

*LIVE NOT BY LIES: A MANUAL FOR CHRISTIAN DISSIDENTS.* ROD DREHER.  
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27.00 USD

Over the last decade, Rob Dreher has become one of the most prolific conservative columnists in the United States. His numerous comments and opinions are riddled with controversies that manage to provoke all sides of the U.S. political and cultural spectrums; some are certainly questionable.<sup>1</sup>

Dreher is not a professional theologian but is a devout Christian who has journeyed from a Methodist upbringing to Roman Catholicism, and finally converting to Eastern Orthodoxy after reporting on the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal. In his work, Dreher attempts to address all orthodox Christians and looks to both Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants for insights. While many academic theologians may overlook Dreher's work, there are many in American churches that are paying attention and that is for whom it is written.

Dreher's 2017 book, *The Benedict Option*, gained much attention both in Christian circles and among cultural and political commentators.<sup>2</sup> In it he urges Christians to a strategic withdrawal from an increasingly secularized, post-Christian society, to creation of domestic monasteries and communities that cultivate Christian spiritual formation and disciplines. The logic goes, since nothing can be done to stop the flood of secularism, Christians should focus inwardly and build arks to ride it out and survive. The title and theme of the book is inspired by the Benedict of Nursia, who at the beginning of the sixth century left the decaying, barbarian-ruled, Rome to establish monastic communities, which by means of rigorous spiritual practices were able to preserve Christian faith and tradition throughout the Dark Ages.<sup>3</sup>

Dreher is not alone in saying that in order for the church in the West to survive secularism it will have to build resilient Christian communities through deeper attention to spiritual discipline and restoration of liturgical elements. The vision is of faithful communities of support that will be subversive to the surrounding—increasingly hostile—secular culture.<sup>4</sup>

Dreher is right in thinking that Christians have largely lost the culture wars in the West, however, this leads him to a defeatist conclusion that it is not even worth it for Christians to try to influence the culture, or try to change social conditions through political involvement. Almost nothing is said about what political and social actions faithful Christians

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Rothman, „Rod Dreher's Monastic Vision,“ *The New Yorker* (May 1, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, „The Benedict Option,“ *The New York Times* (March 14, 2017); Ross Douthat, „Donald Trump's Christian Soldiers,“ *The New York Times* (March 10, 2016); Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig, „City of Rod,“ *Democracy Journal* (March 1, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (Sentinel, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Gilger, „What Rod Dreher gets right in ‚The Benedict Option‘ is just as important as what he gets wrong,“ *America Magazine* (March 16, 2017).

can take, and attuned Christian readers who are not ready to give up—on our cities and neighborhoods—without a struggle will sense that void.<sup>5</sup> But Dreher’s call on the Western Christians to build robust church communities is vital and should be heeded.<sup>6</sup>

In his latest book, *Live Not by Lies*, Rod Dreher takes his notions much further and warns American Christians that the United States is on its way into totalitarianism. The title of the book is taken from the name of an essay by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “*Жить не по лжи!*” Published on the day of Solzhenitsyn’s Moscow arrest, as “his final message to the Russian people,” before the Soviet government deported him to the West.<sup>7</sup>

In the book, Dreher gives a high-level history of the fall of the Russian Empire into Communism. Drawing parallels between what led up to the Russian Revolution and what U.S. is witnessing today, mainly the leftist intellectuals, elites, with their political correctness and social justice. Dreher feeds on the rhetoric of right-wing grievances, which is a noticeable difference to the more bipartisan political critique offered in *The Benedict Option*. In *Live Not by Lies*, Dreher’s conservative columnist side comes out blaring, this obscures things but there still remains much good to glean and agree with.

Further, Dreher talks about the issue with American corporations, particularly the tech industry, becoming advocacy machines for left-wing causes, meanwhile collecting data and surveilling their consumers to unprecedented, Orwellian, levels. He sees it as a laying of foundation for China like totalitarianism, and grooming of the populace.<sup>8</sup> There are some good reasons to be concerned, and Dreher advocates for practices that would help us reclaim some of our privacy and autonomy.

Throughout the book, Dreher relates stories of various Christians in the Soviet Union who were persecuted by the regime, and from them explicates lessons on dissidence for the Western Christians. The proposed practices and methods of resistance are valuable in themselves. To value truth, reject doublethink and protect free speech. To cultivate cultural memory and pass it on to future generations. To build strong families and raise children with moral courage and imagination, and to model hospitality. To hold fast to Christian faith and practice spiritual disciplines. To stand in solidarity with other descending voices even if there are some philosophical differences. To see suffering as a gift and testimony to the truth, to suffer without bitterness and to show mercy to the broken.

Dreher classifies the totalitarianism that he perceives sweeping in, as a *soft* totalitarianism coming from the political Left. However, *soft* seems to be a superfluous classification meant to appease the critics. According to Dreher’s sentiment, any soft form of totalitarianism will quickly descend into a *hard* form. The examples that Dreher gives are also mostly that of a full-blown Soviet totalitarianism, and that is what he calls Western Christians to prepare for.

Dreher thinks that over the past few years America has seen a rise of “soft totalitarianism.” He is not alone in this respect; in recent years a significant number of books have been published on the subject. Notably, historians Timothy Snyder and Anne Applebaum,

<sup>5</sup> Emma Green, „The Christian Retreat From Public Life,“ *The Atlantic* (February 22, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Steve Thorngate, „Who is the Benedict Option for?“ *The Christian Century* (May 8, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (Sentinel, 2020), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Dreher, *Live Not by Lies*, 76.

have both recently written on the theme.<sup>9</sup> The main difference is that Dreher barely seems to recognize that the threat of totalitarianism is just as real from the far-right fascism as it is from the far-left communism. Granted, Dreher's book was published before the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the conflict that ensued, but the rhetoric and the spirit that have led up to it have been present in the country for years.<sup>10</sup>

Dreher aptly identifies the subversion of truth on the Left, but overlooks and largely fails to acknowledge the subversion of truth on the Right.<sup>11</sup> It is worth recognizing that the far-right and the far-left feed off each other, opposition to one political extreme "can harden into support for the other."<sup>12</sup> By focusing solely on communism Dreher taps into the fearmongering on the Right, that indiscriminately labels all progressives as socialists, meanwhile depicting far-right militias as patriots.

Still, Dreher perceptively points to the cultural trends and factors that "leave society vulnerable to the totalitarian temptation."<sup>13</sup> Widespread loneliness and social atomization. The rapidly diminishing faith in hierarchies and institutions. The desire to transgress and destroy. Propaganda and the willingness to believe useful lies. The infringement of ideology "ever deeper into the personal realm, leaving fewer and fewer areas of daily life uncontested." The valuing of loyalty over expertise. We are seeing these trends, especially in the last five year like never before, and it is largely a bipartisan issue.

But by far the biggest loser is *social justice*, which is a composite term that Dreher develops and bundles everything—that he finds wrong with the Left—under.<sup>14</sup> Dreher defines it in Nietzschean and Marxist terms, as a nihilistic and violent endeavor, "a euphemism for a progressive cultural politics." Essentially, all social justice and critical theory rhetoric is placed under suspicion indiscriminately. It comes off as a complete, flamboyant, capitulation of social justice to the political Left, as if to struggle against social injustice makes one a left-wing, radical Marxist.

Dreher recognizes that humanity has an internal hunger for justice, but sees social justice as a contemporary cult. Dreher is fairly right about the extremes and dangers of social justice movements, particularly the demonizing of dissenters and the emerging cancel culture. He also briefly acknowledges that social justice originates in Christian theology and has biblical roots, but is either unaware or simply overlooks the great body of Christian scholarship on the subject. Dreher is right that there are fundamental differences in ideals and priorities between how faithful orthodox Christians would practice social justice and how secular progressives would. However, the social justice that Dreher cuts out for Christians is stripped to a skeleton, it is one that would not dare addressing systemic racism or economic inequality. In his last two books, Dreher looks overseas for lessons and insight

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Tim Duggan Books, 2017); Michelle Goldberg, "Twilight of the Liberal Right," *The New York Times* (July 27, 2020); Bill Keller, "Why Intellectuals Support Dictators," *The New York Times* (July 19, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Ross Douthat, "Where Liberal Power Lies," *The New York Times* (October 17, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Samuel D. James, "Contra Rod Dreher, Not All Signs Point to a Woke Dictatorship in America," *Christianity Today* (December 21, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Trevin Wax, "Are Western Christians Facing a Totalitarian Threat from the Left?" *The Gospel Coalition* (September 18, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Dreher, *Live Not by Lies*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin J. Dueholm, "Live not by a false sense of persecution," *The Christian Century* (February 9, 2021).

but overlooks some of the best lessons in his own backyard, mainly those from the African American church and the nonviolent civil rights resistance of 1960s.<sup>15</sup>

Dreher may not be able to imagine a robust Christian social justice because he also thinks that historical progress is a myth. It is a legitimate critique, since progress is not a linear and unending process. Progress can also lead to unintended and destructive consequences. But fundamentally Christians have to believe that we are in progress to the coming of the Kingdom of God. As we wait for that day, we are called to live as if the Kingdom was already physically here, this requires a suspension of disbelief and a deep faith in a God who enters into a solidarity with the poor and suffering, and with the oppressed.

The practices and strategies that Dreher offers are relevant even without totalitarianism. But practically nothing is said about what can be done to prevent totalitarianism from becoming a reality, it is fairly fatalistic.

Behind the grievances, Dreher is making an important point, our society is in search for “wholeness and purpose.” But, I wonder, how will they find it if Christians have retreated from the public square? Dreher accuses the Left of shaping the American culture but he gave up on the wider culture shaping some years before. If in *The Benedict Option* Dreher gave up on social involvement, in *Live Not by Lies* Dreher instills that those who are social involved are basically leftist and socialist. This sort of thinking is irresponsible and will justify social inaction and indifference for many in American churches.

The pity is that Dreher is right on many accounts, his warnings are completely legitimate and keen. But his pessimism and fear are blinding him to a better way forward for the American church, one that is both theologically orthodox and at the same time socially active. One that is practicing discipleship and spiritual formation in Christian communities, but also struggling for justice—on Christian terms—in their neighborhood communities and cities. Such Church must build monasteries, not far away from Rome but right in the heart of Rome, and a time may very well come, sooner or later, when such monasteries will be pushed “outside the city gate” by secularism, but we must resist, as the dissidents that Dreher writes about did, instead of waiting in a self-imposed exiles.<sup>16</sup>

Dreher’s two latest books are confronting the rise of secularism, and are touching on issues of Christian ethics and spiritual formation in a post-Christian West. While Dreher writes his book particularly for American Christians, this book will be of interest to those studying the development of Christianity in the West and its current issues.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Hebrews 13:12. NRSV.