



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

BOOK REVIEW

Issue Three / 2020

Resisting Soft Totalitarianism

GREGORY Y. GLAZOV

Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (Sentinel, 2020).

Rod Dreher wrote *Live Not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* after observing the consternation felt by Soviet Bloc émigrés at seeing Americans afraid to voice conservative opinions, whilst failing to recognize that these fears parallel those characterizing life under “hard totalitarianism.” Absent strict censorship, secret police, gulags, and material deprivation, the political and cultural scene appears quite different from Eastern bloc communism, but the situations are similar—a fact Americans would do well to recognize. The core parallel is the replacement of traditional Judeo-Christian or liberal conceptions of rights by a progressive creed that ties rights to group identity, revises history, and co-opts a powerful social media to control discourse, thought, movement, and commerce, resulting thereby in a “soft totalitarianism.” Applying Benedict XVI’s description of this dictatorial progressivism as manifesting “the spiritual power of the Antichrist” and invoking Solzhenitsyn’s message to “Live not by lies!” Dreher explores the nature of this beast (Part One) and the means to defeat it (Part Two).

Part One, “Understanding Soft Totalitarianism,” contains four chapters entitled “Kolaković the Prophet,” “Our Pre-Totalitarian Culture,” “Progressivism as Religion,” and “Capitalism, Woke and Watchful.” The first focuses on Fr. Kolaković, a Jesuit who in the Nazi era anticipated the Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia and established a virtual underground, Christ-centered spiritual family that ultimately ushered in the Prague Spring. It is in Kolaković’s genius for building up this family that Dreher finds the answer to the questions wrestled with in Part Two of his book. The remaining chapters present a synthesis of insights from a range of writers specializing in the nature of totalitarianism, the religious foundations of progressivism and “wokeness,” and the parallels between the factors which paved the way for the Marxist takeover of Russia and the reasons why “soft totalitarianism” may be expected to triumph in the West. Dreher highlights the link between Hannah Arendt’s claim that totalitarianism is rooted in loneliness catalyzed not just by economic and sociological but also sexual

uprootedness, by “reading not Darwin but Marquis de Sade,” and James Billington’s contention that the conditions which led Russia to communism included the creation of a large, rootless urban underclass, the radicalization of privileged youth, famine and defeat in war, as well as “sexual adventurism, celebration of perversion, and all manner of sensuality.” Given this mix, the relevance of what happened in Russia to present day America is striking. The high rates of loneliness experienced by Millennials and Generation Z, the gravitation to Marxism shown by Social Justice Warriors, as well as the support given to these ideologies by political and social media elites all gain greater significance than when evaluated independently. Dreher doesn’t think the revolution is inevitable, but he thinks that the conditions are conducive to it. Noting the addition of further isolating factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine, he warns that the mix could become socially explosive, but does breathe a sigh of relief: “Thank God, we do not yet see any burning on the streets or actual revolution.”

Part Two contains six chapters: “Value Nothing More Than Truth” retells Václav Havel’s well-known story of the greengrocer who ceased participating in the ritual of spreading communist propaganda and, by so doing, helped to spark a revolution, validating the Russian proverb: “One word of truth outweighs the whole world.” The chapter continues by drawing similar lessons from figures like Mária Wittner, a hero of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and lesser known resisters like Fr. Kirill Kaleda, who transformed the Butovo Firing Range into a national memorial for those executed by the NKVD. In “Cultivate Cultural Memory,” noting the growing falsification of communism’s crimes among American youth and the attention that dissidents draw to totalitarianism’s ambition to control human memory, Dreher identifies the key to resisting this ambition in Václav Benda’s injunction to create small fortresses of memory, chiefly the family, within a *parallel polis* of alternative social structures, which include underground universities that several Western academics, such as Sir Roger Scruton, Charles Taylor, and Jacques Derrida, helped to establish. “Families Are Resistance Cells” contrasts the loosening of family ties and commitment to marriage that leaves many Westerners refuge-less with the model of anti-totalitarian resistance based in the Christian family as illustrated by that of Václav and Kamila Benda. “Religion, the Bedrock of Resistance” surveys the sense of peace and meaning which religion gave to Christians who suffered imprisonment and torture, their spiritual exercises, prison ministry, *samizdat* literature, solidarity with liberals, and later appreciation by the Church (for example, via elevation to positions of servant-leadership in the Church, as illustrated by John Paul II’s making Ján Chryzostom Korec a cardinal, or via beatification and canonization, as illustrated by Benedict XVI’s beatification of Franz Jägerstätter). The final chapters, “Standing in Solidarity” and “The Gift of Suffering,” contend that the Western tendency to identify the good life as one free from suffering predisposes Westerners to manipulation by soft totalitarianism and that the key to resisting such an error is found in taking to heart stories of Christians who endured hardship under communism. For Dreher, the lives of Krcmery, Solzhenitsyn, Ogorodnikov, and Richard Wurmbrand, among others, testify to the sanctifying power of suffering. The conclusion, “Live Not by Lies,” emphasizes that the answers to life’s questions sought by Christians the world over are found in these stories: namely in their power to reveal that freedom and meaning are to be found not in therapeutic promises of entertainment, pleasure, and comfort, in a “Christianity without tears,” but in the acceptance of suffering as a gift by which one’s heart can be properly detached from these goods and fortified against the manipulation of soft totalitarianism that plays on our fear of loss.

My own parents were Russian dissidents. My father lost his job in the Russian Academy of Sciences for publicly protesting the invasion of Czechoslovakia. My mother, a professor at Moscow University, risked death by typing many *samizdat* works. We were secretly baptized by Fr. Alexander Men, a priest of Jewish origin and “Russia’s C. S. Lewis.” In the West, my father specialized in Russian history and literature, especially in the figure of Stalin and the

writings of Dostoevsky, while my mother was devoted to exploring the links between the writings of the poet Mandelstam, Solzhenitsyn, and Dante. Their recurrent bequest to us, their children, was to preserve a connection to Russia's travails, and to understand that therein, in the testimony given to the triumph of the spirit in her history and literature lies a key to life's meaning: to refusing the temptation to be manipulated by all kinds of fear. The resonance between this conviction and Dreher's message could not be stronger.

The book confirms the prescience of concrete insights offered by Russia's history and literature. The uncanny congruence between Soviet social justice cultism and that currently operating on college campuses is illustrated by Vladimir Voinovich's *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, as recently detailed by Cathy Young. That Marxism and progressivism are spread by the "guilt" felt by the children of privileged classes is foreshadowed by the nihilists of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* sketches out the idea that sexual debauchery catalyzes revolution via the discourses of Pyotr Verkhovensky and Shigalyov, an idea that Russians have named *shigalyovshina* after the latter character. Dostoevsky's focus in this novel on revolutionaries prompted me to formulate several constructive critiques of Dreher's arguments in ways that helped me both to appreciate their inner coherence and to take the conversation further.

Dreher downplays the objection that revolution was foisted upon Russia via Lenin's cunning and bayonets and emphasizes instead the role of economic, sociological, intellectual, and cultural trends. On this score, the key to understanding history for him is not Plutarch's *Lives* but the social sciences, in which Dreher is well-steeped. But if totalitarianism owes more to toxic social trends than to evil revolutionaries, why should the antidote lie in good dissidents and martyrs? If good people can shape history in a positive direction, shouldn't one also allow that history can be shaped in a negative direction by evil people? In fact, it is not an either/or proposition, as Dreher's own identification of Father Kolaković as the prophetic model for his "manual" of resistance suggests. Both the inspiration of individual lives, like the Jesuit priest's, and the creation of strong social bonds, like Kolaković's spiritual families, matter.

As Dreher's sociological assumptions downplay the initiative of revolutionaries in the past, they also lead him to downplay it in the present. Consequently, Dreher passes over the question of whether Christians should support state resistance to such revolutionaries. Now, Dreher does not personally abjure such reliance. On Oct 27th, for example, in response to far-left activists at the University of Oregon who chained themselves on campus to demand the defunding of campus police, Dreher tweeted, "Cut the chains, arrest the kids, put them in jail, with haste, and no apologies." But the book offers no analogous proposals. The reason, I suspect, is that having diagnosed progressivism as a religion, Dreher wants Christians to understand and respond to it on a fundamental, theoretical level, not an immediately political one. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that Dreher's non-discussion of the ethics of Christian collaboration with the state in resisting hard and soft totalitarianism is at odds with Solzhenitsyn. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn lamented not taking recourse to arms to resist arrest. In his "Harvard Commencement Address," he admonished Western youth for refusing to resist communism by force. On returning to Russia, he became a Putin-supporting Pan-Slavist. Dreher does not take up these points, but they serve to indicate how complex the question of state power, revolutionary ideology, and the Christian responsibility to resist the latter by armed force is.

Another thorny issue arising from Dreher's appeal to Solzhenitsyn revolves around the amplitude with which Christians should proclaim suffering to be a gift. Varlam Shalamov, for example, survived more brutal conditions than Solzhenitsyn, knew how torture breaks the spirit, and retained his integrity, but, while frequently imbuing his own *Kolyma Tales* with a

hidden Christian spirituality, he repudiated as unseemly Solzhenitsyn's declarations about the redemptive potential of suffering and what he perceived as his loud, Christian self-posturing. Fr. Dmitry Dudko, whom Dreher eulogizes for heroism, was broken by the KGB. This breaking does not negate his heroism but his tragic story, like that of many other dissidents, requires deeper reflection. Should the Church not negotiate at all with totalitarian powers to protect the faithful? Responding to this problem would illuminate controversies concerning Church relations with totalitarian regimes in the past, such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Bloc, as well as present day ones, such as communist China. At the very least, Dreher's reflections indicate that ecclesiastics who develop these policies must engage and not bypass the wisdom, courage, and experience borne by the representatives of the underground church.

These select reflections are a token of thanks to Rod Dreher for drawing upon a wide range of social scientific, philosophical, and religious literature, as well as surviving living testimony, so as to elucidate, first, the clear parallels between the fearsome phenomena that catalyzed and characterized the hard totalitarianisms of the past century and those attending the ascent of soft totalitarianism today, and, second, for making a concerted effort to honor the memory and voices of Eastern Bloc Christian dissidents and identify in their experience life-lessons that may help contemporary Christians find the courage and strength to resist the manipulation of their spiritual commitments.

Gregory Y. Glazov is a Professor of Biblical Studies at Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology at Seton Hall University and Senior Fellow at the Principium Institute.

