

Post-Liberal Catholicism

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN *TRIUMPH* AND CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

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On October 14, 1970, the *New York Times* published a blistering op-ed from L. Brent Bozell Jr. condemning the scourge of abortion.¹ This was, essentially, an appeal to the court of public opinion. He had been arrested and charged after leading the country's first pro-life protest on June 6 of the same year outside an abortion clinic in Washington, DC. Young men in red berets and Francoist regalia, proclaiming themselves “Los Hijos de Tormenta” after the biblical “Sons of Thunder,” had accompanied Bozell and his good friend Professor Frederick Wilhelmsen for an afternoon of Mass, Eucharistic adoration, and passionate oratory in front of a small crowd of supporters and onlookers.² Then they attempted to forcibly enter the clinic.

Although they were quickly dispersed by local police, the attitude evinced in the July issue of *Triumph* magazine was defiant. The editors offered a blow-by-blow account of the day, an initial rebuttal of the descriptions of the rally proffered by the *Evening Star* and the *Washington Post*, and confident proclamations of innocence. While Bozell and his compatriots were all eventually convicted on minor charges, they coalesced a group of activists who went on to found the annual March for Life and inaugurated a tradition of clinic protests that continues to this day.

The son of an advertiser from Omaha, Nebraska, Bozell earned a scholarship to Yale in an oratorical competition and eventually graduated from the university's law school. He was William F. Buckley Jr.'s close friend and champion debate partner at Yale, and they quickly earned a reputation for countercultural

and pugnacious opinions. Their partnership continued in their postcollegiate years: They published *McCarthy and His Enemies: The Record and Its Meaning*,³ a carefully researched defense of the controversial senator, in 1954; founded *National Review* in 1955; and remained lifelong friends even as Bozell broke from the fusionist consensus articulated by Buckley and his cohort.⁴

In 1960, Bozell ghostwrote Barry Goldwater's *The Conscience of a Conservative*,⁵ which by 1964 had sold over 3.5 million copies and turned Goldwater into the most prominent Republican politician in the country. Although Goldwater lost in a landslide to Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Conscience of a Conservative* galvanized a generation of young activists. Bozell inspired Ronald Reagan, Pat Buchanan, George F. Will, William J. Baroody, Edwin Feulner, and a host of other conservative luminaries with his rhetoric, and he (and his descendants) made essential contributions to the creation of the modern conservative movement.⁶

As his devotion to his Catholic faith deepened, Bozell began to separate himself from newly institutionalized conservatism. His dissatisfaction with his former colleagues at *National Review* pushed him to found *Triumph*, a monthly magazine focused on offering, from Bozell's perspective, a truly Catholic account of the world. *Triumph* ran from 1966 to 1976 and is mostly forgotten today, though a few conservative Catholics still recall fiery polemic from Bozell, Wilhelmsen, William Marshner, and other writers. The magazine developed from the personal friendships Bozell and Wilhelmsen formed through their work

with *National Review*, *Modern Age*, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and the Philadelphia Society.⁷

However, their arguments remain relevant today because they are resurfacing. Post-liberal thinkers such as Notre Dame political scientist Patrick J. Deneen, bestselling author and journalist Rod Dreher, and Harvard Law Professor Adrian Vermeule all have recently engaged in critiques surprisingly similar to those offered by Bozell’s radical tribe nearly six decades ago.⁸

My research interests lie in exploring the critique expounded by Bozell and his coterie of Catholic reactionaries. I first offer a literature review, demonstrating a consistent marginalization of Bozell and *Triumph* by most academics. I then turn to content analysis, exploring to what extent “apocalypticism” in *Triumph* can be quantified. Finally, I compare and contrast *Triumph*’s post-liberalism with Deneen’s 2018 book *Why Liberalism Failed*, Dreher’s 2017 book *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, and several opinion pieces from Vermeule. I hope to demonstrate a continuity of reaction among religious social conservatives that springs from perceived policy failure. The argument concludes by taking stock of political Christianity today and suggesting an alternative derived from Bozell’s story.

Rationale

Why study Bozell, *Triumph*, and the writings of Deneen, Dreher, and Vermeule? Is post-liberalism discourse for anything beyond idle speculation among academics and insular Twitter communities?

As shown in the literature review, Bozell and *Triumph* are consistently under-studied in academia. Most references to *Triumph* are tangential, and there are vanishingly few engagements with the actual substance of the monthly. *Triumph* may have failed (it ran out of money in 1975), but its editors, contributors, and readers went on to found universities, work in politics or academia, and occupy positions of influence in the conservative movement. Similarly, most discussions of “integralism” or “post-liberalism” are

conducted by and for a small minority of the conservative intellectual elite.

The term “integralism” requires definition. Perhaps no one is more responsible for its newfound popularity than Cistercian monk Pater Edmund Waldstein. He distills it thus:

Catholic Integralism is a tradition of thought that, rejecting the liberal separation of politics from concern with the end of human life, holds that political rule must order man to his final goal. Since, however, man has both a temporal and an eternal end, integralism holds that there are two powers that rule him: a temporal power and spiritual power. And since man’s temporal end is subordinated to his eternal end, the temporal power must be subordinated to the spiritual power.⁹

In other words, at least theoretically, integralists seek to overthrow liberal hegemony and reassert what they view as the Catholic Church’s traditional teaching regarding politics: the subordination of the temporal order (the state) to the spiritual order (the Church). Any polity that is not subordinated to the proper spiritual authorities must be regarded, in some sense, as wicked and illegitimate insofar as it perverts Church teaching. The thinkers I investigate are interested in discovering an alternative source of authority that exists outside the leviathan of liberalism, a spiritual sovereignty.

This all may seem obscure and fringe. That said, conservatism’s intellectual trajectory has a massive impact on the United States. Elite opinion is disproportionately powerful, and exploring debates on the margins can clue us in to seismic shifts in political reality before they happen.

One present-day example sticks out: Private-equity executive and National Security Council official Michael Anton’s essay “The Flight 93 Election,” pseudonymously published in the *Claremont Review of Books* in September 2016, received little attention outside of conservative circles before being hailed as the manifesto of the Donald Trump phenomenon.¹⁰ The *Claremont Review of Books* readership is limited to highbrow conservative readers, and Anton is a

respected conservative intellectual virtually unknown to the public. Despite its provenance, the essay is now seen as a classic text that articulates the mindset behind many different groups of Trump supporters. Analogously, though *Triumph* was never more than a fringe publication, we can still learn how religious social conservatives reacted to the tumultuous events of the late '60s and early '70s.

This discontent is crucial to understanding the post-liberal movement today; Deneen, Dreher, and Vermeule are each prominent conservative intellectuals. *Why Liberalism Failed* and *The Benedict Option* are bestsellers, and Vermeule's articles have generated a flurry of attention in mainstream political media. Deneen's book was even recommended in one of former President Barack Obama's year-end booklists.¹¹ More broadly, the Trump years have accelerated realigning trends in the conservative coalition, and many intellectuals sense that the future of conservatism is in flux. Post-liberals are in active contention with other factions in the current coalition, and the results of this debate will have long-term ramifications nationwide.¹²

One potential counterargument to this line of reasoning is that one ought not give a platform to reactionaries or fringe thinkers because of their dangerously heterodox ideas. I disagree with this objection because engaging with ideas many find bizarre or threatening is essential to scholarly rigor and, more broadly, a successful pluralistic society. Rick Perlstein, a popular historian of American conservatism, offered a mea culpa in the *New York Times Magazine* for failing to engage with the radicals, the paranoiacs, and the fringes of American politics.¹³ He argues that for a history of the conservative movement to be successful, scholars must be "conditioned by the present" and "study conservative history's political surrealists and intellectual embarrassments, its con artists and tribunes of white rage."¹⁴

Now, to be clear, Bozell and *Triumph* are neither intransigent racists nor intellectual embarrassments.¹⁵ But they are firmly planted on the fringe because of their philosophical, political, and religious commitments and because of the conscious choice by mainstream historians to sideline them. If

high-information voters and observers are to learn one thing from the Trump years, it must be to watch the fringe.

Methodology

My research comprises two main elements: content analysis and qualitative comparison. I searched for apocalyptic rhetoric throughout the editorials of *Triumph*. Each issue of the magazine contained a section titled "Present Imperfect" or "Non-Imprimatur" and one or two long-form editorials. I reviewed each of the 99 extant issues for language dealing with the following themes and terms: gnosticism, apocalypse, crisis, damnation, despair, dissent, dystopia, eschaton, final, millennial, sin, and the end. I then coded occurrences manually.

Apocalypticism is defined as rhetoric that points toward the uniquely hellish or evil nature of public life or that calls Christians to their eschatological end point in response to political opposition. I expect to see some increase in the frequency of occurrence of apocalyptic language correlate with particularly calamitous (from a social conservative perspective) policy failures. Additionally, I expect to see a rise in the use of apocalyptic rhetoric as *Triumph* nears the end of its run because of the intensely felt experience of financial pressure and failure.

The second portion of my research is a qualitative analysis comparing and contrasting Bozell's and *Triumph*'s arguments to arguments advanced by Deneen, Dreher, and Vermeule. This analysis links modern post-liberals to an under-studied yet crucial figure in the history of the conservative movement and thus contextualizes their arguments within the larger history of Christian social conservatism in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Literature Review

The story of *Triumph* in the literature is a story of persistent marginalization. Most historians have characterized the creators of and contributors to

Triumph as radical, reactionary Catholics with little to no influence on the story of American conservatism as a whole. My review explores two main categories: biographical treatments of key figures in the conservative movement and intellectual histories of conservatism.

Biographical Treatments. Two biographical treatments touch on Bozell, though I think both are flawed in different ways. First is progressive author and journalist John B. Judis' comprehensive 1988 biography *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives*.¹⁶ He mentions both Bozell and his wife Patricia (Buckley's younger sister) several times, but he offers no more than a few sentences on the content of *Triumph*.

Judis' characterization of the magazine is, however, somewhat interesting for our purposes, mostly because of his implicit moral critique of and failure to understand *Triumph*; he chides the Bozells for "getting swept up in the hysteria of the late sixties" and regards their direct action protests against abortion and pornography throughout the early 1970s with bemused detachment.¹⁷ Judis is content to view Bozell's career in light of his mental health issues, effectively dismissing Bozell from the story of modern conservatism and portraying the Bozell family as one with unbalanced views reflecting a tenuous grasp on reality. He relegates them to no more than a few scattered references focused on the friendship and familial dynamics with Buckley.

The second is Daniel Kelly's 2014 book *Living on Fire: The Life of L. Brent Bozell Jr.*¹⁸ The only biographical treatment of Bozell available, *Living on Fire* has many enjoyable and revealing anecdotes and interesting finds from Kelly's archival research in the Bozell family home. Kelly's biography is somewhat hagiographic, and his critiques are tepid at best; that said, it is a useful resource for coloring in my sketch of Bozell and for a few specialized facts that Kelly unearths in the Bozell papers.

Intellectual Histories of Conservatism. One of the most important and influential histories of the conservative movement is George H. Nash's *The*

Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945. It offers a brief summary of *Triumph*, calling Bozell the ringleader of an "estranged camp" of disgruntled, religious individuals.¹⁹ The rest of the discussion hinges on a comparison between the "ultra-traditionalists" under the *Triumph* banner and the "ultra-libertarians" under the loose leadership or example of Murray Rothbard and Ayn Rand. However, as Nash himself notes, radical libertarianism (at least in its early formulations) was a profoundly anarchic and organic enterprise, drawing on "the antiestablishment impulses so widely shared by young Americans in the late 1960s."²⁰

In marked contrast, *Triumph* was built around a counterrevolutionary, bourgeois ethic, with most of their contributors well-off academics or intellectuals and their practical suggestions for everyday life amounting to raising large families, buying rural land, and living with propriety and religious devotion. Additionally, it was substantially more doctrinaire and hierarchical than the libertarian movement, with most thinkers associated with *Triumph* taking their cues from Bozell and Wilhelmson.

Nash is correct in asserting that both movements represent a road not taken in the story of American conservatism; most conservative intellectuals did indeed "pursue what appeared to be the common-sense middle course, veering away from paradigmatic purity."²¹ But what Nash fails to apprehend is that *Triumph* has exerted a more substantial influence than may initially be seen from the magazine's fringe status.

Emory University Professor Patrick Allitt's *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985* is more sympathetic to Bozell's enterprise, especially since his argument relies on emphasizing the impact of Catholic intellectuals on conservative politics.²² Allitt's argument traces the 20th-century Catholic climb out of the intellectual and political "ghetto" into general respectability and the simultaneous fracturing of the Catholic intellectual "consensus" that the climb entailed. He attributes *Triumph*'s rise to the "volatile aftermath of Vatican II," the "abortion question and the beginnings of the sexual revolution," and "dissatisfaction with *National Review*'s

policy-oriented conservatism.”²³ He fingers Bozell as a primary cause of the fractures between theological modernists and traditionalists and between political liberals and conservatives.

Although Allitt is more sensitive than Nash to *Triumph*'s embattled minority, he ultimately misunderstands the essential importance of these reactionary intellectuals: their impact on conservatism as a whole. While *Triumph* may have become a constitutive part within Allitt's new ghetto of a “cerebral preserve of intellectuals hoping in the long term for a vindication their own age seemed unwilling to provide,” the subsequent history of conservatism bears a significant debt to reactionaries, including *Triumph*'s editors.

The most extensive account of *Triumph* is Mark D. Popowski's 2011 book *The Rise and Fall of Triumph: The History of a Radical Roman Catholic Magazine, 1966–1976*.²⁴ Primarily a work of intellectual history, Popowski's analysis is mostly an extended exposition of *Triumph*'s positions on various issues, and his work is useful for exploring the nuances of their arguments. However, the extent to which *Triumph* affects intellectuals and ordinary conservatives outside of its own circle is crucial to understanding the magazine, even if causality and linkages are more difficult to demonstrate. Popowski avoids this, arguing in the introduction that “the editors' radicalism likely made them appear absurd to the overwhelming majority of Americans, even Catholic Americans.”²⁵ His initial characterization of the magazine as absurdly radical sells short the importance of *Triumph*. As Popowski catalogues the various unique claims that *Triumph* makes, he fails to place the importance of the individual claims in the history of the larger conservative movement, leaving us to behold the intricacy of Bozell's intellectual construction without understanding why it is more than a mere curiosity.

One of the most interesting engagements with the content of *Triumph* is Carol Mason's *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics*.²⁶ She takes a theory-laden approach to analyzing the rise of “apocalypticism” and the paradox of committing acts of terrorism, up to and including murder, for the cause of life. One chapter unpacks Bozell's unique

employment of “narrative time” to “divest apocalyptic [pro-life] thinking of its [political] passivity and resignation.”²⁷ For Mason, Bozell is an archetypal figure in the American biblical millennialism tradition, where the narrative of “making time” gives believers the ability to move “in and out of chronological, historical time” and “epochal periods of biblical time.”²⁸ This divine gift of agency frees believers from political passivity, allowing them to participate in the eschatological enactment of Christ's return into history.

Mason's work is unique in that she refuses to fall into the familiar pattern of sidelining Bozell and his tribe in favor of more mainstream figures. She spotlights Bozell's early work ghostwriting Goldwater's *The Conscience of a Conservative* as formative for the entire conservative movement, writing that both *The Conscience of a Conservative* and *Triumph* “paved the way for the New Right's emphasis on morality.”²⁹ Mason sees Bozell not as a fringe character but rather as a prophet who “embodied both the militant protestor and the intellectual strategist” and signaled the vigor and clout of the nascent American pro-life movement.³⁰ Despite (or perhaps because of) her own liberal ideological commitments, Mason offers perhaps the most perspicacious analysis of Bozell's impact on the conservative movement available in the literature.³¹

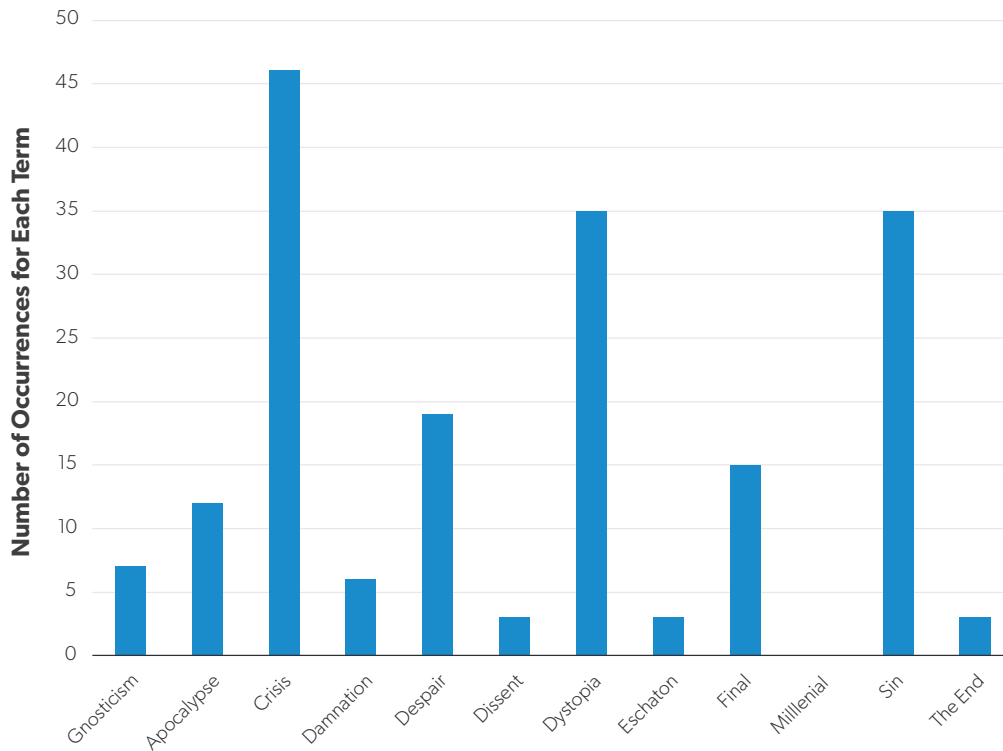
Mason's work is the departure point for my own content analysis. While Mason engages with Bozell qualitatively, I add a quantitative analysis of the editorial content of *Triumph*.

Content Analysis

My analysis of the content of *Triumph* yielded both expected and unexpected results. Content analysis as an evaluative methodology is largely ad hoc, and I could find no parallel study that would give me a standard by which to judge the relative frequency of apocalyptic rhetoric in *Triumph*.

First, I found 133 unique “excerpts” that were apocalyptic in tone and content. This is a relatively low rate of apocalypticism given that the magazine had a decade-long run. *Triumph*'s explicitly countercultural

Figure 1. Sums of Apocalyptic Terms



Source: Author’s research.

identity and razor-sharp editorial focus on deconstructing the American regime to find the root cause of what the authors perceived to be moral rot seem to imply a high degree of apocalyptic rhetoric, yet the editorials typically dealt with commentary on world affairs, church politics, or liturgical abuse. There was no shortage of polemic, but not all polemic is apocalyptic.

While the language of crisis appears frequently, other telltale signs of apocalyptic rhetoric were rarer. Figure 1 and Table 1 show that of the 133 excerpts, language relating to “crisis” appears 46 times, while “dystopia” and “sin” each appear 35 times. June 1968 was the most “apocalyptic” issue, with nine separate occurrences of language fitting the coding criteria. No other issue had more than five. The terms “crisis” and “dystopia” were most frequently coded together, with 11 separate co-occurrences. “Sin” and “dystopia” were the second most frequently coded together, with nine

separate co-occurrences. No other terms occurred together more than twice. There’s a modest downward trend in the number of apocalyptic excerpts captured over time (Figure 2), though this is mostly due to the June 1968 outlier.

These are not the only occurrences of apocalypticism in *Triumph*. There are several articles across the years that dive more deeply into apocalyptic rhetoric and that evince an increasingly pessimistic view of the world coupled with an orientation toward the eschaton. I reviewed the editorial content because it was the most consistent feature across the entire decade-long run of *Triumph*. Editorials reflect the biases, foibles, and focuses of the editors more than other elements of the magazine and are thus representative of the subjective mood of *Triumph*. I hoped to see if a quantitative survey of the magazine’s “mood” would reveal any correlation between perceived policy failures.

Table 1. Code Co-Occurrences per Issue

	Gnosticism	Apocalypse	Crisis	Damnation	Despair	Dissent	Dystopia	Eschaton	Final	Millennial	Sin	The End	Totals
Gnosticism	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	3
Apocalypse	0	0	5	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	10
Crisis	0	5	0	0	6	2	11	0	6	0	3	2	35
Damnation	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
Despair	0	1	6	0	0	1	3	0	2	0	1	0	14
Dissent	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Dystopia	2	1	11	1	3	0	0	0	1	0	9	1	29
Eschaton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Final	1	0	6	0	2	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	12
Millennial	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sin	0	0	3	1	1	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	14
The End	0	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
Totals	3	10	35	2	14	5	29	2	12	0	14	4	0

Source: Author’s research.

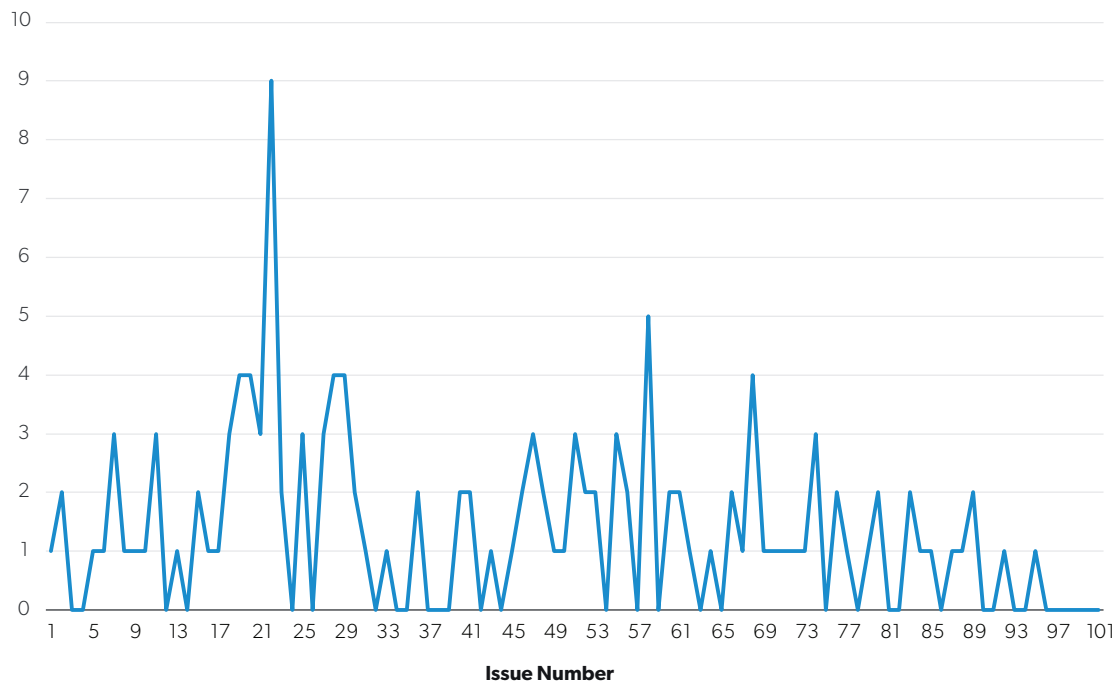
However, there was no discernible correlation with particularized events. This is most likely because of the delay in publishing and printing a monthly; for instance, *Triumph’s* special issue on the pro-life movement in the wake of *Roe v. Wade* in January 1973 appeared two months later. The delay creates a spread in which editorials are written about whatever is on the editors’ minds at any given moment rather than neatly correlated with the big events of the day. Additionally, since the magazine was published only monthly, the incentive was to focus on long-term trends and larger issues rather than breaking news. Other big events had even longer delays; discussions of the Vietnam War ranged across months with no discernible correlation to actual turning points or key events of the war itself. Apocalyptic rhetoric, while a hallmark of some of Bozell’s most famous writings (i.e., “The Autumn of the Country”), is not easily

linked with particular events and in the context of *Triumph* is best understood as an overarching theme that the editors returned to periodically throughout their civilizational critique.

Most people, if they remember *Triumph* at all, remember it for Bozell’s fiery rhetoric. What observers tend to forget is the amount of “inside baseball” (i.e., commentary on various happenings at the Second Vatican Council, changes in the American episcopacy, or administrative explanations of various projects that the editors were launching) or less memorable non-apocalyptic essays. Given that the only way to be reminded of this content is to actually sift through the magazine, my higher expectation for apocalyptic rhetoric is justifiable.

In terms of general mood, characterizing the magazine as apocalyptic is fair for two reasons. First, posterity has already done this; it is a consistent theme

Figure 2. Apocalyptic Rhetoric over Time (Number of Codes per Issue)



Source: Author's research.

running through the literature. Second, the articles that generated the most controversy (those that would inspire debates between *Triumph* and *National Review* or that inspired much reader feedback in the Letters to the Editor) were predominantly apocalyptic in tone. These are the arguments for which *Triumph* is remembered and that made *Triumph* remarkable in its own day.³² So even if particular editorials were, on the whole, less apocalyptic than I expected, the setting of the magazine was still quite apocalyptic in toto, and insofar as the magazine's memory lives on, it does so as a tribune of apocalypticism.

While my content analysis is useful, it has at best limited expository value. A more thorough accounting of every single page may yield a more consistent pattern, but I doubt this because *Triumph* organized its issues in a haphazard and scattershot way that, for the most part, does not correspond to the particular horrors of the events of the day. The mode of quantitative analysis itself is limited, and imposing a quantitative lens on an essentially qualitative magazine

actually obscures the most important themes that can be drawn from *Triumph's* yellowed pages.

Qualitative Linkages, Comparisons, and Contrasts

I turn now to linking *Triumph* to several debates in contemporary conservative Catholic discourse. Understanding the extent to which *Triumph* prefaces these debates can help in discerning patterns within certain elements of religious social conservative movements and further contextualize their arguments in the broader sweep of recent American political history.

Triumph and the Failure of Liberalism. Deneen takes a firm stance against liberalism. He opens *Why Liberalism Failed* with a long epigraph from Barbara W. Tuchman's popular 1978 work *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. Within, we read Tuchman's

aphorism “When the gap between ideal and real becomes too wide, the system breaks down.”³³

Deneen believes the gap between the ideal liberal regime and liberalism in practice has become too wide. Despite the ostensible orientation of liberalism intended to “foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty,” he claims that it actually “generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom.”³⁴ His argument covers four broad topics: politics and government, economics, education, and science and technology. Deneen posits that liberalism has turned politics into a hollow parody of itself, the economy into a ruthless sorting machine of “globetrotting” winners and alienated losers, education into mere lessons on consumption, and technology—per Martin Heidegger and Ivan Illich—into the enslaver of man. In sum, liberalism has been undone by its own success.

For Deneen, liberalism is chimerical and duplicitous. As technology for governance, it is terrifyingly effective. However, for a classical sense of “soul-craft,” it falls short. He believes that the liberal state currently constituted can only continue to impose its rule by administrative and judicial fiat and that liberalism will thus inevitably slide into either increasingly authoritarian liberal technocracy or a vicious quasi-fascist regime.³⁵ To counteract this, he proposes a Dreher-esque retreat from the day-to-day of the liberal regime that will allow people to coalesce in more authentic communities. These new communities will ferment a superior political order that protects liberty without liberalism.

Likewise, Bozell offered several critiques of liberalism. One of his most well-known essays, titled “Freedom or Virtue?” and written in 1962, is his fierce response to *National Review* editor Frank S. Meyer’s opinion on the title question. While primarily oriented toward winning an intra-movement debate between libertarians and traditionalists on the possibility of fusion (Bozell said no), the essay strikes at the heart of what Bozell perceives as disordered in modern political thought. Any form of politics that

places freedom above virtue as a highest or primary political good fails because it misunderstands where freedom originates and does not engage in the most important task of any body politic: the inculcation of at least some measure of virtue in the citizenry. Virtue, for Bozell, is an essential precondition for genuine freedom.

In March 1969, he extended his critique of liberalism in “Letter to Yourselves,” “yourselves” a reference to the conservative movement. He argues that there is no essential distinction between conservatism and secular liberalism except perhaps a matter of degree. Since both “branches” are founded on the 19th-century ideal of “self-fulfillment,” the flow of history has led to the inexorable conclusion of the only significant debates left in liberal politics concentrating on purely pecuniary questions.³⁶ Religion has become compartmentalized and privatized, and every point of political contention has failed to acknowledge what Bozell considers to be a basic truth: that “the goal of the orderers of the public life is to help open men to Christ.”³⁷ Liberalism denies this and turns politics, the art and science of living in community, into pure technique ordered toward the satisfaction of purely material goods (once a basic social peace is established). Bozell and Deneen agree that the “Liberal Man” is an abomination, a testament to the failed anthropology embedded in the philosophy.

A 2012 article Deneen wrote for *First Things* presaged many of the arguments he would make in *Why Liberalism Failed*. Specifically, he proposed that the classic Frank Capra film *It’s a Wonderful Life* was actually “destructive” because it portrayed George Bailey taking the goods of his tight-knit, beautiful community of Bedford Falls and transforming them into the suburban hellscape of Bailey Park by sacrilegiously bulldozing the town cemetery.³⁸ While perhaps a bit hyperbolic, the article outlines the myths Americans tell themselves about their own society, and it’s an important modern criticism from the right of the American way of life.

Likewise, Bozell offered a stirring denunciation of the “American way of life” in a 1970 *New York Times* op-ed (discussed above) he published after being arrested for protesting at a Washington, DC, abortion

clinic. He sardonically portrayed abortion as part of the American dream, lamenting that a woman could “stroll into a clinic, have a baby yanked from [her] insides, stop off at a beauty parlor, then come home to cook supper for the ideal-American two-child family.”³⁹ Bozell’s broadside against abortion also contained critiques of suburbia, consumer capitalism, and “population explosion” hysteria. Crimes against human life, for Bozell, were rooted both in deficient economic anthropologies and a “non serviam” derived from pessimistic, secularized Calvinism. Bozell then reprises the argument against political and cultural gnosticism, reminiscent of political scientist Eric Voegelin’s critiques. But what is notable about both Deneen and Bozell is that they are willing to attack the common understanding of the American dream to a degree unfamiliar to most conservatives.

Where they disagree, perhaps, is on economics. Deneen is far less sanguine than Bozell on the prospects of free-market economics, mostly because he has the benefit of about 50 years of hindsight. Additionally, Bozell is more focused on prophesying the demise of conservatism. Since the economic troubles of his age derived from the liberal consensus of the postwar years, he did not see any reason to critique the pro-market, anti-welfare state proposals that would not be deployed until many years hence. Most of the *Triumph* staff followed distributism to a degree, which has a certain level of consonance with Deneen’s earlier writings at Front Porch Republic. Despite these disagreements or different emphases, the critique of liberalism is similar because, at the last analysis, Bozell and Deneen are both unconvinced that an ideology of freedom actually frees human beings.

Triumph and Tribal Catholicism. Deneen’s polemic draws heavily on Dreher’s 2017 bestseller *The Benedict Option*. Dreher opens by portraying American society as irredeemably corrupt and sinful. In his eyes, social conservatism has lost on every front: The culture war “came to an end” in the wake of *Obergefell v. Hodges*.⁴⁰ This poses a big problem for Christians. The strategies of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority are no longer effective, and despite the years of Ronald Reagan and Bush dynasty dominance on the national

stage (and the corresponding Supreme Court justices), social conservatives have won little more than tax cuts and a few presidential proclamations.

Additionally, the church is in crisis. Dreher marshals statistics showing the rise of agnosticism and declining religiosity of the 18–29 age group, a disturbingly unorthodox common faith among both youths and adults, and the destruction of cultural hegemony once taken for granted. He suggests to the reader: “Rather than wasting energy and resources fighting unwinnable political battles, we should instead work on building communities, institutions, and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation.”⁴¹

So be it. The rest of the book offers practical advice on starting these communities, showcasing Dreher’s interviews with various figures and groups who embody the “Benedict Option” in different ways. Dreher closes with the order he used to begin the book: the Benedictine monks of Nursia. After their community suffered a devastating earthquake, Dreher notes that they remained safe by heading for the hills before the calamity, thus preserving the kernel of faith. They “built within themselves the stability and resilience to endure the worst time—and to begin again, in God’s time.”⁴²

Bozell, too, despaired of refashioning the American state in a Catholic image. Somewhat despondently, he notes in the July 1970 essay “The Confessional Tribe” that the “possibility that the reproductive habits might turn America into a Catholic country was never more than a bigot’s fantasy for the simple reason that the highest public ambition of American Catholics was to be Americans.”⁴³ Given the lukewarmness of American Catholicism and the general godlessness of the country, Bozell argued that the “time has passed” and it was no longer worthwhile to “make America a Christian country.”⁴⁴ Why? Two reasons: America was separated from Christendom by both time and distance, and the American experience “has cultivated highly sophisticated and deeply engrained civilizational habits antithetical to Christianity.”⁴⁵

Like Dreher, Bozell emphasized the importance of seceding from institutions of perceived social control. To this end, he articulated the need for a Christian

school in the Christian tribe, for this was the only way to avoid falsifying reality. This also formed the foundation of a revitalization of the Christian family, for men and women must learn Christian virtue so they could model it to their children in the family before being sent to Christian primary or secondary schools. This tribe—families oriented around shared schooling and religious practices—would embark on the task of slowly defeating “America’s war against Christ.”⁴⁶ The Confessional Tribe, preaching Christ through the explicitly countercultural organization of their own microcosm, would be the seedbed of a new social order.

Deneen and Dreher both advance civilizational critique, critique at the level of first principles and basic political order. Both end up at the same position: The tactical retreat of the tribe will allow the formation of virtuous young Christians prepared to articulate new social forms that more explicitly privilege Christianity and Christian values at the expense of traditional liberal values. The reaction to liberalism, for reactionary Catholics, leads inexorably toward regnant Catholicism, an explicitly political Catholicism. The social order must be sacralized for Christ, for this is the only sufficient method to deal with the degeneracy and decay that surrounds the faithful Christian in a sinful world. Another way of saying this is that Catholic tribalism (an explicit denunciation of Christianity’s political opponents as *enemies*) flows neatly into integralism.

Triumph and Political Catholicism. Vermeule is the most notable of the three figures I discuss. He holds an endowed chair at Harvard Law School, specializing in administrative law and constitutional theory. A law professor from an old-money family including several prominent academics, he converted to Catholicism from his familial Episcopalianism in 2016. Outside of his academic and legal work, he is best known for his role in advancing the prominence of “integralism” in conservative and reactionary Catholic circles.

Like Vermeule, Bozell was unhappy with the Court of his day. Published in 1966 (the year that he began *Triumph*), his book *The Warren Revolution: Reflections on the Consensus Society* can be seen as a signpost of

Bozell’s break with the conservative movement.⁴⁷ However, it was also indicative of the new ideas conservative legal theorists would pursue: namely, originalism and its associated implications.

Bozell designed his book as a comprehensive refutation of the arguments and implicit premises employed by Justice Earl Warren and his coterie of liberals in a series of landmark cases. Bozell proceeds systematically through an analysis of *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Pennsylvania v. Nelson*, *Abington School District v. Schempp* (consolidated with *Murray v. Curlett*), and *Wesberry v. Sanders*. He then conducts a historical survey of the concept of “judicial supremacy” with the aim of revealing the Warren court’s broad judicial overreach as a violation of American constitutional principles. Underlying his analysis is a broader complaint: These decisions disenfranchise Americans who do not share in the liberal “consensus” that demands these outcomes. Liberal consensus ideology was ascendant, and Bozell feared it would supplant both the written and unwritten Constitution.

Where can we find similarities? First, we turn to Vermeule’s conception of “gentry liberalism.” In a June 2020 *Washington Post* op-ed written after conservatives on the Court defected from their ideological brethren in cases involving abortion access and LGBT employment discrimination, Vermeule argues that “middling” conservatives are systematically more likely to defect because the unwritten constitution, a “set of understandings that underlies and shapes our interpretation of the law,” upholds liberal beliefs about freedom and autonomy attractive to upper-crust, highly educated thinkers (such as, say, Yale-trained Supreme Court justices).⁴⁸ The unwritten constitution exerts a “gravitational force” on those not wholly committed to socially conservative beliefs that pulls them toward the liberal side on tough cases that challenge those commitments.

This should remind us of Bozell’s arguments. His work was dedicated to drawing careful distinctions between the “fixed” and “fluid” constitutions, with the understanding that not all provisions in the written Constitution were “fixed.”⁴⁹ Vermeule, like Deneen, has the benefit of 50 years of hindsight on Bozell and is able to confirm his dire predictions from

his February 1968 lament “The Death of the Constitution.” When Bozell mournfully notes, “The enemies of the Constitution have certainly played the major role in doing it in; yet it is not they, but its friends, who have been in a position to ratify its obsolescence, and thus to bury it,”⁵⁰ Vermeule can resignedly speak to the continued weakness of conservative opposition to gentry secular liberalism.

Bozell turned to civilizational critique after finishing volume one of *The Warren Revolution* (and indefinitely postponing volume two) because he could not see a plausible path for restoring the “Madisonian republic” of the founders.⁵¹ Vermeule’s critique of liberalism and support of integralism must be read in the same sense: A string of demoralizing defeats for social conservatives indicates a basic liberal skew on behalf of both the regime’s founding principles and the governing elite, which can only be fixed with a non-liberal regime staffed by dedicated opponents of liberalism.

The last similarity I wish to highlight is between the resurgence of interest in integralism and the concrete political proposals (such as they exist) in *Triumph*. Bozell believed that with the mechanism of the Confessional Tribe, conservatives still in the thrall of secular liberalism would finally see the error of their liberal ways and begin to “mold the public life,” to make clear once again what *being* Christian meant.⁵² Reviewing Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed* in the pages of *American Affairs*, Vermeule calls for strategic infiltration of liberal institutions by agents who can

sear the liberal faith with hot irons, to defeat and capture the hearts and minds of liberal agents, to take over the institutions of the old order that liberalism has itself prepared and to turn them to the promotion of human dignity and the common good.⁵³

Bozell was never as explicit, but an integralist would argue that it naturally followed from his premises. That said, Vermeule criticizes the solution advanced first by Bozell and then by Deneen and Dreher, characterizing it as a doomed enterprise that stupidly relies on the beneficence or at least neglect of a malicious regime, forever “trembling under the axe.”⁵⁴ A Benedict Option or Confessional Tribe would merely delay

the inevitable reckoning; the only solution available is to craftily infiltrate the institutions of the opponents of political Catholicism.⁵⁵

Conclusion

The larger picture of the situation must take into account the apocalyptic framing adopted by the conservative Catholics I have discussed. This is not exclusive to Catholics; evangelical Protestantism, through Falwell’s Moral Majority, effectively harnessed apocalyptic rhetoric to ride to political power.⁵⁶ We often forget that the explicit motivation behind the crusade for Christ was to forestall the damnation of millions of Americans who could be saved only through a recommitment to the Gospel and an aversion to liberals in office.⁵⁷ Evangelical Protestants working with conservative Catholics and Jews formed the backbone of winning electoral conditions for Reagan, both Bushes, and Trump.

One must ask, however, whether the specter of apocalypticism wielded with abandon by religious power brokers on the right has expanded what is perceived to be possible politically. Post-liberals see an opportunity to remake the nation, to fashion a new polity oriented toward Christ and the commonweal. Their ambition comes in the wake of what they see as catastrophic failure, a complete defeat in the culture war. No longer content to work within the broad forms of American republicanism, religious post-liberals find solace in the promise of a new theory of politics that decisively rejects liberalism, for liberalism stands in the way of social conservative victories in the culture war.

These thinkers see hope in Trump’s electoral success, which was powered, in part, by disillusioned conservative Christians. Journalists Timothy P. Carney and Ross Douthat both provided penetrating accounts of the source of this disillusionment: Carney points to declining religiosity and rural voters fearing for the future of their children, while Douthat, following Jacques Barzun, points to civilizational decadence.⁵⁸ But if we follow Carney and Douthat, we might begin to suspect that while Bozell’s intuition

that the West's sickness is "probably theological" is correct, the solutions that Bozell and his followers (exemplified by Deneen, Dreher, and Vermeule) propose miss the mark.⁵⁹ American Christianity is not doomed, and revival will come from unlikely sources.

This is not to paint an overly optimistic picture: There is real resistance to Christian participation in the public square, and participation in orthodox religion is still dropping precipitously. (One wonders if apocalyptic rhetoric strengthens the fervor of a devout few while pushing away the more moderate many.) This should galvanize Christians to even greater engagement with the substantive debates in the public square and not give them a justification to secede.

The public square needs the voice of Christians. But Christians who seek regime change after failing to win public debates may end up unwittingly damaging more than they create. A profound critique is necessary, but so is a profound witness.

Bozell's own life is instructive: Although *Triumph* was shuttered after his own mental collapse, he shifted into ministry as he recovered. His visits to local prisons, homeless shelters, and hospitals touched hundreds, perhaps even thousands. Kelly, his biographer, remarks that he "all but ignored political life, now caring only about bringing mercy to the poor."⁶⁰

A consciously Christian politics of mercy speaks for itself and is, to my mind, the only road out of

the moral and political thicket we Americans find ourselves tangled up in today. Perhaps the merciful Bozell in his old age, rather than the youthful apocalyptic firebrand, is a model for Christians in the public square after all.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. L. Brent Bozell Jr., “Encouraging Murder,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/10/14/archives/encouraging-murder.html>.
2. This is an instructive example of L. Brent Bozell’s infatuation with Spain. The term “Hijos de Trueno” conveys the correct sense Bozell intended with regards to the “Sons of Thunder,” the apostles James and John. Bozell perhaps did not understand Spain as much as he loved the idealized, hyper-Catholic vision he possessed of the nation.
3. William F. Buckley Jr. and L. Brent Bozell, *McCarthy and His Enemies: The Record and Its Meaning* (Washington, DC: H. Regnery Company, 1954).
4. For a comprehensive discussion on the formation of and tensions within the fusionist consensus, see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).
5. Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (London: Victor Publishing Co., 1960).
6. His son, L. Brent Bozell III, is the founder and president of influential conservative activist organization Media Research Foundation. His grandson, L. Brent Bozell IV, was arrested and charged after his involvement in the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021. Some have noted that the Bozell family history shows the story of the conservative movement: L. Brent Bozell Sr. was an executive opposed to the New Deal, L. Brent Bozell Jr. was crucial in forming *National Review* and sparking the Goldwater candidacy, L. Brent Bozell III is at the center of Republican advocacy in the media sphere, and now L. Brent Bozell IV is a committed Donald Trump supporter risking jail time.
7. Mark D. Popowski, *The Rise and Fall of Triumph: The History of a Radical Roman Catholic Magazine, 1966–1976* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 49–52.
8. Even more recently, hedge funder and Peter Thiel-backed Ohio Senate candidate J. D. Vance (author of the stunningly successful 2016 memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*) has fulsomely praised Bozell for his arguments in the debates over fusionism. See J. D. Vance, “End the Globalization Gravy Train,” *American Mind*, April 21, 2020, <https://americanmind.org/memo/end-the-globalization-gravy-train/>. For a comprehensive discussion of the debate between Frank Meyer and Bozell that Vance references, see Declan Leary, “Catholics vs. Libertarians in the 1960s,” *National Review*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/06/catholic-libertarian-debate-triumph-magazine-brent-bozell/>.
9. Edmund Waldstein, “Integralism in Three Sentences,” *Josias*, October 17, 2016, <http://thejosias.com/2016/10/17/integralism-in-three-sentences/>.
10. Michael Anton, “The Flight 93 Election,” *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election/>.
11. Barack Obama, “I’m often asked what I’m reading, watching, and listening to, so I thought I might share a short list from time to time. There’s so much good writing,” Facebook, June 16, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/barackobama/posts/10155941960536749>.
12. Proposals such as Sen. Mitt Romney’s (R-UT) child-allowance plan or Sen. Tom Cotton’s (R-AR) phased minimum-wage increase plan arguably exhibit post-liberal characteristics, particularly in how they move beyond the more free-market consensus that has usually governed conservative policy proposals. That said, Romney and Cotton are not likely in favor of theological post-liberalism and are rather simply looking for ways to distinguish themselves in the run-up to the next election. Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) have both made gestures to post-liberalism in speeches and essays but have not concretized these gestures with proposals.
13. Rick Perlstein, “I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/magazine/i-thought-i-understood-the-american-right-trump-proved-me-wrong.html>.
14. Perlstein, “I Thought I Understood the American Right.”
15. As Matthew Walther, editor of the Catholic monthly the *Lamp*, puts it, *Triumph* was perhaps the only place one could go for a traditionalist Catholic defense of the militant Black Panthers. Most of their editorial staff held postgraduate degrees, and one finds elaborate engagements with Ezra Pound, Thomas Aquinas, Sylvia Plath, and Plato.

16. John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).
17. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.*, 321.
18. Daniel Kelly, *Living on Fire: The Life of L. Brent Bozell Jr.* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2014).
19. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 310.
20. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 316.
21. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 319.
22. Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).
23. Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985*, 141–42.
24. Popowski, *The Rise and Fall of Triumph*.
25. Popowski, *The Rise and Fall of Triumph*, xviii.
26. Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).
27. Mason, *Killing for Life*, 131.
28. Mason, *Killing for Life*, 131–32.
29. Mason, *Killing for Life*, 156.
30. Mason, *Killing for Life*, 157
31. In the acknowledgments, Mason thanks pro-choice advocates for “inspiring” her and dedicates her book to the memory of two Massachusetts abortion clinic receptionists, Shannon Lowney and Leanne Nichols, who were shot and killed by a 22-year-old schizophrenic Catholic man in 1994.
32. A good example is *The Best of Triumph* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 2004).
33. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), vi.
34. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 3.
35. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 180–81.
36. L. Brent Bozell Jr., “Letter to Yourselves,” *Triumph* 4, no. 3 (March 1969): 13–14.
37. Bozell, “Letter to Yourselves,” 14.
38. Deneen, “It’s a Destructive Life,” *First Things*, December 27, 2012, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2012/12/its-a-destructive-life>.
39. Bozell, “Encouraging Murder.”
40. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 9.
41. Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 12.
42. Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 243.
43. L. Brent Bozell Jr., “The Confessional Tribe,” *Triumph* 5, no. 6 (June 1970): 11.
44. Bozell, “The Confessional Tribe,” 11.
45. Bozell, “The Confessional Tribe,” 12.
46. Bozell, “The Confessional Tribe,” 13.
47. L. Brent Bozell Jr., *The Warren Revolution: Reflections on the Consensus Society* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Inc., 1966).
48. Adrian Vermeule, “Opinion: Why Conservative Justices Are More Likely to Defect,” *Washington Post*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/08/why-is-it-always-conservative-justices-who-seem-defect-disappoint/>.
49. Bozell, *The Warren Revolution: Reflections on the Consensus Society* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Inc., 1966), 19. See also Adrian Vermeule, “Beyond Originalism,” *Atlantic*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/common-good-constitutionalism/609037/>. Vermeule argues for an expansive reading of the general-welfare clause in the Constitution ordered to moral, spiritual, and physical “health” informed by the Catholic tradition.
50. L. Brent Bozell Jr., “The Death of the Constitution,” *Triumph* 3, no. 2 (February 1968): 11.
51. Bozell, “The Death of the Constitution,” 11.
52. Bozell, “The State of the Tribe,” *Triumph* 5, no. 7 (July 1971): 39.

53. Adrian Vermeule, “Integration from Within,” *American Affairs* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/02/integration-from-within/>.

54. Vermeule, “Integration from Within.”

55. Vermeule explicitly modifies Alasdair MacIntyre’s famous prophecy, “We are waiting . . . for another—doubtless very different—Saint Benedict.” He cites the examples of Joseph, Mordecai, Esther, and Daniel in the Old Testament and Saints Paul, Dominic, Ignatius, and Cecilia in the New Testament. For further explication, see Adrian Vermeule, “A Christian Strategy,” *First Things*, November 2017, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/11/a-christian-strategy>.

56. For writing on Falwell’s deployment of the “nehemiah” across his media empire to galvanize devout Evangelicals nationwide, see James M. Patterson, *Religion in the Public Square: Sheen, King, Falwell* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

57. Patterson, *Religion in the Public Square*, 158.

58. See Timothy P. Carney, *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse* (New York: Harper, 2019); and Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020). Ross Douthat’s book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* is also highly relevant as a chronicle of the decline in religious orthodoxy in America and a prelude to Carney’s thesis. Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

59. Bozell, *The Warren Revolution*, 1.

60. Kelly, *Living on Fire*, 209.