

## *Christian Reconstruction: R. J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*

By Michael J. McVicar

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The face behind many recent developments in evangelical politics—the icy one framed in shadowy hue on the front cover of Michael J. McVicar’s exceptional book—is that of R. J. Rushdoony. As McVicar deftly shows, this brilliant and tireless thinker’s mid-twentieth-century labors in print and institution building provided evangelical Protestants the philosophical, legal, and political tools to attain power by century’s end.

How did this enigmatic man come to possess such authority? Moving chronologically from Rushdoony’s roots in a central California community of Armenian immigrants to his death in 2001, McVicar judiciously sketches out the career of the Calvinist sage who fused “a militant Christian Gospel with a visceral antipathy to the modern state” into one politically potent Calvinist-libertarian theology called Christian Reconstructionism (p. 4). From the Armenian Presbyterian Church in which he was raised, Rushdoony gleaned a strict Calvinism that assumed God’s total sovereignty over all aspects of life, as well as an aversion to secular state apparatuses of the kind that enabled the Armenian Genocide of 1915 (from which his family fled). In highly readable prose, McVicar describes Rushdoony’s progression out of his

family’s sectarianism into the Presbyterian pastorate—first on the Duck Valley Indian Reservation in Nevada, then in Santa Cruz—then into his editorship of the *Chalcedon Report*, published by the Chalcedon Foundation (the think tank he founded in Los Angeles). As head of the Chalcedon empire, he wrote the great tome of Christian Reconstructionism, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (1973), which called for “a radical reordering of the relationship between human beings and the Christian God” and society through application of Old Testament law (p. 4). “By adhering strictly to biblical law,” Rushdoony explained, “Christians could reverse the curse of the Fall and ‘take dominion’ over the planet and ‘reconstruct’ all of life in Christ’s image.” “Reconstructed dominion men” would in turn fill the planet and “replace ungodly, secular forms of governance with decentralized theocracies and rule as Christ’s vicegerents on earth” (p. 5). Rushdoony’s was no modest revolutionary call.

If implausible as a blueprint for change, this charge was highly effective as a call to action. One of the great strengths of McVicar’s book is the way it traces the subtler influences of Rushdoony’s philosophy on the post-1970s political Right. Consider

two strands in particular. First, Rushdoony “presented a familiarized version of conservatism” that stood apart from the “individualist, economic, and traditionalist visions” offered by other thinkers (p. 92). In it he held up the family—patriarchal, traditional, male-headed—as the essence of societal structuring (a doctrine propagated by the “Quiverfull” movement and made famous by the Duggar family). Any state imposition on this order equaled treason against God. Secondly, Rushdoony designated home schooling as a biblical mandate. For him, public education was not simply problematic because of its secular pedagogies; it was utterly destructive at “its epistemological foundation” because it granted government, not God, sovereignty over the family (p. 165). Rushdoony’s instruction in this area made him a sought-after guru and “celebrity in...the subculture of homeschooling Christians” (p. 164). McVicar rightly pinpoints this contribution to conservatism as the writer’s most enduring.

McVicar traces Rushdoony’s other vital contributions as well, all with the help of unprecedented access to Chaldeon’s records (which he handles

with academic integrity), sophisticated application of interdisciplinary methods, bold but balanced assessment, and an authorial eye for the dramatic. His stated intent is to leave “the story of Rushdoony’s inner life to others” and focus on “the contours of a movement that is inseparable from him, but not reducible to him” (p. 11). Fair enough; but the type of attention McVicar initially gives to the interwoven personal *and* political significances of Rushdoony’s ethnic and familial roots would have been welcomed later in the book, as added reason for why this increasingly troubled man and his movement unraveled in parallel. But McVicar’s is an effective, higher-altitude assessment that proves why Rushdoony’s most widely disseminated declarations, and Reconstructionism as a whole, must be seen not as exceptional to but “part and parcel of America’s twentieth-century legacy” (p. 230).

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