

Countercultural Christian Movements: The Beloved Community and The Benedict
Option

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....ii

Introduction.....1

What’s Wrong with America?.....4

Christian Inclination to Address Societal Ills.....4

Flawed American Society.....7

Flawed American System.....13

Proposed Solutions.....18

Theological Foundations.....20

Human Nature.....20

View of the Other.....25

Role of Suffering.....30

Predictions for Intentional Community Building.....40

Conclusion.....48

Bibliography.....51

Abstract

Intentional religious communities litter the history of America. This paper highlights and compares two different visions of said communities; Martin Luther King, Jr's vision of the Beloved Community and contemporary writer Rod Dreher's vision of the Benedict Option. By addressing the theological and foundational differences between the two, this project reveals the role of Christian belief in the survival of social experiments as well as the inextricably intertwined nature of religion and social life. The character and aims of the Beloved Community and the Benedict Option reveal King and Dreher's theological differences. An additional look at two other communities, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Christian Faith-and-Life Community (CFLC) further relays the importance of religious belief regarding responses to cultural realities.

Keywords: intentional communities, Beloved Community, Benedict Option

Introduction

Urgent and stark calls against the moral decline of society and subsequent judgment from the heavenly realms are an ever-present theme in Christian belief. Prophets cried out against the idolatrous tendencies of the Israelites, Jesus overturned money changing tables in the Temple, pious desert wanderers rejected the plebian faith of the masses, a German monk defied the prevailing theology of the established church, a Baptist preacher opposed racial hatred and systemic injustice in favor of love, and a southern conservative Orthodox journalist bemoans the rapidly changing and chaotic cultural norms of America. The tendency for Christian leaders to speak out against what they see as unethical social interactions boasts a storied past. However, the specific ill they bemoan may vastly change given their particular historical context. Racial injustice and the decline of Western Christianity exist as two different catalysts for public lamentation. And yet, their critics see them both as eternally significant and crucial points of Christian ethical living. Martin Luther King, Jr. took up the cry against racial injustice in America in the 1950s and 1960s as he tenuously fell into a leading role in the Civil Rights Movement. The lamentation about the departure from traditional Christian values plaguing American culture in the twenty-first century forms the basis of Rod Dreher's encouragements for a comprehensive reordering of Christian practice. Both men create their unique visions of ideal communal life as additions to the age-old tradition of opposing and recreating American society based on Christian belief and practice.

This project seeks to make sense of the foundational principles, prominent theological understandings, and goals of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rod Dreher as they relate to Christian intentional community building. King's efforts aim towards the

creation of a diverse and unified humanity called the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community would be a racially diverse and equal existence of all humans. This dream also widens in scope over time to include solutions to all social injustices, not just racial injustice.

Dreher's work focuses on a conservative Christian countercultural movement known as the Benedict Option. Published in 2017, Dreher's book *The Benedict Option* expounds on the tactics of this new counterculture and the urgency with which contemporary Christians should adopt a new way of life that directly opposes the left-leaning tide of American culture. *The Benedict Option* met mixed reviews: various Christian leaders, writers, and thinkers either wholeheartedly supported or rejected Dreher's propositions. Dreher's version of the Benedict Option includes strategic disengagement from the world to reorient traditional Christians to practices and beliefs so that they might preserve the faith for future generations. Dreher suggests several practical methods of distancing from society, including withdrawing Christian children from public schools to educate them communally and with a focus on tradition and practice, disengaging from technology and social media to avoid the ills of a capitalistic and controlling narrative, and physically living in neighborhoods or small communities surrounded by other like-minded Christians in order to craft communal responses to cultural changes and realities.

I will focus primarily on King and Dreher's theological differences.

Understanding their views of the religious implications of the founding of America, the contemporary problems in morality, and their proposed solution clarifies their calls for

countercultural life. Though they maintain different understandings of society and the responsibility of Christians to said society, they both base their beliefs on their Christian faith and practice. In addition, a discussion of their theological beliefs regarding human nature, view of others, and the role of suffering contributes to an understanding of how the two movements relate to one another. Their theological views reveal their beliefs regarding the ethical responsibilities of American Christian as well as the implications of their proposed communities. In addition, a brief discussion of two other intentional communities, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Christian Faith and Life Community will contribute to a further understanding of the implications of the Benedict option.

By addressing both Dreher and King's work, I hope to compare the two as countercultural movements and to understand their relation to one another as American Christian movements. Though both visions emerge from within American Christianity, they represent two vastly different expressions of Christianity. One focuses on justice and specific political engagement, while the other prioritizes discipline and tradition. In other words, the differences between the two men reveal that Christianity does not encourage one specific version of practice, specifically in the realm of community and intentional living. Rather, because King and Dreher focus on vastly different aspects of human life, understand America and Christianity in varying ways, and propose different solutions and encouragements for faithful practice, it becomes clear that Christian belief can, and does, provide foundations for diverse manifestations of social engagement in America.

In addition, a study of King and Dreher exposes how intertwined Christian belief and practice and political and social life are in America. Each man, in his own way, provides a comprehensive vision for exactly how American Christians should engage with social systems. Their emphases on tangible efforts reveal the depth of their belief, and frankly the depth of the American tradition, that religion, specifically Christianity, and cultural, social, and political engagement remain interconnected. King and Dreher focus on different issues plaguing America, and their solutions naturally follow the differences in their thinking. King emphasizes direct political actions meant to realize the Beloved Community physically in American society. Dreher highlights reinvigorated personal and local belief in order to recapture authentic Christian practice and belief. Based on their understandings of the central failings at end, their countercultural solutions make sense. This project seeks to explain the differences between the two men's views and describe the naturally resulting visions for countercultural Christian communities to provide a closer look at the relationship between Christian belief and community life in America.

What's Wrong with America?

Christian Inclination to Address Societal Ills

Rod Dreher and Martin Luther King, Jr. come from the Christian tradition and share the idea that Christian belief holds the antidote to the decline of morality in America. King lamented the cemented state of racial injustice in American life in the mid twentieth century that defied an image of a unified humanity. He opposed the way of

segregated life based on his understandings of the Kingdom of God and the Sermon on the Mount. These images animated his hope that America could make good on its promissory note it had previously failed to cash in. Dreher laments the contemporary culture shift away from traditional Christian values as it will lead Americans further away from God and godly life. He hopes that renewing Christian practice in will reorient American society to a higher, divine truth and way of life. They share the tendency to critique and suggest improvements for the way people act in society based on their theological beliefs. Both leverage their Christian beliefs in their attempts to fix society.

King espoused a personal responsibility for Christians to improve society based on the Christian understanding of love. In a sermon titled “Paul’s Letter to American Christians”, King used the style and language of the Apostle Paul to admonish the American church. He applauded the technological and economic growth of America but chastised the failings of its citizens to “make of it a brotherhood.”¹ The advances of the nation meant nothing without racial justice and a sense of unity among people. For King, Christian belief and practice necessarily resulted in racial justice because it mirrored the love of God for humans and served as a way of imitating Jesus Christ. King obviously and intentionally sought interfaith cooperation because he so highly prioritized human dignity, but he does base his understanding of ideal human society on his Christian theological views about the diversity and oneness of the Kingdom of God. King believed Christians must defy oppression based on the nature and actions of the divine. For King, God intimately cared about and worked to redeem the oppressed and also rebuked the

¹ King, Jr., Martin Luther. “Paul’s Letter to American Christians”. 1956. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute.

oppressor. Imitating the divine then must mean that humans, specifically those in America, should confront injustice in their society. King stated that people “cannot be complacent” and urges them “not to take that attitude for it might be true that this new age is inevitable but we can speed it up.”² He argued that Christians could not simply wait for God to act, but that they must involve themselves in the business of justice in order to hasten its arrival. In King’s view, engaging in nonviolent direct action to oppose practices of segregation or injustice served as the best way to fix what so terribly ails America. By doing so, humans, specifically but not only Christians, engage in the divine order as it naturally tends towards justice and order.

Dreher also believes Christians must address flaws in current society. In his recent work, *Live Not by Lies*, Dreher argues that contemporary American society challenges truth as understood by Christian belief. In other words, Dreher understands society as losing something that it once had; truth about correct human living based on Christian understandings. While King pointed out an unrealized aspect of true Christian belief, Dreher points to a loss of Christian belief as the inherent flaw in American society. As a result, he argues that Christians have a moral responsibility to reclaim correct Christian living to prevent a collective loss of truth.

King works to create a new version of morality based on Christian theological principles, while Dreher works to reclaim a previous and purer version of morality that generations of intellectual and material progress tainted. Because Christians bearers of ultimate truth, they are responsible for the preservation and dissemination of that truth. In

² King. “The Birth of a New Age”. 1956.

address this moral decline, Dreher encourages Christians to focus on inclusion in small communities that live out correct, historical practice and cement the right way of living in its members. He does not suggest targeted political action to reassert public adherence to Christian tradition. Rather, he insists on a revival of practices that ensure the survival of Christian living as a witness against the ills of society. Thus, by honing individual faith and practice, American Christians will embody the ultimate truth and oppose the notion that current individualistic society provides the best way of life. By living out the truth, Christians will both redeem American Christianity from its flaws and eventually redeem society from its evils.

Flawed American Society

However, King and Dreher maintain different views about the fundamental flaw in American social interactions that Christians should address. As a result, they suggest different cultural solutions. King cited injustice, specifically racial injustice, as the core evil of American life and focused on an interpersonal movement aimed at creating a new way of justice. Dreher claims that a progressive social agenda will prove to be openly, violently hostile towards traditional conservative Christian practice. He encourages traditional believers to center their lives around protecting their traditions and way of life so that they can weather the coming progressive storm. Both men base their assessments of American society on their religious beliefs but differ in their understanding of the problem.

King's dream of the Beloved Community challenged the racial injustice in America. He stayed convinced of the evil of segregation as well as of a hope that this injustice could be overturned.³ Though King also spoke out against the injustice of economic systems and war, his primary focus, and this project's, remained racial injustice in America. He argued that "segregation is evil, segregation is against the will of the Almighty God, segregation is opposed to everything that democracy stands for, segregation is nothing but slavery covered up with the niceties of complexities."⁴ For King, the inability of most white Americans to think of and treat African Americans as equal brothers and citizens was a massive social and theological failure. As a result, he encouraged and engaged in direct actions meant to expose and challenge the depth of segregation in American society and create opportunities to realize the Beloved Community.

King believed the root of racial injustice stemmed from flawed theological thinking about the worth of human beings. Racism and its social effects directly contradicted the idea of inherent human dignity based on God's love for humans.⁵ He argued that God's approached humans with agape love. King defined agape love as "an understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill toward all men" and "attempts to regard every man as a neighbor."⁶ The flaw then, of white Americans to treat black Americans as brothers directly opposed God's design. King believed the divine endowed humans

³ King, Jr., Martin Luther. "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore". New York, NY. 1956.

⁴ King, Martin Luther. "The Birth of a New Age".

⁵ Ansbro. John J. *Martin Luther King, Jr: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*. New York: Madison House, 2000.

⁶ Ansbro. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*. 8, 9.

with love and worth. Racial injustice insulted, even killed, this dignity. In his view, racial injustice not only resulted from specific people, but from the natural outpouring of sin that distanced humans from the divine. This not to suggest that King excused the horrors of racial discrimination and hate; clearly, he stood firmly against them. More aptly, King understood racism as a result of a failed understanding of God and humans, and the relationship between the, that centered on sacrificial love and dignity that superseded any human thought or social inclination. Because he understood this in a specifically Christian viewpoint, he encouraged the responsibility of Christians, as well as lamented their refusal to uphold it, to enact the love and understanding of humans in American society.

King's vision began as a lament about the state of American society but ends in hope. The depth of grief over racial injustice is, and should be, staggering. However, his lament turned to hope because he deeply believed that God both cared about and worked in the flaws of the world to bring about justice. As just discussed, the reality of God's love for humans remained intrinsically important. The reality of agape served as a model for the right kind of social interaction that was required and best fit humanity. God already proved it possible, so Christians could trust that the model of agape could emerge victorious. King insisted that those who fight for justice must "not lose faith in man and certainly not in God."⁷ His eschatological understandings that a new kingdom eventually comes to right the transgressions of the world underpinned his conviction of inevitable

⁷ King. "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore".

and imminent justice.⁸ Just like his earlier admonitions of America sound like prophets of old who lamented the detestable oppression and idolatry of ancient Israel, his hope for America rings with the same anticipation of seemingly impossible promises of eternal redemption for Israel. The night may be the long, but the morning is not far over the horizon.

In contrast, Dreher paints a bleak, if not entirely hopeless, vision of America. He sees American society as becoming impossibly and violently hostile toward traditional Christianity, even potentially threatening its existence. Dreher insists that “culture has turned powerfully against traditional Christians.”⁹ He argues the trend toward what he calls “Progressive” social orders diametrically opposes a traditional Christian way of life that originates from and glorifies traditional Western society. He claims that “a progressive- and profoundly anti-Christian militancy- is steadily overtaking society”¹⁰ and that “the greatest danger comes from the liberal secular order itself.”¹¹ Dreher begs the “traditional and conservative Christians” to identify with the feelings of impending doom. Dreher proposes that traditional, Western Christians remove themselves from social interactions that do not support, privilege, or protect Christianity. This withdrawal serves to both shore up their defenses against the coming war and to ensure they do not lose any more irreplaceable aspects of their identity. Christians must safeguard the

⁸Marsh, Charles. *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.

⁹ Dreher, Rod. *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. 9. Sentinel. New York, New York. 2017. Print.

¹⁰ Dreher, Rod. *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*. Xiii. Sentinel. New York City, New York. 2020. Print.

¹¹ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 236.

survival of their faith and “build a Christian way of life that stands as an island of sanctity and stability amid the high tide of liquid modernity.”¹² Dreher stresses the need to rebuild cultural memory and retrain believers in soon-forgotten practice so as not to completely lose his way of life. He calls this the Benedict Option, and argues that he cannot stress enough how important it is for Christians to resist the tide of evil in the coming years.

Dreher does not provide a clear definition of traditional Christianity. While he cites Eastern Orthodoxy, the example of the early church from the Book of Acts, Western traditions, and conservative American Christian practices as foundational to this version of Christianity, Dreher fails to fully identify what traditional Christianity means. He insists that American Christians “cannot understand the West apart from the Christian faith, and we cannot understand the Christian faith as we live it today without understanding the history and culture of the West. If future generations fail to learn to love our Western cultural heritage, we will lose it.”¹³ He contends that the ideal American way of life draws on a rich history of religious identification and Western success. As such, it appears that Dreher views traditional Christianity as tied to and defined by vague generalizations of Western culture.

Dreher’s alarm has increased over time. His lament of the state of America shifted to fear. The slow-burning anxiety that he expressed in his 2017 work *The Benedict Option* changes to urgent worry in his 2020 book *Live Not by Lies*, which suggests that the fall of the empire could come any day. In 2017, he insisted that “the hour is late” and

¹² Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. 54.

¹³ Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. 153.

that “this is not a drill,”¹⁴ and in 2020, he cries that “our cause appears lost.”¹⁵ His mourning does not end in hope. He asserts that Christian engagement in strategic withdrawal tactics to preserve historic Christian practice and belief provides a glimmer of light, but he holds little hope for the redemption of American society. He, like the prophets, weeps for the city, but does not follow with a hope-animated image of what American society could become given the right changes.

King and Dreher, though unified in their pursuit of a new version of intentional community, depart from each other in their estimation of the root evil in American interpersonal life and the specific responsibilities of American Christians. King denounced the flawed view of humans that colored American life and led to systemic injustice. He dreamed of a new community that would uphold theological truths of equality. Dreher views American culture as increasingly antagonistic towards traditional Christianity and desires fortification against outside attacks through intense personal devotion. In other words, King desires a new version of collective American society that begins from Christian practice but will eventually encapsulate all of American life, while Dreher desires a new structure of Christian practice that will protect it from the worst aspects of American society and redeem the decline of American Christianity with possible benefits to the whole of society.

¹⁴ Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. 4.

¹⁵ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 214.

Flawed American System

In addition to their laments about American society, King and Dreher both highlight aspects of the founding of America in their interpretations of the moral decline dominating society. King argued that a collective failure to adhere to the literal words of founding documents led to increased suffering and injustice. King frequently referred to the passages of equality as they both underpinned the foundation of America and served as unfulfilled promises for many. He insisted that the notion that “all men are created equal” was true and theologically correct, but that over time, American society hypocritically failed to uphold this truth and defied correct religious thinking. Dreher argues that the Deist and humanist cultural inclinations at the time of the Founding laid the foundation for the current predicament facing conservative Christians. He views the doctrine of the separation of church and state as one that ensured an eventual backlash against public practice of religion. Both men view the founding of American as intrinsically relevant to the crisis they see in their culture.

King lamented the deviation of Americans from the founding documents that espouse correct theological thinking about human dignity. He read the words of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as affirmations of the “Biblical term the image of God”, or the “innate worth” that is “universally shared in equal portions by all men.”¹⁶ Despite their nonreligious nature, King believed these documents contained correct religious truths that should guide American morality. These documents serve as the basis for all American life, so their statements on the inherent equality of all people

¹⁶ King. “The Ethical Demands for Integration.” *A Testament of Hope*. 119.

should also serve as the law of the land. He celebrated their groundbreaking attention and devotion to equality, stating,

This idea of the dignity and worth of human personality is expressed eloquently and unequivocally in the Declaration of Independence. “All men,” it says, “are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Never has a sociopolitical document proclaimed more profoundly and eloquently the sacredness of human personality.¹⁷

For King, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence expressly stated America’s foundation as a nation of equal citizens based on a religious notion of divinely given worth. However, the reality of racial injustice directly contradicted the founding documents and revealed the hypocrisy and failings of American religious thought. King did not refer to the religious views, or lack thereof, of the founders themselves or the general religious norms of the day, but rather clung to the literal words and meanings of the documents. He did not attempt to argue for a utopian, nonracist spirit as the foundation of America but pointed to the belief of human equality spelled out for the young nation as it should guide and define American society. He insisted that the founding documents presented an ethical responsibility of equality that remained yet unrealized in American life. These passages in the founding documents both convicted white Americans who practiced racial injustice and disappointed African Americans who hoped for the embodied truth of the statements. In essence, King exposed the partial

¹⁷ King. “The Ethical Demands for Integration.” *A Testament of Hope*. 119.

application of the Constitution and the unjust reality of its citizens failing to uphold its sentiments. Their failing to do so resulted not from a declined relevance of the words, but from a declined belief in universal dignity of all humans. American morality had failed and was made even more tragic for King because of the clear inclusion of religiously-minded statements that could have led to a just and inclusive society.

Dreher, on the other hand, suggests that the founding of America resulted from already debased religious and moral convictions and would therefore naturally lead to a dissolution of religious freedoms. Specifically, he highlights the doctrine of the separation of church and state as a noble idea but one that was actually naturally antagonistic to a moral society and the ability to maintain religious convictions. He insists that “religious tolerance... laid the groundwork for excluding religion from the public square by making it a matter of private individual choice.”¹⁸ Dreher concedes that the time-honored tradition of separation of church and state prevented violence in the early years of the nation, but believes that the religious freedom of traditional Christians in the twenty-first century serves as the cost of peace in these early years of the nation. In his history of the decline of Western Christianity over time, Dreher cites the Enlightenment and the trends towards humanism, the very trends underpinning the founding of America, as an attack on Christianity. He views the trend toward humanism as an idolization of the individual’s desires which proved inherently opposed to Christian belief and practice. He argues that “from the Christian point of view, Enlightenment liberalism contained the seeds of Christianity’s undoing.”¹⁹ Dreher sees the very thoughts that are so

¹⁸ Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. 36.

¹⁹ Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. 36.

celebrated as revolutionary and intrinsic to American success as deeply flawed regarding true religious thought. By separating church and state, the Founders relinquished any power Christianity might have possessed as an official religion to the detriment of American citizens. He sees the privatization of religion as a chink in the American armor that eventually leads to a complete dissolution of morality. Though he does not suggest that an established religion would have been a better foundation for America, by recounting the inclusion of the privatization of religion and the flawed religious views of the founders as leading America to the current reality of hostility towards traditional Christianity, it Dreher borders on suggesting a preference for an explicitly Christian nation.

At the same time that he laments the institution of separation of church and state and freedom of religion, Dreher also highly emphasizes the need for Christians to fight for the right of religious freedom. Though he suggests that this very idea of freedom made it that much easier for nonreligious thought and groups to rise up to extinguish Christianity, religious liberty remains necessary in order to preserve Christian for the future. Christians must not lose the ability to practice or observe their faith publicly without backlash. Dreher views religious freedom as an inferior choice to an established national religion that, despite its flaws, must be maintained at all costs. Without it, Christianity teeters towards complete annihilation in the coming years. Dreher critiques the time-honored traditions of religious liberty and separation of church and state as concessions to a secular cultural order that infringes on the rights of Christianity.

Dreher and King view the founding of America as crucial to the creation of mainstream American culture. Dreher criticizes aspects of the founding of America as hidden secular agendas that would later lead to hostility and loss of freedoms for traditional American Christians. King exposed the hypocrisy of the American majority by referring to the overt statements of human equality in the revered founding documents. The difference in the two men's approaches reveals their view of the possibility of moral improvement of American society.

King clearly expresses specific disappointment in the inability of Americans to live out what he viewed as the foundational beliefs of America. This did not lead him to completely reject the American experiment, however. Instead, King engaged in an honest appraisal of the failures of American culture based on its stated goals and system for society. He offered hope for the future of America if Americans could regain what they already possessed in the sentiments of the founding documents. King did not maintain an overly optimistic view of the future of America solely based on American exceptionalism. Rather, he lauded the founding documents for their instances of right theological thinking included in its discussion of forms of government and maintained his belief that correct belief creates ethical living. Dreher focuses on a doctrine included in the founding of the nation as a long-term evil. Freedom of religion prevented forced uniform Christian belief and conflict in an already tense atmosphere, but it would lead to foundations for attack on Christian's rights to publicly observe their faith. For Dreher, the hope for improvement in the morality of American society seems less certain because of the flaws he sees in the original attitude toward religion. He despairs that because

America never had a right relationship with Christianity to begin with, the future does not hold much hope.

Proposed Solutions

The most notable difference between these two propositions, the pursuit of the Beloved Community and the push for the Benedict Option, reveals itself in the end state they hope to achieve. The Beloved Community sought complete justice and the end of all forms of oppression and hatred between people. The Benedict Option encourages a practice of intentional separation from the world characterized by inclusion of only specific people and practices. These different goals stand out as the starkest differences between the two visions for community life.

The Beloved Community emerges as the peak of King's work and dreams of the future, but does not exist solely as an earthly vision. King frequently suggests that the end of the work of the movement is

reconciliation. The end is the creation of a beloved community. The end is the creation of a society where men will live together as brothers. An end is not retaliation but redemption.²⁰

Everything he and those engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, specifically Christians, do must be enacted towards this goal. The movement that cares primarily about humans and their inherent dignity sets its sights on a reality where that dignity is recognized and realized by everyone. However, King maintains only the divine "new kingdom" that

²⁰ King. "Birth of A New Age".

overturns the old and redeems the evil so present achieves this envisioned reality. The desire for the realization of the Beloved Community must also defer to an eschatological timeline. King reminds his audience that they “live in both time and eternity; both in heaven and earth.”²¹ In other words, humans should prioritize and fight for the Beloved Community, but also understand that the dream only fully exists in a perfect time still to come. The true Beloved Community will only be brought to fruition at the end of time when the divine intrudes upon the current world to replace it with the new and better world. Theological understandings of the Kingdom of Heaven led to this eternal framing. Humans should work to realize the Beloved Community on earth, but King saw himself as engaging in a divine movement towards justice that far exceeded him and the abilities of the limited Civil Rights Movement.

On the other hand, Dreher espouses the Benedict Option as an attainable earthly way of life to be embarked upon as soon as possible in order to preserve traditional Christianity. He promotes a “mission... to build the underground resistance to the occupation to keep alive the memory of who we were and who we are, and to stoke the fires of desire for the true God.”²² Dreher’s Benedict Option trends toward earthly expression because he fears the earthly attack on Christianity from American culture. He fears the eventual extinction of traditional, conservative Christianity because it would affect current temporal life. He prioritizes the preservation and restoration of practice.

Dreher calls for intense exclusion in order to ensure survival of the faith. He insists that contemporary Christian should adopt a strategy to “draw close to authentic

²¹ King. “Paul’s Letter to American Christians”.

²² Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 214.

spiritual leadership- clerical, lay, or both- and form small cells of fellow believers with whom she can pray, sing, study Scripture and read other books important to their mission.”²³ Though he uses apocalyptic language to stress the importance of the Benedict Option, his solution stays decidedly earth-bound and specific to contemporary American culture. Dreher considers himself as part of the long narrative of the decline of Christianity, but he clearly cares specifically about what he sees as the current American failure. His end state is much more achievable than the Beloved Community. Though King and Dreher both imagine the ideal Christian way of life to center on intentional community building, their theological backgrounds lead to different timelines and expectations regarding the earthly feasibility and realization of their dreams.

Theological Foundations

Human Nature

As evidenced in their discussions regarding the American system, King and Dreher maintain different views of the most basic aspects of human nature. Their understandings of the capacities and limits of humans influence their visions of ideal Christian life. King prefers a balanced understanding of human nature that neither overly prioritizes human proclivity to sin nor overemphasizes human ability to improve. Dreher does not reject balance per se, but rather critiques what he refers to as the “Myth of Progress” that suggests that the future of humanity, specifically in America, naturally tends towards the best possible outcome. He does not regard humans as totally depraved

²³ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 18

and without redemption, as evidenced by his belief that rededicating oneself to true Christian belief and practice produces a strengthened and improved believer. However, he does reject the notion that humans become more morally right over time which he sees as having taken over collective American thought. The differences in the two men's thoughts create different expectations or hopes for the realization of necessary change in American society.

King's view of human nature attempted to balance the claims of liberal theology and neo-orthodoxy regarding sin and the capacity for good. Ansbro argues that while in graduate school, King actively tried to strike the middle ground between the two schools of thought "while avoiding the extreme positions of both."²⁴ Ansbro suggests that King viewed the depth of depravity typical of the neo-orthodox view and the intense optimism of change of liberal Protestant theology as overstatements of the truth. Rather, he believed that "man by nature is neither good nor bad, but has potentialities for either."²⁵ King argued that humans were neither destined for sin nor destined for greatness. Rather, he emphasized that the same theological belief of the image of God in humans that made racial injustice so repugnant created the possibility of good in individual lives. The image of God not only meant that humans possessed an inherent dignity, but also an inherent possibility of grace-driven goodness. This tempered view of the capacity of good in humans meant that King's lament of injustice could be met with tempered expectations. Unlike the generation of the social gospel adherents before him, King maintained no rosy or inevitable understanding of moral progress. Instead, he argued that the work of grace

²⁴ Ansbro. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*. 87.

²⁵ Ansbro. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*. 87.

given to humans by the divine enabled hope and reconciliation, thus making realistic the cheery claims of liberal theology. This, in tandem with his rejection of the ultimate and irreversible depravity of man, provided King with a tempered hope in the ability of humans to overcome the evils of racial injustice.

In addition, King frequently encouraged a return to a focus on Jesus, “who emphasized the need for humanity to remain conscious of its humble dependence on God as the source of all being and all goodness.”²⁶ King’s understanding of the person and teaching of Jesus Christ radically shaped by his understanding of humanity. In Jesus, King saw the ultimate example of a human who remained both aware of its tendency to sin and thus need for the intervention and direction of God, and the capacity for good through said dependence on the divine. For King, Jesus revealed the very essence and truest form of humanity and helped humans understand both their capacity and need in ways that necessarily led to a hope for the change of society.

Dreher’s position on the essence of human nature bears similarities to King’s balance, but differs in application. Dreher maintains a level of hope for individual capacity for good based on previous examples of saints and faithful communities. He points to key figures and moments from the past to prove the achievability of adherence to traditional truth. In this way, he shares King’s belief in the possibility of good in humans. He shares King’s notions that the capacity for good derives from a Christian life attuned to God. However, whereas King maintained this belief both within and outside of specifically Christian communities, Dreher’s understanding of the capacity for good

²⁶ Ansbro. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*. 88.

necessarily relies on a high level of previous devotion to faith that cannot be achieved outside of traditional Christian belief and practice. In other words, Dreher maintains a much higher level of hope for those already within correct Christian community than he does for those without. Dreher limits hope based on his understanding of how one achieves good.

Even in his discussions about the potential capacity for good in humanity, Dreher rejects what he sees as blindly idealistic views of human nature that insist on the gradual and inevitable improvement of humans. He dismisses the notion that simply the passage of time overcomes sin. Dreher holds to the Christian “belief in the fallibility of human nature” and that “all men and women... are sinners in need of the Redeemer.”²⁷ In doing so, Dreher more closely resembles the neo-orthodox views on the inescapable depravity of humankind. Dreher criticizes what he calls a specifically American view that time naturally enables progress. In fact, he sharply calls Americans to “throw away this crippling nostalgia for the future, especially the habit we Americans, a naturally optimistic people, have of assuming that everything will ultimately work out for the best.”²⁸

He critiques and rejects the collective American view of the inevitability of moral progress because it does not adequately account for the reality of sin in human nature that does not change from generation to generation. He cites various leaders as having supported and promoted this idea of moral progress. In his introduction of his critique of the “Myth of Progress”, Dreher argues “President Barak Obama nodded to the Myth of

²⁷ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 64-65.

²⁸ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 66.

Progress when he cited a line popularized by Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”²⁹ This point means to show both President Obama and King as typical proponents of the belief in gradual morality. Dreher shows the scope of this myth; even the most famed leaders fall prey to its lies. However, the implicit statement that King unswervingly believed in moral progress is false. This quote is a simplified and flawed reading of King’s thinking. When he used the phrase the “arc of the universe”, King did not refer to the trajectory of human history, but the movement and will of God. He did suggest the existence of the gradual realization of justice over time, but because of his belief in the will and work of God to bring it about. To claim he staunchly promoted of the Myth of Progress of humankind is erroneous. King did not believe in human capability of good on their own or apart from the divine. Rather, he pinpoints the working of God, specifically as it reaches a climax in the Easter event, as key to the realization of justice. In his book detailing faith in social justice movements, Charles Marsh argues that “the beloved community is the new social space of reconciliation introduced into history by the Church empowered by the “triumph and beat of the drums of Easter.”³⁰ In other words, the belief that Easter represents the most fundamental reality of evil and injustice’s defeat animates and encourages humans to both believe that God works to overturn injustice in the real human world and in the possibility of their own involvement in the work of the divine like Jesus. Dreher fails to understand this nuance in the thinking of King so he labels him as one of the many

²⁹ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 50.

³⁰ Marsh. *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*. 50.

followers of the Myth of Progress. Dreher's emphasis on human sinfulness influences his belief that only dedicated local communities of serious individuals within the faith can stand against the increasing moral decay that threatens the future of Christianity in America and does not lead to any hope regarding a reversal of said moral decline in the collective society.

Though King and Dreher appear to have similar views regarding individual capacity or possibility for good, King's views of the movement and work of God in that capacity lead him to pursue a more hopeful project of ameliorating the ills of injustice. Both men insist on the idea that capacity for good relies on the intervention of the divine. However, Dreher also introduces and tempers his discussions regarding good with the belief in inescapable human sin. Though this does tend to inject a level of Niebuhrian realism into his proposals for a practical countercultural Christian life, it also means that Dreher lacks the same hope for society that animates King and the Civil Rights Movement. The differences between the two men's understanding of human nature naturally influences aspects of their proposals for ideal communal life.

View of the Other

Dreher also differs from King regarding his understanding of the other and the neighbor. While the guiding force of the Civil Rights Movement and of King's vision for the Beloved Community centered on the inherent dignity of the human being and the importance of others, Dreher sees others as potential threats believers must defend against. Again, both men prioritize their religious foundations, but in different ways.

King espoused a specific theological understanding of the value of humans. He believed in the worth of humans because of their creation in the image of the divine. God ascribes dignity to every human, which others cannot then take away. Again, this theologically based view of humans grounds the vehement opposition to systems of interpersonal injustice. The racial injustice present in America defies this understanding of the relationship between God and humans. King argued that “the underlying philosophy of Christianity is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation.”³¹ King pleaded with humankind, especially Christians, to take on responsibility for one another and to see themselves as a unified group dependent on each other.³² He insisted that Christians must “look deep down within every man and see within him something of Godliness.”³³ For him, a belief in the divinely appointed nature of humankind directly opposes the false sense of hierarchy and superiority so integral to the practice of segregation. This belief of the inherent dignity of humans meant that the individual can and should view themselves and others as worthy of respect and love. The Civil Rights Movement did not feature inherently inwardly-focused mindsets. Instead, it emphasized both the individual self and the neighbor as equally dignified. Thus, Christians are responsible to treat and think of others as divinely appointed.

King focused in particular on the words and actions of Jesus, who was believed to have maintained a specifically others-focused way of life. King saw Jesus as someone who intentionally moves into places of injustice and hurt in order to make things right.

³¹ King. “Paul’s Letter to American Christians”.

³² King, Jr., Martin Luther. “On Being a Good Neighbor”. *Strength to Love. Strength to Love*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

³³ King. “The Birth of a New Age”.

He eats, walks, heals, and lives with the marginalized of society and has no care for the social status of religious and cultural elites. He refuses to abide by a notion that some humans are inferior to others and makes that clear in his actions and words. He fights and calls out injustice and reaffirms the inherent dignity of humans. King's contribution to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s revolved around the actions, words, and reality of the person of Jesus.

In contrast, Dreher presents others as potential threats to be protected against. Dreher encourages a separation from the rest of the world while King stresses the importance of gritty immersion in communities in order to affect change. Dreher views others as challenges to the ability of the conservative, traditional Christian to practice their faith publicly. He insists that "orthodox Christians in the emerging era will need to adapt to an era of hostility."³⁴ He argues that freedom of practice and purity of belief are under siege by hostile outsiders. He highlights what he calls the "Social Justice Warrior (SJWs)" as an embodiment of antagonistic modernism.³⁵ He defines the SJWs as

Middle-class, secular, educated young people wracked by guilt and anxiety over their own privilege, alienated from their own traditions and desperate to identify with something, or someone, to give them a sense of purpose... SJW ideals are transforming elite institutions and networks of power and influence.³⁶

To combat this rising social justice tide, Dreher suggests that Christians must begin "building communities, institutions, and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast,

³⁴ Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. 182.

³⁵ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 46.

³⁶ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 42.

and eventually overcome the occupation.”³⁷ By referencing an occupation reminiscent of France in World War II, Dreher casts those who agree with the social justice ideology as irredeemable enemies. In an interview, Greg Thompson³⁸ suggests that Dreher deliberately creates a list of enemies in *Live Not by Lies*, what he calls “a menacing cast of malignant actors.”³⁹ Thompson also claims that Dreher engages in “an unChristian exercise in dehumanization and an adolescent orgy of name-calling.”⁴⁰ Dreher paints those who oppose his cultural ideas as aggressors bent on systemically destroying Christianity. He then encourages intentional distance as far as possible from the demonic other in order to preserve self.

Dreher highlights Jesus as a paragon of perfect Christian discipline. His few citations of Jesus’s words come from his encouragements or instructions for physical human actions. Dreher’s work includes Jesus, but not in the same way that King includes him. Dreher uses Jesus to example ideal Christian behavior and to emphasize the importance of rigorous personal devotion.

By suggesting that the day soon comes when Christians in America will be wanted criminals, Dreher casts the conservative Christian as a victimized minority. In

³⁷ Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. 12.

³⁸ Gregory Thompson is a scholar, writer, and artist of diverse creative background whose work focuses on race, religion, hospitality, and democracy in the United States. He serves as Executive Director of Voices Underground, an initiative to build a national memorial to the Underground Railroad outside of Philadelphia; Research Fellow in African American Heritage at Lincoln University (HBCU); and as Creative Director of Star & Lantern, a new Cocktail Bar in Kennett Square, PA whose story centers in the African American freedom struggle and the Underground Railroad (Opening June 2021). He is the Co-Creator of *Union: The Musical*, a soul and hip-hop based musical about the 1968 Sanitation Workers’ Strike, Co-Author (with Reverend Duke Kwon) of *Reparations: A Christian Call to Repentance and Repair* and is currently writing a work that explores the role of love in the work of Martin Luther King. He holds an M.A. and PhD from the University of Virginia.

³⁹ Thompson, Greg. “Rod Dreher’s Cold War Imagination”. October 2020. Accessed November 26, 2020.

⁴⁰ Thompson. Interview.

fact, he states that American Christians “are a minority now, so let’s be a creative one, offering warm, living, light-filled alternatives to a world growing cold, dead, and dark.”⁴¹ He frequently refers to the arguments of the secularization theory to prove Christianity currently experiences a rapid decline, particularly in younger generations who take up the mantles of social justice and progressive cultural changes. Dreher cites Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* and its claim that the world descends into an irreversible secular demise centered on individualism. James K.A. Smith describes Taylor’s suggestion as a belief that “what erodes in the last half century is precisely these limits on individual fulfillment.”⁴² Dreher repeats Taylor’s historical narrative of the intellectual and cultural shifts away from a medieval sense of an intensely spiritual life full of religious meaning and centered around the church.⁴³

Dreher sees traditional Western Christian expressions as under attack from intellectual sources that challenge the reality of God and the necessity of a traditional Christian life upholding Christian values like monogamous heterosexual marriage. He claims that traditional Christians face possible extinction as the victims of a centuries long trajectory of secularization. Dreher argues that the “recognition that Western society is post-Christian and that absent a miracle, there is no hope of reversing this condition in the foreseeable future”⁴⁴ serves as the most important first step of the Benedict Option.

⁴¹ Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. 99.

⁴² Smith, James K.A. *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. 87. WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI. 2014. Print.

⁴³ Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. Chapter 2.

⁴⁴ Dreher. *The Benedict Option*. 89.

Dreher's creation of a Manichean distinction between good and evil defies insistences of King that prioritizes the inherent worth and honor of human beings.

King carefully identified ideas, like injustice, colonization, and economic asymmetry, as evil, and not the people who engaged in them. King clearly argues that "the tension is at bottom a tension between justice and injustice."⁴⁵ He maintained a distinct understanding of what existed as evil and worth being fought, but never identified that as a specific person. In addition, King never suggested that those who perpetrated injustice were eternally destined to their roles. Instead, he firmly taught the redemption of all humans. Ansbro speaks to King's understanding of universal grace when he says "while denouncing his acts, King could still revere the personality of the segregationist as an image of God, and regard him as a potential member of the beloved community."⁴⁶ The evil systems people took part in embodied the problem, not the humans themselves. King urged his listeners to "respect them and... feel somehow that they can become better than they are."⁴⁷ He upheld the dignity of every human even in addressing evil. Dreher does not offer a theological understanding of humans the same way that King does. For Dreher, the world exists in stark moral binaries where worth depends on religious, or lack thereof, practice.

⁴⁵ King. "Address to MIA Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church". 1956. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute.

⁴⁶ Ansbro. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*. 29.

⁴⁷ King. "Address to MIA Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church".

Role of Suffering

Dreher also differs from King's understandings of suffering. King and Dreher both spoke of suffering as an inescapable aspect of the Christian life and encourage intense preparation so that the individual believer remains faithful through trial. The two men highlighted martyrdom as an ultimate show of devotion to the faith. In addition, both men argued that the evils of suffering eventually produce a greater good afterward. Despite similarities, Dreher deviates from King's understanding of suffering in key ways. He fears a coming persecution and glorifies the role of a suffering martyr in the style of saints of old. Dreher also deviates from King by focusing more on eventual or unrealized suffering. King spoke about both current and predictable suffering. Those engaged in the nonviolent direct action of the Civil Rights Movement understood suffering as a current reality and something to grieve as a manifestation of the evils of segregation and white supremacist thinking. Dreher and King both identified suffering as a crucial aspect of a devoted Christian life based on Christian history, but focused on different manifestations and realities of the suffering of Christians.

King and his co-laborers in the early Civil Rights Movement thought of suffering in tangible and specific ways. Those who marched, sat in, boycotted, and flooded voter registration viewed suffering as an inevitable response to their countercultural nonviolent protests. King openly admitted that engaging in active "transformed nonconformity, which is always costly and never altogether comfortable, may mean walking through the valley of the shadow of suffering, losing a job or having a six-year-old daughter ask,

“Daddy, why do you go to jail so much?”⁴⁸ He insisted that taking on the role of opposing injustice incurred certain consequences. He did not speak of suffering as an ethereal possibility, but as a tangible and previously experienced reality. King and his compatriots went to jail, survived house bombings, drive-by shootings, and received beatings. Though they anticipated and prepared for jail time and violence, they never desired physical suffering as an outcome and in fact part views it as the very thing they sought to upend. They mourned martyrs like the girls from the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing and honored them as unnecessary damage from an outside evil, not celebrated heroes. People who went to jail did not desire to stay as long as possible to make a point; instead, the arrest itself proved the point and their community sought their release as quickly as possible. They accepted jail time and abuse as inevitable aspects of protest, not badges of honor. Suffering revealed the continuation of an evil long in place with physical outlets.

And yet, despite the horrors of perpetuated, and, in most cases, unwarranted suffering, King believed the ability to take such suffering on without retaliation remained the only way to completely dismantle hate in American society. To King, suffering served a necessary purpose for a transformative change both within individuals and society. The personal transformation of individual bearing of suffering formed the believer into a closer imitation of Jesus Christ. When absorbed as an expression of the Christian method of nonviolence that centered on agape love, the countless wounds borne by those fighting for equality served to erase generations of seemingly irreversible hate in

⁴⁸ King. *Strength to Love*. 19.

society. King insisted that a willingness to take on suffering and hurt and also refusing to hurt others revealed a depth of selfless love. This agape love meant willing the good of the other over individual desires. By bearing the consequences of violence without continuing the cycle of violence, nonviolent protestors affirmed the inherent dignity of their oppressor.

As discussed earlier, a denial of retaliation embodied the belief that oppressors did not exist beyond redemption. King frequently reminded followers that "...we must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy-neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that he is."⁴⁹ King believed that by bearing persecution and violence, they enacted transformative love. By refusing to continue hate, they insisted on a better future for both themselves and their enemies. A society built on love benefitted both friend and enemy alike. He argued that by tirelessly bearing the brunt of suffering without retaliation, "one day we will win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."⁵⁰ This process included some necessary growth pains though. The means to transformation centered on self-sacrifice from the oppressed and a gut-wrenching grief and repentance from the oppressor. King acknowledged that by refusing to retaliate, he exemplified his own innocence and exposed the hatred of those who worked against him. Without seeming self-seeking, this self-sacrificial attitude did depend on the exposure and comparison of evil systems and injustice to the purity and transcendent nature of agape love. King continuously insisted that when agape love

⁴⁹ King. *Strength to Love*. 45.

⁵⁰ King. *Strength to Love*. 51.

serves as the animating force behind bearing suffering individuals and society would transform for the better.

For King, Jesus Christ embodied agape love. Suffering served as a means to partake in Jesus's earthly experience. Jesus's teaching of turning the other cheek and the example of his nonretaliatory acceptance of the suffering he endured for the sake of humanity inspired nonviolence and the tactics of resistance.⁵¹ Suffering was necessary for Jesus, so it must be necessary for those who follow Him. King alluded to this when he called his audience to not "despair if you are condemned and persecuted for righteousness' sake."⁵² One must not scorn condemnation and suffering because they revealed a Christ-like way of life in the individual believer. Love of the "enemy" and the call to live into the example of Christ made suffering an experience one must endure for the sake of coming justice. Believers must take on suffering as an imitation of Jesus, the highest goal of any Christian.

In addition, King saw suffering as the necessary pains of the "gradual victory of the forces of freedom and justice."⁵³ King understood suffering as the necessary and unfortunate sign that goodness, animated by God, worked to defeat the systems of evil and oppression in the world. The fight proved that injustice does not possess the final word on human experience, but that God always opposed it with truth and justice. Enduring suffering for these transcendent ideas provided a way for the Christian to partake of the movement of God in this world. Physical suffering was also seen as shorter

⁵¹ Ansbro. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*.

⁵² King. "Paul's Letter to American Christians".

⁵³ King. "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore".

and less costly than the pain and damage of oppression. Suffering, in any form, resulted from the existence of injustice, but some, like jail time and physical violence, passed. However, others, like segregation, reigned as long-lasting and untenable. Taking on the pain of a moment prevented the future unopposed injustice. Finally, the suffering endured by those who fought for freedom resulted from the evils of racism, not the result of a secularized nation bent on destroying the Christian religion. The initial oppression and suffering endured by African Americans stemmed from an unjust system. The suffering they endured as a result of their fight for civil rights arose from their association with the tide of God working against the evils of the world, but not as a targeted persecution based on their faith. King believed that they endured because they associated themselves with a cause, not because non-Christians sought the removal of Christianity from the nation. He saw suffering as a natural result of working alongside the trajectory and mission of God.

Dreher's view of suffering more closely resembles the call to endure a religious persecution aimed at eradicating Christianity. He encourages an awareness of an ever-intensifying persecution and for traditional Christians to prepare for the coming tribulation. Dreher cries "wherever we hide, they will track us, find us, and punish us if that's what it takes to make this world more perfect"⁵⁴ to American Christians. While Dreher insists that the full depth of suffering will be realized in the looming future, he does suggest that the beginnings of the persecution currently define American life. He cites the backlash against business owners who chose not to engage with homosexual couples, the beginnings of loyalty oaths to diversity, and a growing number of Christians

⁵⁴ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 68.

who struggle to obtain jobs based on their faith as signs of an eminent and greater wave of suffering. Dreher insists that nothing prevents the increase of attacks against traditional Christians due to the ever-declining state of American culture. Believer's only remaining solution depends on mentally, physically, and spiritually preparing for a testing of the faith. Dreher believes an antagonistic non-Christian force increasingly targets American Christians specifically because of their faith.

In addition, Dreher speaks about a coming persecution, not tangible instances of suffering and attacks on traditional Christianity in America. At times, Dreher appears to yearn for the days of ancient Rome where Christians were publicly tortured and the pagan empire was embodied evil incarnate. Though he includes examples of intangible exclusion, Dreher noticeably does not include examples or descriptions of physical violence or suffering against current American Christians. Though he speaks about historical examples of persecution against Christians, his examples highlight international instances outside of America. He cannot point to experiences of bodily abuse, lynching, political disenfranchisement, overt verbal slurs, or any other blatant form of violence against contemporary Christians in America. King can and did. He decried the violence and exclusion that African Americans endured since the beginning of the nation. Dreher cannot readily point to such vivid or tangible examples. Instead, he highlights a shift away from traditional cultural privileges enjoyed by American Christians. Specific examples of suffering at the hands of SJWs would prove the severity and veracity of contemporary American culture hostility towards Christianity.

In his discussions of suffering, Dreher focuses most clearly on intangible and less physical forms of suffering. He fears marginalization, loss of jobs, loss of freedom of practice, and exclusion from the majority. In short, Dreher fears the reality that African Americans faced and defied in the Civil Rights Movement. And rather than acknowledge the suffering of fellow Christians at the hands of people who shared almost too much of Dreher's views, he neglects to engage with the strategies of those who fought injustice. As Thompson argues, "when suffering happens to his enemies, he dismisses it by calling it "oppression". But when suffering- real or imagined- happens to him, he divinizes it by calling it "persecution."⁵⁵ In other words, Dreher fails to acknowledge the real and devastating truth of others' suffering but romanticizes the possibility of his own suffering, most plausibly because the way of life he so desperately desires to protect resembles the very thing that served as the birthplace of the suffering of so many; a privileged, white Christian majority.

One similarity between King and Dreher emerges in their praise of the early Christian church as the ideal society and way of life for modern American Christians, specifically as it relates to suffering. They both appeal to stories of early martyrs as tales to help encourage believers to endure anything because of their faith. Martyrs, and the early church in general, serve as an example of the ideal level of faith each Christian should attain. The underlying claim is that if an individual believer proves unable or unwilling to sacrifice her life for her belief, she does not embody true or full faith. King focused this claim within the specific cause of civil rights and agape love. Martyrs for

⁵⁵ Thompson. "Dreher's Cold War Imagination".

civil rights embodied the dedication to agape love that Jesus realized in his crucifixion. Dreher focuses on self-sacrifice as a prediction for the future of Western Christianity. Without a willingness to die because of a personal identification with a religious truth and subsequent way of life, Christianity faces quick extinction. The two men prioritize, and at times idealize, the early church in their visions for the perfect Christian community in America.

Dreher romanticizes examples of martyrdom and self-sacrifice. When he talks about violence and suffering, he extols the strength and bravery of saints of old who died for the faith. He insists that American Christians “are blessed with examples from saints who’ve gone before.”⁵⁶ In *Live Not by Lies*, he turns to those who suffered great torture at the hands of the Russian regime. He holds up the sacrifice of life for the faith as the ultimate noble good. His view of martyrdom focuses only on the strength of the individual. Dreher insists that “Lukewarm or shallow Christians will not come through with their faith intact.”⁵⁷ Dreher emphasizes whether or not the individual Christian remains well-versed enough in belief and practice in order to willingly oppose worldly powers who challenge their religion, endure the fullness of suffering, and entrust themselves to a powerful God who will reward them in the next life due to their faithful sacrifice. This is not to suggest that martyrs do not hold an incredibly important to the Christian faith. Christian communities throughout time revered and celebrated martyrs as an act of worship as well as exercises in honing personal devotion by imitating various martyrs. Dreher’s particular focus on the storied traditions of martyrdom highlights an

⁵⁶ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 100.

⁵⁷ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 162.

idealized role of the martyr as a manifestation of inward strength of an individual Christian. Dreher does claim that Christians should not seek out suffering. However, these reminders stay short and sandwiched in between lengthy discussions about the glory and inevitability of martyrdom where he holds up various saints as examples to follow. In his discourse on suffering, Dreher does not emphasize the example of Jesus, unlike the prevalent thoughts in the Civil Rights Movement. He points to “the pilgrim path walked by every generation of Christians since the Twelve Apostles.”⁵⁸ Martyrdom serves a specific purpose, but so does the suffering of Jesus. By emphasizing martyrs so heavily, Dreher naturally emphasizes individual devotion as a key feature of correct traditional Christian practice that contemporary Americans must recapture.

Additionally, though Dreher argues that true Christianity peaks in the willingness to die for one’s faith, with all his calls to disengage from the world, protect the remains of traditional Christianity, and create counter communities, he potentially contradicts the path of martyrdom he espouses as glorious. His calls for preservation of practice and tradition through withdrawal inherently challenge a bold willingness to bear the brunt of persecution. He prioritizes Christian practice and those who “are not rock solid in your commitment to traditional Christianity,” insisting that a lack of commitment means that “the world will break you.”⁵⁹ Finally, by privileging conservative, traditional forms of Christianity, Dreher nearly implies that the protection of the traditional Christian majority and privilege in America, and not specific theological beliefs, exists as worthy of dying for.

⁵⁸ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 205.

⁵⁹ Dreher. *Live Not by Lies*. 163.

King and Dreher both emphasize the role of suffering as an essential and anticipated aspect of Christian life. However, they differ in terms of their experience with suffering, which leads to their differing theological views of suffering. King understands suffering as an aspect of sin to be overcome by love while Dreher sees suffering as evidence of particular hostility against Christianity that believers should avoid and further prepare for.

Predictions for Intentional Community Building

This project now turns to an analysis of examples of intentional countercultural communities in America in the mid-twentieth century to help explain the experiences of these communities and understand the implications of an implemented Benedict Option. I analyze two communities, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Christian Faith and Life Community (CFLC) at the University of Texas at Austin, as examples and warnings for both Dreher's and King's projects. King's dream of the Beloved Community never achieved full realization, which, as discussed earlier, reveals less of a failing of the nature of the dream and instead further proves the theological belief that the Beloved Community, as it represents the notion of the Kingdom of God being made manifest in the world, does await a final eschatological fulfillment. The Beloved Community does not remain excused from the discussions and warnings made here based on SNCC and CFLC. In fact, the often-reported dissolution of the push for the Beloved Community and the Civil Rights Movement as it existed in the late 1950s and

early 1960s provides another warning and example to help understand the implications of a trial of the Benedict Option.

Overall, this discussion reveals the results of embodied intentional communities as a way to offer suggestions as to what Dreher may anticipate in the coming years if local Christian communities embark on the Benedict Option. Though SNCC and CFLC appear more similar to the theological and political tendencies of King, their experiences provide helpful to understanding Dreher. SNCC's dedication to individual discipline, the creation of quasi-monastic communities that dealt realistically with local communities, attention to suffering, and their initial focus on specific political realities resemble Dreher's reasoning for the Benedict Option. CFLC's theological beliefs that individual faith applied to every aspect of life, their structuring of communal life around desires for authentic faith, and inclusion of external news and cultural creativity mirrors Dreher's prescription for the actual operations of Benedict Option communities. In addition, both SNCC and CFLC's focus on university students and the change in American culture stand out as aspects of Dreher's project. These similarities reveal that Dreher does not envision a radically new version of intentional communities and the legitimacy of his proposed communal life because of the long-standing precedent of Christian intentional communities. However, SNCC and CFLC's failings serve as warnings to Dreher. Most notably, the two communities embody the potential harm of failing to hold to a static ideology, specifically religious beliefs, over time. In addition, I posit that the nature of the religious beliefs, specifically the theological understanding and view of others, plays a significant role in the survival and success of an intentional community.

SNCC and CFLC both prove that intentional communities centered on countercultural living meant to change their surroundings do experience levels of success. Both movements thrived for a period of time and served prominent examples of the challenges to the conventional social orders prevailing in America. As such, the very existence of SNCC and CFLC do provide legitimacy to Dreher's calls for intentional communities. In addition, America's history frequently features experiments in countercultural communities of all orientations, but specifically religiously-based communities. Dreher's promotion of the Benedict Option does not serve as the only calls for such communal life in contemporary America. Damon Linker recounts the growth of conservative religious groups initiating cultural withdrawal to oppose current cultural changes as well as to instill deeper devotion in coming generations.⁶⁰ Clearly, Dreher's strategy exists as one of many in contemporary American life and is not without precedent. Though SNCC and CFLC represent differing political inclinations that those of Dreher, their basic motivations mirror those of the Benedict Option. Their success, based mostly on the dedication and clear initial purposes of founding members suggests that Dreher's calls and instructions for structured withdrawal can result in successful creation of Benedict Option communities if groups take his words seriously. Dreher also firmly places his project in the realm of possible and achievable because he forms the Benedict Option based on historic Christian monasticism, a staple of global Christian tradition for decades.

⁶⁰ Linker, Damon. "The Benedict Option: Why the religious right is considering an all-out withdrawal from politics". The Week. May 2015. Accessed December 16, 2020.
<https://theweek.com/articles/555734/benedict-option-why-religious-right-considering-allout-withdrawal-from-politics>.

SNCC often serves as a prime example of a well-intentioned movement whose change and shifts over time led to an untimely demise. In his recounting of his years as a prominent member of SNCC, Cleveland Sellers narrates the trajectory of SNCC from an initially religiously-based explosion of student dedication and fervor for organization of the poor and racial justice to the splintered group heavily influenced by and involved in the Black Power movement with no ties to the original Civil Rights Movement that found its origin in the black church.⁶¹ SNCC clearly experienced major changes from their initial foundations. Marsh recounts the story of SNCC as one of an organization losing their ties to the theological beliefs that grounded injustice in sin rather than in the specificity of whiteness and thus losing both momentum and members and ultimately failing as an organization.⁶² SNCC “abandoned the theological framework within which it had once affirmed human dignity” and focused on “ontological whiteness that infected the very being of the country itself.”⁶³ The evolution in thought led to disunity and division within the group, but it also led to a more militant stance that eventually pitted the remaining members of SNCC against the white majority in America because they believed in an inherent nefariousness about whiteness that naturally oppressed black Americans. The focus of SNCC shifted from intentional and incarnational efforts to engage and live with poor communities in order to create local empowerment to violent rejection of a previous world order they viewed as inherently evil. The deviation from a

⁶¹ Sellers, Cleveland. *River of No Return. The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC*. New York, NY: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2018.

⁶² Marsh. *The Beloved Community*. Chapter 3.

⁶³ Marsh. *The Beloved Community*. 124.

theological understanding of the role and identity of evil as sin and system provides the starkest warning to Dreher's Benedict Option project. The latter focus of SNCC of races pitted against each other almost mirrors the motivations and tenor of Dreher's insinuations. His more recent work, *Live Not by Lies*, specifically features a militant rejection of the people he sees as inherently and irrevocably against a Christian way of life. He, like SNCC, focuses on evil as a personal state of being; while SNCC focuses on whiteness, Dreher highlights social justice warriors. Based on SNCC's experience, if Dreher's rhetoric and focus either remains on or continues to more deeply highlight differences, efforts at the Benedict Option will splinter and dissolve as ideology shifts from communal living to what Marsh refers to as "the whims of self-authentication."⁶⁴

Self-authentication and shifts from initial ideologies also defined the Christian Faith and Life Community in Austin, Texas in the 1950s and early 1960s. Formed in 1952 as a residential academic program to supplement university studies and to provide a means for lay Christian students to more actively and intellectually engage with Christian belief, the CFLC experienced a rather swift dissolution a little more than ten years later in the mid-1960s. Despite a rather robust focus on political activism, key engagement with the similarly liberal University Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Austin, and intense theological study, the CFLC was not the long-lasting community that its leaders and students hoped.

Doug Rossinow argues that the CFLC began as a specific, though already admittedly left-leaning, experiment in training lay Christians to a splintered existentialist

⁶⁴ Marsh. *The Beloved Community*. 124.

group narrowly focused on self-realization.⁶⁵ Rossinow understands the CFLC as a Christian community that emphasized the importance of the faith on every aspect of life, a theme very prominent in Dreher's work. Christian existentialism that prioritized finding authenticity in reconciliation between the human and God clearly influenced the CFLC.⁶⁶ However, over time, the group's focus on authenticity and the responsibility to engage in reconciling political action, mostly inclusion with activity of the Civil Rights Movement in Austin, splintered the group and created a loss of a central mission. It eventually shifted into a semi-successful community of nonreligious searches for the authentic, true self that no longer centered around a theological conviction of the all-encompassing and challenging nature of Christian faith for individual believers. Rossinow states that the CFLC in its later years existed as a group that "was no longer a religious study center but, rather, a human potential workshop experimenting with various therapeutic techniques."⁶⁷

Dreher focuses as intently on individual faith and authenticity as did the founders of the CFLC. Dreher repeatedly calls for American Christians to see the importance of living a religious way of life that utterly consumes and informs every aspect of life. His anxiety regarding the future of America sounds similar to the overwhelming feeling of anxiety or disillusionment that Rossinow argues characterized the period directly after the Second World War and centered in white middle class America. In an essay about

⁶⁵ Rossinow. *The Politics of Authenticity*. Chapter 2.

⁶⁶ Rossinow, Doug. "'The Break-Through to New Life': Christianity and the Emergence of the New Left in Austin, Texas, 1956-1964." *American Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1994): 309-40. Accessed March 4, 2021. doi:10.2307/2713268. 321.

⁶⁷ Rossinow. *The Politics of Authenticity*. 81.

intentional religious communities in America in the 1960s, Amy Hart suggests America cultural life then incorporated an “emerging demographic of educated and disillusioned young people.”⁶⁸ Dreher, like the founders and members of the CFLC, attempt to address the disillusionment they feel regarding the state of American culture.

As with SNCC, however, the guiding ideology of the CFLC shifted from one more theologically founded to an explicitly secular understanding of personal responsibility and action. The community dissolved due to differences over how best to balance “the quest for authenticity and the sense of social mission”⁶⁹ and no longer exists as an active part of campus life at UT Austin. Again, as with SNCC, CFLC reveals how easily an intentional community dissolves once the initial theological foundations shift. The search for authenticity within the community in Austin created an almost insatiable desire in the students to effect change and find true life. If Dreher continues to prioritize individual religious discipline in a similar vein, he might soon also find himself in the midst of dissolved Benedict Option communities that no longer cling to a common theological framework.

In a sociological and anthropological study of intentional religious communities and communes from 1776 to 1900, Karen H. Stephan and G. Edward Stephan offer interesting comments on the role of religion in the survival rates of communities. Their study provides helpful insight to the current analysis. They suggest that their data reveals that “the success of communes, measured in terms of the length of time they survived,

⁶⁸ Hart, Amy. “Religious Communities of 1960s America”. Accessed March 3, 2021.

<https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1113&context=forum>. 70.

⁶⁹ Rossinow. *The Politics of Authenticity*. 81.

seems to depend upon whether or not their ideological foundations included adherence to a single, established religion.”⁷⁰ In other words, Stephan and Stephan’s research reveals that groups who maintain one specific religious belief within their community enjoy longer durations. Though their study does not include the movements of the twentieth century, the story of both SNCC and CFLC follows this predication. This indicates that devotion to one, stable religious foundation over time ensures the survival of communities, which provides a helpful statistic for those forming intentional communities.

According to this study, the change in religious adherence negatively impacted the likelihood of survival of SNCC, the CFLC, and potentially the Benedict Option. The Stephans insist upon “the general view that religion contributes significantly to the stability of social structures, enabling religiously oriented groups to overcome problems which- in the absence of such an orientation- might otherwise prove fatal to survival of the group.”⁷¹ In light of this, the lack of adherence to the founding religious sentiments heightened the disputes over the future direction and hastened the dissolution of SNCC and the CFLC.

Though the Stephans insist that “it is by no means clear from these data that similar generalizations can be made for the larger, industrial societies of the world today nor even, necessarily, for the communes which have recently sprung up in retreat from such societies”⁷², the history of SNCC and the CFLC suggests that religious adherence

⁷⁰ Stephan and Stephan. 93.

⁷¹ Stephan and Stephan. 94.

⁷² Stephan and Stephan. 95.

and consistency still contributes to the level of success of intentional communities in modern times. In addition, this finding offers interesting insight as to Rod Dreher's Benedict Option, and should be part of the conversation regarding the feasibility and future of the movement.

Though SNCC and CFLC may reveal potential weaknesses of the Benedict Option, Dreher could increase the success of his project by learning from the two organizations' mistakes, as well as from the dissolution of the push for the Beloved Community. Dreher's focus on martyrdom and strength no matter what assails individual believers does serve to ground his project. His acknowledgement of suffering, though arguably as a highly unlikely and idealized reality, does create an opportunity for cementing a central ideological tenet that underpins each community. In the coming years, as more local communities may take on the Benedict Option, it will be interesting to see how they do or do not learn from the examples of intentional Christian communities who have gone, and failed, before them.

Conclusion

A comparative look at King and Dreher reveals that the two men, though they both call for the creation of a new version of Christian life within American society, maintain inherently different theological views. King praises and upholds the founding of American democracy and equality, understands human dignity as a result of agape love from the divine and a reason for hope in redemption, centers his vision of community in both embodied and eschatological understandings, and wrestles with suffering as a result

of sin. Dreher questions the usefulness of the founding of American religious liberty, refers to humans in binary identities, prioritizes previous tradition in his push for community, highlights martyrdom as the ideal Christian experience, and romanticizes persecution while failing to address experiences of others' suffering. The two men hail from the Christian tradition, but their theological understandings led them to pursue and prioritize divergent visions of the good life.

Dreher's foundational views differ from King's. Dreher's understanding of the fundamental problem with American society revolves around a specific group with an exclusive identity. King highlighted a lament over the particularly exclusive nature of American life that caused unnecessary and even violent divisions in society. While he does not fully define his notion of traditional Christianity, he delineates his enemies as hostile to a newly victimized and newly declining Christian mode of life. He paints others as potential competitors in a fight for control of American cultural life. Central to King's influence in the Civil Rights Movement, the belief of the inherent and universal dignity of the human being derived from theological understandings of the relationship between God and the creation of humans. He saw others as eternally important and even part of oneself. King encouraged love of enemies and discouraged the view that enemies forever existed as enemies; rather they were redeemable neighbors caught up in the waves of injustice. Though they both admired the early church, Dreher romanticizes suffering as a holy persecution created for saints, while King mourned suffering as a hallmark of injustice. Finally, Dreher strives for an earthly method of life centered on retreat and

homogenization. The Beloved Community exists as a vision of a unified brotherhood of humanity that finds its true realization in an eternal redemption.

Despite the similarity of identifying with Christian beliefs and practices, the two countercultural movements do not complement one another nor do they seek to achieve the same outcome for American society. Based on their particular theological and historical contexts, King and Dreher created appropriate responses to what they saw as the ills of society as well as what they hoped Christianity provided for American social life. A study of the two versions of ideal Christian life in America along with a discussion of two secondary intentional communities, SNCC and the CFLC, reveals the various ways in which Christianity has been and will continue to be utilized in the creation of countercultural social movements in America.

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