

The Growing of Roots: Reflections on *The Benedict Option* in light of YWAM's Missionary Mobility

Steve Cochrane

Email: scochrane@pmbx.net

Living *The Benedict Option* envisioned by author Rod Dreher requires a high level of stability, a challenge for groups like Youth with a Mission (YWAM) that have mobility at their core. How can stability and monastic rootedness have anything to do with moving around the world on seemingly perpetual jet lag? Yet the two actually have gone together throughout history more than is generally known (of course, until recently, without the jet lag). The mobility of cross-cultural global mission and the stability of monasticism are not mutually exclusive. In fact, we know of cases of their integration and symbiosis. This can be seen in 6th century Europe with the Celts in Scotland/Ireland and the Church of the East in Asia, both outside the realms of the Roman Empire, yet both with monastic models that included rooted devotion combined with mission mobility (Cochrane, 2017, p. 20).

Though *The Benedict Option* is written primarily for the North American Church, lessons can be gleaned for all. On page 8, Dreher gives a rather doomsday view of the relationship between Christianity and North American culture, pronouncing that the culture wars have been lost and the Christian faith ejected from the Public Square, writing that Christianity could “all but disappear entirely from Europe and North America.” Yet in the Global South and China, it will “continue to flourish.” While perhaps premature in his judgements, Dreher’s warnings of the shallowness that can come with the Internet and a reduced depth in relationships, are of course relevant and applicable to all believers.

The warnings about shallowness and rootlessness must also be taken very seriously by YWAM. Even though the missionary training bases of YWAM (which are also University of the Nations campuses) could in some ways be likened to monasteries in their commitment to learning and devotion, the amount of mobility in the YWAM context threatens to overwhelm the stability. Saint Benedict - his Rule featured prominently in Dreher’s book - cautions about a kind of monk he called a “gyrovague” (Fry, 1980, p. 20). According to Benedict, gyrovagues “spend their entire lives drifting from region to region, staying as guests for three or four days in different monasteries. Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and appetites.” Benedict writes that gyrovagues are even worse than the “sarabites,” another kind of monk addicted to self-pleasure.

The word gyrovague comes from the Latin, meaning one who “wanders aimlessly.” Benedict applies it to monks having no fixed monastery, no local roots anywhere. Strong words of warning, and words of caution to YWAMers and other missionaries that spend their lives in sacrificial service for others. The question must be asked: where are our roots? Are they deep in a particular soil? Is a life of continual short term outreaches, or missionary mobility in long term service, a potential danger? Do YWAM bases/campuses offer strong enough roots? Are YWAMers part of local churches? A life without rootedness in a particular local context, even

while focused on global mission involvement, risks a lack of depth St. Benedict (and Rod Dreher) caution us against.

There have been equivalents of gyrovagues all through history. In the late 8th century in Baghdad, the mission minded Patriarch of the Church of the East, Timothy 1, warned in a letter to the faithful about monks called “Messalians” (in Syriac, “those who pray”). They wandered about in West Asia, in allegiance to no monastery or structures of the Church. At the Church Synod of 790 AD, Timothy has the Messalians condemned as heretics (Cochrane, 2017, p. 72). It is not their devotion that is in dispute, but their lack of submission - as evidenced in a lack of roots.

There is a need for groups like YWAM to take such cautions seriously, as should all Christians. Dreher shares his own struggle with being a gyrovague (p. 66). He calls the gyrovague the “villain of Saint Benedict’s rule” yet the “hero of post-modernity,” and writes: “For most of my life, it would have been fair to call me a gyrovague. I moved from job to job, climbing the career ladder. In only twenty years of my adult life, I changed cities five times and denominations twice.” He then contrasts this mobility with his sister’s story, who stayed in the small town in Louisiana where they had been raised. But when terminal cancer struck her in 2010, Dreher “saw the immense value of the stability she had chosen” as there was a “wide circle of friends and family to care for her” in her final eighteen months.

Dreher was so impacted by this “witness to the power of stability” that he moved his own family from Philadelphia to that same area of Louisiana to be “near them all.” Dreher points out that this kind of local stability is not for everyone, but that “everybody should think deeply about the spiritual and emotional costs of the gyrovague’s liberty that we contemporary Americans take as our birthright.” For mobile missionaries like YWAMers, there are also spiritual and emotional costs. Some of these costs are indeed involved in sacrificial giving for the sake of Christ and his Kingdom. But we must still be attentive to the need for the growing and maintaining of roots.

A 20th century French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil, named one of her books *The Growing of Roots*. She describes the dangers of being rootless, and the need to have roots that go deep into the soil (Weil, 1952). In a similar vein, but very different context, Julie Canlis describes her and her husband’s journey, while pastoring in a small Scottish village, in understanding the power of local stability while living as cross-cultural missionaries (Canlis, 2017). In both contexts the power to resist worldly systems came in part from a commitment to local roots that gave needed stability.

There are several cautions and warnings in *The Benedict Option*. Most apply specifically to the West, but some apply globally. The challenge of not being gyrovagues, but to have local roots while carrying out global mission, is never more applicable than today. YWAMers, take serious note.

References

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