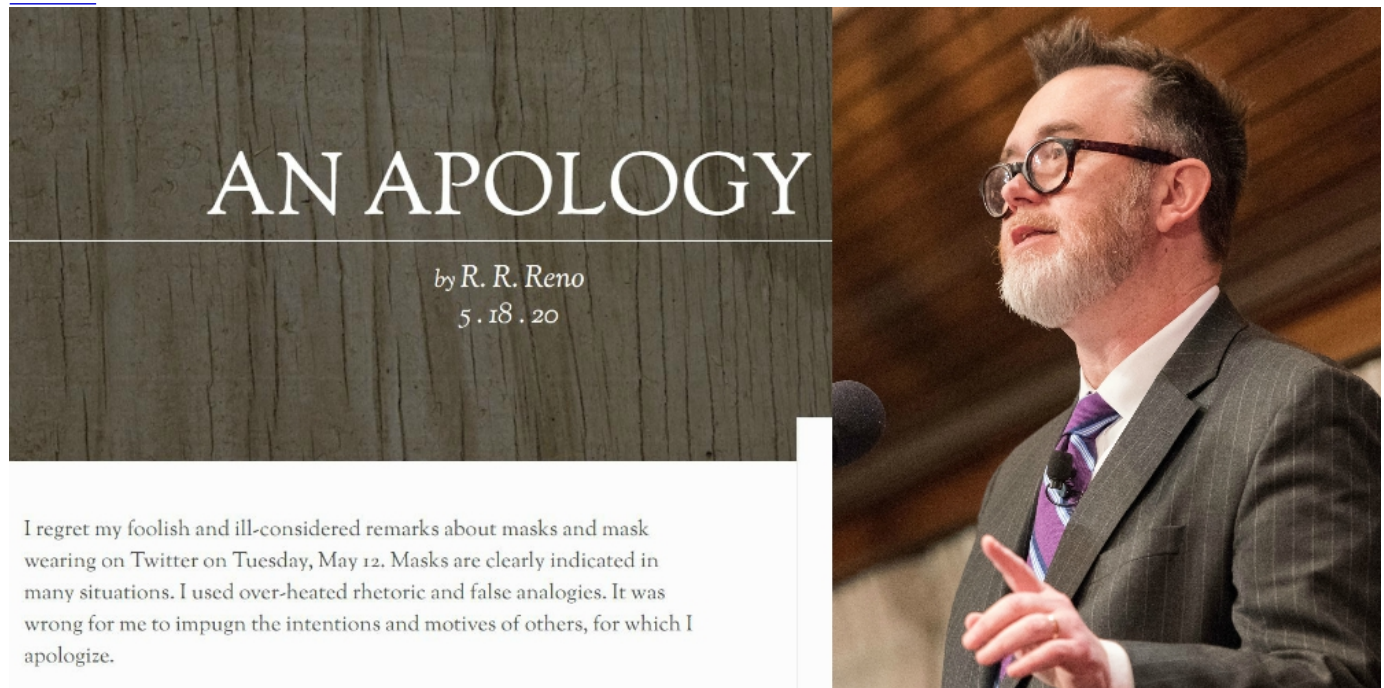


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Left: R.R. Reno's apology, posted to the First Things website on May 18 (Screenshot); right: Rod Dreher (CNS/The Trinity Forum)



by Michael Sean Winters

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No one should take delight in the public meltdown of R.R. Reno, the editor of the conservative magazine First Things. [His apology](#) for some truly bizarre tweets was welcome: I assume someone who loved him reached out and led him to realize how bizarre, and unhelpful, his comments were. This horrible pandemic has struck different people differently. Let us wipe Reno's slate clean back to the first of the year, I thought to myself.

I was shocked, therefore, when Rod Dreher of "[The Benedict Option](#)" fame used the occasion to voice a more [general indictment of the magazine](#):

The crisis of First Things is a symbol of the broader crisis of intellectual Christian conservatism attempting to engage modernity, and to participate in the public square — which is exactly why First Things was founded, and how it sees its mission. My point is that the First Things crisis — if you can call it a "crisis," and I think you can — is not just a crisis for that magazine, but it symbolizes a broader and deeper crisis on the intellectual Christian Right.

Dreher's concern is not merely the crisis President Donald Trump and Trumpism has created for all morally serious conservatives. He thinks there has been a precipitous decline from the heady early days of the 1990s when First Things began publication:

This was the era when Pope John Paul II was at the height of his powers, and even many Evangelicals looked to him as a symbol of authentic Christian witness to the world — not just in terms of piety, but because of his intellectual critiques of modernity. In the US, at least, conservative Christianity offered a coherent and muscular vision — one that often dovetailed with the priorities of the Republican Party, or so many of us believed.

Of course, the 1990s was also the decade when bishops who wanted to defrock pedophile clergy found obstruction, not encouragement, from Pope John Paul II's Vatican. Later, Dreher mentions that Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel, the first editor and major contributor to the magazine respectively, were too close to powerful churchmen for their own good and that the clergy sex abuse scandal that burst into the open in 2002 damaged their credibility. But the real scandal, of

course, was not the media fallout, it was the cover-up of sex abuse, and that happened during the fat years of the '90s.

Dreher faults the early First Things leaders for supporting the Iraq War, even when their hero John Paul II opposed it. He distinguishes between them and the coarser figures of the "religious right" and, surely, they had more moral and intellectual seriousness than, say, the Rev. Jerry Falwell or the Rev. Pat Robertson, but that is a low bar.

More importantly, he fails to note that their critique of modernity was lopsidedly partisan all along. Weigel's failure to embrace the fullness of Catholic social teaching reflected a deeper inability to distinguish between engagement with the world and complicity with the world. If First Things has fallen, it has not fallen as far as Dreher thinks it has, because the starting point for the fall was not nearly as high as he pretends.

Two other aspects of Dreher's commentary are illustrative. First, after noting his own response to the post-Christian world he discerns, the Benedict option — an effort to withdraw into self-enclosed Christian communities where the faithful can hold fast to their traditions — he notes that some at First Things have proposed a different approach: "One that has found its way into the pages of First Things is Catholic integralism, the idea that there should be a closer formal relationship between the Catholic Church and the State, whose governing principles should be consonant with Catholic teaching."

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This group would be scary if their proposals were not so laughable. Even Dreher notes that not that many Catholics consider church teaching binding on the conduct of their lives, so the idea that our civil government could be made to toe the doctrinal line is absurd. Yet, this integralism stands behind some of the legal defenses put forward by some, not all, in the religious liberty brigade, so they are worth keeping an eye on.

More alarming is the central role that sex plays in Dreher's examination of the culture and the state of conservative Catholic thought, and here he is fully in line with Neuhaus, Weigel and Reno. For the earlier generation, it was fidelity to

*Humanae Vitae*, the papal document on birth control, that served as the marker for muscular Catholicism. Now, it is resistance to LGBT rights.

Dreher cites a 2015 article in — of all places — First Things [by Michael Hanby](#), which understood that "the triumph of the LGBT cause in American law, politics, and culture is a metaphysical defeat," Dreher says. He quotes Hanby:

This rejection of nature is manifest in the now orthodox distinction between sex, which is "merely biological," and gender, defined as a construct either of oppressive social norms or of the free, self-defining subject — one often finds protagonists of this revolution oscillating back and forth between those polar extremes. And this sex-gender distinction, in turn, is premised upon a still more basic dualism, which bifurcates the human being into a mechanical body composed of meaningless material stuff subject to deterministic physical laws and of the free, spontaneous will that indifferently presides over it.

This is bosh built around a boogeyman. No one believes gender is a mere social construct except a few fringe academics looking to get published. The triumph of the cause of LGBT rights was not rooted in such conceptual foolishness. It was rooted in the experience of gay men and women growing tired of having to hide much of their lives, of frustration as careers were ruined and physical safety threatened, of being called perverts when no one experiences being gay as the result of a moral choice at all, perverted or otherwise, but as something constitutional.

Yes, sometimes LGBT activists, like all activists, have gotten carried away. I remember the old Bette Midler joke from the '80s: "Why can't two gay men walk down the street without calling it a parade?" But that was a joke. Turns out it was a joke that some of our conservative Catholic friends didn't find funny.

Most of my gay friends are not as fixated on their own sex lives as Dreher, Hanby and others on the right are so fixated. The "metaphysical" hysteria around gay rights was always misplaced by extremists on both sides. I think it is a fine thing that gay people are increasingly free from discrimination and worse. My Catholic faith is not threatened a whit by the phenomenon. Being lectured by people who turned a blind eye to the violence of war and the injustices perpetrated by modern financialized capitalism is rich, whether they were in the founding generation of First Things writers or the second.

Someone must have gotten to Dreher, for he published a [second commentary](#) the next day, regretting that he published his critique when he did, not wanting to appear like he was piling on a friend. Then the serious backpedaling began: "To be honest, though, my distress is a backhanded compliment to First Things, because for so long it has been peerless among religious conservative journals. Though I am thrilled that its editors have been taking it beyond the Reaganist fusionism of the Neuhaus-Weigel era, I don't want to see it get mired in Trumpist crankery. To lose First Things would be a terrible thing."

Yes, Trump has introduced "crankery" into the right in ways it had not been there before, but the cardinal sin of First Things, one you would think the author of *The Benedict Option* would easily discern, was there all along: From its beginning, and despite its name, it was complicit in the reduction of religion to ethics, thence to politics and finally to legalisms. It is no excuse that a similar phenomenon happened on the left.

The problem is not LGBT anything. It is that postwar America — successful, indispensable, a superpower, the "greatest nation in the history of the world" — has become, in fact, the town about which the Master warned the apostles: "And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town" ([Matthew 10:14](#)). Dreher and his friends at First Things are clinging to the dust.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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