

TRINITY ACADEMY **FREEDOM LECTURE**

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" – 2 Corinthians 3:17

Civility, Civics, and the Fate of the City of Man

Wednesday, May 11, 2022

Starting at 7:00 pm.

At University of Portland Buckley Auditorium



Trinity Academy Freedom Lecture

May 11, 2022

Civility, Civics and the Fate of the City of Man

Patrick J. Deneen, PhD

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Extended Summary of Lecture and Panelist Responses

Watch the complete lecture and panelist responses at Trinity Academy's YouTube
<https://youtu.be/8QHyzmpVqTg>

PREFACE

In the third of [Trinity Academy's](#) (Trinity) public Freedom Lectures, author and political theorist, Patrick [Deneen](#), PhD, of Notre Dame, best known as the author of the 2018 book *Why Liberalism Failed*, presented a lecture titled, *Civility, Civics and the Fate of the City of Man* on May 11th at the University of Portland. The lecture was cosponsored by the political science departments at George Fox and the University of Portland and invited three local panelists and published authors to respond to Dr.

Deneen's lecture including Dr. William (Bill) Curtis, University of Portland Professor of Political Science; Dr. Mark Hall, George Fox University Department of Political Science; and, Col. Rev. Dr. Shon Neyland, pastor of Highland Christian Center.

In the recent past, Trinity Academy hosted public lectures by University of Dallas President, Jonathan Sanford, and Calvin University Professor, James KA Smith. In 2020, Trinity received a generous gift that included funds to support an ongoing Freedom Lecture series, inspired by 2 Corinthians 3:17, "...where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom."

Rick Ganz, founder and director of the [Faber Institute](#) offered an opening prayer to stretch the hearts and minds of attendees, bless the speakers and panelists for their lifetime of service and hidden sufferings, and for the prosperity and continued courage for the work at Trinity Academy. "Bless this night and make it more than we imagined," prayed Ganz. "Allow us to walk from this space more awake and more hopeful and perhaps even more fierce about the deep and true things."

John Kurdelak, executive director of Trinity Academy, introduced Dr. Deneen as both a friend and a former Trinity parent at Meadow View School in Falls Church, Virginia. He also introduced the audience to Trinity and its ecumenical model bringing together Catholics, evangelicals, mainline protestants, orthodox and non-denominational Christians. "We are a community of learners who are serious about the life of the mind," said Kurdelak, "and also intentional about our Christian culture as a context for deep learning."

Patrick Deneen took the lectern jesting, "I don't think there is such a thing as a *former* Trinity parent," and commended the ongoing work of Trinity in Portland. In his lecture Deneen set out to address not only the intense political disagreement of our day, which is nothing new to history, but the extreme incivility and inability to talk with a modicum of respect and goodwill that should be the hallmark of good citizenship.

Summary of Event: *Notre Dame's Patrick Deneen Contrasts Cyclops and Civility in Trinity Academy Freedom Lecture*

How can the mythical Cyclops and the development of the fork help us understand the roots of civility and political order? University of Notre Dame political scientist Patrick Deneen addressed this question on May 11th at the University of Portland in the 2022 Trinity Academy Freedom Lecture, entitled *Civility, Civics and the Fate of the City of Man*.

"There's never been a time in history where people just get along," Deneen opened. "But the intense political disagreement of our day comes with extreme incivility and inability to address one another with the respect and goodwill that should be the hallmark of good citizenship."

Deneen grounded his lecture in Aristotle's, *Politics*, beginning with, "That creature that has no need to partake of society is either a beast or a god," (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a). He then explored the deeper context of language around politics and politeness, civics and civility. "These words for city, *polis* and *civis*, speak to a dimension of what is shared and the special

space where human beings interact,” he began. “The *polis* is necessary and unique to being human and more than a beast.”

Deneen took the audience on a journey through Homer’s Odysseus and the Cyclops, a savage being who is both god and beast, and who represents the savagery of life cut off from civil society. He explored the history of the fork and its relationship to civility and hospitality as curbs to some of humanity’s more destructive instincts. Deneen drew from Augustine’s City of God, and Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations of America, as he wove his lecture around constructs of civility such as tools and artifices, social customs and conventions, even companionship (literally “con pan,” to break bread together) over shared meals which have served throughout history to limit the appetites of our *inner Cyclops* and habituate us toward the virtues that make us human.

“The polis,” Deneen reminds, “is a well-governed political order that demonstrates a highly civilized form of life through its politeness...its civility.” The polis is a tool, for the perfection of our human nature and basic appetites. Politics is a tool for achieving a *teleos*, a noble end, but can also, in turn, be perverted toward depravity and savagery, what W.H. Auden describes as the slogan of Hell, “Eat or be eaten.” Politics, argues Deneen, is designed to restrain and temper our political appetites. Manners and customs, perfect and refine us, and habituate us into a type of second nature.

In today’s liberal modern understanding of culture, formalities are often seen as “inauthentic,” and convention is perceived as mere artifice, an imposition on our natural freedom, or an obstacle to the emergence of our authentic selves. Even our advertising slogans promote a culture of consumption and liberation from constraints: *Just Do It, Think Different, Be Yourself, Have it Your Way, Live Your Best Life*. Plato described cities without constraint as a diseased city, a feverished, a sick city. The Bible makes spectacle of cities like these, where individual interests trump concern for a commonly shared life.

Such cities as these were seen as a deformation of the good city, what Augustine calls the *City of God*. It is the city where we obtain true freedom—freedom in Christ. Augustine echoes what Matthew writes about in Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, the city on a hill that lights the world. It’s a phrase echoed by Puritan leader John Winthrop in 1630, calling on his Puritan brothers and sisters to be “a City on a Hill.”

In conclusion, Deneen contrasted Winthrop’s vision of America as a “City on a Hill” to the city of Babel, and Augustine’s *City of God* to the *City of Man*. The city of Babel, he argues, was so radically individual that nothing held them together except the hubris of attempting to build a tower to God. Like all projects like Babel, the effort to hold us together by project-based hubris, rather than cultivating a politic in which we learn to self-govern our appetites, will reach its natural limit. Perhaps what we are experiencing in America today is what the people of Babel experienced. It’s a project that can never hold us together.

In a polis that is not properly formed and governed, the only thing that can hold them together is an external activity – a project-based hubris rather than a commonly shared vision. “Unless we can revive a classical, Aristotelian understanding of politics as a kind of fork that helps us habituate our nature and temper our habits, then what we have in store is another city of Babel,” Deneen concluded. “It is not a City of Man I want to live in.”

PANELIST RESPONSE

Dr. William Curtis

University of Portland

Dr. Curtis offered a “Pangloss-ian defense of classical Liberalism.” The virtue of gratitude as the dispositional essence of “small c” conservatives. From the bottom of his John Stuart Mill-ian, liberal heart, he expressed his gratitude for the event. Curtis thanked Deneen for his critique of liberalism and went on to list the gifts that the liberal age of enlightenment has brought to our modern age, such as freedom for modern science to flourish, a liberal market economy to lift people out of poverty, modern medicine, technological innovation, and our rights to freedom of assembly and expression. He made mention of Adam Smith, the fictional Dr. Pangloss, and economist William Nordhaus. He closed by agreeing with Deneen on the loss of virtue, while holding his position that liberal market economies tend to be more cooperative and more virtuous than non-liberal market economies.

He expressed concerns wondering how radical is Deneen’s political alternative in the lines between the private and political sphere? “One of the virtues of the liberal order is that we give space to the private life,” Curtis clarifies, “but it doesn’t mean that anything goes. As Locke would say, ‘Anything goes is license, not liberty.’” Curtis explains, in his thinking, that “liberty is what we can exercise, and we need the private realm, apart from the state interfering in that private realm.” He expressed that Deneen’s proposed alternative sometimes sounds utopian and romantic to liberal ears, and perhaps unrealistic and dangerous, pointing to the opening lines of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*: “The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognised it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison;” and concluding that history has shown that illiberal and non-liberal alternatives don’t work out.

Dr. Mark Hall

George Fox University

Dr. Mark Hall commended Deneen on using the illustration of the Cyclops in contrast with humane communities where people cooperate together. Hall quoted Aristotle that, “man is by nature a political animal,” and proposed a perspective on the problem in our contemporary society: “we not only have individuals running every which way doing their own thing, but that we have the formation of tribes who identify themselves in terms of a set of characteristics, and then go to war with other tribes.”

Through all of American history we've had all sorts of conflicts, admits Hall, but there might be a sense in which we're developing tribes in a more extreme way that we haven't seen before, and that social media might have something to do with this. Hall referred to "social media created phenomena" that are reinforced and celebrated in online communities. We sometimes have people "choosing to be authentic in ways that aren't authentic at all," he observes.

"Is the problem," Hall asks, "that we are all running around as individuals, or is the problem that we are sorting ourselves into tribes?" Concluding that, "we must think about how to address this tribalization of American politics."

Col. Rev. Dr. Shon Neyland
Highland Christian Center

"This subject," began Neyland, "is near and dear to me in a different way, coming from a spiritual and military background, and shaped over the years by serving our nation around the world in Iraq and Afghanistan." Neyland quoted from Deneen's book, *Why Liberalism Failed*, as follows. "We should rightly wonder whether America is not in the early days of its eternal life, but rather approaching the end of the natural cycle of corruption and decay that limits the lifespan of all human creations."

Neyland noted the four elements highlighted in the book: income inequality, cultural decline, erosion of freedom, and the growth of powerful, centralized bureaucracies. He reflected on recent cultural phenoma like the George Floyd situations, Covid-19, riots over Black Lives Matter, etc. through the lens of Deneen's four elements. "It challenges us," says Neyland, "to focus in on civility and recognizing the humanity in each of us."

Speaking to the audience, Neyland tipped his hat to Deneen saying, "I interpret Deneen as challenging us to move society toward a respect for all mankind. Laws exist for a reason, and any society without laws and guidelines would be chaos."

Pointing to Athens and early Greek political structures, concepts of civility and politeness and kindness, "that's what we need today," Neyland emphasizes. We need an America that recognizes the value of law and freedom and creativity within guidelines and rules that speak to civility. If we work together as humans with dignity and respect, we can maybe bridge the inequality gap through education and technology advancement.

Neyland lamented the rise in indiscriminate violence and murder in America. His daughter describes New Orleans these days as "a war zone," where people are being hijacked and even killed indiscriminately while filling their car with gas. He asked, when will America say, "It's time to stop and come together and unify over common civility?"

“Civility,” Neyland closed, “rules, respect, caring, loving, honoring – those are some words that remind me of what we can be doing together as Americans.”

Patrick Deneen: Closing Response to Panel

I contrast to what I spoke about in terms of Aristotle, and the classical, Biblical understanding of the relationship of the natural and the conventional, or artificial, in that in some ways human beings are by nature creatures of artifice in order to perfect our nature. But, of course, these artifices can be used to corrupt or make worse our nature. I contrast this as one of the ways in which I find myself a critic of what I see as the foundation of the liberal order in which we live, that it may be the source of some of the corruption.

So, it’s interesting to hear my two political science friends here tonight: one of who said everything’s getting better and better in every way; and one of them says things are getting terrible and worse.

Political science has split over the important question of empirical evidence. Let me suggest that Liberalism as a political philosophy begins with a rejection of this Aristotelian understanding, or this Biblical understanding, that humans by nature must use artifice to perfect our own nature. Those artifices include things like table manners, but also includes things like schools. And many of your students in the audience know how long you have to go to school, and how many hours and effort go into perfecting ourselves. We humans take a long time to become human. My dog didn’t take long to become a dog. We human beings aren’t instinct efficient; we require a lot of artifice to become human.

But the liberal order begins with the following presupposition, beginning with the proto pre-liberal author of Thomas Hobbes (someone who influences John Locke): that if one wants to understand human nature, one needs to understand what exists outside convention, outside the city. If we know what existed before there’s any city or convention, then we’ll know what the future really is. And guess what we are? We’re Cyclops. By nature, we are all Cyclops. This is what Hobbes describes as the state of nature. And so, we agree that we can try to create a political order because we are all Cyclops inside that wants to get out. And if we don’t have law that controls us, or sovereign political order that restricts and restrains our Cyclops nature, it’s all just chaos and mayhem and life is nasty, poor, brutish and short.

This argument separates the idea that somehow it is our nature to be conventional. And thus, while we have law, it acts opposite to our nature to want to consume and fulfill our desires. The only thing that holds us back from acting as our rude nature would demand is the threat of physical force of the state. Our knowledge of how we behave leads us to the point in which we understand that the Contract is needed to restrict our nature.

This divide of nature and convention is also expressed by John Stuart Mill, the hero suggested by professor Curtis, who was the villain in my story because Mill says that the problem is that we have all this convention and traditions and customs that restrain our true selves – our true

authenticity. He condemns the despotism of custom because it prevents us from engaging in experiments and expressing our true selves. He's a type of originator of the theory of authenticity: that if we can only overcome and dispel all of that tradition, our true nature could emerge, and true progress could emerge.

Mill has a more confident and optimistic view of what might emerge. But notice how we oscillate in a liberal society: we are either a society who must have extreme and harsh forms of law and order (or our *inner Cyclops* will come out), or we must overthrow that law and order, restraints and customs, so that our true, progressive selves can emerge.

What lies somewhat behind what we're seeing in terms of tribes, is that the law and order regime has not treated certain people well in our society, but when we get rid of the law and order, we release the Cyclops. And we're not very good when we get authentic, as I found out in walking around downtown Portland.

What we have lost is the idea that we are creatures who need convention. Now there's good convention and bad convention. One good convention is what students at Trinity Academy know about – a liberal arts education. It's what Jesus teaches us, about the art of being free. As it turns out, to learn to be free is hard. Hobbes would say that this happens by nature — once we are released from the law, then we're free. But as professor Curtis suggested, that's license, that's not genuine freedom. Genuine freedom is when we learn the capacity to govern ourselves.

When you undertake a curriculum, like these students do at Trinity Academy, you are learning the art of being free. You're encountering, through this new generation of Barbarians, all of the things that Odysseus encounters: the wonderful things and the horrible things that lie above and beneath and on the face of the earth. We learn what it is to be a human being, and to learn that part of being genuinely free.

And whether you call yourself liberal or non-liberal or a critic of liberals, that's something our society desperately needs. We need the resources that stretch and reach outside the order of the liberal tradition to learn those particular sets of lessons.

[Response to Patrick Deneen's Closing Remarks](#)

Dr. William Curtis

University of Portland

I have a different reading of the liberal tradition than does Mr. Deneen. Hobbes recognizes that we don't want the *inner Cyclops* to come out, but unfortunately his solution is the authoritarian ruler. In his book *Leviathan*, he writes that the law of nature which people need to cultivate includes a whole bunch of virtues, and this translates up through Locke and Mill. And Mill is one of our biggest advocates for liberal education—learning different ideas of thought and life and understanding that we don't have the knowledge and that's why experimentation is necessary, constrained within the balance of law. Laws evolve too, but it's the virtues gained through liberal education that help us understand the balance that must be struck between innovation

and experimentation and custom. One way to understand Mill is not that he wants to blow through custom, but to challenge custom by learning all the other customs we can and playing them off against each other to find which ones we find most interesting and meaningful.

Question from the Audience

I had a question about the history of civility and civil discourse in politics. I read something that before WWII, it was common for people to discuss politics socially. Then after WWII, people wanted to put that darkness behind them. Then came consumerism and living the American dream. There is a new organization, Braver Angels, that is trying to start these kinds of conversations. Could you speak to what the path might look like? There are these extreme factions that are now growing – the Barbarians are growing up – and they're much more extreme. I work with a lot of youth, and frankly a lot of these guys don't have the toolkit to get us there.

Response to Audience Question

Patrick Deneen

I think every sentiment you've expressed echoed what Mr. Neyland was saying. While social science can't prove much of anything, one of the things it's actually good at proving is levels of connectivity we see in our society. Social scientists develop good tools at measuring the ways in which we are either in connection with each other, or we are in separation from each other.

Long before social media we were already disconnecting because we were no longer members of various groups and associations, of towns and communities. The development of the suburbs began a kind of separation, and the automobile is the technology that separates us and creates new forms of transportation that disconnects us.

There's a vast literature that shows how disassociated we've become over the course of the 20th century until today. Though you might think social media connects us, it is face-to-face social interaction requires a degree of responsibility that requires me to look in your face and respond to each other. This is a type of habituation that one undergoes in social human interactions. It's a habituation of how we interact with each other in a way that is responsible, in which we have differences, but we come to know those differences and understand those differences.

When de Tocqueville visited America in the early 19th century, he marvels and admires American democracy because Americans are so good at coming together socially and politically and discussing and arguing and debating and resolving various social, political and economic issues. "What they (Americans) have developed is what we in France have not," he writes, and he calls it the "Arts of Association."

De Tocqueville says that through the art of association, and the constant interaction and interplay of different points of view, one may enter a debate with one's own views but after those interactions, something can change; the heart is enlarged as a consequence of it.

We can talk a lot about how we need civility. But civility will follow the efforts, in various ways, to new forms of human interaction where we can responsibly, and with responsibility, interact in ways where we have to own our position and recognize and hear and respond to the position of other people.

Unless we recognize that there's been a real change, a fundamental challenge to our democratic way of life, and a breakdown of the associations in our lives, then our chance for civility is almost nil unless we have new forms of habituation.

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