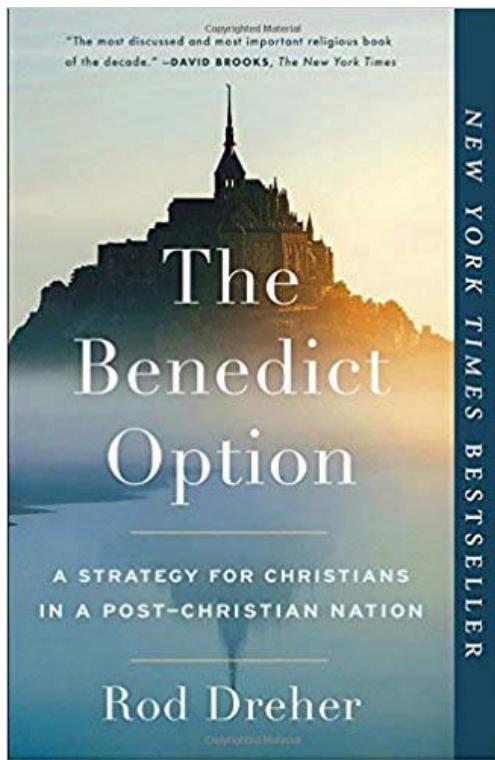


Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation.* New York Sentinel – An Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017. pp viii & 262. ISBN 9780735213296 (hard cover) ISBN 97807352133196 (e book).



Reviewed by:
Deacon Stephen Sharman, PhD

In this eloquent and compelling book, the author, Rod Dreher, argues that the Rule of St. Benedict as it is lived in Benedictine communities provides a pattern for Conservative American Christians attempting to respond to the challenges of their times. It is, therefore, a tract for the times. He makes his intentions clear early in the book: 'I have written *The Benedict Option* to wake up

the church and to encourage it to act to strengthen itself, while there is still time. If we want to survive, we have to return to the roots of our faith, both in thought and in practice. We are going to have to learn habits of the heart forgotten by believers in the West. We are going to have to change our lives, and our approach to life, in radical ways. In short, *'we are going to have to be the church'*, without compromise, no matter what it costs' (page 3). He presents a critique of American culture and church from a conservative perspective. He is himself a conservative American Christian and a senior editor at *The American Conservative*. He shows that he is familiar with conservative Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and Evangelicals. He shows no knowledge of the beleaguered Conservatives in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of

America, a surprising omission since the state of that church is a good example of the anxieties which he describes.

In Chapter 2, 'The Roots of the Crisis,' he sets forth the historical background of the present cultural and religious situation in the USA. This is the building block, the cornerstone if you like, for the rest of the book. He argues, 'we are living with the consequences of ideas accepted many centuries ago, and as a result of those decisions, we are losing our religion – a far greater crisis than merely losing the habit of churchgoing' (page 23). He then presents a summary of 'Western cultural history since the high middle ages' (page 23). This is not a very satisfactory summary. He paints his picture with very broad brush strokes and much of his history is open to serious scholarly challenges. He admits that he will leave out much but he omits history that would have been useful for his argument. For example, he says very little about the English Reformation which had an important influence on the development of American political and religious thought.

Chapter 3, 'A Rule for Living,' is the heart of the book and in this reviewer's opinion the best part of the book. The author describes how the Rule of St Benedict is lived in the Monastery of St Benedict in Norcia in Italy. It is a moving description. He experienced their life of prayer and liturgy by visiting the monastery and by living in their guest house. This experience clearly transformed his life. The sub-titles of the chapter, 'order, prayer, work, asceticism, stability, community, hospitality, balance and the one great tragedy in life,' cover the major aspects of Benedictine life. The author also writes about the brothers' response to a serious earthquake, which destroyed their buildings and those of the town which surrounded them. In his view, the brothers' response to that tragedy demonstrates their deep faith and commitment to their way of life. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that this is only one of a world of several hundred Benedictine communities although it is admittedly a particularly vibrant one. Further we must remember that St Benedict's intention was to found 'a school of the Lord's service' (Prologue to the Rule of St Benedict). His argument that Benedict's monks preserved culture, scholarship and much else through the difficult years of the middles ages is historically accurate. We might call to witness the monastery of Jarrow and Wearmouth in Anglo-Saxon and the work of the Venerable Bede. This was not St Benedict's

intention which was the formation of lives lived in prayer in the presence of God. To his credit the author recognizes this: ‘in traditional Christianity, the ultimate goal of the soul is to love and serve God with all one’s heart, soul, and mind, to achieve unity with Him in eternity. To prepare for eternal life, we must join ourselves to Christ and strive to live in harmony with the divine will’ (page 147).

The remainder of the book is the application of the ‘Benedict Option’ to life in the USA of the twenty-first century. He writes chapters about culture, politics, education and technology. His thesis is that the ‘Benedict Option’ can be applied to these situations and can give conservative American Christians means of survival in a hostile America. His analysis of this situation is eloquent and compelling. He makes his readers sit up and think. His ‘Benedict Option’ is, in the opinion of this reviewer, a spiritually healthy programme since it is rooted in the life of a community of prayer and is based on the double commandment of loving God and the neighbour.

This reviewer is a conservative Canadian Christian and cannot and dare not comment on the accuracy of the author’s analysis of contemporary American life. The value of the book depends on the accuracy of the author’s analysis since he presents his ‘Benedict Option’ as a response to the cultural and religious situation of the USA as he understands it. This reviewer also wonders about the value of this book for Canadian readers. He is inclined to think that it might be useful for Canadians to read this book since cultural and religious trends often begin in the USA and then make their way north to Canada. In any case it is a fascinating book which presents an eloquent description of the current sorrows of life in the USA and a good method of surviving them.

About the reviewer: Dn. Stephen Sharman is a deacon at St. Nicholas parish in Narol, Manitoba. He received his PhD from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2013. The title of his dissertation was *Visions of Light in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*.