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Author Rod Dreher speaks March 15, 2017, at the National Press Club about his new book on the "Benedict Option." The concept, he says, is for Christians to "put some distance" between themselves and "the chaotic mainstream" or Christianity will not survive. (CNS/The Trinity Forum)



by Michael Sean Winters

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As Catholic conservatives go, Rod Dreher, author of *The Benedict Option*, is one of the more thoughtful. He has, in the past, been kind enough to return the favor of complimenting some of my writings, even though both of us disagree with each other on more issues than we agree.

Last week, La Civiltà Cattolica [published an essay](#) by Jesuit Fr. Andreas Gonçalves Lind, that challenged some of the suppositions and conclusions Dreher made in his book, and Dreher responded [with a broadside](#), calling Lind's essay a "smear."

It is not my place to referee this intellectual debate, but I do hope that it can be directed towards a more fruitful exchange and not descend into a grudge match.

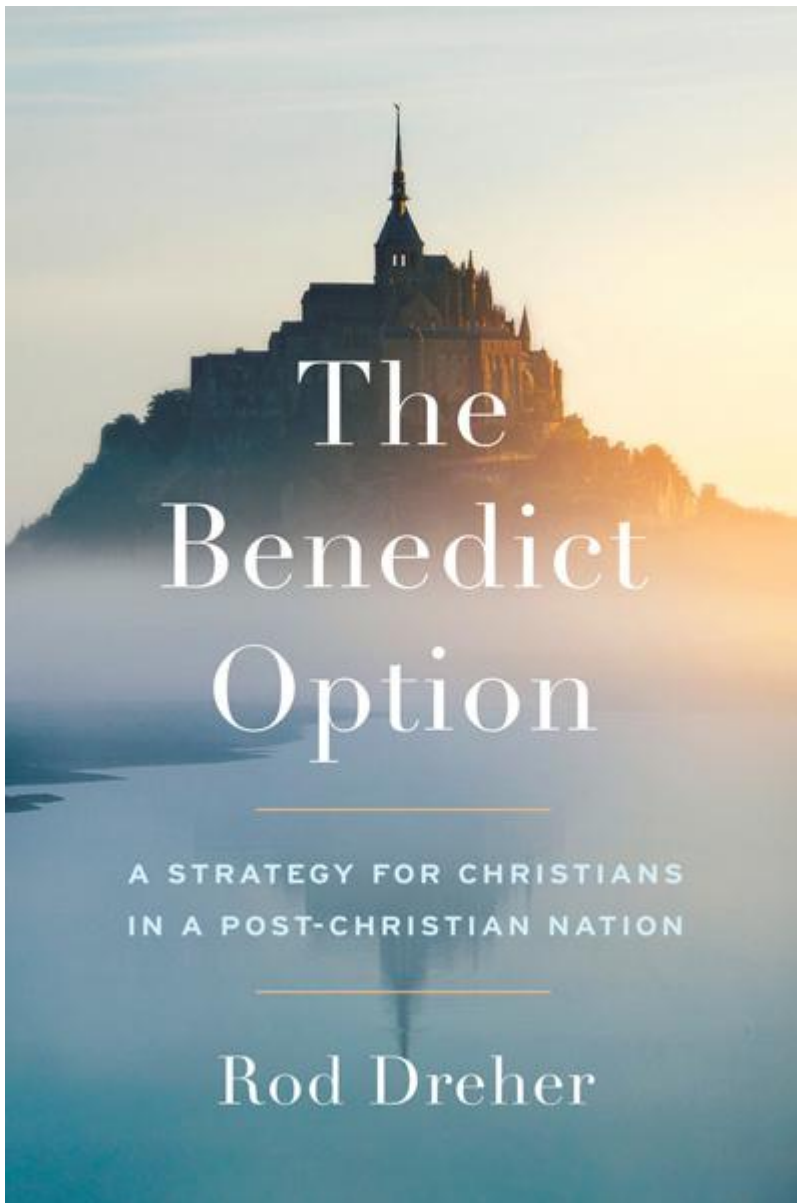
First, I do think Lind commits a foundational error by invoking the Donatists so repeatedly in his analysis of Dreher. He writes:

*Dreher, obviously without falling into heresy, seems to echo Donatus: "If today's churches are to survive the new Dark Age, they must stop 'being normal.' We will need to commit ourselves more deeply to our faith, and we will need to do that in ways that seem odd to contemporary eyes. By rediscovering the past, recovering liturgical worship and asceticism, centering our lives on the church community, and tightening church discipline, we will, by God's grace, again become the peculiar people we should always have been. The fruits of this focus on Christian formation will result not only in stronger Christians but in a new evangelism as the salt recovers its savor."*

Lind can stipulate that Dreher is not "falling into heresy" and he can even say that this is "obvious," but Dreher's vituperative response is no doubt in part the result of his understandable indignation at being continually compared to one of the most notorious heretics in history!

Lind is, however, undoubtedly correct that Dreher, like many Christian conservatives, is a little too inalert to the danger of fashioning a Christian self-image that self-consciously resembles the martyrs and sees our own time as a "new Dark

Age." Surely, Christian complicity with the crimes of the Nazis in the mid-20th century, was a greater threat to the Christian faith than even the most obnoxious anti-Christian bigotry one can find today. Cancers are dangerous when they inhabit the body, not when they are in the ambient air.



The cover of "The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian World" by Rod Dreher (CNS)

Even if we confine our anxieties to threats from without, the threats they perceive from the dominant culture's demands for libertine sexual dogmas are no worse than the threats posed by Revolutionary France, which soon gave way to a great flowering of religious and spiritual life. Besides, the revolution was based on

something solid and important, the rights of man, however dreadfully those rights were breached. Today's fascination with gender ideology has all the earmarks of an academic fad. We should all be compassionate to those with complicated issues of gender identity, but "nonbinary sexual identity" as a cultural battle cry lacks the universal force of "liberte, egalite, fraternite."

Lind also seems to miss the significance of his own notation that Dreher's book is a kind of natural development of arguments first articulated by Alasdair MacIntyre's 1981 book *After Virtue*. True, the analogies both make between the fall of Rome and contemporary America are overwrought. Equally problematic is MacIntyre's argument that the reason there was so much moral degradation in public life was the lack of a shared moral discourse. It should by now be obvious, as Cathleen Kaveny argued in her book, [\*Prophecy Without Contempt\*](#), that, "If MacIntyre is right, we ought to see more coherence — and less fractiousness — within subcommunities that do have available to them full-blown moral traditions, such as those bound together by a particular tradition of faith."

In fact, there is as much fractiousness within the Christian communities as without, which raises serious questions about the degree to which Dreher's envisioned communities are really organized around Christian faith and practice per se or around a particular ideological understanding that adopts a particular religious expression. At least for us Catholics, keeping the small 'c' meaning of catholicity is not an option. We share a common faith, but we live different lives, and I tend to be wary of the leveling impulse that the desire for a "shared moral discourse" can imply. Certainly many who invoke natural law as an obvious candidate for the role of shared moral discourse do not use it to achieve discourse; they use it to beat other people over the head.

On the other hand, when I read Dreher talk about the need for Christians to become less normal, I see his direction as of a piece with the social critics of the 1950s who worried about mass marketing techniques and the homogenization of culture. George Marsden detailed those critiques so brilliantly in his book *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment*, [which I reviewed here](#). It was there that I first encountered John Steinbeck's letter to Adlai Stevenson in which he observed that "if I wanted to destroy a nation, I would give it too much and I would have it on its knees, miserable greedy, and sick." I do not know if Dreher shares my conviction, and Steinbeck's, that the most comprehensive threat to moral fiber and Christian identity in our day comes from our acquisitive, materialistic, economically successful culture. If he

does, and I suspect he might, I am guessing he and Lind could find some common ground. In any event, and for reasons I am sure Dreher might not share, his concern to risk being different is one I share on human, as well as Catholic, grounds. The conformity of both left and right, and the bullying used to enforce that conformity, is stifling.

In his reply to Lind, Dreher brings up the subject of religious liberty. And, in his book he shares the concern of those professionals who think the zeitgeist will not long tolerate adherence to traditional Christian beliefs about sexual ethics. Religious liberty is the contemporary fad on the intellectual right. But, instead of expertise in this area of study providing insight and balance, I have found that too many religious liberty experts see dangers that are not there, perceive slights that are not intended, and overdramatize the threat in order to raise money for their organizations. The last major Supreme Court case that dealt with religious liberty head-on was *Hosanna-Tabor v. EEOC* and the court ruled unanimously in favor of the Lutheran Church's right to hire and fire its own ministers without government interference. *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, two years later, was a closer call with the justices divided 5-4, but this case also involved residual dislike of the Affordable Care Act and the pro-business bias of the conservatives on the court.

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Dreher's book was useful as an intellectual exercise. I do not think the Benedict Option is a thing to be pursued, but it is always helpful to think of the ways and times when we all need to retreat from the world to maintain our spiritual equilibrium. The Benedict Option is like the parlor game of picking an anthem for liberalism: We know that *The Internationale* is the anthem for socialism, but what of liberalism? The answer tells us a lot about how a person conceives of the accomplishments of liberalism — and the failures — but after awhile, you have to leave the parlor and suspend the game and get back to real life. I do not think Fr. Lind's article as, as alleged, a "smear." He engaged the intellectual exercise and discovered flaws. Instead of getting so defensive, Dreher should invite Lind over for a long weekend of repartee.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about the nexus between religion and politics.]

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