



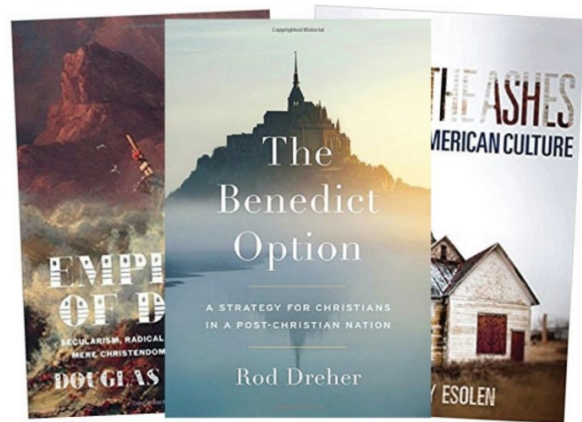
Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 19, 2017

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## Saving Christian Civilization

**Three authors from different religious backgrounds point out some of the problems and solutions to Christianity losing the culture war.**



***Out of the Ashes – Rebuilding American Culture***, by Anthony Esolen, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2017, 203 pages, hardcover.

***Empires of Dirt – Secularism, Radical Islam, and the Mere Christendom Alternative***, by Douglas Wilson, Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2016, 276 pages, paperback.

***The Benedict Option – A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation***, by Rod Dreher, New York: Sentinel, 2017, 262 pages, hardcover.

The present state of Western civilization is in such an appalling condition that those men and women who fear for the future of our 2,500-year-old patrimony may find themselves torn between a sense of sorrow or bitter anger, and a measure of gallows humor. The decline of the West is somewhat like the weather, it would seem: Everyone complains about it, but no one does anything about it. However, the three authors of the works reviewed here are proposing that it is far past time to “do something about it,” and they have set forth their analyses of this plight and their counsel for present and future action in ways that reflect a cogent Christian worldview. Much of the analysis offered by each of the three authors will resonate with readers of *The New American*, and the readership that is being drawn to their argumentation demonstrates that a growing number of Americans are becoming consciously aware of the dangers confronting our civilization, and are ready for assistance in better understanding what needs to be done to rebuild the West.

In *Out of the Ashes – Rebuilding American Culture*, Dr. Anthony Esolen writes from the perspective of a Roman Catholic academic. Esolen’s assessment of the decline of our culture is that modern Americans have largely abandoned belief in the Triune God for a faith in a Leviathan State, and have thus neglected almost every aspect of historic Christian culture. The author summarizes the decline in a wide range of areas: from schools that no longer teach, to families that have been torn asunder, to cities and towns that are no longer living communities but now are merely places to sleep or shop, to churches that have been almost abandoned. Esolen’s assessment is relentlessly true.

Esolen’s role as a literature professor is of great service to his task; his text often draws on the classical literature of our civilization, ranging from Milton and Dante to the Greek and Latin philosophers of antiquity. Because he recognizes that an assault on the existence of “truth” is an important part of the overall war against the West, Esolen understands the subversion of language that the enemies of our



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civilization employ, and he declares that a refusal to submit to using the language of the enemy is an important occasion for resistance:

I believe now that the “higher cant” is too dangerous even for small talk, because we will inevitably end up thinking in its terms. Words like *democracy, diversity, equality, inclusivity, marginalization, misogyny, racism, sexism, homophobia, imperialism, colonialism, progressivism, autonomy*, and many others my readers might name are simply terms of political force and have no real meaning anymore. Some of them never had any meaning to begin with. Do not wash your food in chlorine. Do not sprinkle your thoughts with poison....

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You have to be *educated into cant*; it is a kind of stupidity that passes the capacity of unaided Nature to confer.

Because the corruption of language is at the core of the anti-Western ideology, an important act of resistance is found in a repudiation of the terminology of “social justice” and “political correctness.” The “higher cant” is the language of ideology, and in Esolen one hears a faithful echo of earlier conservatives such as Russell Kirk, who recognized ideology to be a fearful foe of the faith, and a dehumanizing means of enslaving men. In Esolen’s words: “Now we can see how inhuman it is to project history onto the flat template of political action or political ideology.” Ideology wages war against the traditional “Three Estates” — church, state, and home — and much of *Out of the Ashes* is devoted to documenting the forms in which such attacks take place, and the acts of resistance that can be waged in an effort to save what remains. As Esolen observes: “The health of society may be gauged by how full the churches are, those beating hearts of culture and communion.” Ideology perverts and seeks to supplant the authority that resides with the church and the home, and this is a situation which cannot stand:

Everything has been *stolen from the polis* and given over to Jabba the State — bloated, disgusting, corrupt, without conscience, accountable to no one, and voiding the resultants of his meals into the land and the drinking water and the air that everyone has to breathe.

We want our authority returned to us — or we intend to take it up again — because it is ours by right.

The “higher cant” of ideology is a weapon in the war against the family, beginning with the divinely bestowed distinctions between men and women:

Keep it always in mind. The world hates the family. The state is the family’s enemy. The state grows by the family’s failure, and the state has an interest in persuading people that the family can do nothing on its own. It hates fatherhood, and makes little pretense otherwise. It hates motherhood, though it makes a show of championing the unwed mother as well as the mother who, as the ugly phrase puts it, “has it all,” though a moment’s reflection should suffice to show that no one can give his or her all to a career *and* a family *and* the local community.

The acts of resistance undertaken by the church are asymmetrical to the actions of the Leviathan State; thus the course of action that Esolen envisions for the church in the war for the civilization is quite different from the path that church-affiliated conservative lobbying organizations once followed:

Let the churches come out. Let pastors and congregations decide: for every single offense against



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the vigorous liberty of the church, we will walk and pray in two outdoor processions with the Sacrament, host two lectures, organize two summer picnics with Mass outdoors, march to the cemetery on Memorial Day, and in general be so merry and open, so solemn and cheerful, so rich in beauty and the depth of our faith, that despite themselves people will look our way and want to share in the wine we are drinking.

In *Empires of Dirt — Secularism, Radical Islam, and the Mere Christendom Alternative*, Protestant Pastor Douglas Wilson also frames his assessment of the decline of Christian Western civilization in terms of an assault on the “Three Estates”: “God has created three basic spheres — the family, the church, and the civil order. These were all created directly by God and not by man.” Like Esolen, Wilson views the effects of an anti-Christian ideology being easily recognized in a state that has been bloated beyond all reasonable, constitutional authority. Wilson observes that the reigning ideology is marked by a pervasive politicization of all of life, funded by the misappropriated wealth of the people: “But a genuine conservative, who wants the federal government to be one-fifth the size it currently is, cannot be a partaker of the politicization of everything. If the government were that size, they would run out of money in mid-February, and everyone would live non politicized lives until the following January. The word we used to use to describe that state of affairs, kids, was *liberty*. Get your great-grandfather to tell you stories about it sometime.”

Wilson’s apology for a “mere Christendom” begins with an understanding that the secularist ideology has failed the West:

So this means, in short, that there is now no way to defend the West without rejecting, root and branch, the last one hundred years of Western intellectual history. That’s fine with me, and all my modest proposal entails is that we undertake to defend the West by rejecting the last two hundred and fifty years of Western intellectual history. I am willing to defend the next Christendom, and am in fact eager to do so. I am not willing to take my stand on the basis of the dregs of the former Christendom.

For Wilson, the establishment of “mere Christendom” is not the restoration of a Calvinist Restorationism: “This means that a return to Christendom does not entail a return to Geneva, circa A.D. 1590. It means that we are allowed to remember some of the things we have learned in the interim.... I want to live in a baptized civilization. That is what I mean by mere Christendom.”

What Wilson envisions is, therefore, a long-term struggle rather than a short-term “battle for the ballot box”: “When it comes to our secular arrangements, I am not trying to get Christians to vote it out in the next election cycle. That’s not going to happen, and fine. What *can* happen, and what is happening, is a large number of people realizing that secularism is the joke that fell flat. This too shall pass.” Wilson recognizes that progressivism, communism, and the rest of the dreadful “isms” have imposed themselves on their victims with cries of their “inevitability.” But, writing from his particular Protestant perspective, Wilson writes:

How much more potent will it be when Christians understand that the gospel is all about world conquest and when they will be content with nothing less than world conquest? I know that the place where I labor — the Pacific Northwest — will one day be overwhelmingly Christian. This will happen long after I am dead, and long before Jesus returns. This is reformational transformation, not revolutionary zeal.



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This “conquest” will be accomplished by means of God’s weakness, not man’s strength, for our weapons are not carnal. This thing will be done — and it will be done — in the power of the Spirit by means of words and water, bread and wine. What are we doing? We are besieging strongholds, and the citadels of unbelief will fall. Every sermon is another swing of the battering ram, every baptism is an engine deployed to overthrow the devil, and every administration of the Supper is an inexorable offer of wine for the forgiveness of the world and bread for the life of the world. And the day is coming, when they will receive it.

Wilson does not argue for an “established church” in the sense of one that is supported by tax revenues; but he does believe “the Church must be established in the sense that the magistrate has the responsibility to recognize her and to listen to her” — a view that it would be hard to contend would have been controversial throughout much of American history.

The third book under consideration is *The Benedict Option — A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian World*, written by Rod Dreher, a senior editor at *The American Conservative*. Dreher was formerly Methodist and Roman Catholic before becoming Eastern Orthodox, and his book is nearly as eclectic as his own religious path. Of all three books, Dreher’s is the least programmatic. In Dreher’s words:

The Benedict Option is not a technique for reversing the losses, political or otherwise, that Christians have suffered. It is not a strategy for turning back the clock to an imagined golden age. Still less is it a plan for constructing communities of the pure, cut off from the real world.

To the contrary, the Benedict Option is a call to undertaking the long and patient work of reclaiming the real world from the artifice, alienation, and atomization of modern life.

There is a cultivated ecumenism at work in *The Benedict Option*; the book is largely built around a narrative of efforts being undertaken by Christians of many denominations to resist secularization and build Christian institutions in their local communities around the United States. In fact, Dreher seems to essentially repudiate national politics because, in his words:

Today the culture war as we knew it is over. The so-called value voters — social and religious conservatives — have been defeated and are being swept to the political margins. Moral issues may not be as central to our politics as they once were, but the American people remain fragmented, often bitterly, by these concerns. Though Donald Trump won the presidency in part with the strong support of Catholics and Evangelicals, the idea that someone as robustly vulgar, fiercely combative, and morally compromised as Trump will be an avatar for the restoration of Christian morality and social unity is beyond delusional. He is not a solution to the problem of America’s cultural decline, but a symptom of it.

What Dreher advocates is a deliberate withdrawal from national-style politics in favor of local endeavors:

The Benedict Option calls for a radical new way of doing politics, a hands-on localism based on pioneering work by Eastern bloc dissidents who defied Communism during the Cold War. A Westernized form of “antipolitical politics,” to use the term coined by Czech political prisoner Václav Havel, is the best way forward for Orthodox Christians seeking practical and effective engagement in public life without losing our integrity, and indeed our humanity.



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Of course, many readers of The New American would disagree with Dreher's reason and would argue that we must fight the good fight on multiple fronts — the political as well as the cultural, the national as well as the local — thus doing our duty in all things while recognizing that results are in the hands of God. The emphasis of several of the authors on the three estates — church, state, and home — would be recognized by many readers as the context for the struggles of this age.

While it is difficult to do justice to three books written with the depth and scope of the undertakings of Esolen, Wilson, and Dreher, a few concluding observations seem to be in order. In a sense, all three authors share a common analysis of the problem and certain aspects of the solution. Each author grasps a part of the solution: The way in which we educate our children, the restoration of the local community, and the vibrant life of the local church are all important aspects of the defense and restoration of our civilization. None of the writers is programmatic — though it may be argued that Wilson's efforts through the church he serves have provided the clearest opportunity afforded to any of the authors to implement his understanding of the present plight.

There is an opportunity posed by the popularity of analyses such as those offered by Esolen, Wilson, and Dreher to further aid those readers who have been stirred to action by such insightful works. Readers of The New American understand the nature of the present conflict, and the struggle that has now been undertaken for generations to resist the ideologies that have afflicted our civilization. We have much to contribute to this ongoing war for the West.



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