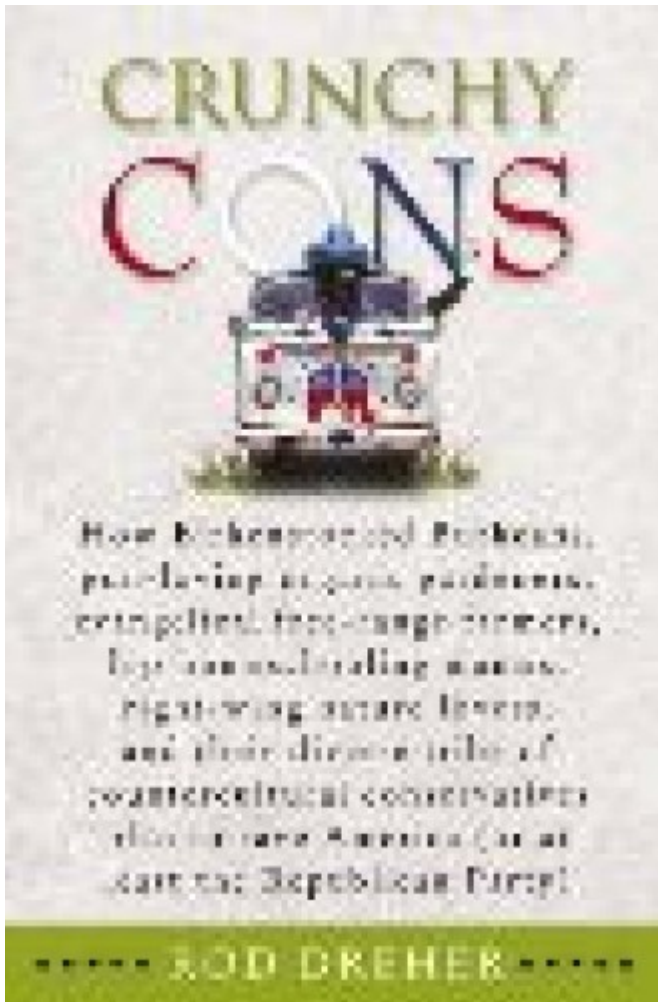


The misfits

By [David Dark](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Crunchy Cons

Rod Dreher

Crown

I think I might qualify as a Crunchy Conservative. I wear Birkenstocks whenever weather permits. My wife and I worry about our children becoming too much the

target market. We buy organic an awful lot. When my friends and I grapple with issues, we ask the age-old question: What would Wendell Berry do? I've voted, at various times, for Democrats, Republicans and Ralph Nader. I want to affirm the sacramental integrity of creation without fitting into any facet of Karl Rove's high-tech totem pole. I want to be a student of wisdom, ever ancient, ever new and ever cosmic.

To my mind, there's an encouraging sensibility on offer in Rod Dreher's *Crunchy Cons*. The subtitle is a bit misleading. Dreher, a writer and editor at the *Dallas Morning News*, doesn't appear to put much stock in the right-wing brand or much hope in the Republican Party. He can't name a career politician (Democrat or Republican) whom he finds encouraging.

He notes throughout the book that it's generally the so-called liberals who are "the most conservation-minded" as homeowners and stewards of local economies. "I fail to see just what American conservatism has conserved." And he repeatedly calls into question the "family values" hype that seems to sustain the GOP: "Conservatives are divorcing at the same rate as liberals."

Amid the static and the noise, Dreher seeks to discern and describe the Crunchy Con character as it emerges beneath the radar of the news networks and the pollsters. The Crunchy Con has begun to suspect that there's something essential in William Blake's vision of "dark Satanic mills," that Jimmy Carter was largely right in his talk of "moral malaise," and that we often commit murder in our attempts at profitably dissecting whatever corner of hallowed creation we refer to as a resource.

Neotraditionalism is an umbrella term that Dreher employs to cover this ecologically minded, self-consciously community-oriented demographic whose ties to religious tradition bear countercultural fruit.

Dreher persists in using the liberal-conservative jargon even as his findings belie the usefulness of the labels. I wonder if this has more to do with his publisher (who also gives us Ann Coulter) than his own inclination. The inexactness of the Us vs. Them paradigm of popular conservative talk is apparent in Dreher's "Crunchy Con Manifesto," which doesn't appear to resonate with either major political party. Among the tenets: "The economy must be made to serve humanity's best interests, not the other way around. Big business deserves as much skepticism as big government." And: "A conservatism that does not practice restraint, humility, and

good stewardship—especially of the natural world—is not fundamentally conservative.”

With statements like these, it often appears that Dreher wants to recover the stolen conservative brand. He thinks the fact that asthma and respiratory diseases are caused by industrial pollutants is a family-values issue. He believes that the popularly “conservative” refusal to relate global warming to human activity is like tobacco company executives’ denial of a link between smoking and lung cancer. And he deeply resents the suggestion that Americans might best respond to the attacks of September 11 by spending more money: “The American way of life is now synonymous with the idea of endless material abundance, at low cost. It is an intoxicating vision, but that’s not how the world works.”

In regard to the million-dollar industry of “conservative” talk, Dreher wants to edge out the predominance of “market-mad consumers who vote Republican . . . whose commitment to conservative ideals ends the moment it costs us something.” He proposes a sacramental vision, something akin to Vaclav Havel’s antipolitical politics, whereby individual ethical choices, discerned and hashed out within communities (families, neighborhoods and churches), might somehow serve to transform the collective.

The revolution might be nothing more than a determined witness in which people choose lifestyles of mindfulness and communal consideration, an art of being in the world. Dreher notes that joining the volunteer fire department or a local farmers’ food co-op might be more authentically conservative than joining the Republican Party.

Compared to the conditioned reflexes of today’s politics (our values versus their values, or *our* Swift Boat Veterans against *their* Swift Boat Veterans), there’s something noteworthy and redemptive in the character type that Dreher sketches. It reminds me of many Protestants my age (I’m 36) whose dabblings in Dostoevsky and other Russian writers eventually took them toward Eastern Orthodoxy and homeschooling or whose discovery of Flannery O’Connor or Walker Percy as they emerged from Baptist youth groups took them all the way to G. K. Chesterton and Roman Catholic catechism.

As I read the book, I kept a list of potential honorary members of the Crunchy Cons. It was headed by Dorothy Day, followed by Daniel Berrigan, William Stringfellow,

Martin Luther King Jr. and Will Campbell (with folks like Cornel West, Bill McKibben and Brian McLaren as more contemporary candidates). And I kept wondering what Dreher would say about such people. With my more obviously Crunchy Con peers, names like these sometimes lead to a strain in the conversation, a parting of the ways.

Like Dreher, these figures conspire toward or hope for a socialization of conscience even when they're skeptical as to how much their moral vision will be popularly realized. They are also remarkably vigilant against the Manichean impasse whereby we assume that *our* kind of people with *our* values (homeschoolers, soup kitchen workers, draft-file burners) are the only ones who are really trying to do something to change the world. They don't bother much with liberal or conservative labels.

"We don't want our kids to be in a school where they'll pay a price for being a nonconformist. We want them to learn in an atmosphere informed by our religious, moral, and philosophical values," writes Dreher. While I'm very sympathetic to Dreher's hope (I teach at a school that advertises itself as Christian), I see something problematic in a kind of greenhouse theory of conservative education in which students are reared and taught within an engineered, not-in-the-world atmosphere. This isn't to say that any old public school will do. But there is tension between the biblical imperative of receptivity toward the ostensible outsider and the ethic of the enclave—between love and safety. I don't pretend to have resolved this tension.

Dreher reports the following conversation:

"What will happen to the public schools if good people give up on them?" a liberal friend asked me one night. She was near to tears trying to convince me of the moral offensiveness of choosing to homeschool. She said it was un-Christian, and implied that there was something racist about our decision. All I could say was that our first responsibility as parents was to our children's welfare, and we would not put them at risk for the sake of living up to a political or social ideal that we believed, rightly or wrongly, conflicts with what's best for our kids.

I'm not sure where I'd land as a partaker in this particular conversation or what label might be added unto me at its conclusion, but I'd want to throw in, as an attempted testimony, that the coming kingdom of God is an appropriate hope within which to

place our hope for our children's welfare. What it will mean to try to bear witness to it in various contexts (to homeschool or not to homeschool?) will always be the work of communal discernment.

More than any explicit reference to the kingdom come, Dreher refers throughout the book to Russell Kirk's "permanent things"—"those eternal moral norms necessary to civilized life and which are taught by all the world's great wisdom traditions." I can imagine a great deal of common ground in conversations relating Jesus' gospel to the "eternal moral norms" of Dreher's Crunchy Cons, but I sense some tensions too. Are the norms whatever should be obvious to all sensible people of good will? Might the gospel occasionally be foolishness to the Greeks and the world's great wisdom traditions? Might Day and the Berrigans and Will Campbell prove scandalous in their attempted multipartisan, enemy-loving witness? Aren't we all only now (and still and later) coming to the faith?

I want to affirm the supposedly shared values or eternal moral norms of my conversation partners while reminding all present that none of us possess a God's-eye view of what life is all about. To my recollection, nobody ever disputes my point (we're all learners, unknowing heretics, ignorant initiates in the ways of the Lord), but it's easy to forget in the fevered pitch. We love our labels like ourselves, and we long for firm positionings to adopt and repeat knowingly. Self-confidence at high volume is often mistaken for strength and virtue, and the adversarial posture appears to be something of a best seller.

In a moving passage that took me completely off guard, Dreher recounts a conversation with some strangers in a bar about the unlikelihood of terrorist attacks in Dallas. The strangers began by noting the possibility of Baptist fundamentalists provoking Muslim fundamentalists and ended, amid laughter, by describing a scenario in which a well-known Baptist megachurch is targeted and destroyed. Dreher excused himself politely, drove home, and cried sitting in his driveway.

By his own account, Dreher attempted to regain his composure by returning to a habitual thought pattern ("Stupid goddamned liberals"). But he notes how fear and hatred preempted his ability to think clearly. Specifically he notes how he refused to entertain the arguments against military action in the run-up to the Iraq war, even when articulated by card-carrying conservatives, because his hatred of terrorists and liberals outran his reason.

In reference to this episode, Dreher wrote online of “how both parties and their partisan machines keep us all stuck on stupid. . . . They gin up such fear and hatred of the Other that they get us to be loyal to them no matter how badly they’re failing, or [how] lousy their agendas.” In a sense, Dreher is offering a personal testimony concerning the selective fundamentalism whereby we filter out voices that might in any way call into question our feverishly defended worldviews.

In the final chapter, “Waiting for Benedict,” Dreher cites the end of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, which imagines the possible coming of another St. Benedict. According to Dreher, “The key thing to notice here is that the original Benedictines understood that the process of civilizational decay was, in the short run, irreversible, and that therefore the only reasonable thing to do was to make a strategic retreat behind defensible borders.” I largely agree with MacIntyre and Dreher concerning the mess we’re in, and I agree that subversive communities are the way to go (it takes a village, after all).

But without losing anything (hopefully) in the way of Crunchy Con solidarity, I’d like to throw in the notion that Jesus’ gospel will always call into question whatever it is we have in mind as “defensible borders.” The people of Nineveh, as a certain ancient tradition affirms, are often already repenting in ways that we, the self-consciously religious, have yet to see. And the values we espouse, as Dreher understands, are frequently most faithfully practiced by the people who have yet to fall into any mad circle of “values” talk. An ongoing admission of mutual screwed-upness, even within our ethical enclaves, might clear the air for the possibility of candor and sane thinking and, perhaps, listening.