

“All the great renewal movements came from below..”

Interview with Rod Dreher
(in Bratislava, Slovakia)

In 2017 you published your bestselling book *The Benedict Option*, in which you argue that conservatives in the United States have lost the culture wars. What is your vision of the culture war battlefield in America two years later? Has anything changed since you published *The Benedict Option*?

I am still absolutely sure conservatives lost. When I published *The Benedict Option*, it was shortly after Donald Trump was inaugurated as president [of the United States]. In fact, when I finished the manuscript for the book just before the election, I wrote it as if Hillary would win. After Trump’s election to president, my hope was that he would appoint some judges to the United States Supreme Court who had a much stronger view of religious freedom and free speech. Judges aren’t religious leaders, they’re cultural leaders, and I wanted them to be able to preserve the space for traditional groups, religious and political, to act. Trump has done that, but he has been such a disaster on many other levels. He has discredited a lot of religious conservatives who supported him. And so when Trump leaves office, there will be a tremendous, serious backlash against conservatives.

So you are saying that American society is today even more polarized than it was two years ago?

Yes. Back in 2015, before I wrote *The Benedict Option*, and as I was starting to work on it, I got a phone call from an American doctor. His mother was an immigrant from Czechoslovakia. She spent six years in a Czech prison as a political prisoner when she was young. She's very old now and lives with him. The doctor called me and said, "I have to tell you, my mom says to me, 'I'm starting to see signs in this country, the United States, that remind me of when Communism came to Czechoslovakia.'" And I thought, "That's crazy!" I mean, maybe she's an old woman, maybe she's exaggerating, so I contacted an old friend who is a mathematician at the University of Cambridge. He and his wife defected from Hungary in the 1960s. So I wrote to him, because I knew I could trust him. I told him what the Czech woman had said and I asked, "Is that true?" He said, "Absolutely, yes. My wife and I are sitting here in Cambridge" – he's retired – "we're watching TV every day. We're reading the newspapers and we're thinking, 'This is like when Communism first came to Hungary.'" And I said, "But can you explain why?" He said, "It's mostly the absolute refusal of the Left to allow dissent. If you get on the wrong side of them, they will stop at nothing – even telling lies – to destroy you professionally and personally." He said, "That's what Communists did." And that stayed in my mind. After that, every time I would meet somebody in the US or the UK who grew up in the Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe, I would ask them the same question. I would tell them what the Czech woman said and would ask, "Do you see this too?" Every one of them says, "Yes, absolutely." My new book will be about this.

In fact, we are conducting this interview in Bratislava, where you are collecting material for your new book. What do you take away from this trip?

I feel, more strongly than ever, that people who are political, cultural, and religious conservatives need to organize in a deeper, cultural way to prepare for much more difficult times. Here in Bratislava this morning, I went to a house out in the suburbs where during Communism there was

a samizdat¹ printing press in the basement. You had to go through an underground, concrete tunnel, to come up the other side. I interviewed the people who did that. They were telling me that the thing that gave them the most courage during those years was friendship. Their faith, yes. But also friendship in small groups. Because that way, you knew that you weren't alone. So that is something I'm focusing on a lot right now.

You are comparing today's political, cultural, and religious conservatives with dissidents during the Cold War. But dissidents against who and what?

Against the liberal mainstream. A few years ago, the issue that divided was same-sex marriage, now it is transgender. The US Supreme Court has agreed this year to hear a case – three cases combined into one – that will decide whether LGBT individuals will be included under federal civil rights law, which abolished race discrimination. What will happen if the court decides yes? It will mean that every church, every religious school, every institution that follows traditional Christian teaching on sexuality, will be considered by the law as if they were run by the Ku Klux Klan! And what that means, strictly speaking, is that they could have their special tax status taken away from them. Now, that doesn't sound like a big punishment, but so many churches and religious schools operate on such a low budget, that if they were to lose their tax status, they would have to close. Religious conservatives have to prepare for this. Since *The Benedict Option* came out, it has sold well. It has sold about 64,000 copies in the US, and it's been translated into ten languages, but I'm still having trouble convincing American conservatives that they are under threat. Solzhenitsyn said in the introduction to a 1983 English-language edition of *The Gulag Archipelago*, that there is always this “fallacious belief” that what happened to Russia under the Soviets could not happen to people like us. “Alas,” he wrote, “all the evil of the twentieth century is possible

1 Samizdat was a form of dissident activity across the Eastern Bloc in which individuals reproduced censored and underground publications by hand and passed the documents from reader to reader (Wikipedia).

everywhere on earth.”² Americans don’t know that. They just think that everything is going to continue like this forever.

This is a dramatic comparison. Can you explain your vision of today’s culture war battlefield in more detail?

I get e-mails all the time from Christians and conservatives who work in Silicon Valley and who tell me what’s happening at their company. But they say, “Please don’t publish this. If they found out, I would be fired.” But it’s not just there. It’s in big companies like Apple and Facebook that have a national reach. They are forcing changes in laws around the country. This is the new trend. It’s also coming down to the level of local schools. I live in a small southern city – Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A Baptist pastor there – it’s a conservative place, Trump country – a Baptist pastor at a big church told me last year, “I had a woman in my congregation come to me and say, ‘I need your help. My daughter goes to a public school in the city. She’s thirteen. She came home from school and said, ‘I’m a boy.’ And I went to see the counselor at the school to say, ‘What is going on here?’ The counselor said, ‘Ma’am, you need to accept your son as he is.’” This is happening at a level that most Americans who are my age or so – I’m 52 – don’t even see. But the kids, they completely believe in this, so it’s just a matter of time. There doesn’t seem to be any stopping point. After transgender – what then? I have a friend who finished high school, and she had a girl in her class who said she was a wolf. A transspecies. She wasn’t kidding. And if you didn’t call her a wolf, you could get in trouble. This is not in New York, this is in Louisiana. It is happening, I believe, because there has been a massive change in how ordinary people think about their own identity – that their bodies and their selves are nothing but expressions of will – and because the Internet has destroyed all hierarchies of thought and information. This is a modern version of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, and it spreads with the speed of lightning.

2 Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (Harper & Row, 1985).

According to the All-Russian Census, there are several hundred elves in Russia.³

Oh! Good to know. I think that one of the most frightening things is that everything is changing so fast. I was reading some dissident literature from the Communist period, and people didn't think that what the intellectuals said would matter. But then, suddenly it mattered very much. Czesław Miłosz, the Polish writer, said in his book *The Captive Mind*, and I'm paraphrasing this, "In the twentieth century, people in Eastern Europe found out that the obscure writings of intellectuals could matter very much in their everyday life."⁴ In the same way, if you read this postmodern academic stuff, you can't make sense of it, but it is changing the elites. And the elites are the ones that are controlling the future. When I look at the US now, I think about Spain in 1931, when the trouble started there that eventually led to a civil war. I don't think that we will pull guns against each other in the US, but the polarization is so great now and there's no center left. I don't know where the limit is.

Social scientists argue that the middle is vanishing and extreme opinions on the left and right spectrum are increasing. Do you agree that the middle is disappearing?

Yes, absolutely. And this is what makes me think of Spain. When the Spanish Republic was declared in 1931, the Left took power and immediately began to burn churches. Well, at the next election, there was a backlash from the Right, who began to persecute the Left. And so, what eventually happened over the next couple of years was that everybody lost faith in democracy, because democracy was a system that could allow their enemies to take power. And the middle vanished by 1934. By 1936, they were shooting at each other. Well, I don't want to be too alarmist but you're right, there is no middle. I'm a conservative, but I don't think I'm an extremist. I end up voting for whoever the Republicans put up, not

3 Itogi Vserossijskoj perepisi naselenija 2010 goda: bol'she jel'fov i men'she hobbitov [Results of the Russian Census 2010: the number of elves increases, the number of hobbits decreases], *Taday*. 20 December 2011 [<http://www.taday.ru/text/1365028.html>].

4 Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*. (Vintage Books, 1953), 3.

because I believe in them necessarily, but because I'm so anxious about what the Democrats would do to religious liberty and free speech, which are my most important issues. And I feel like I can't take the chance to vote for them. Even though, on their foreign policy, I'm more likely to be Democratic. On economic policy, I'm more likely to support the Democrats. Culture is the scary thing. It's not even that I don't like what they would do, it's that I have absolutely no trust in them, and I'm afraid of them. They consider traditional Christians to be bigots, no better than racists. In a famous speech in 2015 at the United Nations, Hillary Clinton said that religions must be made to change, to liberalize on abortion and things. I don't want a liberal telling conservative religion to change. Religious liberty is a sacred value in America.

Do you see signs of culture wars also in Europe?

Yes, definitely. And American conservatives like me have looked at the Visegrád countries as maybe a third way, but being in Slovakia I realize that they are not doing well...

What do you mean by third way?

A third way between Western neoliberalism and the Russian model. Maybe countries in Central Eastern Europe can hold on to traditional values, pro-family values. At least they don't have the same sort of collapse of moral values that we're seeing in the West, over abortion, gender ideology, and so forth. But from what I'm learning in this new round of interviews – and I've talked to some people in Hungary too – is that the young see the material prosperity of Western Europe, and they want that more than anything else. So we'll see. But I do have so much hope when I come here and meet individual Europeans, young people, forty and under. To see how undeceived they are about things. And how happy they are. They know that they're minorities as conservatives and as religious people, but they're not despairing. I was in Spain earlier this year, presenting the Spanish translation of *The Benedict Option*. I visited the cathedral in

Valencia, where I saw a relic of a hand and part of an arm. It was a relic of Saint Vincent of Saragossa, the first martyr of Spain, killed in the persecution of the Roman emperor Diocletian in the year 304. And there was his hand there, at the cathedral. And you could see it and you could pray there, in front of it. And I thought, this is something that Europe has that we don't have. They still have the architecture of Christian culture. They have the cathedrals. Maybe people don't go there like they used to, but it's still there as a sign. People saw the burning of Notre Dame in Paris, and it worried them. I think it was a sign to them, like, this could go away if you don't love it. But they have the relics of the saints. They have so much architecture. It's not the same thing as having an active religious faith, but in the US, if people stop going to a church, they tear it down and put a shopping mall there. That doesn't happen in Europe so much. I think a lot about something that Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev of the Russian Orthodox Church has said on a number of occasions. He said that practicing Christians – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant – have to come together. The things that divided us in the past, they're important, we can't ignore them completely. But the challenge from post-Christianity and a hostile post-Christian culture is so great that we need to try to help each other. So that's kind of what I do in my travels in Europe.

In Europe there are strong institutional churches, which frequently have state privileges and certain access to powerful elites. You instead have argued that Christians should refrain from political power and concentrate on their own small communities. Do you think that a Benedict Option for Europe will work?

It has to, because the institutional church leaders are so weak. Look at the Catholic Church in Germany. It's so weak; it so desperately wants to compromise with the world. When I spoke in Rome last fall at the presentation of the Italian translation of *The Benedict Option*, I met a well-connected German Catholic. He told me, "You know, we Germans know that in twenty or thirty years the institutional church will collapse, because there won't be enough Catholics left even for the church tax." The Benedict Option encourages people to plan for that time. People like me, we're building networks of families. We're raising our kids in the faith, in a seri-

ous way. And we want to help them to marry each other, because we know that it will be our responsibility to carry on the faith, even as the institution is collapsing. I think that's true everywhere.

If I understood your position correctly, you don't believe in the strong, institutional European churches, as you think that they are already corrupted by the system. But you believe in small new communities of believers that, on the grassroots level, will develop some kind of alternative.

Yes. Well, actually, I should make it clear – I'm not a Protestant. I believe in the episcopacy, in the structure, it is something that we have to have. But I think that if you're looking to the institution itself for renewal, you're not going to find it. Catholics have told me that in the history of the Catholic Church, all the great renewal movements came from below. And I think that there's no reason to think it will be any different this time. If you look at the things that the bishops say – in the US or even in Europe – there's nothing inspiring in most of it. But when you go meet the local people, at the ground level, and meet some priest who really has the faith, they know what they have to do.

You mean, they have the faith in the sense that they defend this conservative traditional vision of family?

Yes. And they live by it.

How has your experience of conversion to Catholicism and then to Orthodoxy shaped your vision of the institutional church?

I was maybe twenty-five when I became a Catholic, and I became very tribal. I was in Washington at the time, working there, and I was so proud to be Catholic. My identity was in Catholicism, and I thought it was so strong. In fact, it was weak, because I was so convinced up here, in my head, but had not done the deep work of conversion. I made a classic

intellectual error: believing that being intellectually convinced was sufficient. And God allowed me [to fall]; it was a merciful fall. By writing for years about the sexual abuse crisis, I had my ability to believe in Catholicism taken from me, bit by bit, with great pain. Later, I came to understand that I was paying the price for my spiritual and intellectual pride. When I became Orthodox, I said, “Don’t be the kind of Orthodox [Christian] as you were a Catholic.” Let me be clear: this was not the Catholic Church’s fault; this was my fault. But it really appealed to me, the idea of this strong, triumphalist church, the bishops taking a stand, and all that. In fact, as the abuse scandal showed, for many of these guys, their words were false. My most shameful moment as a Catholic came in the year 2000. I was a columnist for the *New York Post*. The *New York Post* sent me to the Holy Land to cover the pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II. You can imagine, to be a faithful Catholic and to be standing at the Sea of Galilee, with the successor of Peter – it was incredible. And on one of the days, I was standing with other journalists in the courtyard of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Latin Patriarchate, the headquarters of the Catholic Church. We were waiting for the Pope’s car to come in from Bethlehem. We were standing and waiting and waiting. I saw, on the other side of the courtyard, an American cardinal. I said, “Oh, it’s him! And he’s one of the good ones; he’s a good conservative and I’m going to go over there and kiss his ring and kneel down, because I’m a good conservative Catholic. I’m not like those liberal Catholics who won’t kiss the cardinal’s ring.” So, I went over there; I made a big show of kissing his ring. Well, this was Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston. Within two years, he was exposed as being completely corrupt with the abuse scandal. And I was so ashamed of myself. There’s nothing wrong with kissing a cardinal’s ring. But there is everything wrong with doing it for the reason that I did it, you know. I did it in bad faith, I did it out of pride, and I did it out of triumphalism. I think that Orthodox people who are like that, too, can set themselves up for a very big fall. Protestants as well.

Also in the United States some religious leaders, especially Evangelicals, are close to political power and the present government.

When Trump goes, the Evangelicals are going to be devastated, because so many of them have placed so much value on him, and they are trying to keep alive or resurrect this old nationalistic idea. If you go on YouTube and look at First Baptist Church in Dallas, Robert Jeffress, the pastor there, is one of Trump's biggest supporters. They have flags in the church. They have "Salute to America Sunday." You can't believe it! But the young people involved there, they see that and think, "This is hypocrisy." My Evangelical friends are really worried about what's going to happen, because the nationalism and hypocrisy of the older generation has burned them out. Now, I didn't vote for Trump the first time. I may vote for him in 2020, simply because of religious liberty, but I'm trying not to convince myself or rationalize it by saying he's a good guy. I think he's the less bad choice.

From reading your book, I got the impression that you think that there's an imminent decline of Western civilization, and that's why you have to retreat. It's not about tactics or the strategy of politicians; it's more about certain historical changes.

Yes, that's true. I'm not an American TV evangelist; I'm not saying the end of the world is here. But the end of a world is here, and I don't know how much longer liberal democracy will last. I think that we have lost the transcendent moral and metaphysical basis that made liberal democracy work. When you run out of gas in your car, and the gauge says "empty," your car will still move a little further, we say you are "driving on fumes." Well, I think that we are, in that sense, driving on fumes in the West. Whether it goes to the Far Left or the Far Right, I don't know. The most important thing to conserve is the ability to see a transcendent realm. Augusto Del Noce is an Italian political theorist whom I discovered recently.⁵ He died in 1989, but he was writing brilliant things in the late 1960s. He said that Marxism in the West changed in the 1960s to focus on culture, because it knew that economic Marxism was finished. In 1968, he said that what's happening is if these people continue to have success, then they will elim-

5 See more: Rod Dreher, "Do You Know Del Noce?", *The American Conservative Blog*, 9 January, 2018 [<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/do-you-know-del-noce/>].

inate the possibility of transcendence and that people will lose a sense that there is a transcendent realm or that we can have access to it. I think that was prophetic. I think that has happened, and it's happening even more. Well, I think the chief political project – if it can be described as a political project – has to be trying to keep a space open, however small, where people can see beyond this life.

I want to ask you about your view of Russia. I understand that you've never been to Russia, but there is this image of Russia as a country of traditional moral values, and I know that some American conservatives admire Putin, because they see him as the guarantor of this traditional morality. What is your vision?

I've never been to Russia, but I have some Russian Orthodox friends. This past Sunday, on Pascha, we had a party at our parish in the afternoon. We had RT showing live from Moscow, from Christ the Savior Cathedral. We were watching it on YouTube, and it was so beautiful. And I said a little prayer to thank God that this can happen in Russia again. At the same time, I also know this is theatre, and to have the church in a position of power again is not the same thing as converting Russia. You know from my publications that I lost my Catholic faith. And I lost it because, in part, I had so much faith in the institution. So when I became Orthodox, I made a vow to myself and to God never to get involved in thinking about the church as a political animal or as a political institution, even though that aspect unavoidably exists. It is very easy not to be confused about the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the state in America, because there are so few Orthodox believers, and we have no power at all in the public square. Maybe that is a kind of blessing. At the same time, we American Orthodox have no way to conceive of the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the state in Russia. So that's a roundabout way of saying that I don't think much about the relationship of church and state in Russia. I trust my friends there who are very critical of it, but they're also men who go to church, who go to the liturgy, who pray and try to do good works and live a holy life and not get involved there. One thing I noticed is that in the US, we like to project ideals onto what we don't know. So other conservatives look at Putin, and

they think he's strong. Look, he's standing up for traditional values. And hey, I'm generally grateful for that, but at the same time, if you try to say critical things to certain Americans about Putin, they don't want to hear it. Similarly, here in Europe, I found – in Slovakia, and everywhere I go – conservatives don't want to hear anything negative about Trump; they just don't. It is somehow important for them to believe that Trump is a better man than he is.

When was the first time Russia appeared on your radar as a stronghold of traditional values? Do you remember this moment?

Do I remember the moment? Pussy Riot, that's when. It became huge news in America, and all decent Americans thought that the musicians were being persecuted by Putin, never thinking, "Wait a minute, they had no right to do what they did!" If they had gone into a mosque or a synagogue and done that, there would be a different story here. Part of that is my Orthodoxy, but if I was a Catholic, I would feel the same way. It made me realize that Russia is a place that has more respect for these values than the United States.

But if in America somebody goes to the altar and tries to do something similar, I think he'll also be arrested, no?

He may be arrested, but it won't be seen as a great sacrilege. And if he did it to a well-known conservative church, he would be cheered for it by many liberals in the media. It would be seen as a sign of standing up for what's right, of "speaking truth to power," to use a phrase favored by liberals. If he did it to a black church, that would be a different story, it would be seen by the media and by the mainstream commentators as a racial thing. But again, that's because the media are secular, and they interpret church only through politics. To get back to your question – probably Pussy Riot is when I started paying attention, because it was so unusual. And because the way the Russian government reacted to that drew such a strong criticism from American liberals. Nobody – not even conservatives – were

defending the Russian government. But for me, as an Orthodox Christian who used to be Catholic, there are some things that are absolutely sacred. And to be a good liberal should not require you to think that if someone profanes an altar in a cathedral, that it's okay. You're supposed to be okay with that, because "we're all good liberals here."

From a Russian perspective, I would say that we have the opposite side of the same problem: in Russia there is a conservative ideological dictate. So the problem is not liberal ideology as such, but this general trend toward suppressing basic human rights and freedoms for the sake of ideological reflections.

We conservatives in the West need to understand this better, because it is so opposite to our experience. As I said before, I think that what we're seeing now is a transition to a new paradigm where the far-left progressives are setting the tone for the society. And traditional Christianity, which used to be in that place, has lost. And it's going to continue, I would say. Perhaps the unpleasant truth that is now emerging is that there is no space, and no constituency, for authentic liberalism. You know, even though I am a conservative, I do not want to live in an authoritarian state, and generally do not want to force my convictions on my fellow citizens. But maybe it's the case that under liberalism, and in the absence of a basically shared sense of transcendent order allowing for diversity in unity, either left-wing authoritarianism or right-wing authoritarianism will govern our societies. Perhaps it will not be possible to govern otherwise. One way or the other, the future is not bright.

Interviewed by Dmitry Uzlaner on 2 May 2019