

Religion News Service

Why the culture war's losers shouldn't retreat from public life (COMMENTARY)

Jacob Lupfer | July 1, 2015



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A man watches the skyline of Manhattan as the Empire State Building is lit in rainbow colors during the celebration of the annual Gay Pride Parade in New York on Sunday (June 28, 2015). Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Eduardo Munoz

*Editors: This photo may only be republished with RNS-LUPFER-COLUMN, originally transmitted on July 1, 2015.

(RNS) Now that the Supreme Court has found a constitutional right to same sex marriage, what will happen to those churches and everyday believers who disagree with the decision?

Religious conservatives on the losing end of the culture war have long been debating this question.

Most traditionalist leaders will continue fighting for religious liberty protections so that their constituents and institutions can act in accordance with their belief that marriage is between a man and a woman.

But for many, Friday's historic ruling was no minor setback. It definitively signaled the end of a Christian cultural ethos in America and inaugurated a new era in which non-LGBT-affirming believers will be fined, harassed, persecuted and even criminalized.

Rod Dreher, an insightful writer on religion and culture, has been preparing for this new reality for years. [His proposal](#) is called the Benedict Option (named for the sixth-century monastic, not the current pope emeritus).

During the early Middle Ages, Dreher writes, "Benedict's communities formed monasteries and kept the light of faith burning through the surrounding cultural darkness. Eventually, the Benedictine monks helped refound civilization."

The contemporary darkness Dreher sees is epitomized in the Supreme Court's Obergefell decision. "It is the logical result of the Sexual Revolution, which valorized erotic liberty," he writes.

Conceptions of the Benedict Option vary, even among people sympathetic to Dreher.

At a minimum, the Benedict Option involves forming intentional communities of like-minded believers to nurture their countercultural faith. It also emphasizes parents' transmitting faith to children outside the influence of institutions such as public schools and culturally accommodating churches.

The Benedict Option arises from a bunker mentality and an overwrought persecution complex.

For one thing, Christians already have communities of faith in which capable leaders and like-minded believers teach and practice their faith. They're called churches.

A number of socially conservative faith leaders are changing the Christian right from an angry band of crusty preachers and Republican foot soldiers to a more thoughtful and winsome movement. The Benedict Option seems to disregard and undermine that effort.

I remain hopeful that our robust civic pluralism can accommodate traditional religionists even in a legal and cultural context that affords rights and protections for LGBT people.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid."

Dreher is not advocating a complete withdrawal, but it is not clear how Benedict Option Christians will engage and evangelize when they are so inwardly focused.

At this point, the Benedict Option is more a thought experiment for hand-wringing conservatives than a concrete set of proposals or plan of action. But most conceptions of the Benedict Option emphasize home schooling.

The social isolation of children is not without risks and costs, however. It can be especially devastating for overzealous parents when their kids' values or faith formation diverges from their preferences.

In the past, traditionalist Christians of various stripes have put aside doctrinal differences to work together on legal and political issues such as abortion and marriage. This "ecumenism of the trenches" unites them in a cultural battle, but one in which the odds of literally fighting (let alone dying) are remote.

Let's not forget: Social conservatives in the U.S. lost a court case. Some Christians are losing their lives.

In the Middle East, ISIS is raping and beheading Christians. Pope Francis says these truly persecuted Christians are united in an "ecumenism of blood." For many in that conflict zone, blood is not a metaphor.

I have urged toleration for people who continue to believe that marriage is between a man and a woman. Yet, as if on cue, we have seen calls in recent days to legalize polygamy, end tax-exempt status for churches and rewrite a major federal religious freedom law.

It is harmful to religion and to democracy when one group's members are ready to turn their backs on civil society and another group is ready to push them.

Today, traditionalist Christians remain the largest religious group in the freest nation on earth. At the same time, the LGBT movement is ascendant and culturally powerful.



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The survival of civilization, though, depends more on these two groups learning to coexist than on Dreher and his fellow exiles rebuilding it from the ruins.

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