

Letter to the Editor of *First Things*

A Reply to Matthew Schmitz,

“Bourgeois Vice” in the magazine’s Back Page, pp. 72-71 [sic], November 2019

Matthew Schmitz uses my gender change in 1995, of which he disapproves – calling me “he” throughout to signal the disapproval, and making up tales about my family of thirty years of love – as a way to attack my liberalism, which he hates. The turn is not very gallant of him, and if I were still a man I reckon I would challenge him to a duel.

Nor is the turn very clever. In the same week, as it happens, an Aryan nationalist website used the same turn for the same purpose, right down to the use of “he.” Weird Deirdre, they both exclaim, and proceed to be scandalized, too, by her weird attachment to the gospel of love and of free will embodied in true liberalism. Hatred, besides its spiritual corrosion in the *odium inimicitiae* exhibited in Mr. Schmitz’s piece, makes for strange company. As the old rhyme puts it, “And the pig got up and slowly walked away.”

Mr. Schmitz read a little of the reissue in its twentieth year of *Crossing: A Transgender Memoir*, with its brief Afterword. The rest of my politics and scholarship he gets on the fly. He calls me throughout a “conservative,” which I have never called myself, though willing to chat politely with such folk. The error shows anyway the problem people have trying to force “classical” liberals like me onto the silly spectrum from left to right. The spectrum is only about in what direction a massive state is to enforce illiberal schemes, such as the left’s takeover of free speech (of which he accuses me) and of economic life; or the right’s takeover of bedroom behavior and of irritating foreigners.

And there’s the point. Mr. Schmitz quotes my Afterword: “In a free society shouldn’t they be allowed to? Tell me why not.” Then he says, with rare charity, “This appeal to freedom is powerful.”

It is, though conventional since the Blessed Adam Smith. It is as theological as it is political. Or so I have argued in *The Bourgeois Virtues* (2006) and later writings on theology and economics. God, as this no doubt terribly confused Episcopalian (“catholic lite”) believes, wants humans to be free. Sin, virtue, and salvation make no sense if we are God’s pets in Eden, unable to choose. True liberalism, like science, is perfectly consistent with true religion.

So is changing gender.