

So, go on retreat with Fr. Buckley, again if you already had the privilege once, or for the first time, if you long to have heart and mind united. He will ask you what Jesus asks of you.

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The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation. By Rod Dreher. New York: Sentinel, 2017. Pp. viii + 262. \$25.

As a Benedictine monk, I could not help but be intrigued simply by the title of this popular new book hailed by David Brooks as “the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade” (*The New York Times*, March 14, 2017). Dreher begins with the alarming claim that we are entering a new Dark Age, the result of increasing individualism and the loss of shared belief. Nonetheless, though D. is a senior editor of *The American Conservative*, he candidly admits that no brand of politics, liberal, or conservative, can remedy this corrosive social fragmentation. Instead, contemporary society is so lost, according to D., that what the world needs, citing the conclusion of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, is “another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict” (18). If Benedictine monastic communities were able to survive the collapse of the Roman Empire, or so his argument goes, then maybe there is still wisdom in the Rule of Benedict that is worth learning from today. Consequently, D. proposes that faithful Christians will survive the present crisis only by forming alternative communities to live, work, learn, and worship—the Benedict Option.

He imagines such Benedict Option communities to be small, intentional communities guided by practices that D. culls from the Rule of Benedict—a sixth-century monastic text consisting of a prologue and seventy-three fairly brief chapters. D. rightly notes that Benedictine spirituality is practical and the Rule “is not a collection of theological maxims but a manual of practices” (53), practices including order, prayer, work, asceticism, stability, community, hospitality, and balance. As D. argues in chapter 3, these practices have sustained monastic communities for centuries and have the potential to again shape Benedict Option communities today. This very well may be true, but in his appropriation of Benedictine spirituality, the astute reader will notice that D. never quotes a scholarly commentary of the Rule. Nor does D. consider the limitations of the genre of hagiography as he holds St. Benedict’s flight from Rome as a model for contemporary *fuga mundi*. Surely greater research would have improved this work, but one can get the impression that making a contribution to the field of monastic studies is not D.’s primary objective. For indeed, D. is convinced that something greater is at stake—namely, the survival of Christianity and, indeed, Western civilization. The very question that motivates D. was the same motivator for St. Benedict: how to form and sustain vibrant Christian community in service to God’s reign in the world.

To begin an answer, D. observes that the Rule uses “school” analogically in reference to the monastery itself. But the learning and teaching that occurs in the monastery

is not only, or even primarily, of an intellectual bent. Yes, the formation of a novice certainly includes the study of the Rule, yet a novice really learns how to be a monk by living as one—and the abbot teaches best by example. Similarly, promoting a praxis-oriented approach, D. writes, “Christianity isn’t just a philosophy but a way of life that demands everything” (109–110). When Christian education left the monastery and went to the university, something was lost, and D. is right to suggest that we need to recover experiential knowledge as an essential way to hand on the faith. To know about Jesus is not enough for a disciple if it does not also shape the way we live every day. D.’s real target is “the false distinction between church and life” (131).

Certainly, some readers will find themselves objecting to D.’s decidedly pointed analysis of family life (chapter 6), education (chapter 7), work (chapter 8), sexuality (chapter 9), and technology (chapter 10). Nevertheless, even in such disagreement with D. on particular issues, the ways and extent to which Christian faith should influence the whole of our lives remain essential questions for Christians to consider. While some will be attracted to the “costly” form of Christianity that D. advocates, many will not—no monastic community to my knowledge (regardless of the degree of its asceticism) has a waitlist for admission.

At the heart of this work is the question of how Christians should engage the world. Hopefully, this essential question is not overshadowed for the reader by multiple reasons to critique D.’s version of a seemingly one-dimensional Benedict Option. Yet, by appealing to the practical spirituality of Benedictine monasticism, D. identifies a vital aspect of any strategy that hopes to transform the world: the daily practice of Christian faith.

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Materialism. By Terry Eagleton. New Haven: Yale University, 2016. Pp. x + 176. \$24.

Eagleton, Distinguished Professor of English Literature at the University of Lancaster, UK, and author of more than fifty books on various social issues, sets forth in this book a critique of various forms of materialism and the philosophers who conceived them. He nowhere offers a detailed presentation of any of these philosophies but instead cites passages from different works and critiques them for their strengths and weaknesses. His comments are frequently insightful and quite often witty as he points out what he sees as defects in the treasured view of other materialists besides himself. In the first chapter, for example, E. offers a review and critique of various forms of materialism (dialectical, historical, mechanical or reductive, cultural, speculative). Without identifying fully with any of them, he settles provisionally for what he calls somatic or bodily materialism: “it takes seriously what is most palpable about men and women—their animality, their practical activity and corporeal constitution” (35). In chapter 2, he endorses the view of Merleau-Ponty about the body not as an object of thought but as an ongoing activity: “having a body is, for a living creature, to be interinvolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and to be continually