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REVIEW OF BOOKS

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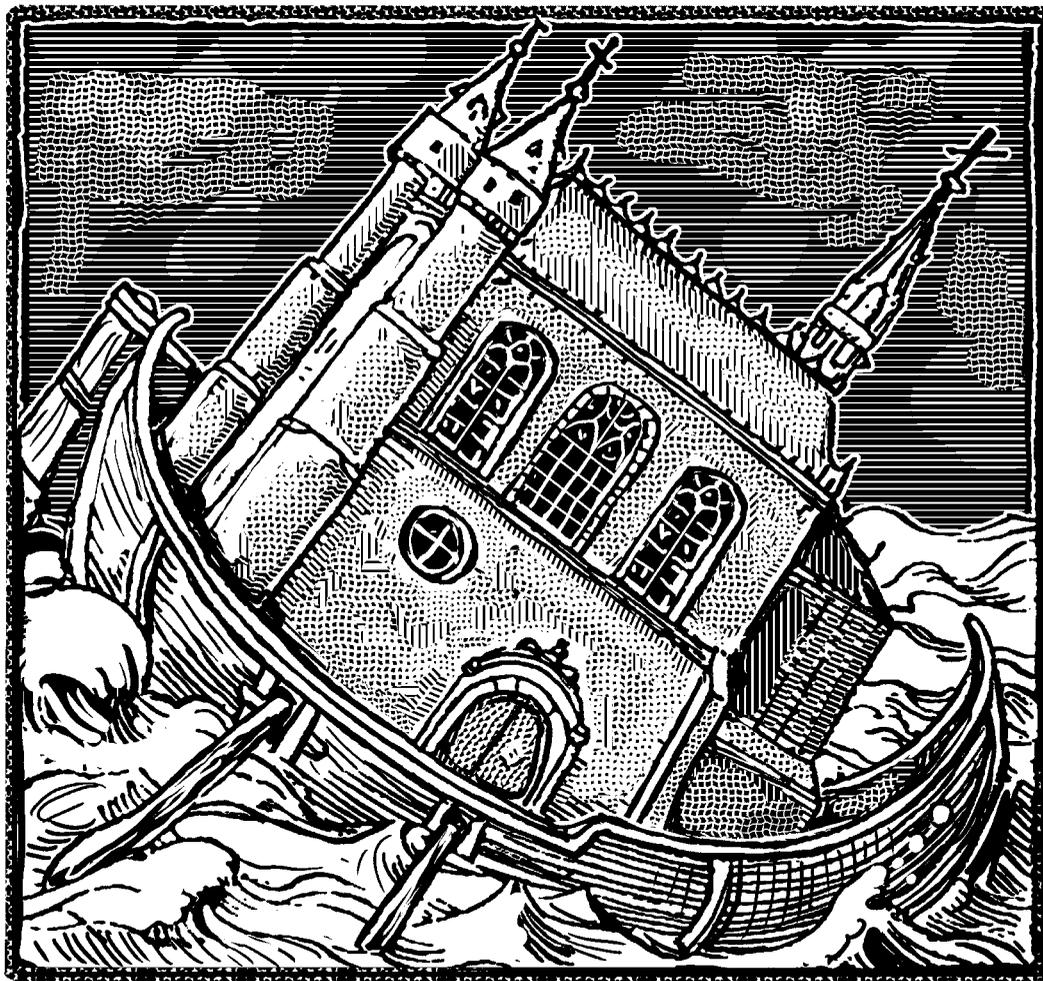
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Essay by John Daniel Davidson

NEW LIFE TO A DYING WORLD?



NEARLY 50 YEARS AGO IN A BROADCAST on German radio, then-theology professor Fr. Joseph Ratzinger spoke in stark terms about the Catholic Church's future. He suggested—prophetically, it turned out—that the Church would shrink:

From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge—a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges. In contrast to an earlier age, it will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision. As a small society, it will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members.

He would return to this theme again and again down the years, before and after he be-

came Pope Benedict XVI. The thrust of his thought is that the modern Church is artificially large. The decline of the faithful over the past half-century has left behind a skeletal infrastructure without flesh and blood to animate it. Therefore, we should expect to see Catholic schools and parishes, even cathedrals and basilicas, close. We should expect fewer ordained priests and fewer parishioners. This shrinking will be painful but also invigorating: those who remain in the Church will be Christians who are fervently seeking the face of God, and from the ruins of what was an inflated Church, a genuine faith will reassert itself and bring new life to a dying world.

In America, the number of Christians relative to the general population has been shrinking for many years, mirroring a much more advanced state of decline in Europe, where it's fair to say that Christianity is not only waning but dying out. If Christianity's cultural dominance is at an end, what are the faithful supposed to think about this epochal change? How are they supposed to respond?

To borrow the title of Francis Schaeffer's 1976 documentary about the decline of Western thought and culture, how should we then live?

Communities of Faith

A QUARTET OF RECENT BOOKS TACKLES this relatively old question with fresh urgency. The most talked-about of them is perhaps Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option*, structured as a kind of tour of contemporary Christian communities that have taken seriously Saint Benedict's call to live apart from the world, according to a rule. A senior editor and frequent blogger for the *American Conservative*, Dreher visits monastic and lay communities alike, beginning with the Monastery of St. Benedict in Norcia, Italy, where 15 monks and their prior have lived since 2000, when a handful of Benedictines reopened the 10th-century monastery after 200 years of disuse. (It's now being rebuilt after a devastating 2016 earthquake.) The monks provide Dreher with a convenient



jump-off point: they are the living, breathing exemplars of his thesis, that “[t]he forces of dissolution from popular culture are too great for individuals or families to resist on their own. We need to embed ourselves in stable communities of faith.” Dreher isn’t exactly calling for Christians to flee the world and shelter in monasteries *en masse*, but he argues it’s time for Christians to consider honestly what going along to get along really means in a wholly secular society—and what the alternatives might look like.

He takes as self-evident that Christians have lost the culture wars in America. “Rather than wasting energy and resources fighting unwinnable political battles,” he argues, “we should instead work on building communities, institutions, and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation.” Dreher is optimistic about the future, dreary though it might seem right now. The church has survived much worse than the trials it faces today, and it has always emerged from seasons of winnowing and pruning even more fruitful and vibrant than before.

It is not guaranteed, however, that the church *in the West* will survive. Dreher’s aim is to give Western Christians an idea of how to incorporate Benedict’s rule into their churches and families and communities—and he offers specifics. To begin, he argues that churches, especially evangelical churches, must adopt liturgical forms of worship. Liturgies are an antidote to the scourge of individualism and emotionalism that afflicts so many American congregations—evangelical and Catholic alike—because liturgy combines corporeality with transcendence, and inculcates Christian tradition and teaching in ways that contemporary worship services cannot.

Pull your children out of public schools—and don’t fool yourself that Christian schools are much different. Find or establish a classical Christian school, and if you can’t do that, then homeschool your kids. Run your home like a monastery, with fixed times for family prayer each day. Immerse your family in the history of Western civilization and the study of Scripture. And so on. Dreher’s exhortations encompass even the sort of living arrangements Christians should consider. He visits a lay Catholic community on Italy’s Adriatic coast that began as an informal group of young Catholic men who stuck together after college. It now numbers about 200 members and administers a community school, three different charitable cooperatives, and maintains a close connection to the Benedictine monastery in Norcia. He stops short of arguing that all Christians must up and join a commune.

As the book unfolds, it becomes clear that the “Benedict Option” is an artful piece of legerdemain; it’s really just shorthand for living a radical form of the Christian faith—“relearning the lost art of community,” as Dreher puts it. He maintains, with good reason, that for the church in the West to survive and preserve her traditions, Christians will need to incorporate every aspect of their lives into their faith. But of course Christians are supposed to live like this anyway, so his branding of “*the Benedict Option*” can be irritating; as more than one reviewer has noted, it seems neither Benedictine nor optional. One suspects, however, that Dreher means only to grab the attention of distracted Christians and point them in the direction they should already be heading.

Books discussed in this essay:

The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation, by Rod Dreher. Sentinel, 272 pages, \$25

Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture, by Anthony Esolen. Regnery, 256 pages, \$27.99

Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society, by R.R. Reno. Regnery, 256 pages, \$27.99

Strangers in a Strange Land: Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World, by Charles J. Chaput. Henry Holt and Co., 288 pages, \$26

A Culture of Truth

THAT’S THE PURPOSE, TOO, OF ANTHONY Esolen’s slim volume, *Out of the Ashes*. A fellow now at Thomas More College (after being shamefully hounded out of Providence College in the spring for blaspheming against the campus “diversity” gods), Esolen writes in a biting, somewhat antiquated prose that is at first arresting for the contemporary reader. But he has just as many specifics in mind as Dreher, although they are at once more expansive and more ordinary—yet no less radical. Anyone familiar with Esolen’s prolific writings on Christian life and culture knows that he pulls no punches, and this book is no exception. He begins with a candid, self-conscious admission: “In this book I shall indulge myself in one of civilized man’s most cherished privileges. I shall decry the decay of civilization.”

But Esolen isn’t joking around. He is alarmed, and will cause his readers to be alarmed, not only at the decay of Christian culture but the decline and disappearance of community. We are turning in on ourselves, he argues, and the things that once bound us together—family, yes, but also local clubs and associations of all kinds—are simply disappearing. Insignificant, often wicked entertainments and pleasures are replacing them, and enslaving us in turn. We have arrived at this impasse, writes Esolen, because we have been telling ourselves massive lies—lies about what it means to be a man or a woman, lies about what families are, and especially lies about who God is and what he desires for us. We have to “clear our minds of cant,” he writes, in order to recover our civilization and live as we were meant. This is no easy task. “It is almost impossible in the modern world *not to accept lies* as a matter of course” (emphasis in the original).

Esolen means to reveal the deep deceptions of modern life and walk us slowly back to reality. The reading can be uncomfortable at times, because he is asking us to reconsider not just how we worship and how we educate our children, but also how we think about nearly everything we do, day in and day out. His refreshing answer to the deluge of lies is to immerse ourselves in *things*—the physical reality of the created world:

Things, in their beautiful and imposing integrity, do not easily bend to lies. A bull is a bull and not a cow. Grass is food for cattle but not for man. A warbler is alive but a rock is not. The three-hundred pound stone will not move for a little child or a boy or a feminist professor. Water expands when it freezes and will break anything unless you allow for that. Things are what they are. They know no slogans, and they do not lie.

And they give witness to the Glory of God.

Much of our predicament, he argues, comes from a deep, self-imposed alienation from the world of created things, from the glory of nature and the deep truth it conveys. “I have asked my freshman honors students at college where in the sky the sun will be, in the middle of the afternoon in September, here in Rhode Island. They don’t know,” he writes. “They are strangers to the world, but they certainly are *not* strangers to the lies and folly that are the stock in trade...of mass entertainment, mass education, and mass politics.”

To restore our culture, we must create (or recreate) lives and communities based on the truth. That means not only restoring a cor-



rect understanding of manhood and womanhood, but restoring a correct relationship to work, perhaps teaching our children a trade. It means bringing things like hospitality and unsupervised play back to life. Esolen follows a kind of ruthless logic:

Because children should be able to play freely outdoors and for hours on end, there should be neighborhoods for them to play in. Because there should be neighborhoods, there should be in these locales the natural though informal monitors of the neighborhoods: elderly people on their porches, many mothers, and men and women at work in family businesses nearby. Because there should be such neighborhoods filled with people, our social policies should favor them and support them, and our cultural expectations likewise. Therefore we should not subordinate the family to work; the double income family should not be the norm; we should reconsider all things that tend to remove father and then also mother from the place where they live.

Where Esolen's diagnosis loses me is when he comes to consider how to build a society

around these sorts of dictums. What sort of community does he envision? Where are the majorities that would adopt such policies? It seems clear from his conclusion that he does not foresee the wholesale restoration of American culture, or even that such a restoration is possible. Like Dreher, Esolen sees instead insular outposts of Christians—practicing a peculiarly vibrant Christianity, to be sure—beset by a sick and dying mainstream culture. It is a vision of Christians as a beleaguered minority, somewhat walled off from the wider world, attempting to resurrect a specific way of life that, in the end, sounds an awful lot like life on an American farm in the late 19th century. One gets the sense Esolen is fine with that.

For Richer or Poorer

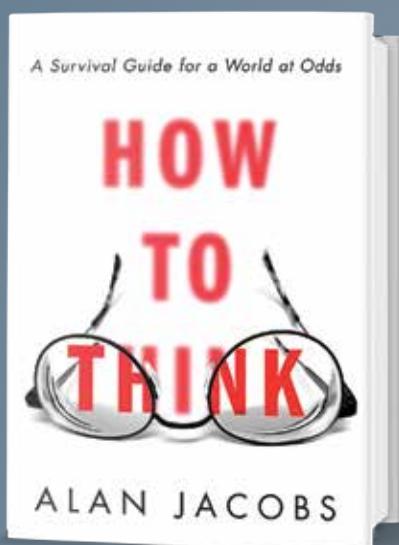
IF DREHER AND ESOLEN SEE SCATTERED Christian communities restoring and preserving civilization amid a hostile, aggressively secular order, R.R. Reno sees the inevitable collapse of that order, which he argues is much weaker than it appears. Reno, the editor of *First Things* magazine and a theologian by training, lays out a program for restoring American culture by exposing the tyranny and deception at the heart of the secular re-

gime. His book, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*, which derives its title from T.S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society*, is organized by imperatives: defend the weak, raise up the poor, promote solidarity, limit government, and so on.

Reno is especially concerned with a “hyper-individualistic” American society. But his approach is slightly different than that of Dreher and Esolen. Drawing heavily on the work of social scientists like Robert Putnam and Charles Murray, Reno argues that American individualism has distorted our sense of what freedom is, to the point that our notions of freedom harm the poor and the weak while serving the interests of the rich and powerful. Treating these societal ills means pushing back against our ingrained notions of freedom and the American dream. “Taken in isolation,” writes Reno, “the American dream produces the conditions for ever larger government, more coercive laws, and a culture of denunciation and censure that limits freedom, though always for the sake of a supposedly greater freedom.” Only freedom properly understood, he says, can serve as a check against the tyranny of government and the systematic exploitation of the poor by the rich.

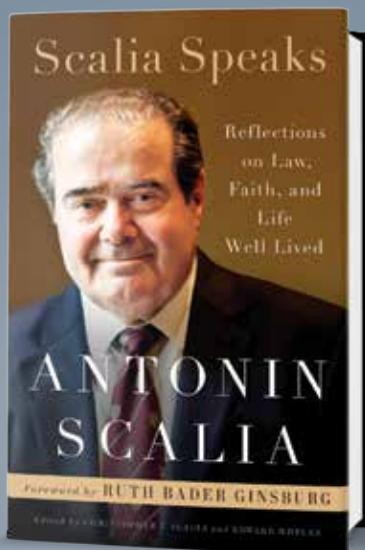
Indeed, he is singularly concerned with the plight of the poor because he sees their pre-

WISDOM. LESSONS. INSIGHT.



HOW TO THINK

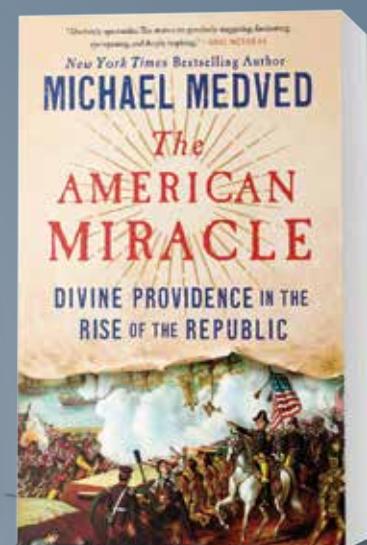
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dicament as the direct result of a half-century of policies and changing cultural mores that favor the rich and well-educated while leaving everyone else behind. Murray's argument in his 2012 book, *Coming Apart*, is that well-educated Americans live more or less the way most Americans did 50 years ago. They marry, attend church, and are involved in a host of mediating institutions that bolster their communities. Less-educated Americans, by contrast, are isolated. Few of them attend church, belong to civic organizations, or interact with any organized group besides the government. For them, social maladies like divorce, single parenthood, and drug addiction are the new normal.

Reno deploys Murray's argument to advance a more nuanced thesis. Whereas Murray styles this phenomena as a passive "coming apart," Reno sees an active war against the weak by the strong. The point of this war might not be to despoil the poor, but that is the effect. The goal of the upper class, Reno writes, is to impose a culture of "nonjudgmentalism" that allows the rich and well-educated to do as they please, freed from all the old strictures to decide what is right for *them*, consequences be damned—even if that means the ruination of those less fortunate.

Nonjudgmentalism, Reno argues, works for the well-to-do because they have the discipline and knowledge to navigate a world in which there are no rules. In a particularly fascinating passage, he cites a book written by British anthropologist Mary Douglas in the late 1960s that explains this phenomenon. Douglas studied two systems of authority and social control, the "positional control system" typical of the working classes, and the "personal code system" typical of the upper class. In a positional or "restricted" code system, "social roles are assigned to one's social position rather than negotiated," explains Reno. "So that if my position is that of a father, I must abide by a 'restricted code'—that is, I must behave as a father is expected to behave." That stands in stark contrast to the personal code, which gives no set answers or guidelines for social behavior.

The result of the dominance of the personal code of social control is the reigning nonjudgmentalism we see today, which values reasons over rules and, Reno maintains, necessarily favors the rich over the poor. In her study, Douglas cites one example of the deleterious effects of the personal code being imposed upon the working class, when English Catholic bishops in the 1960s lifted the requirement to abstain from meat on Fridays in favor of a personal discipline each Catholic would choose for himself. That robbed working-class Irish

Catholics of "an important identity marker," writes Reno, one that reinforced "their sense of cultural integrity in a historically inhospitable Protestant society. The progressive elites of the church, seeking a more 'modern' and 'intentional' form of Catholicism, heedlessly undermined the system of social control that suited working-class Catholics and gave their lives dignity."

In essence, this is precisely what has been playing out in American society over the past 50 years, at nearly every level, and it relates directly to Reno's overall indictment of our misguided sense of freedom. Whose freedom, he asks, does the sexual revolution serve? Or the therapeutic culture that undermines strong convictions—what Pope Benedict XVI called "the dictatorship of relativism"? Certainly not the weak and powerless. In a modern American culture where the only real bulwarks against government power are family and church, those most vulnerable to oppression are those without families, without church.

The silver lining in Reno's thesis is that he sees the writing on the wall for the ruling class, by which he means the "reconstitution of elite

Christians will have to reconcile themselves to a kind of second-class status.

WASP culture as post-Protestant and ethnically diverse but intellectually homogenous," a development he calls "the most important change in American society of the past half-century." This elite class, powerful and culturally dominant though it might be, is in fact fatally weak. Its downfall will be a consequence of the ruin it has brought to the rest of the country. We can already see this emerging, as the pathologies that once belonged to the inner city now spread among the middle class in suburban and rural areas. "At some point," Reno suggests, "people will notice what the post-Protestant WASPs have done." And when they do, Christians will be ready—not to become the next establishment, but to exert influence on it, "turning it in directions that promote wellbeing for everyone," not just the well off.

Reno's book is a departure from both Dreher's and Esolen's, because he's more concerned with illuminating the ruling class's ideology and exposing its injustices than with giving Christians ideas and inspiration about how to revive their faith. And yet his focus is complementary to theirs. When the

establishment collapses, as Reno believes it inevitably will, countercultural Christians—the "Benedict Option" set—will need to be ready to influence and guide the next establishment. Those in power "may not become Christians," he acknowledges, "but they might find themselves newly grateful for a renewal of Christian influence on society."

Living as Aliens

THE POWER OF THAT INFLUENCE should give Christians hope. Charles Chaput, the archbishop of Philadelphia, makes a strong case for hope in *Strangers in a Strange Land*. Chaput is a rarity among American prelates: a leader who takes seriously the doctrines of his faith and how Christians should live them out in a dizzying post-modern world. His book is more pastoral in tone and purpose than these others, but it is no less unsparing in its diagnosis of our time. As he explains, the principles of the American Founding, which are harmonious with the tenets of the Church, have been discarded. "We're passing through a religious revolution in America," he warns.

For many generations a common Christian culture transcended our partisan struggles. It gave us a shared framework of behavior and belief. Now another vision for our nation's future has emerged. It sees no need for Christianity. And in many cases it views our faith as an obstacle to its ambitions.

Like the other authors, Chaput sees in this revolution a chance for the Church to rediscover its calling and revive the culture around it, and Christianity's rich history should be its guide in this effort. One of Chaput's chapters is devoted to the *Letter to Diognetus*, a 2nd-century apologia in which its anonymous author defends Christianity. This was a time when paganism was dominant and most Romans viewed adherents of the new sect as dangerous, disloyal cultists, who did not accept the gods and the system of public piety that every other Roman practiced.

The letter's description of Christians would have been startling to the Romans. Followers of Christ, the author writes,

live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners.... They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast off their offspring. They share their board with one another, but



not their marriage bed.... They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.

Chaput notes that these early Christians, who lived in a time of sporadic persecution at the hands of the Roman government, “didn’t build fortress enclaves” or “manufacture their own culture or invent their own language.” Rather, they transformed Roman culture and appropriated elements of it to their own uses, emboldened by a radically different understanding of their place in the world than the pagans among whom they lived.

Chaput’s point is that Christians today must resist the temptation to retreat from the world because the world is after all in great need of them: “If we want to follow Jesus, we must love the world too and remain in it, as he did, to work for its salvation.” In a passage quoting a column by Dreher that calls for “intentional separation from the mainstream,” Chaput cautions that Christians cannot “give up on the good still present in American society,” while also working to preserve Christian community and, as Esolen exhorts, rebuild American culture. To do that, Christians today must rediscover the spirit of the early church, which based its claims on nothing but the fact of the Resurrection. In the second century, Chaput says, Christians had no great cultural achievements, no power, and scarcely any history. Yet the author of the *Letter to Diognetus* likened Christians to the soul and the world to the body: “The soul is shut up in the body, and yet itself holds the body together; while Christians are restrained in the world as in a prison, and yet themselves hold the world together.” These early believers could write like this because they knew what they were about. As Chaput notes, “The only thing that could validate such a statement was this: Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. If the Resurrection happened, then that fact changes everything.”

Light in the Darkness

THESE FOUR AUTHORS TAKE DIFFERENT approaches to the same theme—the aggressive secularization of mainstream society and its implications for the church—but they all arrive at a similar conclusion: a renewed church will see society safely through

the dark times ahead, so Christians must begin renewing the church now. If there is anything wanting in these volumes, it is perhaps a more complete discussion of what all of this might cost individual Christians. The authors do talk about the sacrifices attendant to something like the Benedict Option—but not in detail about the possible future of persecution.

Dreher hints at this theme in a chapter titled, “Preparing for Hard Labor.” Christians, he argues, need to reconsider the role of work in their lives, not just because it has taken on an outsized role in modern life, but because Christians are not going to be left alone by the progressives that dominate our economy: “We may not (yet) be at the point where Christians are forbidden to buy and sell in general without state approval, but we are on the brink of entire areas of commercial and professional life being off-limits to believers whose consciences will not allow them to burn incense to the gods of our age.” It’s easy to think of recent examples pulled from the headlines—Christian bakers, florists, and wedding planners who decline to participate in same-sex weddings, foster parents who refuse to affirm the ideology of transgenderism at the behest of state agencies, employers who won’t provide contraceptives to their employees. The list of mandates, large and small, will surely grow longer as our progressive scheme of government persists.

Dreher does not say so explicitly, but it might be that Christians will have to reconcile themselves to a kind of second-class status that they have never really known in America. That means, to put it bluntly, preparing for relative deprivation and hardship. As these books make clear—and anyone with eyes to see already knows—the long peace that has persisted in the West between church and state is at an end. This will come as a shock to Christians who assumed their cultural dominance was permanent. Chaput, in his pastoral way, alludes to this. He writes about three different kinds of mourning that are unique to Christians: grief for our own sins, the grief we feel living in a world full of sorrows and suffering, and a third kind, which is measured in the cost of discipleship:

the sorrow of those who accept the cross of Jesus Christ in this life, die to the world, and prefer the joys of God to worldly offerings. This kind

of mourning comes from those who hurt because of their commitment to Jesus. Being disciples makes their lives harder. Maybe it’s enduring ridicule from doctors because they’re not on the birth control pill and they’ve had a fourth kid. Maybe their tithing means they can’t take a vacation they hoped for. Or maybe it’s taking a pay cut because working more would take them away from their family.

Or maybe it’s something even worse. Maybe it’s losing your job. Maybe it’s having your business seized by the state. Maybe it’s going to prison because you refuse to obey laws that violate your Christian faith. Such things have happened before. What makes us think they will not happen again, here in America?

Pope Benedict XVI was right: it is time now to reconcile ourselves to a smaller, more faithful Church. For serious Christians—will there be any other kind before long?—that will mean integrating their faith so thoroughly into their lives that they risk being labeled a “zealot” or a “fundamentalist” by erstwhile friends and colleagues, and perhaps labeled something worse by the government. It will mean becoming rather strange in the eyes of the world. Benedict said as much in that radio address nearly 50 years ago, when he warned that the Church “will lose many of her social privileges” and “make much bigger demands” on believers. But he closed with these words of hope:

The real crisis has scarcely begun. We will have to count on terrific upheavals. But I am equally certain about what will remain at the end: not the Church of the political cult, which is dead already, but the Church of faith. It may well no longer be the dominant social power to the extent that she was until recently; but she will enjoy a fresh blossoming and be seen as man’s home, where he will find life and hope beyond death.”

The authors of these volumes do not say so in such plain terms, but their arguments in effect echo Benedict: the hardship to come is more than a necessity, it is a blessing.

John Daniel Davidson is a senior correspondent at The Federalist.

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