

Dreher, Rod, *The Benedict Option. A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, New York: Sentinel, 2017, 262pp

Rod Dreher's last book, *The Benedict Option*,¹ is written as a call for Christians who feel that "Western society is post-Christian and that absent a miracle, there is no hope of reversing this condition" (89). A conservative himself, Dreher urges Christians to give up politics—specifically, Republican² politics—focusing instead in developing Christian communities.³ Following Alasdair MacIntyre's thought, Dreher sees liberal democracies as the battleground between two traditions of thought: emotivist⁴ liberalism and Christian virtue ethics. Given that the former has the upper hand, the latter can only survive, Dreher affirms, by promoting tight local communities living Christianity passionately. The model of this community is found in the rule of Benedict of Norcia, who revitalized monastic life in the sixth century. The rule of Benedict promotes the sanctification of everyday life, balancing manual work and prayer with the help of asceticism and discipline. Dreher's book is an attempt to transpose the monastic rule to the lives of contemporary laypeople.

This turn to the local seeks to develop a "subculture" that can "outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the [liberal] occupation" (12). The use of the term "occupation" sets the tone for the whole book: liberalism, by its own nature, declared war to the Christian West. It has challenged Christian an-

¹ Numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in Dreher's book.

² Although Dreher recognizes that Trump "is not a solution to the problem of America's cultural decline, but a symptom of it" (79), his analysis of American politics, and of Trump's presidency in particular, is not critical enough. It is disappointing that a learned Christian as Dreher fails to utterly reject and condemn Trump's xenophobic, racist, anti-democratic politics.

³ Dreher praises Václav Havel's "antipolitical politics" (92)—understood as the individual refusal to collaborate with a totalitarian regime—as well as Václav Benda's idea of a "parallel polis"—defined as "a separate but porous society existing alongside the official Communist order" (93). Dreher, however, never explains why these politics of resistance against totalitarian regimes are appropriate in liberal democracies. Although he correctly identifies the tendency of liberalism to disregard and silence its opponents (masking its power in the form of "neutrality" or even "common sense") it is by no means evident that *that* kind of resistance is efficient, to say nothing of its desirability, in societies that recognize, although perhaps imperfectly, human rights.

⁴ For a discussion of emotivist ethics see MACINTYRE, A., *After Virtue*, Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, pp. 11-12.

thropology, proposing a Sexual Revolution that has repaganized the West, a revolution which “can never be reconciled with orthodox Christianity” (197). It has promoted secularism and embraced the kind of epistemic and moral “liquidity” diagnosed by Zygmunt Bauman,⁵ diluting the once robust Christian anthropology and leaving only a narcissistic and hedonistic culture that convinces everyone that happiness is only achievable if we satisfy every one of our desires.

Against the pervasive influence of gender ideology and the modern distinction between facts and values, the Benedict Option opposes classical Christian schools based on a comprehensive view of human existence, the teaching of virtues, and the study of the history of Western –that is to say, for Dreher, Christian– civilization.⁶ Against the atomizing effects of liberal individualism, the Benedict Option promotes communities of engaged Christians where the whole takes care of those going through hard times and professional networks bolster the success of their members.

Notwithstanding the strength and vitality of Dreher’s call for a renovated Christianity, there are important problems in the book we should address. Perhaps the most worrisome of them has to do with his understanding of our secular age. There can be, Dreher suggests, no compromise with the modern push for secularization. However, this position forgets that Christianity took the very first step towards a secular world. Christianity stood against civil religions, demanding a sharp distinction between the temporal and the transcendent (cf. Mt 22:21). Dreher forgets that modernity –and, with it, secularity– not always went *against* Christianity: modern thinkers like Petrarch and Erasmus were Christians who tried to provide fresh answers to the questions scholasticism failed to solve.⁷ This confusion is evident when we see Dreher’s misreading of Charles Taylor’s view on secularity. Dreher mistakenly takes Taylor’s *explanation* of Alain Renaut’s view of humanism for his own. According to Renaut, Taylor explains, “[t]he entire ethical stance of moderns supposes and follows on from the death of God”.⁸ But this is *not* Taylor’s view. In *A Catholic Modernity?* Taylor affirms that “in modern, secularist culture

⁵ See BAUMAN, Z., *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

⁶ Contrary to Dreher’s radical rejection of secular modernity, Joseph Ratzinger understands “Europe” (i.e., the West) as a composite of four heritages: Greek, Christian, Latin, and *modern*. While Ratzinger admits the “ambivalence” of modernity, he notwithstanding stresses that “by no means should this lead to a rejection of the modern era”. RATZINGER, J., *Fundamental Speeches From Five Decades*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012, 169.

⁷ See, for instance, GILLESPIE, M., *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008, chapters 1 and 2. On Christianity and secularity see GAUCHET, M., *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

⁸ TAYLOR, Ch., *A Secular Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 588.

there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel".⁹ Even Joseph Ratzinger –whom Dreher deems “the second Benedict of the Benedict Option” (246)– calls for a complementariness between Christianity and secular rationality.¹⁰ In short, rather than Dreher’s Manichean simplification, secular modernity and Christianity coexist in a complex, fertile relationship that purifies each one and prevents them from becoming hubristic.

Another problem is found in Dreher’s understanding of “faithful orthodox Christians”, that is, “theological conservatives within the three main branches of historical Christianity” (18). Dreher’s Benedict Option is a call to *all* Christians, irrespective of their specific affiliation. An ecumenism that fails to ask the question of truth fails, however, to be authentically Christian.¹¹ While he exhorts Christians not to water down doctrinal distinctiveness and to respect the differences (137), he attacks the compartmentalization of education and its separation “from the life of the church” (148). But, one must ask: if the Benedict Option is open to Christians broadly understood, how is it possible to create a tight relationship between the community, education, and the church? What “church” are we talking about? Moreover, while Dreher insists in giving testimony to the truth, he sees no problem with the many theological differences between the three branches. Is Christ really present in the Eucharist, or the sacrament is rather a memorial? Has the Pope, in communion with the bishops, the grace of infallibility when teaching matters of faith? What about the dogma of Mary’s Immaculate Conception? Do we have seven sacraments or less, as Luther suggested? While marriage is of paramount importance in Dreher’s book, the question whether it is or not a sacrament seems not as important. The project loses traction when we note what an exacerbated religious pluralism, which is, ironically, a product of the liberal mind, does to the question about truth.

A final aspect to consider here is, in my opinion, Dreher’s overemphasis on sex –suggesting that today no core Christian teaching is more important to obey than sexual ethics (196). Dreher understands the Sexual Revolution and gender ideology as a consistent anthropology. But this fails to see, first, that there are in gender ideology just and necessarily vindications of historically oppressed groups, and second, that there are important contradictions between different aspects of this ideology, i.e., that gender ideology is itself a discussion arena among different currents. Moreover, his chapter on sexuali-

⁹ HEFT, J. A. (Ed.), *Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 16.

¹⁰ RATZINGER, J., *Fundamental Speeches From Five Decades*, p. 215.

¹¹ This is also Ratzinger’s position. See, for instance, RATZINGER, J., *Truth and Tolerance*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, chapter 3.

ty gives the impression that the Christian teaching on sexuality has remained constant, failing to admit that Christianity has made mistakes that forced it to rethink the place of women in the family and the ends of marriage, to give only a couple of examples.

Dreher's *The Benedict Option* is an ambitious project to rejuvenate Christianity, instilling our contemporary societies with the spirit of Benedict. However, although offering an interesting diagnose of the challenges Christianity encounters at the dawn of the third millennium, the book fails to provide a consistent description of the meaning of faith in Christ because of its attempt to function as a catch-all strategy; and it also fails to engage modernity fairly and properly, because of a too eager Manichean view of reality that dismisses the moral improvements that secular modernity advanced in the West.

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