

Should you retreat from the public square?

For many people the state of America's presidential campaign is an index of the corruption of our national culture. At the moment, though anything is possible given the fickleness of the electorate, the flawed personal lives and political views of the candidates, and a savage media, it seems that Donald Trump will face Hillary Clinton, though at this writing, this match-up is not certain.*

It's damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't for voters, a choice between two evils. The choice is a symptom of a culture which has been corrupted over the past 50 years by the decay of the family, moral relativism, fading religious commitment and a forgetfulness of history. Many people are so disgusted that they are turning their backs on the political process and retreating from civic life altogether, though many others are becoming active because they see the consequences of their failure to vote before.

Throughout history there have been many responses to corrupt or dysfunctional public life. It is worthwhile to consider several of them.

The Epicurean Option

Epicurus, a philosopher of the late Classical Greek period, famously told us that pleasure is the highest principle of being. But he also warned us to be moderate and refined in our delights, for hedonism is a tricky thing. Too much pleasure usually backfires into sickness or it depresses us because it does not seem to be what satisfies us, once we have it.

Epicurus advocated a cautious, *ne quid nimis*, nothing in excess, moderate approach which was based on a calculated despair at ever finding a definite meaning in life. It was a

sign of ignorance even to try; things happened by necessity; free will was an illusion. An insane fear of the gods plagued most people, gods which had been invented by clever politicians and poets to make rule easier by postulating mythical rewards and punishments.

The only thing that made sense to him was to shut off the din of praise and blame, the passions of public life and the idiotic blather of sophists. Have nothing to do with them, said Epicurus. Stop worrying about what goes on in the heavens, or in the world, or in the city.

“Withdraw from it all!” was the prudent way to deal with public affairs: get as far away as possible from the shrines, the town square, the theaters, and the academies. Find yourself a quiet garden. Water the flowers; feed the chickens. The only sane thing was to chuck it all. Enjoy what you could. There was no alternative.

Today the “Epicurean Option”, for all its bleakness, can make sense to a weary modern mind. What little pleasure there is lies in careful moderation. That is the best we can do.

The Benedict Option

There is a Christian version of the “Epicurean Option” called the “Benedict Option”, a phrase from Alasdair MacIntyre’s book *After Virtue*. MacIntyre argues that the classical understanding of virtue and vice is no longer possible in the hazy ideologies that control modern culture. In a world where the autonomous self is free to shape itself into whatever it wants, a natural law or Christian notion of virtue and vice has no meaning. For those who understand the deep disorders of the culture, what alternative is there but retreat?

The “Benedict Option” refers to the monastic tradition of St Benedict of Norcia whose isolated monasteries preserved the wisdom of the past during the barbarian invasions and the moral corruption of late Roman civic life. It was in these

centers of tradition and order that what was good in the classics and early Christian life was saved and represented anew.

As opposed to the “Epicurean Option”, the “Benedict Option” creates islands of wisdom and virtue in a sea of chaos. Men are men; women are women. The family is not blighted by the obscenities of decadent cities. This life could transform Sodom and Gomorrah once they had realized the depths of their own corruption.

The problem with this “Benedict Option”, as the theologian Jean Daniélou once noted, is that Christianity is not intended for the few. The whole point of Christianity, as contrasted with Greek elitism, was that it was intended also for the Gentiles, for the poor and the normal, not just the Chosen People. The “Benedict Option”, so it is said, leaves the culture at the hands of the ideologues. It is a counsel of despair that admonishes us to flee.

The Apocalyptic Option

Then there is the “Apocalyptic Option”. Its supporters argue that the dominance of relativism, the expansion of Islam, and the loss of Christian faith means that God has seen all He needs to see about what men do with their free will when actually lived in various times and places. The appointed time is near. There is no need to strive to establish a perfect city on earth (an abiding temptation designed to avoid what Christianity actually teaches). The only thing that remains to complete in history is the Judgment.

Musing about “the end time” is popular amongst fundamentalist Christians, as the popularity of novels about “The Rapture” attest. *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, by Hal Lindsay, has sold about 30 million copies since its publication in 1970; [*Left Behind*](#) novels about the “tribulations” before the coming of Christ have also sold millions of copies.

But we should not forget the sober and profound reflection of Josef Pieper in his book on the end of history. Robert Hugh Benson's novel, *The Lord of the World* takes up the same topic, a book cited by both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis. Ratzinger's book on Eschatology is still worth a careful reading.

The "Apocalyptic Option" may seem preposterous, but predictions of "the end times" have a long history. The Greek philosopher Plato imagined a kind of apocalypse in which each man would be judged by how he had lived his life. In the *Gorgias* he said that history would not be complete until good was rewarded and evil punished. Plato is still a master of this topic.

The Muslim Option

A new, and surprising, option is the "Muslim Option". In recent years, most of the ancient Christian enclaves in the Middle East, the "Benedict Options" of earlier centuries which had survived for hundreds and hundreds of years have been destroyed or are under threat.

Even in the remotest corners of the world Christian monasteries and churches are being destroyed, literally ground into gravel as contrary to Allah's will. Even the remote and most renowned monasteries and churches are eradicated as alien to the new culture. The Benedict option presupposed some place to which one could escape, a political system that at least let them alone, or so remote from the centers of power that no one cared about them. Today, a cell phone can take a pick-up truck with soldiers, machine guns, knives, and demolition equipment to any address on the planet.

The "Muslim Option" is peace through the voluntary or forced "conversion" of everyone to Islam as the Qur'an has mandated. While this option seems improbable to many besides its advocates, it may well be the fate of a good part of Europe as

it has been the fate of the Near East, North Africa, and parts of Asia.

Europe and America are belatedly beginning to talk of fences and walls, the means that were set up to protect the medieval towns and cities from the barbarians or from the earlier armies of Mohammed. We even hear discussions of "[The Islamization of America](#)". Neither Christians nor secularists would be able to hide in this new world order.

Moving forward

Analyzing these options can give us some insight into how Christians are engaging and should engage with a dominant secularist culture. The Epicurean option suggests that we should take no real interest in these public things. We just want to be left alone. The Benedict option counsels us to disengage from public life and to live in counter-cultural communities where some semblance of right order can be preserved. The Muslim option is to conquer and crush the dominant culture (i.e., both Christians and secularists). The Apocalyptic option suggests that Christians let God sort out the mess.

In the light of these considerations, is there yet another option that we might call "the Aristotelian Option"? Aristotle lived in a sophisticated but turbulent age. He observed wars, corrupt and demagogic politicians. He knew the passions of the great majority in any society. He knew how tyrants rose out of the unlimited freedom of democratic citizens who had no principle of order in their own souls.

Yet he taught that the good man did have responsibilities in society. He defined man as a "political animal". Man found his greatest dignity and fulfillment when he participated courageously in affairs of state. For Aristotle that meant serving in the government of Athens or fighting in its army. He did not think that a rational being ought to retreat from

engagement in public life. But he was realistic enough to acknowledge that good regimes do fail and there is an order to their failure. He also could envision, with a change in the souls of the citizens, a return to good order. But immediately, Aristotle is most helpful for us today in his description of what happens in democracies in which the souls of the citizens are not ruled by anything but their own desires. He saw how quickly tyrants would arise within such regimes and impose their own arbitrary rule.

Bede the Venerable, the Anglo-Saxon monk who wrote *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People* about the year 730AD, had harsh words for British Christians who failed in their duty to convert the Saxons, Angles and Jute invaders from the Continent: "Among other most wicked actions ... which their own historian, Gildas, mournfully takes notice of, they added this – that they never preached the faith to the Saxons, or English, who dwelt amongst them." But the context of conversion today is not that of pagan tribes who were open to Christianity. In 12 centuries, very, very few Muslims have been converted, while whole nations once Christian are now Muslim. The imposition of understandings of human life directly contrary to the natural law is now almost the norm of public life in the West. Christians are being driven out of public life if they do not change their views and accept the politics of the state.

The old saying that we attribute to Alcoholics Anonymous that you will not reform till you hit bottom seem almost true of our culture. The mark of Christianity is the Cross. As Georg Marlin (*Christian Persecution in the Middle East*) and Robert Royal (*Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century*) have pointed out, we are seeing more martyrs than have happened in all of previous history. What struck these authors was the relative indifference with which these killings are greeted among us and the nobility of those who have suffered them in quiet.

So, in the end, is there what might be called a "Schall

Option"? The first is that each of the "options"—Epicurean, Benedict, Muslim, Apocalyptic, and Aristotelian—is at work among us. And they are live options because the political regimes we see before us are disordered in the way Aristotle outlined them to be and in the way the natural law is being systematically dismantled by legal and political decisions. Such is not exactly a cheery conclusion, but it is one that conforms to the outlines of what we see almost everywhere we look, whether it be North or South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, or what's left to escape to.

Still, there is something to be said for knowing where we are. Most of our trouble has been caused by rejecting or not receiving what indeed could set us on a real Aristotelian option, one in which the things of Caesar were limited to what belonged to him.

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Notes

* See Robert Royal, "[The Choice of the Soul](#)." The Catholic Thing, March 7, 2016

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