and economic structures. Rather than approaching Liberalism solely as a political arrangement or policy framework, this study treats it as a developing anthropological and moral vision that shapes modern understandings of freedom, autonomy, and the human person. To provide a coherent exposition of Liberalism as a unified project, the study is structured into three distinct movements.

First, the study clarifies the meaning of modern liberalism by tracing its conceptual development from classical roots to its modern forms. It explores how liberalism has evolved into a normative anthropology where freedom is no longer understood in relation to truth or the good, but is reconceived as autonomy—the capacity of the individual to determine meaning, values, and identity independently of external authority. Durkheim’s principle of social solidarity is relevant here, as liberalism’s atomistic anthropology weakens collective moral bonds once sustained by religion, leading to fragmentation in moral consensus. Second, it situates modern liberalism within its socio-political context, examining its emergence from the crisis of authority. Weber’s notion of social action provides a lens to understand how liberalism redefines human purpose away from transcendent vocation toward secular autonomy, reshaping freedom as a project of individual meaning-making. Third, it analyzes the economic foundations of modern liberalism. This section explores how market logic reinforces the view of the human person as a rational, self-interested agent whose freedom is primarily expressed through choice. It further examines how this transactional logic displaces thicker moral bonds, contributing to the moral and social fragmentation characteristic of contemporary society.

Methodologically, this study employs a historical-conceptual approach drawing on political philosophy, social theory, and economic thought. The article is primarily descriptive and analytical, aiming to clarify the internal logic of modern liberalism before undertaking a normative evaluation. This exposition prepares the ground for a theological reflection. By bracketing transcendence from public reasoning, liberalism generates a conception of freedom that lacks an end, rendering moral norms seemingly arbitrary or oppressive.

In response, this article argues that the limitations of modern liberalism point toward the necessity of a Christological framework. While liberalism celebrates self-assertion, the Incarnation offers a radically different account of freedom, one rooted in relationality, gift, and self-giving love. By situating modern liberalism within a broader theological anthropology, this study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on reconciling freedom and moral truth in the contemporary world.

Defining Modern Liberalism

The evolution of liberalism is not the story of a single, static doctrine, but rather a *histoire raisonnée* (reasoned history) of a modern creed that has continually refashions itself to meet shifting threats to individual liberty. This dynamic explains why liberalism cannot be understood apart from its internal tensions and historical mutations. While Liberalism is fundamentally a modern phenomenon, an intellectual offshoot of Protestant Christianity that emphasizes the sanctity of the individual conscience, its character is defined by the tension between its classical roots and its more expansive modern manifestations. To define modern liberalism, one must trace the evolution from a defensive philosophy focused on limited government and legal security to a progressive theory centered on human flourishing and social justice. This historical movement is not merely chronological but conceptual, revealing how liberalism's understanding of the human person gradually expanded in response to the limitations of its initial anthropological assumptions.

The foundation of classical liberalism rests upon a specific anthropological view of the person as an "atomistic" individual, a self-sufficient being whose identity and rights are established prior to any social or communal relationship. This tradition emerged primarily through the seventeenth-century contractarian discourse, most notably in the works of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who argued that the individual is a bearer of abstract rights who enters society only through a voluntary social contract. In this sense, classical liberalism arose as a sustained protest against absolutism, seeking to secure individuals against arbitrary power. At its core, this tradition was concerned with protecting the lives, liberties, and estates of individuals through constitutionalism and the rule of law.

Consequently, classical liberalism takes as its core metaphors the parliamentary state and the marketplace, envisioning a society in which political order and economic exchange were governed by impersonal rules rather than discretionary authority. Access to both the political and economic spheres was determined solely by individual talent, labor, and capital, emphasizing a meritocratic structure in which the state's role was minimal. Because its primary aim was protection rather than participation, this era of liberalism was not inherently democratic, and it often feared that unrestrained, majority rule could threaten property rights and legal stability.

Central to this historical framework is the concept of 'negative freedom' or 'negative immunities,' which defines liberty as the absence of coercion or interference. In classical liberalism, rights are identified with certain freedoms that are protected

against coercion or interference by others. They function as defenses against intrusion into the individual's private sphere. Freedom of religion, speech, association, and assembly are thus treated analogously to property rights, forming inviolable zones of personal autonomy. This understanding produced a rigid public-private dichotomy, in which morality was largely confined to the private realm, while the public sphere was governed by self-interest and competition. This commitment to negative freedom also shaped liberalism's understanding of political authority. Liberalism, in this sense, does not present a comprehensive theory of personal morality. Instead, it establishes limits within which diverse moral, religious, and political perspectives may coexist in modern democratic societies. Its primary concern is not the content of the good life but the fair conditions under which competing conceptions of the good may be pursued. By refusing to adjudicate between competing conceptions of the good, liberalism implicitly relocates moral authority from objective truth to individual preference. Moral disagreement is thus managed not by reference to truth but by rules of coexistence. Durkheim's principle of social solidarity is relevant here, as the atomistic anthropology of classical liberalism undermines collective moral bonds once sustained by religion, contributing to social fragmentation.

The practical application of these principles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to the exclusion of specific groups, most notably women, from public life. Political and economic participation depended upon property ownership and legal status, relegating women to the domestic sphere under the "cult of domesticity." Over time, however, the marketplace mentality penetrated the family itself, transforming the home from a moral refuge into another site governed by contractual and proprietary logic. This development exposed an internal contradiction within classical liberalism: the institutions presumed to sustain virtue were increasingly undermined by the system designed to protect liberty.

Classical liberalism ultimately reached a "state of paralysis" when confronted with the social breakdowns and inequalities caused by industrialization. Wrapped in its defense of autonomy, negative freedom, and limited government, it lacked the conceptual resources to address poverty, labor exploitation, and social fragmentation. Its silence in the face of the emerging social question revealed the limits of an atomistic anthropology that treated individuals as isolated units rather than socially embedded persons. At this juncture, liberalism was compelled either to revise its understanding of freedom or to risk moral irrelevance in the face of modern social realities.

This impasse prompted the emergence of modern or reform liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* marks a decisive turning point through its vision of the human being as a "progressive being," whose individuality must be cultivated rather than merely protected. Thinkers such as L. T. Hobhouse and John Dewey further argued that liberty requires emancipation from material deprivation, not simply freedom from legal interference. In practice, this shift found expression in British welfare legislation, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, and the postwar expansion of social programs.

All of which challenged the principle of freedom of contract and the traditional sanctity of property rights. Modern Liberalism, in this view, reverses the aims and limitations of classical liberalism and, in doing so, risks undermining the achievements that classical liberals secured when they replaced monarchical tyranny with constitutional governance. Modern Liberalism is generally regarded, even by its critics, as a branch of liberal thought because its moral foundation remains rooted in the principle of freedom. Its negative aim is to free individuals from the insecurity of hunger, unemployment, illness, and poverty in old age, while its positive goal is to enable members of modern industrial societies to flourish in the diverse and self-developing manner envisioned by Mill. This insight marked the birth of welfare-state liberalism, which reconceived government as an active instrument for creating the conditions for individuals to genuinely flourish. This transformation reaches systematic expression in the work of John Rawls, whose theory of justice functions as the moral charter of modern liberal democracy. Rawls subordinates economic inequality to fairness through the difference principle, thereby redefining liberty within a framework of distributive justice. Weber's notion of social action is instructive here, as modern liberalism redefines freedom as secular autonomy, shifting human purpose away from transcendent vocation toward individual meaning-making.

Ultimately, modern liberalism responds directly to the social question that its classical predecessor neglected. By acknowledging the social nature of the human person, it narrows the divide between public and private life and reconceives political authority as responsible not only for protection but also for the conditions of meaningful autonomy. In essence, if classical liberalism functions as a shield protecting the individual from the state, modern liberalism operates as a bridge, seeking to supply the social, economic, and institutional means necessary for dignity, participation, and belonging.

Socio-Political Roots of Modern Liberalism

Having established liberalism's conceptual evolution, it is necessary to examine the historical forces that enabled this transformation.

The modern liberal project emerged as an offshoot of Protestant Christianity, shifting emphasis toward the sanctity of individual conscience. This transformation, catalyzed by the Reformation, fractured the unity of religious authority and generated an urgent need for a new basis of social peace. Fr. Nicanor Austriaco, a Dominican priest, observes that this period inaugurated a "crisis of authority" that reshaped Western conceptions of truth, morality, and political legitimacy.

This crisis was not merely institutional but existential. Steven Smith describes the emergence of the "divided self," torn between reason and passion, public duty and private belief. With the collapse of shared moral horizons, individuals experienced alienation and paralysis, no longer anchored within a unified moral cosmos. The medieval synthesis gave way to a modern world in which faith and politics were increasingly separated, and human reason assumed dominance as the organizing

principle of social life. The erosion of theological consensus thus created not freedom alone, but uncertainty, an instability that demanded a new political logic capable of managing deep disagreement. The advent of the Judeo-Christian God, by introducing an absolute distinction between the infinite and the finite, shattered the harmony between human reason and the political order, leaving the world no longer experienced as a stable moral order but rather as a realm of contingency. Philip Sheldrake affirmed this in his book *A Brief History of Spirituality* “this transition from the pre-modern world, where religion dominated the political, social, and intellectual spheres, gave way to a modern era characterized by the dominance of independent human reason and the separation of faith from politics.” Hegel also describes this as the experience of unhappy consciousness, the disappearance of any sense of order from the universe, where God, the source of that order, was conceived as so thoroughly unfathomable by human reason as to leave him all but irrelevant for practical purposes. Durkheim’s principle of social solidarity helps explain this fragmentation, as the erosion of religious authority weakened collective moral bonds and left individuals increasingly isolated within a pluralistic order.

This transition from the medieval to the modern worldview represented a fundamental reordering of human experience. Political thought gradually moved away from the collective rituals and shared moral horizons of antiquity toward an emphasis on individual conscience. The intellectual currents of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment acted as primary solvents of the old order, dismantling a system in which authority was understood as a reflection of divine will or charismatic destiny. According to Austriaco, the religious turmoil of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation generated a loss of confidence in faith, as competing Catholic and Protestant truth claims undermined the plausibility of a unified religious foundation for social life. The Reformation further intensified this crisis by internalizing religious authority and grounding it in the individual conscience. According to Smith’s reading of Hegel, the Reformation constituted a “second world-historical shape” that demanded that social and political institutions recognize the sovereignty of the individual will. As religious experience was increasingly detached from communal mediation, moral self-determination came to be understood as an inalienable right rather than a shared ecclesial vocation. In this context, society increasingly sought an alternative basis for knowledge and order beyond contested theological authority.

In response, political authority was reconceived in secular, rational terms. The state ceased to be a sacred hierarchy and became an instrumental mechanism for securing peace and order. Austriaco, drawing on Jeffrey Stout, explains that the secular worldview did not initially arise as a deliberate rejection of religion, but rather as an unanticipated response to this seventeenth-century crisis of religious and political authority. Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes sought to reconstruct knowledge on foundations independent of contested religious claims. Hobbes and Locke abstracted the individual from historical and communal contexts, imagining a pre-political state of nature governed by self-preservation. This development

culminated in the Enlightenment, which Smith describes as the “age of critique,” defined by its attempt to place all inherited laws, customs, and religious dogmas before the judgment seat of reason. Prejudice came to be understood as any belief grounded in authority rather than critical reflection. Moreover, the state was no longer conceived as a natural moral community but as an artificial construct arising from the consent of autonomous individuals. Steinberger explains that both Hobbes and Rousseau articulate a modern conception of the state grounded in individualism, in which the political order is the creation of contracting individuals. He stresses that what the social contract creates is an authorizing entity whose legitimacy derives from individuals’ consent, not from natural or organic community. This logic produced the modern social contract and, ultimately, the neutral state. Political legitimacy no longer derived from divine order but from individual consent. Authority was limited to the protection of basic civil goods, life, liberty, property, and security, while questions of ultimate meaning were relegated to private life. Liberalism thus emerged as a protest against arbitrary power and as a procedural substitute for lost moral consensus. This shift gradually displaced comprehensive religious metanarratives and replaced them with fragmented, tradition-independent standards of rationality.

Hobbes played a crucial role in this transformation by grounding political legitimacy in the management of existential anxiety rather than theological truth. Accordingly, Hobbes maintained that where public peace was not threatened, the state should leave its subjects as much freedom as possible, since security rather than sanctity constituted the true aim of political authority. This “Hobbesian foundation” proved crucial for later liberal thought, suggesting that the state’s primary function was to manage earthly affairs with sufficient predictability that individuals would no longer be compelled to play for their salvation at cross and pile. By breaking with the classical Aristotelian view of man as naturally social, Hobbes’s construction of the state of nature established the foundational principle of atomic or possessive individualism in modern liberal thought. This shift reconceives the human person not as a being naturally ordered toward a shared community, but as an unencumbered self, an autonomous individual whose personal identity and rights are established prior to, and independent of, communal obligations or historical context. This normative anthropology frames freedom no longer as a pursuit of the common good, but as a state of autonomy, in which the individual is exempt from external constraints and empowered to determine meaning and identity independently of any transcendent or communal law. Authority was thus rationalized, transforming citizens from subjects of a paternal ruler into individuals protected by a neutral political order that could accommodate diverse moral commitments.

This historical reorientation eventually necessitated the establishment of the neutral state, a defining feature of modern liberalism. Unlike ancient forms of tolerance, which were largely pragmatic and ritualistic, liberal neutrality emerged from the conviction that political authority must refrain from adjudicating among competing conceptions of the good life. In a liberal society, individual autonomy is

elevated as a fundamental value, and the state is envisioned as an arbiter neutral toward its citizens' moral, religious, and philosophical commitments. Rather than promoting a particular vision of human flourishing, the state is tasked with maintaining the procedural rules that allow individuals to pursue their personal goals without undue interference.

Locke further refined this framework by separating the sacred and secular realms and grounding toleration in the freedom of conscience. He argued that political authority must be confined strictly to the management of bona fide goods of earthly peace, security, life, liberty, property, and physical well-being. Within this framework, toleration became a moral principle rather than a pragmatic concession. Authentic belief, Locke argued, requires free assent. Pluralism became a structural feature of liberal society instead of a temporary disorder. This commitment to liberty of conscience reinforced the broader liberal claim that moral pluralism is not a social failure, but a structural feature of a peaceful political order.

In contemporary political philosophy, this commitment finds its most influential articulation in John Rawls. As Austriaco notes, Rawls argued that a democratic society can survive only if it excludes comprehensive doctrines, religious, moral, or philosophical worldviews, from serving as the basis of coercive political power. Gerald Gaus also commented on Rawls, that, because it is unreasonable to expect citizens to agree on a single comprehensive worldview, Rawls maintained that political deliberation must be governed by public reason, which restricts arguments to secular values presumed to be accessible to all. In other words, Rawls institutionalized neutrality through the concept of public reason. Political authority, in this view, preserves stability not by affirming truth but by bracketing it. By reconceiving the state as a procedural framework, modern liberalism shifted the aim of governance away from directing the soul toward a transcendent end and toward the practical necessity of securing civil peace and property. This transition reflects a deliberate choice to prioritize civil peace and personal autonomy over moral perfection. This procedural neutrality generates what has been termed a Crisis of truth, in which moral obligation is no longer understood as a response to a communal or transcendent law, but instead becomes a matter of personal decision. Pope St. John Paul II described this post-modern condition in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* as follows:

Recent times have seen the rise to prominence of various doctrines that tend to devalue even the truths that had been judged certain. A legitimate plurality of positions has yielded to an undifferentiated pluralism, based upon the assumption that all positions are equally valid, which is one of today's most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in truth. Weber's notion of social action is instructive here, showing how modern liberalism reorients freedom away from transcendent vocation toward secular autonomy, redefining human purpose as individual meaning-making within rationalized structures.

By deliberately remaining silent on ultimate moral ends, the neutral state effectively brackets transcendence, ensuring that political stability is maintained not

by affirming truth but by excluding it from the public sphere. What emerges is a political order capable of sustaining peace amid diversity, yet deliberately silent regarding ultimate moral ends.

The development of modern liberalism continued to evolve in the nineteenth century through the work of John Stuart Mill, who constructed a new superstructure of individual autonomy upon earlier liberal foundations. Richard Mullender noted that in *On Liberty*, Mill shifted the focus from mere protection against state interference toward a developmental ideal of individuality. Human beings came to be understood as progressive beings, capable of shaping themselves through diverse experiments in living.

In this later liberal framework, the role of the state expanded beyond the prevention of force and fraud. The harm principle, according to which coercion is justified only to prevent harm to others, became a tool not merely of restraint, but of social development. Thinkers such as L. T. Hobhouse and John Dewey argued that genuine liberty requires freedom not only from legal coercion but also from hunger, unemployment, illness, and social insecurity. This development marked the emergence of welfare-state liberalism, which viewed government as an active instrument for creating the conditions for individuals to flourish.

By the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the liberal crisis of authority had thus evolved into a sustained effort to protect individual liberty against shifting threats, from monarchical tyranny to the psychological domination of public opinion. As Austriaco observes, the contemporary moral landscape that results from this history is simultaneously postmodern, secular, and liberal, characterized by deep pluralism and the absence of a shared moral horizon. The neutral state, once conceived as a solution to religious conflict, now functions as the structural framework within which modern moral discourse unfolds, facilitating freedom and diversity while remaining deliberately silent on the question of ultimate truth.

This society, structured to prioritize procedural fairness and individual choice, provides the foundation for the market logic that defines modern liberal economics. The neutral, rights-bearing individual is thus perfectly positioned to become the rational, self-interested agent of the marketplace, where freedom is primarily expressed through transactional choice rather than shared moral truth.

The Economic Foundations of Modern Liberalism

The same philosophical assumptions that reshaped political authority also transformed economic life. Modern liberalism's economic dimension extends the logic of autonomy and rational choice into the marketplace. As political authority became limited and procedural, economic activity increasingly became the primary arena of individual self-expression and freedom. This transition to a procedural political authority finds its economic mirror in the principle of value-neutrality in the marketplace. Just as the liberal state avoids adjudicating between competing conceptions of the good to maintain civil peace, the economic order treats all

individual preferences as equally valid expressions of autonomy, regardless of their moral content. In this framework, the market functions as a spontaneous order that coordinates diverse interests without requiring a shared moral horizon or shared moral intentions. Durkheim's principle of social solidarity underscores how economic liberalism, by treating all preferences as equally valid, erodes shared moral horizons and weakens the collective bonds that once sustained social cohesion. The procedural neutrality of the state is reinforced by a marketplace that brackets substantive truth, ensuring that freedom is preserved not by ordering it toward a common good, but by hollowing it out into a neutral mechanism for satisfying preferences. Building on the principles of autonomy and rational choice established in political thought, economic liberalism extended these ideas to the marketplace, emphasizing free exchange, minimal state intervention, and the pursuit of self-interest as a mechanism for social prosperity. Examining this economic framework highlights how modern liberalism not only reconfigured political authority but also reshaped social and economic relations in accordance with its vision of the autonomous individual.

The emergence of modern liberalism is inextricably tied to a fundamental reorientation of the human subject, from the classical citizen, defined by political virtue, to the modern bourgeois, defined by economic interest. As Steven Smith notes, the modern age replaces the language of virtue with the language of interest. Civil society, understood by Hegel as the "system of needs," becomes the central sphere of social life. The human person is increasingly defined not by citizenship or moral excellence but by economic agency. In the transition from the classical citizen to the modern economic man, the person is no longer defined by their social function within a natural moral community, but by their capacity for autonomous choice. The market becomes the primary stage for this unencumbered identity, where the individual expresses their freedom not through shared moral ends, but as a project of continuous self-definition through consumption and the maximization of private advantage. The rational, self-interested agent of liberal economics is, therefore, the necessary embodiment of an anthropology that views the self as independent of all historical or communal encumbrances. This transformation also marks a decisive reversal of classical liberal restraint, as modern liberalism increasingly reimagines the state not merely as a guardian of order but as an instrument for securing the material conditions of individual freedom.

The story of the self-interested economic agent begins with the disintegration of the ancient polis. Smith notes that, for the ancients, politicians incessantly discussed morals and virtue, whereas the moderns talk only of business and money. Hobbes and Locke contributed to this reorientation by abstracting the individual from communal bonds and by interpreting human motivation in terms of desire and acquisition. The state was reconceived as an artificial mechanism for regulating competition rather than cultivating virtue. As industrial capitalism developed, however, liberalism again confronted its own limits, prompting early welfare interventions that challenged absolute freedom of contract.

Smith further identifies René Descartes as a subtle philosophical precursor to this economic reorientation. Descartes favored the commercial atmosphere of Holland, where individuals were more concerned with their own affairs than curious about those of others. This ironical distance from public duty enabled the pursuit of private, non-political goods such as comfort, security, and health, reinforcing a model in which private interest becomes the primary engine of social progress. Montesquieu, a modern pragmatic historian, likewise observed that modern liberty was grounded in the liberation of man's competitive and acquisitive propensities, especially the right to acquire and hold property. Yet modern liberalism gradually abandoned the view that property rights are absolute, instead treating them as instrumental and subordinate to broader goals of social justice and individual development.

Hegel recognized both the achievement and danger of this economic order. Smith notes that Hegel regarded this as a genuine achievement of the modern world, insofar as it granted individuals free scope to pursue private well-being. Nevertheless, Hegel remained deeply critical of a social order in which everything is judged in terms of exchange value alone, arguing that the economic agent becomes a mere fragment of the human person, reduced to a single cog by the division of labor. This anxiety would later intensify within modern liberal thought itself, as uncontrolled capitalism came to be viewed as a new form of domination from which workers and consumers required liberation.

In contemporary discourse, this legacy persists in what Smith calls the new liberal paradigm. Modern liberal theorists often inherit assumptions from neoclassical economics, including methodological individualism, value neutrality, and psychological hedonism. Yet modern liberalism decisively departs from classical *laissez-faire* doctrines by incorporating social justice into its economic foundation, arguing that economic inequalities are justifiable only to the extent that they improve the position of the least advantaged members of society. Weber's notion of social action clarifies how modern liberalism redefines freedom as secular autonomy, embedding rationalized structures of choice that shift human purpose from transcendent ends to individual meaning-making.

Modern liberalism radicalizes this insight by asserting that government intervention in the economy is not a threat to liberty but a prerequisite for it, aimed at emancipating individuals from hunger, unemployment, insecurity, and social dependency so that they may flourish as progressive beings. Thus, modern liberalism ultimately reconceives economic intervention not as a violation of liberty but as a condition for its realization.

Government action becomes the means through which individuals are liberated from deprivation and enabled to flourish as progressive beings, completing liberalism's transition from a doctrine of protection to a comprehensive vision of social freedom. However, as this exposition has demonstrated, the fulfillment of social freedom through material and procedural means leaves unanswered the deeper

question of human purpose, necessitating a move from political and economic analysis to theological reflection.

Ultimately, the economic foundations of modern liberalism disclose their own insufficiency by leaving freedom directionless. While the market effectively coordinates individual desires, it remains structurally incapable of addressing the question of meaning or providing a criterion for discerning which desires are worthy of pursuit. This anthropological crisis, in which the person is reduced to a bundle of preferences, points to the necessity of a Christological framework. In contrast to the self-asserting autonomy of the marketplace, the Incarnation reveals a radically different account of freedom rooted in 'self-gift' and relationality. St. Paul writes of Christ that "he is before all things, and by him all things consist" (Col 1:17). This affirms Christ's ontological priority over all creation and indicates that all things depend upon Him continuously for their being, not merely at the moment of origin. In his book *The Limits of Liberalism*, Mark Mitchell expanded this and quoted St. Augustine:

As Augustine observes, God did not create and then depart; the things derived from him have their being in him. Creation, therefore, is not a single completed event in the past but an ongoing reality sustained by Christ's will and power. When creation is reduced to a mechanistic process, it easily supports the notion of an autonomous self. However, when we view creation Christologically, both temptations are deflected. The creation is not ontologically self-sustaining, and neither is the self-autonomous. Rather, all created beings, and human persons in particular, exist in a state of continual dependence.

This Christological account of creation and dependence also illuminates the human condition after sin. For St. Thomas Aquinas, the Incarnation must be understood against the backdrop of humanity's wounded state: fractured by sin and incapable of restoring itself through autonomous effort alone. As Thomas Joseph White explains, God becomes human not merely to instruct from without, but to heal and elevate human nature from within, leading the human person back to God through participation in the grace of Christ. Read in this light, the Incarnation is not an interruption of human history but its decisive restoration, addressing both the metaphysical dependence of creation and the moral and spiritual disintegration of the human person. Aquinas' Christological reading of Scripture thus offers a vision of freedom and human flourishing grounded not in self-assertion, but in communion, grace, and restored relationality.

Sociological and Spiritual Implications

The exposition of modern liberalism reveals not only its philosophical and theological tensions but also its profound sociological and spiritual implications. Liberalism's redefinition of freedom as autonomy, detached from communal and

transcendent frameworks, reshapes both the social fabric and the spiritual horizon of human life.

Durkheim's principle of social solidarity underscores how liberalism's atomistic anthropology weakens collective moral bonds. By privileging the individual as prior to society, liberalism erodes the shared rituals, values, and moral horizons that once sustained cohesion. This fragmentation is evident in the decline of communal institutions, the privatization of morality, and the displacement of religion from the public sphere. The sociological consequence is a society increasingly characterized by alienation, where individuals struggle to locate meaning within a pluralistic but disconnected order. Spiritually, this erosion of solidarity diminishes the communities' capacity to nurture faith and shared transcendence, leaving individuals vulnerable to existential isolation.

Weber's notion of social action further illuminates the trajectory of modern liberalism. As freedom is redefined as secular autonomy, human purpose shifts from transcendent vocation to rationalized structures of choice. Liberalism embeds individuals within bureaucratic and economic systems that prioritize efficiency and procedural neutrality over substantive moral ends. The sociological implication is the rise of a rationalized social order in which meaning is constructed through individual decision-making rather than communal or transcendent reference points. Spiritually, this rationalization risks reducing freedom to mere preference satisfaction, leaving society vulnerable to moral relativism and existential disorientation.

Together, Durkheim and Weber reveal that the liberal project, while effective in securing civil peace and material prosperity, generates a sociological condition marked by weakened solidarity and rationalized autonomy, and a spiritual condition marked by diminished transcendence and relational grounding. The implications extend beyond governance and economics into the lived experience of community, identity, and moral responsibility. Liberalism's anthropological limits thus call for a framework that can restore relational grounding and transcendence, ensuring that freedom is not only procedural but also purposeful, not only secular but also spiritually fulfilling.

Conclusion

This paper has presented an exposition of modern liberalism, treating it not merely as a technical theory of governance but as a developing anthropological and moral vision. By tracing liberalism's conceptual evolution from classical roots to its modern forms, the study has shown how the "crisis of authority" following the Reformation necessitated the rise of the neutral state. This political framework, grounded in procedural neutrality and individual consent, has been shown to be inextricably linked to an economic foundation that elevates market logic as the primary arena for individual self-expression. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the

article has demonstrated that liberalism is a unified project aimed at securing the autonomy of the “unencumbered self.”

Notably, the investigation into the socio-political and economic roots of modern liberalism yields several critical findings.

First, the shift to normative anthropology: Modern liberalism has replaced the classical view of the human person, defined by virtue and social function, with a normative anthropology of atomistic individualism, where the self is understood as prior to and independent of communal obligations. Durkheim’s principle of social solidarity highlights how this atomistic anthropology weakens collective moral bonds, leaving individuals detached from the communal frameworks that once sustained moral consensus.

Second, procedural neutrality as a bracketing of truth. The liberal state maintains social stability not by affirming a shared moral truth, but by bracketing transcendence. This procedural neutrality treats all conceptions of the good as equally valid, effectively hollowing out the public square of substantive moral purpose.

Third, the market as a cultural framework. Economic liberalism functions as more than a financial system. It is a cultural framework that reinforces the view of the person as a rational, self-interested agent. Market logic transforms freedom into a series of transactional choices, further fragmenting social and moral bonds.

Fourth, the crisis of direction: By emancipating the individual from traditional authorities without providing a final end, liberalism generates a crisis of truth in which moral obligation becomes a matter of personal decision, leaving freedom without direction. Weber’s notion of social action clarifies this reorientation, showing how modern liberalism redefines freedom as secular autonomy, shifting human purpose away from transcendent vocation toward individual meaning-making within rationalized structures.

While the socio-political and economic foundations of modern liberalism provide a robust mechanism for managing pluralism and material security, they remain structurally incapable of addressing the deeper question of human fulfillment. The unencumbered self at the heart of the liberal project is a figure of radical autonomy that ultimately lacks relational grounding.

This study recommends adopting a Christological framework to address the anthropological limits of liberalism. Such a framework emphasizes freedom rooted in relationality and self-giving love, complementing civil liberties with moral and spiritual grounding. By resituating human freedom within this theological vision, society can move beyond a merely procedural existence toward a life in which truth and liberty are reunited. Ultimately, while the liberal state can secure the conditions

for peace, only a framework of self-giving love can provide the final end that satisfies the restless heart of the modern man.

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