

The Benedict Option and the identity/relevance dilemma

Rod Dreher's [The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation](#) has certainly emerged as the most talked-about religious book of 2017. Within weeks of its publication, dozens of editorials, reviews, op-eds and panel discussions were dedicated to it. Practically every friend and contact I have sent me something about the book and urged me to comment on it. The very intensity of the interest in the text in one way proves Dreher's central point, namely, that there is a widely-felt instinct that something has gone rather deeply wrong with the culture and that classical Christianity, at least in the West, is in a bit of a mess.

Anyone looking for concrete evidence of the crisis doesn't have to look very far or very long. Twenty-five percent of Americans now identify as religion-less, and among those thirty and younger, the number rises to 40 percent. The majority of people under fifty now claim that their moral convictions do not come from the Bible and traditional prohibitions, especially in regard to sex and marriage, are being aggressively swept away. In fact, legally speaking, the momentum has shifted so dramatically that now those who defend classical views on sexuality are subject to harassment, even prosecution. For Dreher, the Obergefell Supreme Court decision in regard to gay marriage, which basically unmoored marriage from its Biblical and moral foundations, was the straw that broke the camel's back.

It's important to see, moreover, that this was not simply due to a quirk or particularly anti-gay prejudice on Dreher's part. That legal determination had such a powerful impact because it expressed, with crystal clarity, the now widespread conviction that morality is essentially a matter of personal decision and self-invention. A reviewer for Commonweal commented that Dreher's reaction to the

Obergefell decision, though understandable, is disproportionate, given that the twentieth century has witnessed moral outrages far beyond the legalization of same-sex marriage. But this is to miss an essential point. To be sure, atomic bombings and genocide are far graver ethical violations than gay marriage, but in regard to the former, there was, among sane people, a clear consensus that these acts were indeed morally wrong. What has changed is that an agreement across the society regarding the objectivity of good and evil has largely disappeared. As G.K. Chesterton put it a hundred years ago, “Men today have lost their way. But this is not surprising, for men have always lost their way. The difference is that now they have lost their address.”

And so Dreher recommends the now famous “Benedict Option,” named for the sixth century saint who, at a time of cultural collapse, withdrew to live the Christian life intensely and intentionally. Christians today, Dreher urges, should acknowledge that the cultural war has largely been lost and should stop spending time, energy and resources fighting it. Instead, they ought, in imitation of St. Benedict, to rediscover, savor and cultivate the uniquely Christian form of life. This hunkering down is expressed in a variety of ways: homeschooling of children, the creation of “parallel structures,” which is to say, societal forms of resistance to the dominant culture, the opening of “classical Christian schools” where the great moral and intellectual heritage of the West is maintained, the beautiful and reverent celebration of the liturgy, the revival of a sturdy ascetical practice, a profound study of the Bible, the fighting of pornography, challenging the tyranny of the new media, etc. Only through these practices will Christians rediscover who they are; without them, Dreher fears, Christianity will become, at best, faint echo of the dominant secular culture.

As I was reading the book, I kept thinking of the famously unresolvable “identity/relevance” dilemma. The more we emphasize the uniqueness of

Christianity, the less, it seems, the faith speaks to the wider culture; and the more we emphasize the connection between faith and culture, the less distinctive, it seems, Christianity becomes. This problem is on display throughout church history, as the society becomes, by turns, more or less amenable to the faith. In the era when I was coming of age, the period just after the Council, the Church was thoroughly committed to relevance, so committed in fact that it came close to losing its identity completely. Part of the spiritual genius of St. John Paul II was that he struck such a dynamic balance between the poles. Who was more of an ardent defender of distinctive, colorful, confident Catholicism than the Polish Pope? But at the same time, who was more committed to reaching out to the non-Christian world, to secularism, to atheism than he?

In point of fact, the career of Karol Wojtyla sheds quite a bit of light on the advantages and limitations of the Benedict Option. When Wojtyla was a young man, the Nazis and Communists produced a poisonous, even demonic, cultural context, and he was compelled, consequently, to hunker down. With his friends, he formed a clandestine theatre group, which, under cover of darkness and behind locked doors, preserved the great works of Polish drama and poetry, a literature in which the Catholic faith was ingredient. During those dark years, identity was the supreme value. But then, when he became priest and eventually bishop and Pope, he was properly prepared to unleash the energy he had stored. The result was one of the most dramatic transformations of society in modern history. Better than almost anyone in the Church at the time, he knew how to make the ancient faith relevant to the culture.

So do we need the Benedict Option now? Yes, I would say. But we should also be deft enough in reading the signs of the times and spiritually nimble enough to shift, when necessary, to a more open and engaging attitude.

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