

LIVE NOT BY LIES: A MANUAL FOR CHRISTIAN DISSIDENTS

(ROD DREHER)

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A disease is going around. No, not the Wuhan Plague. This malady only affects the Right, and I name it Scrutonism. The symptoms of Scrutonism are a razor-sharp ability to identify one's enemies and to understand their plans to destroy us, combined with a complete inability to imagine any way in which those enemies can be defeated. For a sufferer of this disease, his headspace is occupied by nostalgia and fear, in varying proportions—mostly the former in the late Roger Scruton's case, mostly the latter in Rod Dreher's case. Scrutonism's harm is that it makes sufferers ignore the only question that matters for the Right today: what are you willing to do, given that your enemies are utterly committed to destroying you and yours?

I used to be a Dreher fanboy, until he lost the plot with the Wuhan Plague and, more generally, descended into constant unmanly maundering. I'm still a fan, however (to steal a line from Aaron Renn, though he was talking about Tim Keller, not Dreher). And *Live Not by Lies* has partially restored my opinion of Rod Dreher as a pillar of today's Right. It is an outstanding book, tightly written and tightly focused. That does not mean it is complete, for reasons I will lay out today, but it is good for what it is—the sharp diagnosis of the ways, means, and ends of our enemies.

The outline of the book is simple. Dreher shows how life in America (and more broadly much of the West, though America is his focus) is swiftly becoming indistinguishable from life under totalitarian Communism, in its essence, if not yet all its externals. The Left, now as then, will do anything to impose its evil will across all society. (This is obvious on its face and established in detail in many of my other writings, and also at enormous length on Dreher's blog.) The Left's political vision is wholly illusory while at the same time utterly destructive. A necessary part of their plan, again now as then, is suppression of all dissent, especially religious dissent, through controlling all aspects of every citizen's life. This plan is already largely implemented for many sectors of American society, although Dreher claims this is a "soft"

totalitarianism, different in degree from the “hard” totalitarianism of Communism at its height.

He talks of Czesław Miłosz and the pill of Murti-Bing, of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, of Hanna Arendt. He deftly draws parallels between the rise of Communism in Europe and our present situation. He identifies the appeal of the Left, and of its totalitarian ideology. He talks of progressivism as religion and of the cult of social justice. He talks of woke capitalism and the surveillance state built by the Lords of Tech. He talks of the oppressive social credit system in China (under the funny heading, “The Mark of the East.”) These chapters are uniformly excellent and I strongly recommend them to anyone not already familiar with these truths. But my purpose here today is not to summarize what is happening now. Many others have summarized this book well. And to be clear, as with most of my book reviews, I am not actually reviewing Dreher’s book. Rather, I am delivering my own thoughts. If you don’t like that, well, you’re in the wrong place.

A crucial internal ambiguity pervades this entire book. Dreher’s frame is totalitarianism. He channels men and women who suffered under the most evil regimes the world has ever known. He paints a picture that offers gruesome tales of torture as a regular instrument of state control. The epigraph he uses, from Solzhenitsyn, says such evil “is possible everywhere on earth,” and Solzhenitsyn was not talking about a social credit system, but real torture and death. Yet Dreher disclaims, repeatedly, that this might happen here. Instead, he suggests a Huxley-ite future, or Murti-Bing, or Shoshana Zuboff-ite/PRC-type consumerist monitoring. At the same time, though, he talks about ever-growing state and, more, private corporate actions that are not yet physical torture, yet are meant as severe punishment, such as job loss and social ostracism. The reader is confused. What, precisely, is the future Dreher is predicting, and why? The question remains unanswered.

Dreher does, however, offer a type of solution. In the face of these poisonous headwinds he prescribes spiritually-centered private organizing, in essence his famous Benedict Option. “[The Christian dissident] needs to draw close to authentic spiritual leadership—clerical, lay, or both—and form small cells of fellow believers with whom [he] can pray, sing, study Scripture, and read other books important to their mission.” He must be prepared to suffer, because in the new dispensation, he will

suffer, if he refuses to worship the new gods. Dreher, in short, recommends the “parallel polis,” with a strong religious component.

He has discussed this before. I have also discussed this before, more than once, and that it will not be allowed, because our enemies have learned from their earlier defeats, and as Dreher himself repeatedly says, they have vastly more powerful tools than their Communist forbears did. Thus, for example, he is correct that families are resistance cells—but our enemies see this too, which is why families will not be allowed to be resistance cells, but will be forcibly broken up if parents dare to instruct their children aright. No, the parallel polis will be of short duration, if indeed it can be set up at all, and the Benedict Option, without an armed wing, is dead on arrival.

Dreher does not offer any non-passive mechanism for success (but I will—just wait a few minutes). Dreher recommends Christian witness such as that of Václav Benda and his family. He recommends retaining cultural memory, and accepting suffering. But nothing succeeds like success. We know about the Bendas because Communism fell. And Communism fell both because of its internal contradictions and because it faced massive external pressure put on it by the West. Dreher is unclear as to what exactly he expects the future to bring to people of today situated like the Bendas. In essence, his argument seems to be that it ultimately worked out for dissidents under Communism, so it will, someday and in a manner yet to be shown, work for us. Maybe. Or maybe not. In other words, Dreher seems to think that the parallel polis is self-executing, as long as strong religious faith is kept.

Moreover, whether Dreher sees it or not, we are indeed heading to hard totalitarianism, not merely soft totalitarianism. To our enemies, justice delayed is justice denied. That inescapable inner logic, combined with Girardian scapegoating, means soft totalitarianism will never be enough for them. We already have soft totalitarianism, for any white collar worker, and anybody can see that the demands for compliance are accelerating, not slowing down. The reader sees no reason at all we’re not heading to “prison camps and the executioner’s bullet,” because Dreher doesn’t give one, while at the same time talking a great deal about the Gulag, the Rumanian torture camp at Pitesti, and so on, continually recurring to such history. Then he says “American culture is far more individualistic than Chinese culture, so that political resistance

will almost certainly prevent Chinese-style hard totalitarianism from gaining a foothold here.” This is whistling past the graveyard—how has this supposed individualism slowed down our enemies even a whit? Soft totalitarianism may lie on the far side of hard totalitarianism (as it was with late Communism), but it will get worse long before it gets better. The reader gets the impression Dreher is pulling his punches, afraid of being seen as too extreme, too “out there,” in our controlled political discourse.

Hope is not a plan. Dreher should see that; he even quotes a Slovak dissident, “If they had come at us in the seventies, they might have succeeded. But we always remembered that the goal was to turn our small numbers into a number so big they could not stop us.” Dreher doesn’t acknowledge that getting those big numbers is crucial to success, along with a will to action (used in later Communism for mass demonstrations), and he has no plan for getting them. “Only in solidarity with others can we find the spiritual and communal strength to resist.” True enough—but what is “solidarity” here? Is it meeting in the catacombs to pray for a better day? Or meeting to plan action? Apparently only the former.

Yes, Dreher offers some legislative solutions. They make sense. But, as Bismarck said, politics is the art of the possible. He meant compromise is necessary, but if your enemies have all the power and no need to compromise to get everything they want, what is possible of what you want, is nothing. Nobody with actual power will even associate his name in public with Dreher’s legislative proposals, because they are cowards, and they refuse to be seen opposing globohomo. Political proposals in the current frame will not come to fruition; they will die like the seeds in the Parable of the Sower, either among the brambles, or fallen on rocky ground. Legislative proposals are not a mechanism for success.

Scrutonism, of which as you can see Dreher has a bad case, is a call to be a beautiful loser. But you can’t inspire anyone with a program that offers being a loser. People cowering under fire want a plan; they want a leader to point not only to what Christ would do, but how that will help them, and more importantly their children, come out the other side, cleansed and victorious. What Dreher offers instead is a call to martyrdom. This is theologically sound, but not politically. And unlike Communism, the modern Left, globohomo, faces no external pressure. This is a strategic question, of passivity versus aggression. When I think

of 1453, I think not only of the priest, celebrating the Divine Liturgy as the Turks tore into the Hagia Sophia, turning to the eastern wall and walking into it, from whence it is said he will return when the Turks are expelled (which will hopefully be soon). I think also of Constantine XI Palaeologus, the last Emperor, cutting off his imperial ornaments and rushing out to die with the common soldiers. How about some of that?

Dreher talks very often of the Bolsheviks. He never mentions the Whites, who after all could easily have won, or other heroes who actually did defeat Communism, such as Francisco Franco or Augusto Pinochet. My point is not that we need to encourage violence, though I am not opposed in the least to violence in the right circumstances—quite the opposite. My point is that people need positive, active heroes, not just heroic sufferers. No man is an island, in the John Donne cliché, but that means that very few have the internal resources to passively suffer. They need inspiration about how the future will be better, both in this world and the next. Dreher does not offer it. He instead offers a variation on *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, a book I read (said to be second only in popularity to the Bible), and thought was depressingly passive and navel-gazing. People like me may go to the back of St. Peter's line—or maybe not, since we did not take what we were given and bury it in the ground of personal introspection, but rather grew it.

So, if you do not have enough people or enough power at this moment to impose precisely your vision of the world, where do you start? You form alliances with those who have similar goals. Yet Dreher never talks about alliances, except briefly in connection with Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia. As Dreher mentions, most of Charter 77's participants weren't Christian, and some were radical Marxists. But he suggests no equivalent for the religious Right today, alliances with those with alien views who, together with us, oppose the totalitarianism of the Left. Why? Because he has been instructed that policing one's rightward boundary is what he must do, before anything else. (There are no possible leftward alliances for us; what are sometimes called "good faith liberals" are merely willing dupes in the Left's totalitarian agenda, and of no use in this fight.) This policing has, for many decades, been the original flaw of the Right, for which William F. Buckley bears most of the responsibility—hobbling ourselves by permitting our enemies to

dictate with whom we may ally. Dreher may not even realize it, but his enemies have crippled him before he can leave the gate.

I'll give Dreher a short break here, for this problem is not his alone, but general. A few months ago the generally excellent Sohrab Ahmari, who is much more aggressive than Dreher, was hyperventilating, on his own initiative, that VDARE (a racially-tinged anti-immigrant front in which John Derbyshire is prominent) was absolutely, unequivocally, beyond the pale and nobody at all should have any interaction with it. (He was complaining that Trump advisor Stephen Miller had shared VDARE links years ago while at Breitbart.) His support for this was, I kid you not, an article from the far-left *Guardian* newspaper, a British paper, extensively quoting the odious so-called Southern Poverty Law Center, a noted hate group. This shows that, still now, even the dissident Right of men such as Ahmari voluntarily debilitates itself by letting the Left set limits for it on what is acceptable discourse and what are acceptable alliances. This is no way to win. Utterly smashing the SPLC is the way to win. Does that mean I think we should ally with racists and the like? Yes. Yes, it does. Absolutely. Six days a week and twice on Sunday. We should ally with anyone who will help us win.

I resisted this obvious conclusion for a long time, but it's true. Who then should be sought, now, not tomorrow, as allies? First, the neopagan Right, exemplified today by Bronze Age Pervert, a movement of great appeal to many young men, who are the backbone of any winning radical political movement. Second, the racialist right. The Left is explicitly and totally openly racist today, whipping up anti-white hatred everywhere, and it's just dumb to pretend this isn't obvious. They abandoned the colorblind ideal long ago, yet demand we pretend they are not racist to the core. Racism may be a sin (although it is no special sin, merely one of innumerable examples of the cardinal sin, pride, and far from the worst of those). But I'm happy to ally with all sorts of sinners, and so is every politically-minded Christian, if he is being honest. The violent. Those who dishonor their parents. Adulterers. Homosexuals. In fact, it may surprise you to know, I myself am a sinner! I may not want some sinners in my inner circle, or around my family and children, but in pursuit of common goals, worthwhile goals, why not link arms? We instinctively reject this obvious truth, because to cripple us, and gradually destroy us, the Left forbids it, and we, since the late, unlamented

Buckley, have let them so dictate, to our destruction. No more, if we have any sense. The Titans must throw off the chains forged by their enemies, and that means working hand-in-glove with all the people the Right has traditionally excluded on ideological grounds.

Of course, neither the neopagan Right nor the racist Right, nor other subcurrents on the right (integralists and anarcho-libertarians, for example) have any relevant power or influence today. The idea is not that allying with open racists will be the key to power (although it might well be in the future, if the Left continues fomenting racial hatred, and white people finally react defensively). It is that doing exactly what benefits us, and making decisions on that basis only, defangs the Left. We must ignore their demands that we spend enormous energy policing our rightward boundary, while they never, ever, for a single second, police their leftward boundary. I see no point in allying with clowns, men like Richard Spencer—because they are ineffective and incompetent, not because of their views. I have no interest in working to implement fantasies of ethnostates. But if the white nationalists or the anti-Semites want to work with me to destroy the Left, let's go.

That doesn't mean all alliances are simultaneously possible, or that they will be necessarily permanent. I think that black people and other ethnic minorities should overthrow the grifters whom they let speak for them, and I'd be happy to then ally with them to destroy the Left, if enough of them wanted to do so. Still, even if that were to happen, I doubt that a durable coalition of the general dissident Right (e.g., Ahmari), white nationalists, and based black people would be possible. Too much divergence in worldview would likely make such a coalition untenable except on narrow issues, or against powerful outside enemies. On the other hand, historically speaking, all tribal and ethnic groups had contempt for each other, as is human nature, yet managed not infrequently to work together—the Ottoman Empire is one such example. But they were not infected with modern ideologies. More broadly, I doubt if a modern country, with modern communications, can be successful at all if the people within it have too little in common; the United States tried, with the melting pot, but that was probably a special moment with special circumstances that can never be recaptured. Probably the future is a fractured United States with

some degree of ethnic sorting, and within those new states, ongoing alliances of various types to ensure the Left never rises again.

But those are problems for Future Charles! Let me be positive for a moment. Unlike Dreher, I see a path to victory against the totalitarianism of the Left. First, in every Warsaw Bloc country, what sustained the Left in power was not the guns of the government, but the guns of the Soviet government. We don't have that problem, and in fact we have guns ourselves, a lot of them. Unless we let them take the guns, we can only lose so much power, if we have the will to resist. Second, under Communism, it appeared that dissidents were only a tiny fraction of the population. This was a deliberate lie, and the same lie is told here. Globohomo only seems triumphant, because our enemies propagandize us, using their total control of modern media, that it is triumphant. I don't think globohomo is like the German government in the times of Franz Jägerstätter, of whom Dreher often talks (an Austrian Catholic executed by the National Socialists, and the subject of a 2019 film by Terrence Malick, *A Hidden Life*). Jägerstätter faced something that actually was unstoppable—not only a strong and determined ideological government, but one supported by the vast majority of the population (as José Ortega y Gasset wrote, force follows public opinion), that was fighting an existential war, and run by Germans, not by low-IQ fat tranies with butch-cut green hair. I think our current ideological opponents appear strong, but are weaker than they appear, probably far weaker.

Third, regardless of power balance, unreality cannot continue forever. What ended Communism in Eastern Europe was not a wish for blue jeans, or liberal democracy, but a wish to return to ordered, Christian liberty. Because what the Left offers can never satisfy (most of all it cannot satisfy the young—they will not tolerate endless being fed porn in their pods), the wish for reality that satisfies will always rise again. Dreher quotes a Slovak dissident, “[This soft tyranny] will end. The truth has power to end every tyranny.” He notes that no dissident leaders under Communism, in the 1970s and 1980s, expected Communism to fall in their lifetimes, and they were completely wrong. Yes, hope is not a plan, but being on the side of reality is an asset.

What specific mechanism, then? Some, including Dreher in some moods, argue that we can go on as we are at this moment forever, that we will get semi-competent digital totalitarianism as far as the eye can

see, offering Murti-Bing along with Ryszard Legutko's coercion to freedom. This is false. Perhaps the most important truth to recognize is that our society is so very, very fragile, as the Wuhan Plague has exposed. Even Dreher seems to recognize that collapse is more than possible, it is probable. "It only takes a catalyst like war, economic depression, plague, or some other severe and prolonged crisis that brings the legitimacy of the liberal democratic system into question." True, his conclusion is typically pessimistic: that the Left will use the crisis to end any freedoms remaining. That's silly. We're going to get, and we should welcome despite the likely hardship and cost to ourselves, a hard reset, which is coming whether we want it or not. Whatever it is (most likely economic collapse), a great many people will be very, very unhappy and desperate as a result. There lies opportunity, which we must seize. Yes, one possible short-term result is that our current rulers see their thrones of power shaken, and respond by assigning people like us the role of scapegoat. (Robert Hugh Benson's *Lord of the World* proceeds somewhat in this vein, though presumably we can ignore the eschaton for the current analysis.) This is where guns come in. The other possible short-term result is that those prepared to throw our rulers from their thrones, and bring about a new order of things, can use such a fracture to restore the world.

I am perfectly well aware that this sounds insane to those on the Left, who really believe that they are on the right side of inevitable history, and that I am spinning a lurid fantasy of doom followed by victory to comfort myself at their certain triumph, which they know, they just know, will bring the secular eschaton, any day now. But I have history on my side, not them; if one thing characterizes today's Left, other than evil, it is lack of historical knowledge. Someone is Pollyanna, but it is not me.

Naturally, given the likely future, we should be preparing. There is a great deal good with Dreher's recommendations of spiritual preparation, and it dovetails well with the creation, now, of networks of those who will adopt a more aggressive, active, coordinated role upon the onset of a societal fracture. If those networks are not formed now, they will be difficult to form later, when the time comes. (If the time never comes, that is just the way it is, but that seems unlikely.) What those are, I don't really know yet, though I have some inkling. What I do know is

that, despite attempts at censorship, modern technology allows those potentially involved to find each other, and we should be doing that—in secret, at least in part, to blunt the inevitable attacks.

After the reset, what we'll get is new politics. Dreher says, "As far as we can tell, there is no new political religion brewing in beer halls or coffeehouses." He's wrong there; whatever it will be already exists, although it is unlikely to be wholly new. It just lacks the right leaders and the right fertile ground, and those will arrive. I do worry, though, that even a reality-based, reborn, yet still rich, society will find fresh new ways to be stupid. I imagine a society that can be great, the High Middle Ages with rockets, but what is the evidence that, given human nature, that society can ever exist? Maybe human nature just won't permit it; maybe people want comfort and vice, if they can afford it, not great things, and always will. But that is also a problem for Future Charles! Or, more likely, his great-grandchildren.

And when, after the fire, we have won? Dreher quotes dissidents who are very proud that Christians did not seek vengeance after the fall of Communism. That's very nice of them. But what it ignores is that neither did they seek justice, the reification of which is often indistinguishable from vengeance, the difference lying only in the heart of the punisher. This was a gross error. Once the Left is broken, and their nasty ideology permanently discredited, whatever the mechanism, meting out justice and ensuring that ideology never rises again are both essential. The best historical example of a process along those lines is post-World War II denazification, but not one cut short by new geopolitical reality as that one was, rather a permanent one. Yes, there will have to be rigorous punishments for some on the Left, just as there were at Nuremberg. Mostly, though, it will have to be permanent denial of civil rights, such as public political participation, or the ability to teach, and denial of the ability to cause trouble or influence others, such as forbidding all access to media and the internet. Is that itself a modest type of "soft totalitarianism"? Yup. Someone must rule; classical liberalism, where the ideas of John Stuart Mill underpin society, doesn't work. Dreher, in another one of his confusions, calls for a return to classical liberalism, which he fails to see inevitably led to where we are today, and only ever tolerated men like him on sufferance. No thanks. I'm fine with doing

to the Left, forever, what Dreher accurately complains they now do to us. If they don't like it, they can find a new country. Let's get on with it.