

Review of Dreher, *Live Not by Lies*

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There can be little doubt that civil liberties are at risk of erosion today by certain ideologies. This is of obvious concern to intellectuals in liberal democratic societies. In the yearning for greater social good, both conservatives and progressives occasionally cross the lines of thought censorship. And when they do so, they threaten the intellectual freedom that lies at the foundation of modern democracy. It is essential that free intellectual conversation, even strident debate, about these issues continue unabated.

However, the concern about ideological domination can become so totalizing that it becomes extreme. Ultimately, it becomes the very thing criticized, a dominant ideology that militates against intellectual freedom, even while warning against thought censorship and “cancel culture.”

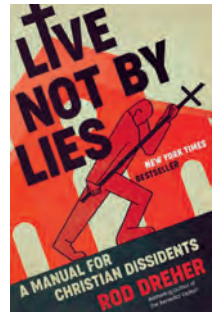
Rod Dreher’s *Live Not By Lies* has managed to accomplish such painful, naive, and self-incriminating irony, by prophesying the rise of totalitarianism in America and the West.

“We Americans may well be living in a fog of self-deception about our own country’s stability,” Dreher proposes. Contemporary American society is rife with “weaknesses that are consistent with a pre-totalitarian state” (44). America, and the West in general, are in a state that he calls “soft totalitarianism.”

This phrase sounds, at least at first glance, oxymoronic. How could any totalitarianism be anything but “hard”?

Dreher’s neologism “soft totalitarianism” springs from a long history. If there is anything constant in the Wild West history of American Christianity, it is a persistent anxiety about the foreboding march of modernity. At the turn of the twentieth century, revivalists like Billy Sunday reacted to the changing mores of an increasingly modern America. In the 1920s, fundamentalists decried what they saw as liberal trends in biblical criticism. At midcentury, federally-mandated and enforced school integration, along with civil and voting rights legislation, provoked a widespread withdrawal of Christian conservatives from civic life—consider the rise of the Christian school and homeschool movement, for example. Later, Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority” and the melange of Christian rightwing nationalists that flocked to Donald Trump’s MAGA revolution recoiled from the expansion of suffrage and power-sharing with heretofore marginalized populations.

In short, after the United States’s shift from an agrarian society to an industrialized and urbanized one, much of the American Christian community persisted in a sentimental and maudlin myth that has been confronted time and time again by the inexorable



Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*. New York: Sentinel, 2020.

realities of new conditions. This myth, cleansed from its populist makeup, is a loose ideological tradition of white fundamentalist nationalism.

Every ideology must have its nemesis. For the purveyors of this particular myth, the enemy is what Dreher calls “the Myth of Progress”: “Believers in the Myth of Progress hold that the present is better than the past, and that the future will *inevitably* be better than the present.” Dreher populates this category—according to well-worn, popular right-wing rubrics—with “leftists” who are, in turn, “socialists, communists, Trotskyites, left-liberals, and so on” (48–49).

He proceeds with the customary American conflation of socialism with communism. Dreher does a lot of conflating. The academic and corporate efforts against hate speech are described as “thoughtcrime heresy-hunting,” and this oppression, too, is due to progressivism, and is part and parcel of the regime of “soft totalitarianism.” And he makes an especially pertinent conflation when he likens “social justice warriors . . . in our society” to “Bolsheviks . . . in late imperial Russia” (60).

Dreher refers here to a statement he made some pages before, uttered in that breathless semi-journalistic tone for which he is lionized: “Social justice warriors and the theorists of their cause are not ‘normal people’ who live by common sense. Fanatical belief in Progress is the driving force behind their febrile utopianism” (46).

The chimera of progressivism has long provoked Cassandra-like warnings in the literature of American fundamentalism, and many of these dark prophecies have complained most about these “social justice warriors.”

Witness the wooden, reactionary response to the reformist Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch and others. Despite earlier achievements of evangelicals in social reform, the anti-modernist anxiety of the early twentieth century latched onto a rejection of the Social Gospel. Even then, in the early fundamentalist movement, the effort to apply New Testament ethics to not only the individual but society was characterized, negatively, as “progressivism.”

In his chapter “Progressivism as Religion,” Dreher sets out to delineate the beliefs of social justice warriors, beliefs that act as criteria for prosecuting “thought crimes.” Once again, he enlists the aid of a public intellectual. This time it is James A. Lindsay, who Dreher makes sure the reader knows is an atheist and university-trained mathematician, to highlight the universality of his concerns.

Summarizing Lindsay’s research, Dreher lists the beliefs of “the typical SJW” (60). SJWs understand everything through power. For them, there is no objective truth. They engage in identity politics to sort the oppressed from oppressors. The oppressed are connected by intersectionality. SJWs believe that human realities are created by language (hence, the “woke language” persecutions of outspoken professors in academia).

Dreher tries to explain the clear predicates of social justice in Scripture and Christian tradition. He proposes that there is a difference between Christian social justice and secular ideals of social justice. The former, he says, is biblical and based on a transcendent moral order. The secular sort of social justice has sheared off its Christian dimension. “Without Christianity and its belief

in the fallibility of human nature,” he writes, “secular progressives tend to rearrange their bigotries and call it righteousness” (64).

Dreher goes on to accuse SJWs (and, by extension, all progressives) of more felonies. They deny sin. They work to alienate man from his Creator. They ratify sin and undermine the natural family. They deny Biblical teaching. They impose identity politics upon the life of the church.

He should be credited for moderating his complaints with this reasonable-seeming statement: “Faithful Christians must work for social justice, but can only do so in the context of fidelity to the full Christian moral and theological vision through which we understand the meaning of justice.” Well, who can disagree with that? But in the next sentence, it becomes disturbingly clear that Dreher presumes a very particular iteration of that vision. This filter through which he promotes his version of justice is both fundamental and fundamentalist: “Any social justice campaign that implies that the God of the Bible is an enemy of man and his happiness is fraudulent and must be rejected” (65).

This statement, more than any other, goes to the heart of the matter. Social justice warriors and progressives, so Dreher not implicitly or subtly implies here, “must be rejected” because they have made God an enemy. And, QED, *they* are the enemy. *They* are just like the ones who, a hundred years ago, brought on the Bolshevik Revolution, and the rise of the oppressive atheist Soviet state. And the regime of real totalitarianism.

Other harbingers of “hard totalitarianism” populate *Live Not By Lies*. There

is such a thing, Dreher says, as “woke capitalism” (74). Big businesses have migrated leftward on social issues, and in his estimation, this is worse than right-wing American corporate capitalism. There is also, relatedly, the prospect of “surveillance capitalism” (76). Warnings abound about Big Data, but noticeably absent is any endorsement of government regulation of Google, Facebook, X, or other advertising platforms.

In all these warnings, Dreher attempts to show that the current liberal, secular, and progressive environment has the mechanisms to move America from soft to hard totalitarianism.

Dreher then goes on to narrate the experiences of people who have languished under the latter—that is, oppressive regimes of real totalitarianism. And he helpfully presents valid wisdom from those subjected to persecution and oppression. He narrates true accounts of the imprisonment of Christians by the Communist regime in Eastern Europe. Drawing from the autobiographical book *This Saved Us*, Dreher recounts the ordeal of Slovak physician Silvester Krčméry, who endured repeated beatings and interrogations in prison. Through this, the physician concluded that he could survive only upon faith, not reason.

From such accounts, Dreher recommends such pearls as “value nothing more than truth,” “cultivate cultural memory,” “families are resistance cells,” and “religion is the bedrock of resistance.”

Who can argue against this advice? Who would want to? Aside from the troubling repetition of martial words like “resistance,” it must be said here that better treatments can be found in authors such as Richard

Foster, Ronald Sider, Jim Forest, and Jim Wallis, to say nothing of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, and her friend Peter Maurin. Actually, Dreher mentions Maurin in passing, quickly stating that the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement “distinguished Christian social justice from the godless Marxist view” (64). Dreher doesn’t mention the other founder, Day, at all.

In the second part of *Live Not By Lies*, Dreher makes some accurate observations and offers good advice. Yes, the search for truth must remain paramount. Yes, a sense of history is essential—though mainly to reinforce civic engagement in a liberal democracy, not to resist the specter of totalitarianism with an opposing tribalism, as Dreher implies in the sixth chapter. Here he includes some unfortunately outdated commentary on Poland, which, in his telling, perceives the West as inimical to its own survival.

Any good advice notwithstanding, Dreher’s cultural analysis is hobbled by contradiction. It is a problem that he has inherited from the long Christian fundamentalist reaction to the realities of American history. He is quick to complain about so-called victims of left-wing persecution, but says nothing about victims of right-wing violence and the even more frightening rise of authoritarianism. The most egregious example of this is Dreher’s open preference for Viktor Orbán’s administration, marked by constraints on press freedoms and anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ legislation.

Dreher fails to prove that there is a causal relation between liberalism or progressivism on one hand and the rise of totalitarianism on the other. The Soviet regime, along with all other oppressive tyrannical, totalitarian

structures, rose from oligarchic and autocratic despots. There was no preceding culture of liberalism that would have cultivated free discourse. But to raise the ominous image of these historic enemies of humanity and to associate their approach with people who are “liberal” is an old-fashioned and regrettable American tradition.

This is dangerous talk. It inflames the partisan polarization that is underway today in Christianity in general, and in Orthodoxy in particular. It encourages the rejection of fellow Christians who engage in so-called “liberal causes” as “progressive” and therefore “anti-Christian.” Too frequently, that rejection metastasizes into demonization, and fellow Christians who espouse, out of their own faithful biblical and patristic meditation, commitments to racial and economic justice, to environmental stewardship, and to the decrease of oppression around gender and sexual orientation are not only rejected but subjected to persecution and aggression.

At this point, it would be salubrious to consult the original essay “Live Not By Lies” by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The Nobel laureate, who was hardly an enthusiast for Western liberal democracy, remained a fervent anti-totalitarian, and was so *consistently*. He did not fall prey to the contradiction of complaining about one dominant ideology while promoting another—of denouncing liberal “soft totalitarianism” while advocating conservative authoritarianism. Here is what Solzhenitsyn advised “an honest man, worthy of the respect of his children and contemporaries,” who will not live by lies. Such a man:

Will not write, sign, nor publish in any way, a single line distorting, so far as he can see, the truth;

Will not utter such a line in private or in public conversation, nor read it from a crib sheet, nor speak it in the role of educator, canvasser, teacher, actor;

Will not in painting, sculpture, photograph, technology, or music depict, support, or broadcast a single false thought, a single distortion of the truth as he discerns it;

Will not cite in writing or in speech a single “guiding” quote for gratification, insurance, for his success at work, unless he fully shares the cited thought and believes that it fits the context precisely;

Will not be forced to a demonstration or a rally if it runs counter to his desire and his will; will not take up and raise a banner or slogan in which he does not fully believe;

Will not raise a hand in vote for a proposal which he does not sincerely support; will not vote openly or in secret ballot for a candidate whom he deems dubious or unworthy;

Will not be impelled to a meeting where a forced and distorted discussion is expected to take place;

Will at once walk out from a session, meeting, lecture, play, or film as soon as he hears the speaker utter a

lie, ideological drivel, or shameless propaganda;

Will not subscribe to, nor buy in retail, a newspaper or journal that distorts or hides the underlying facts.¹

These resolutions will resist any strongman or authoritarian. It is a pity that Dreher himself did not make them. That would probably be asking too much. The fact remains that, notwithstanding *Live Not By Lies*, there’s only one kind of totalitarianism. It is only the hard kind, and America is hardly there yet.

The critical flaw of Dreher’s argument is not his critique of the contemporary liberal narrative, which indeed is open to criticism by an intellectually honest interlocutor. It is fear: fear of the challenge of the unknown and the unfamiliar, fear of facing one’s inner demons, fear of reexamining the core tenets of one’s value system. And fear is the worst enemy of freedom and truth. The paradox of using Solzhenitsyn’s quote as a title is precisely in Dreher’s substitution of what he considers a liberal lie with the convenient, yet old and tired, lies of a fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity.

American Christianity has been ill-served by the constant drumbeat against liberalism. And with Dreher’s *Live Not By Lies*, it will continue to be. ✪

¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not By Lies” (1974), tr. Yermolai Solzhenitsyn (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Center, 2006), <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/live-not-by-lies>.



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