Reading *The Benedict Option* with MacIntyre and Schmemann

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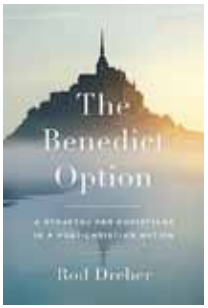
Rod Dreher's idea of a "Benedict option" is ostensibly drawn from the closing paragraph of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's monumental book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Writing in 1981, MacIntyre pointed to the efforts of Christians during the decline of the Roman Empire to salvage their moral tradition by constructing "local forms of community."[1] Dreher cites this passage of MacIntyre in *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, which is an extended plea for contemporary Christians to withdraw from mainstream society and to turn inward, forming intentional communities where the faith may be kept alive through the oncoming dark ages.

MacIntyre's remark is, however, a strange foundation on which to build this argument. For in extracting one phrase from *After Virtue*, Dreher ignores the strong caution that preceded it. Moreover, except in that book's conclusion, which Dreher invests with so much meaning, MacIntyre never mentions St. Benedict again in his subsequent work. Meanwhile, Dreher neglects some of MacIntyre's most important books and essays, such as *Secularization and Moral Change*. We know this from the potted history he gives us as when, for example, he insouciantly claims that "the loss of the Christian religion is why the West has been fragmenting for some time now, a process that is accelerating."[2] MacIntyre (who is as much an intellectual historian as he is a moral philosopher) lays out abundant historical evidence for his thesis and argues forcefully that

> the view that moral and social change is consequent upon the decline of religion is false, and the view therefore that such change could be arrested or could have been arrested by halting the decline of religion is also false. I have argued instead that the causes of moral and social change have lain in the same *urbanization* and *industrialization* that produce secularization.[3]

While Dreher nods his head toward the Industrial Revolution, he never really takes MacIntyre seriously and investigates the role of urbanization and industrialization. Nor, worse, does he do the only sensible thing and pursue a critical analysis of the role of economics beyond the dominant neoliberal paradigm. We shall return to this problem presently.

Though I have every sympathy with Dreher's evidently sincere desire to see Christianity flourish everywhere possible, I regret to say that Dreher's book offers little that is new and fresh to assist with such a task. It is, rather, wreathed about with the stale air of



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

[1] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 263.

[2] Dreher, 22.

[3] Alasdair C. *MacIntyre, Secularization and Moral Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 58. My emphasis.

apocalypticism on the cheap. In reading Dreher, I was ineluctably drawn back to a passage from the great Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemann's *Journals*: "In the Bible, there is space and air. In Byzantium the air is always stuffy, always heavy, static, petrified."[4]

In fact, several passages from Schmemann came to mind while reading *The Benedict Option*, which fixates on same-sex marriage and gender issues to an unhealthy and unhelpful degree. None seems more acute or appropriate than a remark from March 1976, during Lent: "Students' confessions. Always sex. I am beginning to think that this sin is useful; otherwise they would consider themselves saintly and plunge into guruism."[5] Dreher's entire project reeks of guruism.

It is, of course, the nature of gurus that they must convince you of their epistemological superiority. They know things that you cannot possibly know—at least not as they are known by the guru. One thing the guru certainly knows is how bad things are and how badly you need his wisdom, his program and, especially, his *merchandise* to get you out of the deplorable state of affairs you are otherwise condemned to inhabit.

That is the most objectionable feature of Dreher's book: its profiteering on the back of despondency and determinism as manifested in such claims as "the wave cannot be stopped, only ridden." Or when he counsels Christians to build an "ark" instead of fighting "unwinnable political battles."[6] Or when he flatly insists that "the new order is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be lived with."[7] These claims are theologically objectionable insofar as he presumes to know that nothing can be changed and, consequently, that there is no room for the virtue of hope.

Such claims are also objectionable on historical grounds. While Christianity has dwindled and even died off in some parts of the world at different points in history (the history of the Assyrian Church of the East offers the clearest example), such a process is by no means inevitable or, as Dreher suggests, entirely out of our control. He also ignores the surprising ways the Church can rebound precisely when, in the eyes of the world, she seems to be at her weakest.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, similar predictions of decline and demise were made by many as the Church in the West felt under attack in the aftermath of the French Revolution and in the face of the increasingly prominence, including the formation of the Italian state which deprived the Church of the Papal States. The Papal States were thought to be essential to the mission of the Church—wrongly, as we now see, and as Pope Leo XIII himself quickly grasped. In fact, it was under Leo that the Church—and especially the papacy—found a new focus and dynamism, and emerged into the twentieth century on an upward trajectory, aided in no small part by money earned as compensation from Italy for loss of the Papal States and as part of the Lateran Treaty process.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, in the heat of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the plight of the Church also looked dire to many, and even what finally became the great reforming Council of Trent was, for some time, a very close-run thing that nearly fell apart. But ultimately Trent proved to be a success. Again the Church was

[4] Alexander Schmemann, journal entry for February 27, 1979. *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann, 1973–1983*, trans. Juliana Schmemann (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2000), 213.

[5] Schmemann, 113.

[6] Dreher, 12.

[7] Dreher, 18.

on the move, with new orders, such as the Jesuits, and a new dynamism that recovered much of what she had lost. The Church opened up new avenues, took on new nations, and continued to grow globally.

Going back further still, to the rise of the mendicant orders, the Church in the age of Dominic and Francis was thought by those giants and many others to be in a massive state of disrepair and dissolution, perhaps fatally so. But Francis of Assisi—responding, so he believed, to the Lord's call to "repair my Church," launched a reformation that continues more than 800 years after his death, as the sisters who sponsor and run my own University of Saint Francis daily, cheerfully attest.

Knowing even just a little of this history must surely give one reason to question Dreher's firm determination that Christianity in North America and Western Europe is finished. Examining Christian history all the way back to the beginning helps one to see that the Church has *always* been in a cycle of decline and rebirth, rising in some places at some times while sinking in others.

There are other serious problems with Dreher's recounting of history, not least his retailing of the discredited notion of "wars of religion" and his indifference around the founding of the modern nation-state. But arguably the most egregious flaw with Dreher's historical section (chapter 2) is its attempt to describe the history of the Enlightenment without even mentioning MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*[8] The convenient neglect of such a crucial if dense book reveals once and for all that Dreher's read of MacIntyre is selective and tendentious.

Dreher's lack of familiarity not just with Catholic and broader philosophical history, but also with Catholic life in any serious detail—apart, that is, from his boutique examples in Italy, Oklahoma, and Maryland—is really telling. For there are plenty of Catholics I know who have been doing the things he has packaged together, and been doing them without fanfare for decades. There are, moreover, many Catholics emerging today—especially among the much-feared and much-derided "millennials"—who have a deep grasp of the faith and a deeper desire to live it. I see them every semester in my classes, and they give me a modest degree of hope.

I have now taught for almost 20 years in three countries at a number of Catholic institutions at both the high school and university level. With each passing year my students seem, quietly and imperfectly, but firmly and hopefully, to be growing in the strength and depth of their faith. I find, therefore, Dreher's narrative of unrelenting decline to be extremely selective in its evidence, and plainly to ignore plenty of evidence I have myself seen firsthand.

Dreher goes on and on about "moralistic therapeutic deism" (never taking seriously some of the criticism of that claim and its research, which I have myself heard from other Catholic sociologists), but the Catholics I see in my classes are, with each passing year, farther and farther removed from that. He also makes much of Pope Benedict XVI's comments about the "dictatorship of relativism," but my classroom experience has made it clear to me that nobody is ever really a relativist.[9] When I have taught ethics and moral theology to students, I have easily managed to disabuse students

[8] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

[9] Also see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, "Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues, and Goods," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1992): 3–19.

of a lazy relativism by asking them to tell me how they live their lives when faced with significant moral choices.

So are my examples correct, and Dreher's wrong? Do my anecdotes trump his? I would not for a instant claim that. In fact, let us suppose Dreher is more right than wrong about our particular moment in North American and Western European Christian history. Let us suppose Christianity is largely on life support, and may soon die out almost entirely. What is to be done? The answer he proposes to this is, of course, the "Benedict option."

But what kind of solution is this? Here remedy and disease seem almost indistinguishable, and here a deeper appreciation of MacIntyre could, perhaps, have rescued Dreher's project at the moment of its conception. For Dreher's project seems to have fallen into the very pit MacIntyre predicted in a 1979 essay. There MacIntyre recognized the dangers of "the peculiarly deep secularization of our pluralist culture," which

> offers traps to the theologians into which they continually fall. A culture of systematic unbelief would provide a relatively unambiguous context for theological utterance, while a pluralist culture offers an atmosphere of tolerant absorption through which the theologian is diminished and patronized and in which the theologian too often responds either by an anxious accommodation to the culture or by an equally adaptive reaction against it.[10]

Dreher is clearly in the latter category, offering a reactionary take on this moment in our history. Like many reactionaries he is a member of the bourgeoisie, proof of which can be seen in the very notion of a Benedict *option,* which can be dismissed as both harmless and irrelevant precisely because it has failed to offer us—as MacIntyre continues later in the same essay—"a *theological* critique of secular morality and culture," including, of course, the economics of late capitalism.

The "Benedict option," then, seems to participate too much in the fatalistic neoliberal economics of the culture it claims to resist. Dreher's whole project seems an example of what James C. Edwards describes thus:

> Laid out before one are whole lives that one can, if one has the necessary credit line, freely choose to inhabit: devout Christian; high-tech yuppie; Down East guide; great white hunter. This striking transformation of life into lifestyle, the way in which the tools, garments, and attitudes specific to particular times and places become commodities to be marketed to anonymous and rootless consumers: these are the natural (if also banal) expressions of our normal nihilism.[11]

The whole "Benedict option" smacks of just such a transformation of life into lifestyle, and its uses and abuses of Benedict have turned that great saint into a commodity to be marketed to "anonymous and rootless [Christian] consumers."

In this regard, all those commentators worried about the political implications and applications of Dreher's proposal have nothing to worry about: he is simply not radical enough, for his proposal—to borrow Catherine Pickstock's language about the dreamy reforms of Vatican II—manifests "an entirely more sinister conservatism" that fails "to challenge those struc-

[10] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, "Theology, Ethics, and the Ethics of Medicine and Health Care: Comments on Papers by Novak, Mouw, Roach, Cahill, and Hartt," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 4.4: 435–443.

[11] James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 1997), 50.

tures of the modern secular world that are wholly inimical to liturgical purpose."[12]

Far from challenging, let alone overthrowing, those structures, Dreher beats an unseemly and hasty retreat from them and says the idea of anybody challenging them is pointless. Worse, Dreher sneers that those who still want to challenge the structures of the modern secular world are deluded. Those who do not read the signs as he does are dismissed as "the most deluded of the old-school Religious Right" or as out of touch as White Russians after the Revolution.[13] But assertions do not arguments make, and such derisive dismissals as these merely underscore Dreher's very flimsy and intellectually fragile *plaidoyer* for a particular program that will appeal to people most like Dreher: middle-class American Christians.

But gurus have no greater insight into the future than anyone else. Indeed, gurus should be questioned precisely insofar as they try to see and say how things are, and how they are going to turn out. Let us invent a law here—call it Merited Commensurability: the more adamant someone is in saying that such and such is bound to happen, the more we ought to greet such claims with the strongest skepticism.

I wish Dreher had a deeper recognition of the contingencies of culture and unpredictability of human events. At one point he edges up to such a recognition, saying that "History is a poem, not a syllogism," but he has no sooner delivered himself of that single line then he races back to what the psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan has called a narrative of "chosen trauma," in which the West is in inexorable decline and persecution of Christians is coming in fast and thick as far as the eye can see.[14] (Dreher's treatment of Sigmund Freud, on pages 42–43, turns the latter into the usual sort of grotesque one would expect from those who have never read primary sources. Dreher reads Freud through the mediation of Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*.)

Dreher's overheated narrative of trauma and decline could have benefited from a hefty dose of modesty and restraint at the urge to predict the future. Here I rather wish he had some of the modesty manifested in Winston Churchill's eloquent eulogy for Neville Chamberlain, delivered in Parliament in late 1940:

> At the lychgate we may all pass our own conduct and our own judgments under a searching review. It is not given to human beings, happily for them, for otherwise life would be intolerable, to foresee or to predict to any large extent the unfolding course of events. In one phase men seem to have been right, in another they seem to have been wrong. Then again, a few years later, when the perspective of time has lengthened, all stands in a different setting. There is a new proportion. There is another scale of values.

Dreher's "scale of values" inclines toward recommending such things ("options" indeed!) as deeper prayer and more frequent fasting, these being unobjectionable—indeed noble—in themselves. But when they are packaged together with still further options enjoined upon others, and when especially they are read, as they only can be read, in light of his regular gastronomic ejaculations on his blog about oysters and mustards, or, now, the bourbon cocktail invented by a friend and called the "Benedict option," I could not help

[12] Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

[13] Dreher, 12

[14] Dreher, 23.

but think of another work of MacIntyre's that Dreher seems never to have read, *Marxism and Christianity*. There MacIntyre says of the Tractarians and the "ascetic disciplines" they commended to everyone (weekly communion, intense local community life, regular fasting, auricular confession, and other devotions practiced in ritually resplendent churches) that these disciplines "were of a kind possible only to a leisured class."[15]

Like most members of the leisure class, Dreher evidences little interest in seeing the social environment flourish on a wide scale, preferring only that it do so for the small communities he advocates, and of course for himself. Though Dreher commendably says at one point, "love the community but don't idolize it," the rest of his book is precisely such near-idolatry.[16] Here again one can only note that a deeper, more sophisticated engagement with MacIntyre would have saved Dreher from such fatuities.

MacIntyre has offered repeated demonstrations of, and arguments against, what he calls the "communitarian mistake," which is premised upon "a further mistake...that there is anything good about local community as such." Those "communities are always open to corruption by narrowness, by complacency, by prejudice against outsiders and by a whole range of other deformities, including those that arise from a *cult of local community*." To avoid such problems and deformities, local communities must engage in many things, including "a rejection of the economic goals of advanced capitalism."[17] Dreher seems totally uninterested in any such rejection.

Dreher seems to lack self-awareness of how such advanced capitalism makes his peripatetic blogging life possible, but makes many of his proposals impossible for too many other people, who must pick up and move far from family and community merely to survive economically. Here we must include his praise of "stability," his advocacy that one must "live close to other members of your community," his insistence that public schools be abandoned and people should homeschool their kids, and his impertinent demand that "church can't just be the place you go on Sundays—it must become the center of your life."[18] Try suggesting any one of these things, never mind all of them (and still others he recommends) to the people working three jobs just to pay rent and forced to relocate every few years when jobs disappear.

Incidentally, those Tractarians recommending such ascetic disciplines as Dreher does, and those practicing them, did not always have an easy time of it in the Church of England of the late nineteenth century. There was considerable opposition to many of these proposals, as John Shelton Reed's fascinating *Glorious Battle: The Cultural Politics of Victorian Anglo-Catholicism* showed. In the end, the "ritualists" and Tractarians, when they did not decamp for Rome, were reduced to a Dreher style of pleading merely for the right to be left alone pursuing their "option" for what Cardinal Henry Edward Manning came caustically to call "private judgment in gorgeous raiment, wrought about with divers colours."

Cardinal John Henry Newman, of course, came to loathe private judgment. In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* and then especially in his famous "*Biglietto* Speech," he denounced private judgment as just another species of liberalism. Newman, acutely aware of the

[15] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 1969), 108.

[16] Dreher, 137.

[17] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 142–145. My emphasis.

[18] Dreher, 65–67, 129–134, 165–166, 131.

contingencies of history, especially Christian history, and loathe to make the sorts of facile prognostications that Dreher does, ended that speech in Rome after being given a red hat by Leo XIII with this apt reminder:

> Christianity has been too often in what seemed deadly peril, that we should fear for it any new trial now. . . . Commonly the Church has nothing more to do than to go on in her own proper duties, in confidence and peace; to stand still and to see the salvation of God.

Dreher is not content to stand still and see the salvation of God. His busybody guruism, seeking to safeguard "Orthodox Christianity" is, as MacIntyre suggested, a typical reaction of the leisure class that often has the greatest tendency to fixate on simplicity, intentional community, and various forms of voluntary self-denial—whether in monasteries or pseudo-monastic communities. It is the leisure class especially among converts to Orthodoxy (in what Amy Slagle has aptly called the *The Eastern Church in the Spiritual Marketplace: American Conversions to Orthodox Christianity*) who most often seem to fetishize monasteries, who have the time and money to obsess over "monasticism" and "tradition" in psychologically suspect ways, running after their "spiritual fathers" for permission to pee or clip their toenails on Fridays in Lent.

Dreher, of course, is not made of such stern fanaticism. Curiously but revealingly, his gaze falls primarily upon Catholic and Protestant communities in preference to, for example, Mount Athos. Nevertheless, one must challenge this desire to play at being a monk or a quasi-monastic, and one must regard any and all calls for "new forms of community" with a great deal of skepticism until and unless they engage in—as MacIntyre says—"rethinking even further some well-established notions of freedom of expression and of toleration. But about how to do this constructively in defence of the rational politics of local community no one has yet known what to say."[19]

Absent such serious rational thought, and attendant safeguards, one can only be cautious and reluctant to pursue such a life, much as would-be monks rightly were before their tonsure. I am told by a liturgist of impeccable scholarship that some recensions of the Byzantine rite of monastic tonsure saw the *hegumen* or abbot toss the scissors away three times when presented with them by the would-be monk, who would then have to scramble across the floor to retrieve them repeatedly, each time being reminded of the seriousness of the state of life he was about to enter and the real risks he would run thereby.

Because of those risks, it is imperative that one repeatedly and ruthlessly interrogate any romanticism about monastic or community life in any form, for they are fraught with conflicts and problems, not least a tendency toward escapism and subtle forms of self-promotion—and not-so-subtle forms of control, manipulation, and outright sexual abuse. Returning once again to Alexander Schmemann, we see that Schmemann has already offered us severe warnings about these temptations in a bracing and acid passage from January 1981:

> More and more often it seems to me that reviving the monasticism that everybody so ecstatically talks about—or at least trying to revive it—can be done only by liquidating first of all the monas-

[19] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 223.

tic institution itself, i.e., the whole vaudeville of *klobuks*, cowls, stylization, etc. If I were a *starets*—an elder—I would tell a candidate for monasticism roughly the following:

—get a job, if possible the simplest one, without creativity (for example as a cashier in a bank);

—while working, pray and seek inner peace; do not get angry; do not think of yourself (rights, fairness, etc.). Accept everyone (coworkers, clients) as someone sent to you; pray for them;

–after paying for a modest apartment and groceries, give your money to the poor; to individuals rather than foundations;

–always go to the same church and there try to be a real helper, not by lecturing about spiritual life or icons, not by teaching but with a "dust rag" (cf. St Seraphim of Sarov). . . .

–do not thrust yourself and your service on anyone; do not be sad that your talents are not being used; be helpful; serve where needed and not where *you* think you are needed;

–read and learn as much as you can; do not read only monastic literature, but broadly. . . .

–be always simple, light, joyous. *Do not teach*. Avoid like the plague any "spiritual" conversations and any religious or churchly idle talk.[20]

Real monastics, whether Benedictine or otherwise, know that the course of wisdom is to be found not in talking "church talk" or promoting "options," but in listening and serving everyone, without drawing attention to oneself. Real monastics who have done that include another of Dreher's fellow Orthodox, nowhere in evidence in his book: Mother Maria Skobtsova, who made wartime Paris her "monastery" without walls, serving the suffering she encountered there, including the Jews, service to whom and protection of whom cost Maria her life in the gas chamber of Ravensbrück. She would later be canonized by the Orthodox Church, not just for this sacrifice of her life but also for her monastic service in and for the city of Paris, not atop some mountain somewhere or in an inaccessible cloister.

What Skobtsova was living was something later described by another Franco-Russian Orthodox theologian, Paul Evdokimov, as "interiorized monasticism," which may be lived anywhere and everywhere for the life of the world.

Precisely insofar as it is interiorized, such a monastic spirit it is silent, reflecting, as Thomas Merton once said succinctly, the entire wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers: "Shut up, and go to your cell!"

May we all do so. ❋

[20] Schmemann, 284–285.

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