An Option Best Avoided

CARL F. HOROWITZ

If there is an "It" book now reigning on the American Right — the kind of book that triggers conversations in homes, classrooms, dorm rooms, restaurants, and churches — *The Benedict Option* may well be Exhibit A. Its author, Rod Dreher, the man who poured crunchy granola into the big bowl of American conservatism, has delivered a message to fellow Christians: Minimize, or better still, cease contact with modern America and form separate communities. By doing this, believers can preserve their faith for generations and re-enter the larger culture when it's safe to be a Christian again.

The book has won substantial praise from clergy and laymen alike. One has to wonder what all the buzz is about. *The Benedict Option*, for the most part, is shallow, overwrought, and just plain wrong-headed, doomed by its central premise that collective self-exile is necessary to the survival of Christianity. With its caricaturing of present-day America as a vast sewer of debauchery, materialism, and barbarism, the book may be difficult even for the faithful to take seriously.

Ray Oliver "Rod" Dreher, now in his early 50s, is a likable and interesting fellow in spite of his illusions. A native of southern Louisiana ("Dreher" actually is a German name, not French), he is a conservative thoroughly estranged from the donor-driven world of Conservatism Inc., and closely related to that, the Republican Party. Raised a Methodist, he converted to Roman Catholicism in the early Nineties until sex scandals within the Church a decade later eventually led to his conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy. A senior editor for *The American Conservative* and a popular blogger, he made a reputation for himself over a decade ago with his first book, *Crunchy Cons: How Birkenstocked Burkeans, Gun-Loving Organic Gardeners, Evangelical Free-Range Farmers, Hip Homeschooling Mamas, Right-Wing Nature Lovers, and Their Diverse Tribe of Countercultural Conservatives Plan to Save America (or at Least the Republican Party)*. Though heavy on self-satisfaction, not to mention disdain for those not sharing his perspective, Dreher, to his credit, put forth a fitfully competent neo-agrarian critique of modern society, inspired by techno-skeptics such as Wendell Berry, Jacques Ellul, Bill McKibben, and E.F. Schumacher, not to mention postwar *Ur*-conservatives such as Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver. His fusion of traditionalist and hippie sensibilities suggested creative possibilities for a political and cultural alignment.

THE BENEDICT OPTION
A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation
By Rod Dreher
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The passage of time, unfortunately, has witnessed the author souring on the American prospect. There is no point in sending in more troops to win the Culture War, he argues, for that war is already lost. "Nobody but the most deluded of the old-school Religious Right believes that this cultural revolution can be turned back," argues Dreher. As a corrective, the author would take us back in time — *way* back — to avert the abyss: a sixth-century Italian monk, St. Benedict of Norcia, a patron saint of Europe.

St. Benedict was a tireless figure. Having witnessed Rome in virtual ruins, rather than despair he founded monasteries, which at the time referred to small communities of believers more than any one specific religious order. Committed Christians in present-day America, asserts Dreher, should take their cue from Benedict. As America now teeters on the brink of the fate that befell Rome, it does not deserve one's assent. In Dreher's view, rather than participate in a futile rescue operation, Christians should exit the scene and establish closely knit communities within or outside our national borders. Whatever

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happens to the heathen they leave behind apparently is of little concern.

Now let it be said that there is much to admire and to decry in Christianity, at least as practiced for centuries. Lists of the pluses and minuses will differ from person to person, of course, but the point here is that calling one's self a hesitant Christian is not unreasonable. A belief system need not be a binary choice between total acceptance and total rejection. Some might call this heresy. Yet without a willingness to entertain a debate between Skeptic and Believer, a religion risks becoming ossified.

Rod Dreher, unfortunately, is a binary type. For him, Christianity (good) and modern society (bad) are polar opposites, and for that reason, the former should have as little as possible to do with the latter. Throughout *The Benedict Option* he insists on self-segregation as a means of survival. The Christian faithful, he insists, cannot make it through the current dark night simply by professing belief, attending weekly services, and living a righteous life. Given today's overwhelming tide of secularism and selfishness, they must go that extra mile and develop "creative, communal solutions to help us hold on to our faith and our values in a world growing ever more hostile to them." By forming or joining self-sustaining communities, believers are less likely to stray from the faith.

In an ironic way, Dreher's call for radical disengagement parallels the main plot of Ayn Rand's epic novel *Atlas Shrugged*, in which productive men and women, disgusted with the larger parasitic collectivist society, relocate to a secret alternative community formed under the command of their hero, John Galt. Now Rod Dreher is about the last person in the world one would accuse of making a pitch for Ms. Rand's hyper-rationalist, anti-religious Objectivist philosophy. But however unwittingly, he shares with her the conviction that if at first you don't secede, try, try again.

A strategic retreat to quasi-monasticism, with its offer of a safe harbor from the depredations of contemporary culture, might seem drastic. Yet Dreher sees no other way to sustain the faith until the larger society recovers its moral bearings. Likening post-Christian America to a flood, he justifies mass secession as a rescue mission from drowning:

> Could it be that the best way to fight the flood is to…stop fighting the flood? That is, to quit piling up sandbags and to build an ark in which to shelter until the water recedes and we can put our feet on dry land again? Rather than wasting energy and resources fighting unwinnable political battles, we should instead work on building communities, institutions, and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation.

Christian orthodoxy in the West, Dreher argues, has been faltering since the fifteenth century, with each stage of history representing an acceleration of the abandonment of God. The Renaissance, the Reformation,

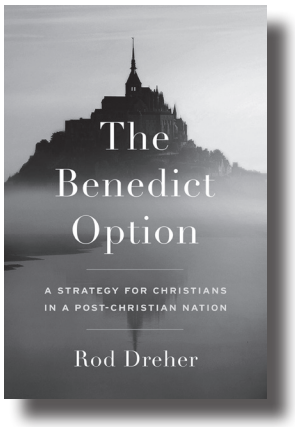
the Wars of Religion, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the current Sexual Revolution are but lurches toward our current "blasted heath of atomization, fragmentation, and unbelief." Separation would enable Christianity to flourish in the face of decay.

Dreher incessantly paints a grim portrait of "post-Christian America." The skeptic might ask: Are we really *post*-Christian? Don't hundreds of thousands of churches across our land every Sunday swing their doors open to worshippers? Isn't there enough of a proliferation of Christian radio and TV programs? To this, the author responds that American Christianity has become counterfeit, all but supplanted by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), a feel-good ecumenical pastiche of milquetoast clichés and affirmations. Dreher admonishes the reader to understand that while God is fair, He also is demanding. MTD is a cop-out from the constant self-sacrifice, suffering, and repentance required of true Christians. Being a "good person" is not enough. Get behind thee, Joel Osteen and Rick Warren!

Our spiritual morass, argues Dreher, apparently beyond redemption for now, calls for pulling the plug and dropping out. Somehow the moral antibodies of even the most devout Christians have become too weak to stave off the temptations of Twitter, luxury goods, and the Kardashian sisters. In the conflict between Christianity and "consumerism," most Christians don't stand a chance. Godless capitalism is effectively no different from Godless Communism. Dreher writes: "(The) consumerist approach to the community of believers reproduces the fragmentation that is shattering Christianity in the contemporary world. In Benedictine monasteries, however, monks are always aware that they are not merely individuals who share living quarters with other individuals but are part of an organic whole — a spiritual family." He ruefully refers to a recent sociological survey showing that only nine percent of millennials believe consumerism is a serious issue.

Monkish devotion, communion, and self-abnegation are necessary to build a military-style backbone in this struggle. "The order of the monastery produces not only humility but also spiritual resilience," Dreher writes. "In one sense, the Benedictine monks of Norcia are like a Marine Corps of the religious life, constantly training for spiritual warfare." Dreher doesn't exempt himself from boot camp. At one point in the book, he recalls a time of personal crisis in which his Eastern Orthodox priest instructed him to recite the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner") for an hour each day. "It was dull and difficult at first," he writes, "but I did it out of obedience. Every day, for a seemingly endless hour, silent prayer. In time, though, the hour seemed much shorter, and I discovered that the peace I had conspicuously lacked in my soul came forth."

Reflexive obedience and self-denial are Dreher's guideposts for a successful Benedict community. Deep Christianity must be thoroughly woven into daily activity. Life is to be lived with Spartan asceticism, every thought and action a way of saying "no" to the self and "yes" to God. While the author admits most residents will need gainful employment to survive, the purpose of work would not be to pay bills or even enjoy the work, but to bask in the divine light. Referring to St. Benedict, Dreher writes, "The work must serve not ourselves but God and God alone." Eating would be for sustenance, not pleasure, with frequent fasting part of the bargain. Education should function as Christian indoctrination ("formation"), and in much stronger doses than found even in most parochial schools. In addition, geographic mobility should be discouraged; individuals or families who move to a Benedict community should put down roots there. All such arrangements are necessary to achieve absolute submission to God.



As for the inevitable topic of sexuality, Dreher doesn't deny that sex, "a divine gift," is necessary for procreation or affirmation of love between a man and a woman. But its disordered use, he adds, is "one of the most destructive forces on earth." Pornography is a "scourge" that destroys human imagination and breaks up families. As only marriage can justify sexual activity, single adults will have to wait indefinitely (like he did) until Mr. or Miss Right comes along. As Dreher views the Sexual Revolution as catastrophic for Christianity, he is perplexed as to why clergy and laymen alike are hesitant to raise the subject. But ever the optimist, he looks to the future. "Our job as Benedict Option Christians," he writes, "is to form communities of healthy chastity and fidelity that can protect the gift and pass it on to the next generations." This may sound sensible on the surface. But experience has shown all too often that when chastity and fidelity are central organizing principles of a community, the means of enforcement are highly coercive. Snooping and snitching are tacitly if not overtly encouraged. The author seems unable to accept that a monastic way of life, though not without its rewards, is not meant for more than a small minority of believers.

Dreher sternly rebukes computer technology, now the main transmitter of pornography. Yet for him,

technology of *any* kind is the larger problem — a strange observation coming from a full-time blogger! Porn or no porn, technology has debased our souls and compromised our ability to make sense of the world. It is a "protean theology," one that bears witness not to God but to "an ever-changing Self that is seeking liberation from all limits and unchosen obligations." The author might not be a pure Luddite, but he certainly could pass for one with this observation: "We have to work hard to fight back against the technology that makes our everyday lives so easy, so that we can be human beings who live in reality."

Some might characterize Dreher's ideal Benedict community as a cult. The author offers at best weak assurances against such an outcome. Separatist religious communes, regardless of doctrine, tend to have an intensely authoritarian social structure. Their leaders may disguise this reality to visitors with Potemkin Village-style displays of "sharing" and "enthusiasm," but the control from above is always there. Benedictine communities might produce workable experiments in daily living, but insofar as the author frames the issue, the differences between one community and another would be far more a matter of degree than principle. Isolation and authoritarianism aren't just features of such communities; they are *defining* features.

In all fairness, Dreher recognizes the potential dangers. In Chapter 6 ("The Idea of a Christian Village"), citing an unpleasant real-life instance, he cautions: "The greatest temptation for tightly-knit communities is a compulsion to control its members unduly and to police each other too strictly for deviation from a purity standard. It is hard to know when and where to draw the line in every situation, but a community so rigid that it cannot bend will break itself or its members." True enough. The perfect, as the adage goes, is the enemy of the good. But what Dreher can't seem to grasp is that Benedict-style communities, even with the best of intentions, on some level must blend love and fear to be sustainable. The fact that they are Christian, as opposed to Jewish, Muslim, or New Age, does not immunize them from a descent into localized tyranny. Any assurances that these communities will be immune to power grabs by sociopaths on the order of Tony Alamo, Warren Jeffs, or Lester Roloff ring hollow. It is in the nature of insular communities, built on an edifice of dogma, to suppress free expression as a means of averting attrition and a breakup.

It's not as if Dreher is entirely wrong in expressing disdain for the hyperactive excesses of modern life. Overworked adults could benefit from turning off their pressure valves more often. Teenagers would do well to spend more time cultivating productive hobbies and less time shopping and text messaging. But the author's solution resembles nothing so much as a Rightist version of the Leftist multicultural "snowflake" syndrome now running rampant among today's college students. Dreher just can't help but feel "hurt" or "offended" by someone else's spontaneous words or behavior. Unable to conduct Savonarola-like campaigns to destroy the sources of sin in hopes of preventing it, Dreher would have believers move off the grid and dwell in protective homogeneous bubbles. It is to our good fortune that he is unlikely to find many takers. ■