

The Reactionary Option: Musings on the decline of western civilization

As long as people of color, queer people, and women remain an afterthought in these debates about modernity, our lives and deaths will not matter even as the fate of the world is discussed.

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April 4, 2017



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I always find it amusing when white Christians debate—exclusively among themselves—the fate of civilization. The rest of us can only be outside observers, passengers in sweeping historical narratives in which we are an afterthought. Not only does this erasure obscure what has actually occurred, it falsifies what these storytellers say about themselves, their traditions, and the wider world.

When you hear discussions about the decline of western civilization and the importance of cultural renewal, ask some of the following questions:

- For whom in particular is civilization *now* sharply declining for?
- What has been lost?
- What needs to be regained?
- What is being protected?
- Most importantly, *who* is telling the story? Who is the *I* or the *We* talking in relation to the tacit or unthought *them*?

Asking these questions is very important. We can debate classical liberalism, declining religious institutions, the fragmentation of the modern self, and public faith in a pluralistic world. But without addressing these questions, this kind of debate remains myopia masquerading as universal insight. Such is the case with the buzz swirling around Rod Dreher's book [The Benedict Option](#).

This is not a book review. For that, you can read takes from [America, Mere Orthodoxy](#), *New York Times* columnist [David Brooks](#), and the more critical [Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig](#), among many others. As a writer for *The American Conservative*, Dreher has been developing his articulation of the Benedict Option for many years now. He has explained it [in depth](#) and has summarized it as follows:

The “Benedict Option” refers to Christians in the contemporary West who cease to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of American empire, and who therefore are keen to construct local forms of community as loci of Christian resistance against what the empire represents. Put less grandly, the Benedict Option — or “Ben Op” — is an umbrella term for Christians who accept MacIntyre's critique of modernity, and who also recognize that forming Christians who live out Christianity according to Great Tradition requires embedding within communities and

institutions dedicated to that formation.

Read in the most positive light, the Benedict Option is about local Christian cultural renewal that no longer prioritizes larger political control or change in a wayward secularized society. Yet, interrogating how Ben Op diagnoses societal waywardness is crucial.

According to Dreher, movements for empowering women, people of color, and sexual minorities are among the biggest threats to western civilization. Sure, he also points to other issues such as the contemporary use of technology and its effect on us. On this point and a few others, Dreher touches upon general societal issues that people from across ideological spectrums would want to address in some form. Yet, his writing throughout the years—culminating in this book—has been marked by reactionary fears.

Christianity is declining? True Christians are being marginalized in society? It's telling that, for Dreher, this is attributed to developments like feminism and the sexual revolution. Christianity was not said to "decline" or "enter into a crisis" when large numbers of white Christians endorsed slavery, genocide, concentration camps, or segregation. The crisis is not Christians justifying the subordination of women or extreme economic inequalities, or the destruction of our planet. Even now, the fact that a sizeable number of Christians are rallying behind Trump who is [demonizing foreigners](#) is negligible.

Dreher has made it repeatedly clear that he sees minorities who name oppression and injustice as the [real bullies](#) pushing a form of identity politics that is marginalizing white, conservative, Christian men in American society. According to him, the [real threat](#) is not police brutality or mass incarceration but movements like Black Lives Matter and phenomena like "black-on-black" crime. Even when Dreher does not explicitly address race or identity, it's important to remember that this is the background he is writing against. This is central to his understanding of Christianity's cultural decline.

Many well-intentioned responses to Dreher lose sight of the larger picture. The issue isn't merely that Dreher is advocating for Christian political withdrawal. In that case, the Benedict Option simply needs to be countered with the affirmation that God still calls us to work in imperfect politics and seek the welfare of larger cities. In other words, Dreher just needs some worldly Augustinianism!

Instead, we need to ask more questions. For example, isn't it ironic that someone is calling for the Christians who have been most historically privileged in the United States to retreat from larger politics precisely as we have an unprecedented presidential administration hell-bent on attacking minorities?

As theologian Willie Jennings has [written](#), the idea of preserving tradition has functioned as a powerful drug that has ran alongside white masculine longing. The problem is not merely the Benedict Option but various narratives and debates about change and the preservation of tradition. These debates about the future of western civilization are unified in deeper ways.

Take, for example, James K.A. Smith who criticized the Benedict Option in the [Washington Post](#) for carrying a “whiff of privilege.” It's humorous that Smith now wants to implicitly charge Dreher of racism when Smith, himself, has frequently [egged on](#) Charles Murray—the social scientist of “Bell Curve” fame whom the Southern Poverty Law Center has [classified](#) as a White Nationalist.

While criticizing Ben Op's privilege, Smith has openly [championed](#) another narrative of civilizational decline and alarmism in which inequalities and hierarchy are construed as inherent to God's good creation. He describes the decline of higher education in the U.S. as tied to democratization. Smith argues that there are forms of elitism that are good for society. The changes that took place within higher education in the 1960s, precisely as many minorities first gained access to these institutions, represents another form of decline for Smith.

Dreher's reactionary strategy is the Benedict Option. Smith's reactionary strategy is the [Anti-Revolutionary Party](#).

With the Benedict Option and many responses to it, we are caught within a vicious circle of whiteness, of toxic Christianity. In these debates, the rest of us are left on the sidelines. The spectrum of debate revolves around the best ways to protect the natural hierarchies of creation. As long as people of color, queer people, and women remain an afterthought in these debates about modernity, our lives and deaths will not matter even as the fate of the world is discussed.

Another version of this post originally appeared in [Do justice](#).

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