

## The Benedict Option: Living the Faith in Community

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*The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation.* By Rod Dreher. New York: Sentinel, 2017. 262 pp. \$25.00 (cloth).

In the introduction to *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (2017), conservative Christian Rod Dreher writes, “Over the last decade, I have been writing on and off about the Benedict Option, but it never took off outside a relatively small circle of Christian conservatives. Meanwhile the Millennial generation began to abandon the church in numbers unprecedented in U.S. history” (p. 2). An editor and blogger for *The American Conservative*, Dreher is a controversial figure, and I suspect that most readers of this journal will find themselves in deep disagreement with Dreher about issues relating to gender, sexuality, and the interpretation of scripture. Without minimizing these differences, I will offer a charitable reading of *The Benedict Option*, because certain aspects of Dreher’s proposal seem to resonate strongly with some of the most creative, spiritually and socially emancipatory Episcopal movements of our own day. An exploration of Dreher’s provocative manifesto and action plan for renewal, interwoven with an investigation into some Episcopal intentional communities, suggests that the two have more in common than at first meets the eye, despite the divergence of views from conservative to progressive. Both have connections with the contemporary movement known as the “new monasticism.”

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Although he identifies as “a believing Christian and a committed conservative” (p. 1), Dreher is critical of those conservative Christians who “seemed content to be the chaplaincy to a consumerist culture that was fast losing a sense of what it meant to be a Christian” (p. 2). Dreher decries radical individualism, secularism, consumerism, and the fragmenting of communities, and urges Christians to return to the roots of our faith in thought and practice, to change our lives and approach to life in radical ways. Today’s Christians, according to Dreher, are called to find new, creative, joyful, and countercultural ways to live the faith in community. He calls this way of living the Benedict Option.

*The Benedict Option* offers a critique of modern culture from a traditional Christian point of view. To this end, Dreher draws inspiration from the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Western civilization, according to MacIntyre, has lost its moorings. The time is coming, prophesies MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981), when men and women of virtue will understand that continued participation in mainstream society is not possible for those who want to live a life of traditional virtue. These people will find radical and countercultural new ways to live in community.

For Dreher, our culture’s worship of the self and material comfort represents a spiritual crisis. Just as the sixth-century Saint Benedict of Nursia responded to the collapse of Roman civilization by founding a monastic order based on order, prayer, work, stability, community, balance, and hospitality, Christians today must rethink their relationship to contemporary American culture. Dreher states, “The idea is that serious Christian conservatives could no longer live business-as-usual lives in America, that we have to develop creative, communal solutions to help us hold on to our faith and our values in a world growing ever more hostile to them” (p. 2).

While the politics Dreher himself attaches to such speculation tend to swing heavily to the right, if one removes the word *conservative* from many of Dreher’s statements, his broader assertions apply to a wider scope of Christians, humanists, and others who wish to live virtuous lives outside the mainstream contemporary culture. Not so long ago, after all, the “counterculture” was a word we employed to speak about the intentional cultivation of alternative communities on the left.

Many such alternative communities continue to thrive, including some within the Episcopal Church. For example, the Boston

Cambridge Mission Hub (BCMh), an initiative of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, is devoted to developing “a network of long-term, affordable intentional communities that cultivate a transformed sense of belonging in their members while rooting them in their congregations and neighborhoods.” The BCMh Vision statement begins, “People of all ages long for a connection to God, for strong and supportive community, and for meaningful work that aligns with their faith.” ([bostoncambridgemitsonhub.org](http://bostoncambridgemitsonhub.org)).

BCMh defines intentional community as “a group of people committing to one another, living together and intertwining the essential rhythms of life: eating, praying, working, and playing.” Life Together, another initiative of the Diocese of Massachusetts affiliated with Episcopal Service Corps, “provides training and support for radical Christian transformation.” Fellows live in intentional community, where they “come to experience and understand the power of community as the source of peace, change, renewal, connection, and courage” (<http://www.lifetogethercommunity.org>).

Both of these Episcopal initiatives respond to a host of social ills in our current culture: social isolation, overconsumption and unsustainability, the struggle to live a values-based life, a lack of right relationship to self, others, the planet, and to God. There is an emphasis on service, radical renewal, and being formed by Christian spiritual practice.

According to MacIntyre, modern society has become “a collection of strangers, each pursuing his or her own interests under minimal constraints” (p. 16). This society is characterized by “distancing oneself from community as well as any unchosen social obligations” (p. 17). The result is a deep fragmentation of community. When we live for ourselves, and ourselves alone, we lose relationship, stability, and the moral standards of working and living in community. MacIntyre’s title, *After Virtue*, is an apt comment on the cultural loss of objective values, which is to say values found outside those defined solely by the self. Arguably, one antidote is to be found in living intentionally according to the values of a more richly imagined moral community. For conservatives such as Dreher, these values include the authority of scripture and the stability of the traditional family. For Life Together fellows, these values include community organizing and working for social justice. For the managers and residents of the Boston Cambridge Mission Hub, these values include being a part of the fabric of city neighborhoods and church communities.

Considered under the aspect of the partisan divide that structures so much of our world today, Dreher's communities and the intentional Episcopal communities seem deeply at odds, but the cultural and partisan politics of the moment are not the only way to understand such movements, all of which express deep intuitions about the need for the renewal of rich moral and spiritual communities.

Indeed, not only the mainstream and progressive voices, but also the conservative Dreher, call for the renewal of the church. He sings a familiar refrain: the churches are largely ineffective in combatting the forces of secular and consumer culture as young adults are abandoning the church in unprecedented numbers. What can be done? Dreher proposes the idea of a Christian village, living close to other members of your church community. Family life, Dreher asserts, must be oriented toward God. He proposes establishing regular times of family prayer. Be serious about spiritual life, he urges. Turn your home into a domestic monastery.

A domestic monastery. The vision statement of BCMH introduces a model of "a life that integrates meaningful work, a *household pattern of devotion*, congregational worship, and engagement in the wider community." In short, the intentional communities envisioned by this Episcopal initiative are much like Dreher's vision of a Christian village. So too, Life Together emphasizes spiritual formation as well as leadership development through a regular life of prayer in community. The young people in these Episcopal intentional communities are looking for more than social connection; they address the spiritual longing that is manifest in the movement known as the new monasticism.

New monasticism is an ecumenical contemporary movement toward a prayerful life. The movement encompasses a variety of contemplative spiritual practices that can be lived in the world, balancing the tension between social engagement and contemplation. It is characterized by radical renewal, nurturing common life, and peacemaking in the midst of division as well as commitment to a disciplined contemplative life. This new manifestation of monastic life is based in the principles of hospitality, reaching across church boundaries to build relationships ("The 12 Marks of a New Monasticism," *Sojourners*, January 2007).

And what of sexuality and politics, those elephants in the room? Dreher maintains that the "natural family" consists of a married man

and woman and their children, and the advance of gay civil rights has brought a reversal of religious liberty for believers who do not accept the LGBT agenda. He feels that professing orthodox biblical Christianity on sexual matters is now thought to be evidence of intolerable bigotry and racism. Nevertheless, Dreher is dismayed by the election of “robustly vulgar, fiercely combative, and morally compromised” Donald Trump, a man who does “severe damage to the church’s reputation” (p. 81). Faithful theological conservatives, Dreher asserts, “recognize an unpopular truth: politics will not save us” (p. 18). In his view, religious conservatives are better off building thriving subcultures than seeking positions of power.

The Benedict Option is not about building a gated community for Christians but rather establishing practices and institutions that reverse the isolation and fragmentation of contemporary society. Dreher believes that “Christians should be as open to the world as they can be without compromise” (p. 73). “Stay polite and respectful,” he urges. “Don’t validate opponents’ claims that ‘religious liberty’ is nothing more than an excuse for bigotry” (p. 87). Indeed, Christians need all the friends we can get, he says. “Form partnerships with leaders across denominations and from non-Christian religions. Extend a hand of friendship to gays and lesbians who disagree with us but will stand up for our First Amendment right to be wrong” (p. 87).

Perhaps an open-minded reading of *The Benedict Option* can encourage us to be peacemakers in a divided world, to extend a hand of hospitality and friendship across not only denominational boundaries, but the divisions between progressives and conservatives as well.