

# Hold the Granola

*Gilbert Meilaender*

*Crunchy Cons*  
by Rod Dreher  
Crown Forum, 272 pages, \$24

Making a long drive home from a meeting late last summer, I found myself hungry in the early afternoon. I needed something that would be quick, inexpensive, and good. And there (providentially?) was the sign: a Burger King off the next exit. I felt like a flame-grilled Whopper, and the beauty of it is that you can “have it your way”—which in my case meant hold the tomato and mayo, add mustard. Here is a realm of life where being pro-choice is just the thing for me. I know, of course, that there are some who don’t like Whoppers, and that’s fine, so long as they do not make the mistake of identifying their likes and dislikes in food with what is right and wrong.

As I began to eat, two young boys (probably about ten and eight years old) sat down with their parents at an adjoining table. Both boys had on Chief Wahoo caps, so I would have known they were Cleveland Indians fans even if they had not been discussing the previous night’s game, which they had seen on ESPN. It happened that in my hotel room I had myself spent the last part of the evening watching that same game. I decided therefore to venture a brief conversational gambit. “Go Tribe,” I said to the younger of the two boys.

And that set us to talking while we ate—first about the previous night’s game, then about the Tribe’s chances more generally, and from there we branched off into a wide-ranging discussion that (as I recall) covered everything from baseball cards to steroids. Our ability to watch the Indians on television even though we did not live near Cleveland created a little shared community among us as we sat there eating in Burger King. The experience was so satisfying that I went back

up to the counter for a Hershey’s Sundae Pie and stayed longer than I’d planned.

Almost everything about that experience would be judged and found wanting by Rod Dreher, author of *Crunchy Cons*, a book that argues for a kind of conservatism that focuses not on the free market or a strong American foreign policy but on eating right, home-schooling children, avoiding living in monochromatic suburbs, being environmentally “green,” and being religious in what are thought to be countercultural ways.

I will leave to others the task of sorting out the sense in which Dreher’s “manifesto” (as he himself terms it) is or is not a legitimate form of political conservatism in this country. I do have a hunch that five years from now he will be less likely to characterize himself as a conservative, for it is hard to regard as one’s comrades so many people for whom one has such evident scorn and disdain. These are “boring” people who are just interested in “things” and are, therefore, caught up in a shallow consumerist mentality. They tend to think that the purpose of life is acquiring more things, living in bigger McMansions, and leading “ordinary” lives. They support the Iraq War “to protect access to cheap oil,” which is “what this war is really about”—and without which they cannot drive their gas-guzzling cars the long distances from where they live in their McMansions to where they work. It strikes me as unlikely that Dreher can continue indefinitely to consider such people his allies. But, in any case, since he himself says that “crunchy conservatism is a cultural sensibility, not an ideology,” there is justification for considering it in ways that do not focus on politics.

Dreher develops his case primarily through recounting the lives of people who in a variety of ways manifest the crunchy-con sensibility. This makes for a

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book rather longer than it need be, and I may as well admit here and now that I find these people a little less interesting than Dreher does. (I refrain from characterizing them as “boring,” though I have to struggle manfully against temptation in the case of the woman who muses about how fortunate she and her husband feel to have escaped the preoccupation with “things” that characterizes so many smart and good—but boring—people whom she knows.)

Although it is not always easy to say precisely what unites these crunchy-con folk, Dreher characterizes them as committed primarily to faith, family, and community—and it may be useful to take these as rubrics for reflecting on his manifesto. (I will pass by almost entirely one topic—food—that Dreher takes up. If he wants to cut out chips and soda and use that money to buy “ethically and nutritionally superior food,” if he wants to spend more of his income to buy meat raised, and produce grown, by those who live near him rather than by agribusiness corporations, I will certainly not tell him to do otherwise—though I feel no strong urge to taste the “creamy sorrel soup” or share the “thin slab of Manchego.”)

Different as crunchy cons may be in certain ways, “the thread that ties them all together, that gives them focus, is religion.” I would like to believe this, but Dreher’s account is so confusing that I often had a hard time knowing what to make of it. He recounts, for example, how, when he lived in Brooklyn, his wife’s closest friends were a few other stay-at-home moms who seemed not to be religious but who “were all united in the belief that there was something supremely important about caring for their children.” The word “supreme” in such a context ought to be a problem for those who are seriously religious.

Whatever the content of their religious faith, Dreher suggests, crunchy cons are all nonrelativist: All agree that truth really matters. “As such, we are all comrades in the conservative counterculture.” Evidently this is crucial, for, at one point in his religious journey toward Catholicism, Dreher concluded that “if there was no God, then there was no right and wrong.” But this Dostoevskyan insight remains a bit uncertain, for a few pages later he says “it’s certainly not that one has to be religious to be moral.”

On the one hand, crunchy cons are looking for a religion that restrains our desires and asks of us a kind of submission. On the other hand, they affirm a “sacramental” vision of the material world, which gives “an essentially religious way of interpreting reality, even if one isn’t formally religious.” In short, within the confines of his chapter on religion, Dreher manages to blur the important distinction between a view that charac-

terizes all religions as fundamentally alike in that they express the same human experience of sacred power and a view that characterizes religions as ways of life that teach us how to think about the world and that may or may not turn out to be asking the same questions or doing the same things. The conflation is, I suspect, inherently unstable. One of these understandings of religion will provide the sense of submission that Dreher seeks, but it cannot unite the crunchy cons whose religious traditions are different. The other understanding will unite them—and is therefore, in my view, more fundamental to Dreher’s vision—but it can invite submission to tradition only by accident, only insofar as that seems fulfilling.

A strong sense of impatience runs through the pages of *Crunchy Cons*. Perhaps it is the impatience of the prophet, and, to the degree that it is, one must attempt to learn from it. Still, over the years I have not found the folks who sit in church with me to be as vapid as Dreher seems to think they are. I admit that, on those occasions when for one reason or another I have been at a Catholic Mass, the liturgy (let us not even mention the hymnody) has largely failed to move me.

Still, even as a Lutheran, I would never say (as Dreher does), that “if the only contact a typical American Catholic has with Catholic teaching and thought is what he hears at Mass, he will remain a self-satisfied ignoramus.” I would not say it, in part, because I have watched ordinary bourgeois folk struggle in their different ways to take seriously what happens in the church’s worship. And I would not say it, in part, because, evidently unlike Dreher, I do not suppose they were self-satisfied ignoramuses before coming to church. Nor do I think that “traditional Christian values [make] so little apparent difference in the lives many conservative believers lead.”

If this is simply an assertion that we all fall short of the beliefs to which we are committed, then it is obvious but not very prophetic. If it is something more, then it fails to do justice to the struggles many believers have thinking about how they ought to live (and it fails, inexplicably, to give us any insight into why they bother to come back week after week when there are so many obviously more interesting ways to spend Sunday morning).

Years ago, as a seminary student, I took a course in pastoral theology taught by a man named George Hoyer. I confess that I remember absolutely nothing from that course—except one thing. Commenting one day on the tendency of pastors to become impatient (and prophetic—this was the late 1960s, after all) with their parishioners, Hoyer said: “Don’t forget that these people are coming back week

after week to hear you.” Then, after a pause, he added: “And you’re not always so good.” I can find in Dreher’s discussion almost no understanding of the struggles of people who are serious believers but who simply decline to spend as much time thinking about their own experience as Dreher does about his.

Although Dreher says explicitly that faith is the thread that ties crunchy cons together, there are many moments in the book when a reader might think that the real key is its emphasis on the family. This comes out even in his discussion of the kind of home one ought to buy. One of the most basic flaws—indeed, one of the vices—of Dreher’s book generally is an inability to distinguish between what one dislikes and what is morally wrong.

For example, speaking as one who moved (within the same town) from one house to another a couple of years ago, and who did so motivated in large part by the desire for an attached garage, I perked up when one of the crunchy cons interviewed by Dreher comments about his own “cozy neighborhood”: “We’re close. The on-street parking. People want to have their garages, but if you have that, you pull in and never have to see your neighbors. That’s so isolating. I think the detached garage has led as much to the collapse of civilization as Janet Jackson baring her breast.” Well, a little philosophy is a dangerous thing (and there’s plenty of evidence for that in the interviews Dreher recounts), but this does not sound to me like the “humility” Dreher claims as a defining mark of crunchy conservatism. It sounds, rather, like someone entirely unable to separate his likes and dislikes about how to live from questions on which, as a matter of morality, we need to agree.

More central to the emphasis on family, however, are Dreher’s discussions of mothers who stay home to rear their children, of home-schooling, of being “mission-minded” about rearing one’s children. Surely there is much in his account with which to agree. Children need parents who are available for more than short stretches of quality time. A good bit of what happens in school is boring and even oppressive, and what is important could almost surely be accomplished in shorter school days and years. At home some children are simply turned loose with the television, permitted to spend a great deal of time watching programs of questionable worth. And, more generally, children need structure if they are to develop the habits of character that will stand them in good stead as they mature.

Nevertheless, if there is much with which to agree, there is also reason for concern. There must be a way to take seriously the rearing of one’s children without

focusing with such intensity on “family as mission” (probably the central concept of Dreher’s chapter on education). Doing the best we can to rear our children is a task that is both obligatory and (sometimes) satisfying, but to clothe it in the language of “mission” begins to lose something essential to the relation between parents and children: namely, the mystery of it all.

Child-rearing is not pottery or sculpture; the materials in our hands turn out to have ideas of their own. Most of what we know about the task we learn only too late, after our mistakes have been made. Rather than a mission of rearing countercultural children, we have the task of doing the best we can, in love, to set our children on the way in life. We teach them how to behave, we try to set them on the right path and shape their character properly, but we don’t own their souls. They must for a time obey us, but they don’t have to share all our likes and dislikes.

Dreher is not wrong, of course, to note that some proponents of public schooling in America “explicitly sought to undermine the family” and “separate children from the influence of their families.” But, at the same time, genuine nurture recognizes that we must, in various ways, hand our children over to others as well. We do not possess them. Indeed, at moments I found myself wondering whether crunchy cons, in their zeal to turn against an obsession with “things,” were not in danger of filling that need for things with children. And I shudder to learn of the children reared by crunchy cons that “these kids are going to be rebels with a cause” when they grow up. We may all hope to bring up children with character sufficient to resist whatever is genuinely evil (and character wise enough not to brand as evil what is simply not to their liking), but to delight in rearing little rebels, who will likely think they know far more than they do, does not strike me as a helpful way to face the future.

This desire to create rebels turns into attitudes such as hostility toward the “media culture” in general and television in particular. “The most important thing we can do is toss out the television or commit ourselves to drastically curtailing its use. Putting ourselves and our families on a strict mass-media diet is vital; how can we ever hope to think on the Permanent Things if we fill our minds with nothing but ephemerality?”

Probably, of course, Dreher does not mean for us to start with the *Dallas Morning News*, for which he works as writer and editor. Here again it is important to distinguish our likes and dislikes from right and wrong. Even as a child, and still as an adult, I have never cared for cartoons or animation, but I can’t imagine decree-

ing that none of my children should. Moreover, it is far from easy to say what is and is not ephemeral. If my morning sports page reports that in yesterday's game Jim Thome had two hits in four at-bats, that will be true weeks, months, and years from now—when many of the claims made in *Crunchy Cons* have had their day or, even, been demonstrated to be wrong. It may be, moreover, that children who learned from watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* day after day will prove to be as imaginative and dependable—even, when necessary, as capable of rebellion—as those who were deprived of that experience. There are a few ways to go wrong in rearing children, but there are many ways in which to go right.

The most important issue, however, lies in the way the book's discussion of the family as mission-minded intersects with religion. I have already recounted how the women with whom Dreher's wife Julie came to be friends in Brooklyn shared a belief "that there was something supremely important about caring for their children." In that context Julie also comments: "All of us wanted more than anything to be a real part of our baby's life. A baby, that's a human being. That's a soul. That's a life. The baby is not an accessory. He's not part of life. He's everything."

But no, as a matter of metaphysical fact, he's not everything. We understand, of course, how a devoted and caring mother might sometimes feel that he is. We understand how he might absorb so much of her time and energy as to seem to be everything. We understand that caring for him is her vocation in life. We understand that the tie between her and her child is so deep and intimate that nothing could entirely efface it. But her child is not everything.

To love that child more than Jesus is, we have it on good authority, to be unworthy of Jesus. To bring that child to baptism is to hand him over to God, who must be the guarantor of his existence, and to the church, which must accept responsibility for him. There is something stiflingly possessive in this account of the parent-child bond. It is, no doubt, understandable—even admirable—in a world where so many children are left simply to fend for themselves, but it sometimes strikes a disturbing note.

It is harder to discuss Dreher's ideal of community, because his depiction of it is less specific than his discussion of faith and family. On the one hand, what he praises in the life of many of the crunchy cons are "the skills of self-sufficiency." Hence, he puts forward as models the people who can raise their own food and the homes where all the essential tasks of life take place, even home churches. On the other hand, however, he is critical of suburban living which, "how-

ever comfortable and prosperous," is associated with "alienation and a loss of community." Why exactly self-sufficient independence is more conducive to community than an interdependence that relies on the skill of others to do what we cannot is a mystery to me.

Still, it is probably true that the ideal of community espoused in *Crunchy Cons* is closely related to its attack on a life "too focused on material conditions" or too greedy to have and enjoy material things. Here again, we would be foolish not to grant the truth in Dreher's manifesto: All too often our hearts cling too attentively even to good things (though one might wish that Dreher, for all his rejection of Gnosticism, were clearer about their goodness). The problem, however, is that there are so many different ways that greed may lead us astray.

"I am sitting," Dreher begins a vignette, "in my neighborhood hangout, a wine store and bar next to an Irish pub. It is a warm spring afternoon, and I am relaxing over a book, with an open bottle of tart California white at my elbow. There are worse ways to spend a Saturday afternoon."

Perhaps so, though I can think of few, especially were I to have to wear his Birkenstocks rather than my New Balance sneakers while doing so. We can go wrong by wanting too many things in never-ending supply; we can also go wrong by being too fussy about which things we have. Thus, Aquinas notes that "inordinate concupiscence" in eating may obviously occur by eating too much. But it may also occur, less obviously but just as perniciously, when one seeks food that is "*sumptuous*—i.e., costly food as regards its quality," or "food prepared too nicely—i.e., *daintily*." Aquinas sees how our captivity to things may be more subtle than we realize, so subtle as to enchain us precisely when we think to break free of it.

"Most of us," Dreher writes, "do not believe in restraining our appetites." He is not foolish to worry about our inability to discipline our desire for the good things of life and about our reluctance to make the sacrifices that genuine community requires. Nonetheless, he pays little attention to dimensions of life in which children, for example, may learn just such lessons of discipline and interdependence.

For example, despite all the problems he rightly sees in our schools, children there may play in a band or orchestra—where they will learn to depend on others, learn the meaning of harmony, and need to spend hours in the discipline of individual and corporate practice. Children there may participate in sports, one of the realms of life in which we still are eager for excellence, and in which such excellence demands sacrifice, self-discipline, and subordination of one's own desires

to the shared goal of the team. While reading *Crunchy Cons*, I found myself surprised that its author seemed to know so few people who had profited from such experiences, whereas I know many. I have, I think, as much hope for those boys I met in Burger King as I do for some of the countercultural rebels Dreher wants us to produce.

There is much that strikes me as on-target in *Crunchy Cons*, along with a good bit that strikes me as misguided or ill informed, but where the book goes awry has less to do with substance than with tone. As Reinhold Niebuhr noted, if one really wants to be a prophet, one may need to be an itinerant; it is hard to

hang around those who have been bludgeoned by our critique. No doubt such prophets are sometimes needed by all of us, but I wonder whether the tone of this book might not have been more successful had its author been less intent on demonstrating that those who live in ways different from his own are flawed souls—and more intent simply on depicting the goods he has found without invidious comparison with goods others enjoy.

It was after all G.K. Chesterton, whom Dreher seems to regard as one of the patron saints of his manifesto, who noted that “it is not familiarity but comparison that breeds contempt.” FT

## Playing Scratch-and-Win

The Scratch machine dispenses fun  
in little pictures. You choose one  
as flat and bright as a cartoon  
of GI Joe and his platoon.

When no one sees, you take a shot  
and feed the only bill you’ve got  
that’s crisp enough into the slot

And then just stand there,  
deep in the thrall of a riddle, a dare,  
as behind the illuminated rows,  
the *deus ex machina* inside it slows,  
and drops into your waiting hand  
whatever fate Fat Chance has planned—  
lose five bucks, win fifty grand.

Beneath the chartered camouflage,  
the pink flamingos and Macaws,  
you scrape away with black thumbnail,  
as if it were the Seventh Seal,  
or sweetheart’s answer come by mail—  
you’re deemed a loser by those laws  
no one can trespass or appeal.

*Belle Randall*

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