

Crunchy Cons - The New Conservative Counterculture and Its Return to Roots
Rod Dreher

The essential observation of this book is that although man lives not by bread alone, both political parties act as though we did. Dreher characterizes liberals as those who refuse to admit any limits on their sexual behavior, and conservatives as those who reject any limits on their economic behavior. Both, he says, have the materialistic view that happiness is something to be gained by possession, in the one case of another body, the other material “stuff.”

Dreher is what I would call a true conservative. He believes in conserving the family, the community, our traditions, our natural resources and with them our environment, the relationship between our bodies and those of the plants and animals that provide our nutrition, and most importantly, between us and our generation and the generations of our progeny yet unborn.

It is not the conservatism of the Republican party, which he endorses weakly as merely the lesser of two evils. It is the minimalism of the socialist master of the “minor arts” and father of the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris, who advocated that one “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.”

Dreher advocates homeschooling for several reasons. It allows parents to communicate their values faithfully to their children. It isolates the child from the worst of popular culture, the precocious sexuality of TV, the materialism of clothes and gadgets and all that stuff. It also recognizes that parents are uniquely invested in their children’s futures, and that a homeschool environment is uniquely capable of adapting to the personality and individual strengths of each child.

Dreher recognizes that his set of beliefs are most often found in a package that includes religious belief. He cites examples of Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox Christian and Jewish families. He views the mainstream Protestant churches as being hopelessly compromised by the values of their host society. As Daniel Dennett would claim in “Breaking the Spell,” Dreher believes in belief. He advocates belonging to a church, but rather strikingly abstains from advocating any particular set of beliefs about a God. This to me is the problem of our age. There is no logical argument to counter Dennett and Richard Dawkins’ cases that mankind is no more than the end result of a blind evolutionary process. Moreover, religion is successful because religious people are breeders. They put the interests of their progeny above their own. Europeans and Blue State folks have caught on, and putting their own material interests above those of their children, they are refusing to commit to having children.

It seems that Dreher is advocating a kind of stasis, but the fact is that society is in a permanent, and accelerating state of flux. The current wave is washing away traditional morality and family structure. Who knows what comes next? All we know for sure is that the history of those who stand against the tide has not been rich with success.

Though Dreher doesn't pursue this line of thought, there seems to be a disconnect between the fact that it takes an affluent modern society to generate the kind of back-to-simplicity he advocates. Crunchy cons can no more be self-sustaining than Shakers. They need the universities, the Internet, the interstates etc. to survive. They also need to be highly intelligent and driven individuals in their own right. They don't meet the criterion of Kant's categorical imperative. It is not a way of life that could be universalized.