Orthodox Christians Must Now Learn To Live as Exiles in Our Own Country

Rod Dreher
June 26, 2015

Rod Dreher is a senior editor and blogger at The American Conservative.

Voting Republican and other failed culture war strategies are not going to save us now

No, the sky is not falling — not yet, anyway — but with the Supreme Court ruling constitutionalizing same-sex marriage, the ground under our feet has shifted tectonically.

It is hard to overstate the significance of the Obergefell decision — and the seriousness of the challenges it presents to orthodox Christians and other social conservatives. Voting Republican and other failed culture war strategies are not going to save us now.

Discerning the meaning of the present moment requires sobriety, precisely because its radicalism requires of conservatives a realistic sense of how weak our position is in post-Christian America.

The alarm that the four dissenting justices sounded in their minority opinions is chilling. Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Antonin Scalia were particularly scathing in pointing out the philosophical and historical groundlessness of the majority’s opinion. Justice Scalia even called the decision “a threat to democracy,” and denounced it, shockingly, in the language of revolution.

It is now clear that for this Court, extremism in the pursuit of the Sexual Revolution’s goals is no vice. True, the majority opinion nodded and smiled in the direction of the First Amendment, in an attempt to calm the fears of those worried about religious liberty. But when a Supreme Court majority is willing to invent rights out of nothing, it is impossible to have faith that the First Amendment will offer any but the barest protection to religious dissenters from gay rights orthodoxy.

Indeed, Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito explicitly warned religious traditionalists that this decision leaves them vulnerable. Alito warns that Obergefell “will be used to vilify Americans who are unwilling to assent to the new orthodoxy,” and will be used to oppress the faithful “by those who are determined to stamp out every vestige of dissent.”

The warning to conservatives from the four dissenters could hardly be clearer or stronger. So where does that leave us?

For one, we have to accept that we really are living in a culturally post-Christian nation. The fundamental norms Christians have long been able to depend on no longer exist. To be frank, the court majority may impose on the rest of the nation a view widely shared by elites, but it is also a view shared by a majority of Americans. There will be no widespread popular resistance to Obergefell. This is the new normal.

For another, LGBT activists and their fellow travelers really will be coming after social conservatives. The Supreme Court has now, in constitutional doctrine, said that homosexuality is equivalent to race. The next goal of activists will be a long-term campaign to remove tax-exempt status from dissenting religious institutions. The more immediate goal will be the shunning and persecution of dissenters within civil society. After today, all religious conservatives are Brendan Eich, the former CEO of Mozilla who was chased out of that company for supporting California’s Proposition 8.
Third, the Court majority wrote that gays and lesbians do not want to change the institution of marriage, but rather want to benefit from it. This is hard to believe, given more recent writing from gay activists like Dan Savage expressing a desire to loosen the strictures of monogamy in all marriages. Besides, if marriage can be redefined according to what we desire — that is, if there is no essential nature to marriage, or to gender — then there are no boundaries on marriage. Marriage inevitably loses its power.

In that sense, social and religious conservatives must recognize that the Obergefell decision did not come from nowhere. It is the logical result of the Sexual Revolution, which valorized erotic liberty. It has been widely and correctly observed that heterosexuals began to devalue marriage long before same-sex marriage became an issue. The individualism at the heart of contemporary American culture is at the core of Obergefell — and at the core of modern American life.

This is profoundly incompatible with orthodox Christianity. But this is the world we live in today.

One can certainly understand the joy that LGBT Americans and their supporters feel today. But orthodox Christians must understand that things are going to get much more difficult for us. We are going to have to learn how to live as exiles in our own country. We are going to have to learn how to live with at least a mild form of persecution. And we are going to have to change the way we practice our faith and teach it to our children, to build resilient communities.

It is time for what I call the Benedict Option. In his 1982 book After Virtue, the eminent philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre likened the current age to the fall of ancient Rome. He pointed to Benedict of Nursia, a pious young Christian who left the chaos of Rome to go to the woods to pray, as an example for us. We who want to live by the traditional virtues, MacIntyre said, have to pioneer new ways of doing so in community. We await, he said “a new — and doubtless very different — St. Benedict.”

Throughout the early Middle Ages, Benedict’s communities formed monasteries, and kept the light of faith burning through the surrounding cultural darkness. Eventually, the Benedictine monks helped refound civilization.

I believe that orthodox Christians today are called to be those new and very different St. Benedicts. How do we take the Benedict Option, and build resilient communities within our condition of internal exile, and under increasingly hostile conditions? I don’t know. But we had better figure this out together, and soon, while there is time.

Last fall, I spoke with the prior of the Benedictine monastery in Nursia, and told him about the Benedict Option. So many Christians, he told me, have no clue how far things have decayed in our aggressively secularizing world. The future for Christians will be within the Benedict Option, the monk said, or it won’t be at all.

Obergefell is a sign of the times, for those with eyes to see. This isn’t the view of wild-eyed prophets wearing animal skins and shouting in the desert. It is the view of four Supreme Court justices, in effect declaring from the bench the decline and fall of the traditional American social, political, and legal order.

We live in interesting times.
So we must learn what it means to do evangelism as exiles, as strangers and outcasts in our own land. Embracing Exile. I remember the first time it dawned on me that I wasn’t a normal missionary. Living in a Muslim country, I wasn’t technically a missionary (not operating under a religious worker visa). I didn’t have an office, not even a ministry budget. We didn’t have facilities or a compound or a church building. When Peter the apostle wrote his first letter to Christians living in Asia (not too far from my former home) he addressed them, curiously, as exiles. But these people were not literal exiles. They were not, as we might imagine them, like the desperate refugees and wayfaring immigrants flooding the West today from the war-torn Middle East or famine-stricken Africa. It is hard to overstate the significance of the Obergefell decision and the seriousness of the challenges it presents to orthodox Christians and other social conservatives. Voting Republican and other failed culture war strategies are not going to save us now. Discerning the meaning of the present moment requires sobriety, precisely because its radicalism requires of conservatives a realistic sense of how weak our position is in post-Christian America. Read more.

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While reading about the Orthodox Christian tradition is certainly important, it is crucial to step into an Orthodox Christian parish church near you to witness/experience the Church’s worship and fellowship. Doing so will make much of what you have read come alive, in the sense of seeing how that about which you have read is actually lived. Think of it in the following way. A person can read a dozen books on swimming, but that which he or she has read will not come alive until he or she actually gets into a pool. Similarly, a person can read a dozen books on Orthodox Christiani...