

With Reservation: A Review of *The Benedict Option* from Eastern Europe

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In the ten chapters of *The Benedict Option*, author Rod Dreher gives a strategy for life for Christians. Overall the book can be very helpful for Youth With A Mission's development of missional communities around the world. My perspective comes from Latvia where my parents and grandparents experienced the Soviet regime and I personally experienced education in a Communist country. I am skeptical of some of the suggestions the author gives.

Dreher suggests we base our rule of living on an adapted version of the ancient Rule of Benedict that includes order, prayer, work and stability, asceticism, balance, community and hospitality. I think all of these thoughts are quite well known in our YWAM setting. In particular, Christian hospitality could really be a key for our post-Christian society. As Pastor Rozentāls states, "Hospitality is creating a void, but not a void that scares, one that creates joy... And I think that is the longing of every person and of every community – to find a hospitable place to dump all the fears and to experience healthy and whole life."¹

When we look at YWAM's core beliefs and foundational values² and other founding documents, we can actually see a "rule" in many ways similar to what the Rule of Benedict is for the Benedictine context and for what Dreher suggests in his book. Our founding documents define us as a movement, they help define who we are locally, and what YWAMers everywhere can expect from each other.

After defining the proposed Rule, Dreher illustrates how it could work in different areas of society. The first area the author notes is politics. Even though later in the book Dreher suggests we form Christian communities and retreat from the current state of affairs, he also notes that "religious liberty is critically important to the Benedict Option" (p. 84). The Church in Latvia has never experienced the freedoms and influences as in the USA, therefore it experiences a different view and different expectations from the state and in the exercise of politics. A Latvian Lutheran bishop says he is "surprised, that more people [in Latvia] are not involved in political parties as members and are not part of building politics from inside, not even mentioning that only half of the citizens go to vote!" Then he exhorts, "Let us use the time of peace, to influence and work towards building society and well-being."³ It must be understood that YWAM communities as well as churches are affected in their exercise of freedom by how free the state allows them to be. So there is definitely a need for a "new kind of Christian politics" as Dreher suggests, but it cannot be a retreat.

The author mentions Václav Havel and Czech dissidents and the idea of "antipolitical politics" (Dreher, pg. 92). Living in an oppressive government is not easy. A Latvian dissident

¹ Pulkstene, Gerda (April 20, 2014). *Mācītājs: mēs augam par sabiedrību, kurā nevienu nesit krustā* (Pastor: we are growing into a society, where nobody is crucified). Accessed October 12, 2018 from tvnet.lv: <https://www.tvnet.lv/5208595/macitajs-mes-augam-par-sabiedribu-kura-nevienu-nesit-krusta>

² See <https://www.ywam.org/about-us/values/>

³ Jenson, Hanss Martins (May 5, 2017). *LELB Liepājas bīskapa svētruna 4. maijā Liepājas Sv. Trīsvienības katedrālē* (Sermon of Liepaja Bishop of LELC on May 4th in Liepaja St. Trinity Cathedral). Accessed October 12, 2018 from www.lalb.lv: http://www.lalb.lv/lv/?ct=lelb_zinjas&fu=read&id=2098

who had been sentenced to three prison terms during the Soviet regime, Lidija Lasmane-Doroņina states: “There were people who were forced to cooperate [with the Communist government], for example, by threats to hurt their family members. They had no way out... The system simply had these people on their knees; that was their goal. The system had to keep on their knees all who were not exiled or who did not run away. We were submissive to this power, we were afraid of it and we did everything to survive, because life is most important to a human being.”⁴ From this perspective our YWAM bases and training programs should be challenging Christians to take an active part in politics, at least in Latvia.

In the area of church the author calls for rediscovering past traditions and relearning traditional habits of asceticism, as well as emphasizing order, beauty and goodness. Each of our YWAM bases have their own “liturgy” and traditions, but I think the most important is the foundation, the worldview. The outward expression is not as important. Latvia recently experienced two completely different Christian events. One was the European Youth Meeting led by the Taizé community at the end of 2016. The other was the Awakening Europe event in September 2018. Each had very different expressions of Christian faith, or we could say – very different liturgies. The message however was quite similar – give yourself to God completely. I would agree with Dreher about the need for order and beauty and goodness, but he did not convince me about the use of ancient liturgies.

In considering Christian formation the author writes from within the context of American liberties. In Latvia as in some other countries education is very much state regulated. If the state does not want it, separate education, like Christian schools or homeschooling of children, will not happen. In that kind of situation it is the parents’ responsibility to teach the children to see the truth even in very difficult situations (such as Communist times). Teaching history, teaching where we come from, then becomes very important! That will be foundational. This is something Dreher argues for.

The area of *The Benedict Option* that connects closest to the YWAM setting is the concept of a Christian village. From the beginning YWAM bases have been functioning as Christian communities. It is interesting that in the early years of YWAM the bases were often located in rural areas, something Dreher suggests is strategic now. From what I have seen over the decades, YWAM has had a movement toward the cities. We are also still called to be the salt and the light of the rural communities.

The author also addresses hard labor, eros, and technology, topics significant to strategic community building. I find it pertinent what professor Tēraudkalns observes: “There always will be people who search for benefits delivered by a religious group with a high tension level with society, and others, who want religion that does not demand a lot of them.”⁵ *The Benedict Option* challenges each reader to decide what would be their involvement in building the Kingdom. This book can also give valuable input and create space for more discussion in YWAM on how we can develop missional communities.

⁴ Laganovskis, Guntars (January 31, 2018). *Lidija Doroņina-Lasmane: Neiesim taču sist savam brālim sejā (We should not hit our brother in the face)*. Accessed October 12, 2018 from lvportals.lv <https://lvportals.lv/viedokli/292989-lidija-doronina-lasmane-neiesim-tacu-sist-savam-bralim-seja-2018>

⁵ Tēraudkalns, V. (2014). *Reliģijpētniecība: vēsture, metodes, teorijas (Religious studies: history, methods, theories)*. Rīga: Mansards, p. 111.