

OpenTheo

Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest (with Crawford Gribben)

September 11, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Crawford Gribben, author of the book 'Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest' (<https://amzn.to/3tvPBPS>), joins me for a discussion of movements downstream of Christian Reconstruction and the attraction and impact of Moscow, Idaho. He is also the author of the book 'The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland', released earlier this week (<https://amzn.to/2YODmmn>).

Those interested in learning more about this subject might also appreciate Michael McVicar's appearance on my podcast (<https://adversariapodcast.com/2020/08/13/r-j-rushdoony-and-christian-reconstruction-with-michael-mcvicar/>).

If you have enjoyed my videos and podcasts, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Hello and welcome. I am joined today by Crawford Gribben, who is the author of the recent book *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America, Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest*, published by Oxford University Press earlier this year. It's a book that tackles particularly the situation in the areas of Idaho, of Washington, and maybe North Utah as well, and talks about the influence of successor movements of the Christian Reconstructionist movement.

He teaches history at Queen's University in Belfast, where he focuses particularly upon Puritanism, apocalyptic thinking, and other issues. He has written a book, *Writing the Rapture*, and more recently, just published this week, *The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland*, which I hope we can have a conversation about sometime. Thank you very much for joining me.

Thanks, Alistair. It's great to be here. I appreciate your work, and it's lovely to have a conversation about this.

So, to start us off, what is the book about? Well, the book is about a pattern of migration that's taking people from across the United States and even from further afield, even from Europe, into very specific parts of the world. In this book, as you mentioned, I'm especially interested in the migration as it ends up with people moving into North Idaho. So people have been moving into this part of the world for a very long time.

Of course, it's got that kind of frontier mentality, and if you read into the history of Idaho, you will very quickly discover that it's been the home of migration movements, really, since European settlement began. The most famous, the most successful of those migration movements was that of the Mormons, who continue to make up a huge proportion of the state's population. But there's been many smaller migration movements into the area as well, some of them, I think, deeply unpleasant, including Aryan nations, neo-Nazi, white supremacist kind of migration movements.

Others reflect a much more conservative religious mentality, which is what I'm interested in writing about in this project. So as I read into this, as I came to understand more about it, I came to see that there were two real migration movements overlapping. Well, a whole sequence of migration movements, but fundamentally, for my purposes, two which overlap, both of which have a focus on Moscow, Idaho, which was a very curious selection, given that this is a very small, but very stimulating, very interesting, but fundamentally very small town in the middle of a very, very large state.

So, you know, what was it that was drawing people to Moscow? One of these migration movements was a migration movement being promoted by an online survivalist blogger called James Wesley Rawls, and he had an early association, as a number of his publications reveal, with an individual called Gary North, who we might want to talk about later on. But James Wesley Rawls, very much influenced by Gary North, and in the late 1990s, Gary North was calling people, as part of his Y2K crisis preparation, to move into the North Idaho area, and specifically to move into the Moscow area, where there were lots of good infrastructure, lots of good institutions, and even good churches that concerned conservative Christians, and could, you know, very quickly make that town their home. And James Wesley Rawls took that agenda very much on board, and in recent years has been promoting migration to an area he calls the American Without, which is an area encompassing Idaho, eastern Washington, eastern Oregon, that kind of

area, where he believes there's already a conservative majority, and he wants to see more conservative people moving into it, really to enhance this demographic, so that while the rest of America might almost free fall into cultural crisis, there will be a kind of a heartland left, where conservative-minded, traditionally-minded religious believers, Christians typically, but not exclusively, will be able to make a good home.

And that's really the first migration movement, the American Without migration movement. But why were they focused on Moscow in particular? Well, as I began to read some of the novels that James Wesley Rawls has written to promote this idea of migration, I came to discover that several of his characters themselves ended up in Moscow, and not just in Moscow, but actually in a particular congregation in Moscow, which is the congregation known as Christ Church, which is led by Douglas Wilson, who is in reality, as well as in fiction, one of the ministers of this church. So I suppose that was a very curious moment of realization, that a migration movement that's very much focused on survivalist themes could be drawn to another kind of survivalist, or another kind of migration movement, which is focused really very much on theological, cultural, religious themes.

And in some ways, the two were sort of mapping onto one another. And I suppose that that realization was that the point at which a curiosity, because I've been following events in Moscow since the 1990s, the moment at which a curiosity became something a bit, you know, more serious, and eventually this book was the result. So the Pacific Northwest has long seemed to attract a certain type of religious person, or survivalist that you mentioned, certain sectarian movements, and think about the Mormons that you mentioned, and some of the people who are listening to this might have watched the recent Netflix series Wild Wild Country and the Rajneeshis, another interesting movement in Antelope.

Is there something about the place that really provides fertile ground for these sorts of movements? What do you think it is that attracts them to this location? And how do you see that history of that migration playing out over time? Yeah, it's a really interesting question. I suppose you could argue that every one of these communities has got a different rationale for moving into that area, or at least that's how they might understand it themselves. But from someone outside, someone who's not part of any of these movements, someone who's not bought into, for example, the Latter-day Saints narrative of, you know, a kind of an American utopia, or the community whose name I'm not going to attempt to pronounce, but they all dress in orange jumpsuits and live in Burns County, Oregon, or they did until there was an unfortunate incident of attempted bioterrorism.

You know, they all have had a different rationale for being there. But I think from the outside, it seems that one of the very, one of the features that makes this area so attractive is just its emptiness. And, you know, people who belong to utopian movements

or intentional communities are often looking just to be left alone.

And, you know, of course, that's a very attractive proposition at the best of times, but especially if you belong to a group that might look a little bit odd in downtown Chicago, as you would if you're dressed in an orange jumpsuit, for example. However, the reason why the Doug Wilson community in Moscow moved into this area, I think, is completely different. And it's not because of its emptiness, but rather because of its strategic value.

Jim Wilson, who's Doug Wilson's father, wrote a couple of books, I think, back in the 1970s, which were talking about principles of evangelism. And at that time, I believe, Jim Wilson was running a series of evangelistic bookshops or something like that, but was very involved in thinking strategically about Christian evangelism. And he wrote one book called Principles of War, in which he argued that Christian evangelism should be focused on specific locations, which are both strategic and achievable.

So, you know, Chicago that we just talked about is strategic. It would be wonderful if Chicago became a Christian city, but it's probably not likely to happen, at least not in the short term. So it's not achievable.

And other locations are achievable. You know, the next door village is very achievable, but it's not strategic. So he began to argue that Christians need to be much more intentional in their evangelistic practice and look for locations which are both strategic and achievable.

And of course, a town like Moscow, which is a very, very small town, around about 20,000 inhabitants, but a town that's got two major universities, one in the city and one, I think, just seven miles away in Pullman, Eastern Washington. But that's a location that's both strategic and achievable. And that's really what took Jim and the Wilson family into that area.

And, you know, it's those principles, as they began to play out, that led to the formation of community evangelical fellowship, which eventually morphed into Christ Church. And from, you know, from which the CREC denomination began to take shape. So, I mean, I think that in the area, I think you're right, Alistair, in that part of the world, there are, you know, Latin speak, traditional Latin mass parishes, Catholic parishes.

There's any number of zany, unusual religious movements. Groups like the Plymouth Brethren have always been quite strong up in areas like Sandpoint and places like that. And in fact, Garrison Keillor, the well-known, now cancelled, but until recently well-known humor writer who grew up in the Plymouth Brethren, actually writes in some of his books, but going to Sandpoint to take part in Bible conferences.

And other groups like the Cuneites, the two-by-twos, and Mormon fundamentalists, you know, there's all kinds of groups up there for all kinds of reasons. But, you know, for the

community we're most interested in, they were drawn to that location not because of its emptiness, not because of its isolation, but because of its values of being both strategic and achievable and a place from which there could be launched a Christian mission, a Christian culture developed that could ultimately be of global consequence. I've visited Moscow a few times myself, and one of the things that has always stood out to me about the place is how livable it is as a location.

You can actually live on foot in Moscow for the most part. There was an article a while back in the American Conservative by Gracie Olmsted talking about just the importance of going on walks. And as she was writing about this, I thought, I can think of one place in America where you could really do this, and it's Moscow.

And then she goes on to talk about her grandfather who lived in Moscow, and that's where she really got this from. It's interesting just how unusual the place it is. And for that reason, I can see why it has attracted people.

There's a sort of small-scale cosmopolitanism to the place as well, because you have all these different influences and communities coming together. There's interesting forms of cross-pollination, and it's not what you might expect from the outside. Well, I think that's a great point, Alistair, because one of the times I was there, I was having breakfast with someone, actually, and this was a person who was driving me down to the airport, and I'd left all of my baggage, my computer, in the so-called trunk of the car, in the boot of the car.

And we sort of enjoyed what we had to eat and then headed back to the car. And he just opened the door, and I realized he hadn't locked the car. And I said, well, all my stuff was in the back of your car.

Why didn't you lock your car? And he sort of looked at me with this kind of baffled amazement to say, well, don't you understand? You know, this is Moscow. We don't need to lock anything up. And in fact, he said, when my family moved to Moscow, the house that we bought didn't even have a lock in its front door.

I thought, well, there can't be too many places in North America where people can still say that. But yeah, it's a beautiful town, isn't it? It's got very varied groups in it. You know, it's got kind of a real hippie flavor, kind of alternative culture flavor.

It's got a really good farmer's market. It's got music performances on Saturday mornings, funnily enough, just outside New St Andrews College in downtown. And you know, it's a beautiful place.

One of the few places where your choice of coffee shop to go to has all sorts of ramifications. So your book has within its subtitle, the words Christian Reconstruction. And how does Christian reconstructionism fit into this picture? First of all, what is

Christian reconstructionism and how would you describe some of the family resemblances with Christian reconstructionists and movements influenced by them? Yeah, yeah.

Great question. Well, Christian reconstruction is the name of a social and theological theory that was developed by an Armenian American Presbyterian minister called R.J. Roshduni in a sequence of publications that began in the late 1950s and continued more or less until his death just around the turn of the century. R.J. Roshduni came from a family line that had been very seriously impacted by the Armenian genocide at the start of the 20th century.

And as the family migrated to North America, began to put down roots there, as R.J. Roshduni grew up in the 30s, 40s and so on, he determined that the fate of Armenian Christians should never be the fate of Christians in America. And so he was very worried about pie in the sky fundamentalism, you know, by and by salvation. He was much, much more interested in encouraging Christians to think about the really serious implications of biblical teaching for the here and now.

And as he began to think about social theory, about the role of government or economics, and as he turned to scripture to try to work out how as a Christian minister he should preach about the role of government or economics, for example, he also came to be increasingly convinced of an eschatological position known as post-millennialism, which is the view that Christ will return to the earth after, not before, but after this extraordinary period that's described often as the millennium. So in other words, while the vast majority of American evangelicals were expecting social conditions to get worse and worse, and true Christianity to be further and further marginalized, Roshduni expected exactly the opposite. He expected true Christian influence to grow and grow, and that ultimately the kingdoms of the world would become the kingdoms of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And as that happened, he believed Christians would have to think very seriously about issues of, for example, government and economics. You know, how do you administer a country when the vast majority of its citizens are Christians? What will they expect? You know, what will they expect of ideas about religious liberty, for example? Will they still believe it? And how seriously will they take the Ten Commandments as a blueprint for this future society that he anticipated? And so Roshduni began to think through lots of these issues, and you know, he was very influential, for example, in the homeschooling movement, both Christian and non-Christian homeschooling movement, as an expert witness in court case after court case that established the legal right of parents, including Christian parents, to educate their children. And the way he made that argument for the religious right to education, or of education, was based very much on the philosophy of Cornelius van Til, a Dutch Reformed philosopher, whose works he appreciated and in fact helped to get published in various ways.

But all of this package came together. The idea of theonomy, which is the idea that God's rule, God's law should rule nations, or that nations were responsible to act according to divine law. So the idea of theonomy, God's law, the idea of post-millennialism, the expectation that the world would be transformed by the gospel before the coming of Christ, and van Tilian philosophy, sometimes known as presuppositionalism.

All these three things went together to make up a very distinctive form of thinking about the role of God's law, the role of eschatology, and the role of philosophy in relation to theology. And that package is really the package that became known as Christian Reconstruction. Now obviously, it's an incredibly sophisticated, often extremely nuanced set of ideas, and as that has been rolled out through the decades following, from the 1980s, well through the 70s, into the 80s, 90s, it took on various flavors in different locations across the United States.

Different communities of reconstructionists were established, the different emphases, different themes, one in Tyler, Texas was much more churchly, and the one in California that Rustini was himself most closely associated with, was I suppose much less liturgically interested than some of the other groups elsewhere. I think that the first generation of reconstructionists struggled, I think, really to make their ideas attractive. Their ideas were very influential, and I think that, you know, it's very difficult for people to measure just how influential they have been, but I think they have been very influential, but that's not to say they've been very attractive in the way that they've been packaged.

And some of Rustini's ideas, for example, where he was promoting them alongside his conviction that the Old Testament dietary laws should still obtain today, or he was promoting them alongside some of his ideas about geostationary theory, for example. And, you know, so it then, it was difficult then for adherents of these movements to sort of cherry-pick the big ideas out and leave the, you know, the rest just to sort of blow away. But I think that that effort to streamline these ideas has been much more successful in the second generation of reconstructionists, who might not even be comfortable calling themselves reconstructionists, but who have clearly been influenced by Rustini, and who often say so publicly, while, and depending, I think, who they're speaking to, both identify with or reject the reconstructionist label.

And I think, you know, to I don't think that's an effort of duplicity. I think that, I think that's just an, actually an effort to clarify their own position vis-a-vis not the actual definition of reconstruction, but the definition that their audience of that moment brings to the term. So, yeah, I think that has been a very successful effort in the second generation, which I think is especially obvious in the Moscow-Idaho area, and in the kind of cultural artifacts they produce, and the cultural reach that they possess, that there's been a real effort there to soften, to streamline, to move away from some of the odd,

eccentric, harsh positions that have been taken in the past, and to present something that's much more winsome, much more persuasive, and much, much more culturally aware, much more sophisticatedly packaged, and, you know, something which I think is really beginning to shape the way that many evangelicals are thinking about the current situation of America and the responsibility and opportunity of Christians within it.

Now, all of that is not to sort of gloss over the continuing tendency among those who may or may not be reconstructionists still to package up with these ideas, other positions which may simply be contrarian or, you know, even deeply offensive and divisive within the conservative evangelical community, if such a community exists, but I think that their principal goal, setting aside issues, you know, some of these, you know, really controversial things that have been said or published, that their principal goal has been to streamline and make as attractive as possible the most important elements of that previous generation of reconstructionist work, and I think, you know, as I said to you, I think they're doing that, you know, in a very sophisticated way, a very clever way, a very knowing way, self-conscious way, and obviously a way that's paying huge dividends. A lot of your work has been on the subject of Puritans and on eschatology more broadly, and I'd be curious to hear your thoughts about how the movement of reconstructionism and that movement west to start new ideal communities stands in the line of the first American Puritans, and also how it fits into the broader constellation of American eschatologies. Yeah, again, that's a really interesting question, Alistair.

I mean, I think Puritans get a lot of really bad press, especially among the sort of truly reformed in the United States, and I, you know, I don't think they really, I don't think a lot of that criticism is fair, but that, that, the question of the character of Puritanism comes up a lot when people begin to discuss the historical valence of the project of community that's been formed in Moscow, Idaho. So my own sense of it is probably not shared by many people, but my own sense of it is that what's happening in Moscow, Idaho, and in communities like that is in direct continuation with the project of Puritanism, for example, in 1630s Massachusetts. I think it's exactly the same sociologically.

It's an effort to move a population into a new part of the world to do something which is extraordinary by, by, by, by, by many comparisons. It's also, it's deeply theological, it's, it's deeply influenced by an eschatological vision, a vision of a world transformed by the gospel before the coming of Christ, and so, you know, there, there, there may be aspects of Puritan, of, you know, 17th century English reformed theology, Puritan theology, which are not fully worked out, or aspects of, for example, the Moscow, Idaho theology, which are not fully mapped on to 17th century comparisons, but I think, just generally speaking, as a sociological phenomenon, I think it's exactly the same thing, and it's clearly shaped by the same kinds of theological factors. Now, how does that map onto your second question, which is about how this fits into the long history of American millennialism? Well, that's a kind of an interesting question too, because, of course, there have been many, many eschatological movements, millennial movements.

We've mentioned some of them already, Mormons being one of them, who, you know, combine this utopianism, this expectation of global transformation, this commitment to, to communal living, or to community, who combine all of that with, with plans to, to migrate, but, you know, I think that lots of these other groups, they, I think, would, would be organized on a different basis, often with sort of charismatic leadership, or prophetic leadership, rather, rather than with expository or theological leadership, and I think that they would also, perhaps, have a sense of wanting to keep to themselves much more than the folk in Moscow, Idaho seem to want to do. So, how does all of this work out? Well, you know, if you look at Jonathan Edwards there in the 1730s, talking about the Great Awakening and imagining America as the place where the millennium is going to begin, and I think, you know, in conversations with some of the students at New St Andrews, which is the big liberal arts college in Moscow, Idaho, that's associated with this group, I think that, you know, we definitely heard similar kinds of ambition and expectation, and some of that, I think, might have been slightly unformed, but it's the same kind of expectation, and so, you know, I think there are many critics of the Moscow-Idaho community, and I'm not saying that criticism is necessarily misplaced, but I think that any criticism that doesn't take account of the fact that this is a deeply, deeply, deeply, intrinsically, perhaps even uniquely, American project with, you know, deep roots in American religious history is probably missing a really important part of what this is all about. I started looking into this group, Alistair, in the 1990s when I was doing my PhD on Puritanism, Puritan Eschatology, and I saw this group as a latter day, it's a bad expression, but as a modern, a modern parallel to the 17th century groups I was looking at.

It seemed to be doing things in almost exactly the same way, and, you know, a 17th century historian can almost view it as a kind of a worked out example of many of the principles that, you know, the likes of the John Cottons of this world were beginning to map out in that same period. Just as a footnote to that, I think that one of the ways, one of the reasons why what's happening in Moscow looks so outrageous by modern evangelical standards, one of the reasons that we can explain that is because of how much evangelicalism has changed and how evangelicalism has allowed itself to be shaped by the American constitutional agenda rather than by the original vision of the New England settlers in the early part of the 17th century. Just a couple of days ago Christker uploaded a Doug Wilson sermon entitled How to Move to Moscow, and within the sermon Wilson describes a steady stream of people moving to Moscow at the present time.

He speaks about the fact that pretty much everyone within the church there is in a very different church and situation from the one that they were in two years ago, and within your book you talk a lot about the factor of migration. We've spoken a bit about that to this point, and how do you see migration and the way in which a place like Moscow can serve as a sort of city on the hill for people more broadly throughout the US? How do you

see its influence functioning in that respect? Why has it attracted so many and what sort of people has it attracted? Again a really interesting set of questions Alistair. I mean it's attracted a lot of people.

It's very very hard to get numbers to put numbers to that claim, but it is possible to see where the influence of migration is being felt, and that's most obviously traced in rising house prices. Now Idaho has some of the fastest rising house prices anywhere in North America, and you know the house price spike can be seen in places that are quite far away from the more metropolitan parts of the state, if you can put it that way. So it's hard also, so first of all it's hard to get numbers.

Secondly it's difficult to determine how many of the people who are migrating to Idaho are doing so as part of this quote-unquote migration movement, and not just as retired LA policemen looking for a quieter place to live. That's also quite a difficult decision to make. However when you go to the churches in the area, I think you can see and speak to people in the area, I think you can see a huge number of people who've moved into the area within the very recent past.

In the field work that we did back in 2015-16, they were an incredibly diverse group of people. Everything from technology entrepreneurs to people who worked in handcrafts, everything from designers to engineers, you know a really extraordinarily diverse group of people, but often people of quite high caliber. So the people who I think the people who are moving to the Moscow Idaho area, they tend to be people who have been exposed to the church's message in some kind of way.

That I think means that they are already some of the more thoughtful people, they're already people who are prepared to take risks, sometimes quite significant economic or family risks to move into that area. So you're not seeing in the churches in Moscow, you're not seeing a cross-section of typical Americana evangelicalism. It tends to be a certain kind of person who has heard the message and is both willing and also able to respond to it and to come.

There they are, they're building something which is obviously a cut above the average intellectually, theologically, culturally, artistically. It's full of, I mean it really is full of above average people, there's no doubt about that. That is potentially a weakness as time goes on, but you know I think that's how it looks to me.

You mentioned some of the creative endeavors that people are involved in and what they're building. It might be worth unpacking a bit more about what exactly is going on there on the ground, because many people think in terms of maybe a church that's being formed, some big community in terms of just the congregation of a church, but there's a lot more going on than that. It seems to me that the amount of creative endeavor that I see when I've visited Moscow has far exceeded anywhere else that I've seen pretty much in terms of a Christian community, in terms of new organizations.

The organization I work for, the Davenant Institute, has had its roots in Moscow, same with the Theopolis Institute in many respects, and many other organizations, businesses, places to have a coffee together that have run by Christians in the community and tech businesses. All these sorts of organizations that are very integrated into the life of the community, and I think as a result you see a very clear connection between people's life as Christians and their day-to-day vocations. There's something unusual about that that maybe it would be helpful to describe for people who have never visited Moscow.

Yeah, you've described it beautifully Alistair. I think it's quite hard to put your finger on, but I wonder how much of that endeavor is actually driven by the fact that this is a movement largely of migrants who are coming into an area and who have to establish themselves financially. These are people who are entrepreneurial in the way they think about family life.

They're willing to make the move to this part of the world. Not a lot going on in this part of the world economically, especially in the area outside, some of the logging towns outside Moscow, they're not that great actually. And so people who move into this area, I think are often people who are just entrepreneurially inclined, and that explains why you've got everything in the church from massive software companies all the way through to bars.

In fact, I discovered, much to my delight, that the only premises, the only licensed premises in Moscow who are willing to serve students is a bar that's run by someone from the Christchurch community, or that was at that point. So, you know, I think that the sociological aspect of migration pushes people towards certain kinds of economic activity. But also, we've talked about eschatology already in our conversation, Alistair, but I think that the note of optimism that drives congregational life filters out in all kinds of interesting ways, perhaps even in business.

So, you know, if you believe that Christ has given you the responsibility to use your gifts, and that, you know, the way you work, nine to five, Monday to Friday, actually contributes to the growth of his kingdom. And on top of that, if you actually believe that his kingdom is going to grow and grow and grow, then there's every reason to believe that, you know, the way you pour a cup of coffee, or the way you treat your customers, you know, or the sales pitch you make for your latest software product, all of these things actually are significant. And so, you know, I'm not implying, of course, that an amillennialist or premillennialist can't make a good cup of coffee.

I have, in fact, tasted some. But, you know, I just think that, as Doug said to me at one point, it's so much easier to play when you're on the winning team. I think that's a nugget of his wisdom that applies not just to church life, but actually to life full stop.

That was my sense of it. I don't know what you thought in your visits there. Yeah, so it's

very much my sense of it.

I think one aspect that might be worth thinking about is simply the way in which Rush Dooney's vision of Christian education has really taken root in Moscow, whether that's the Logos School, the way that they're producing material for Christian schools, NSA, and all these different ways in which Moscow is just this seedbed of words and publications. And it's producing an immense amount of material. It's seeding a vision all over the place.

People go to Moscow, they catch the vision, and they go elsewhere and want to start a Christian school or something, or some Christian educational institution. It seems to me that that is perhaps one aspect of Rush Dooney's vision that is for which Moscow could be seen as the flag bearer in the current context. Well, I think that's true.

I mean, I think just I was, I would add as a footnote to that, that in some ways the Moscow education project is quite different from Rush Dooney's, isn't it? Because he was so negative about classical education, and yet classical education is exactly what is the central pillar of Logos, NSA, and, you know, the kind of homeschool curricula, the Christian school curricula that not just Canon Press but other publishers who are represented in the congregation are also beginning to spin out. And so I suppose what really makes the Moscow education project so innovative is that they have this Rush Dooney-esque model of Christian responsibility in education filled with not some kind of nouveau project from the 1970s, you know, but actually the depth and riches of a culture which is a Christian culture running back, but also a Christian appropriation of classical culture. So, you know, it's deeply, deeply attuned to Western tradition with many of the strengths of that tradition.

Christians in Moscow have received national attention in the past year or so as a result of resistance to mask mandates, of the COVID restrictions, and then a number of other ways I think you can see the community becoming one that within the larger evangelical firmament is very politicized. It stands for certain tensions on racial issues, on the relationship to government, on things like Doug Wilson's recent piece on forging vaccine passports, whatever it is, these are very live culture war issues and Moscow is really punching above its weight or speaking into these issues with a particular resonance for certain audiences. How do you see the way in which or possible futures perhaps for Moscow in terms of the breakup of evangelicalism into various constituencies of sensibility perhaps that I think we're probably seeing at this current time? Yeah, I think you're probably right.

I think that some of the action in the Southern Baptist churches recently have really indicated the extent to which critical race theory or the Me Too movement has a potential really I think to cut across evangelicalism in fundamental ways. It's difficult obviously, well it's impossible to predict the future unless you're a post-millennialist in

which you can probably do so with some confidence. I'm not, so I'll just say it's difficult for me to predict the future.

I mean my sense, I've written something on this recently, my sense of it is that groups that have thought through a position on these issues which are really electric in American culture right now such as the relationship between Christians and government, the possibility of resistance, even deception in relation to government, and the you know never mind the bigger issues that are associated with the perennial problem of race and legacy and reparations and so forth in American culture. I think my sense of it is that any community that has thought through a position on that and is able to articulate it and to promote it and to do so in a consistent, cogent, and sophisticated way is only going to reap dividends from that. And you know people, I think there's a lot of evangelical leaders, commentators out there who simply don't really know how to respond in a way to some of these major issues that does not look like unprincipled panic.

If any community can respond in a reasoned, may not be reasonable, but in a reasoned way I think that you know their legacy will only grow. I mean it's been interesting, I tried to watch the video on the fake vaccine passports but of course YouTube had taken it down. Now Doug Wilson I think has really used video very very successfully over the last number of years including his Amazon Prime talk show Man Rampant.

But of course the danger with this is that unlike the world of the printed page where he can really control his product and disseminate his product, when it comes to video I think he is depending on other people's platforms to a large extent. And you know the taking down of the vaccine passport video from YouTube you know is I think an example of just how difficult it could be to depend upon that medium. Now the group has never depended upon that medium before.

I think that their success has been driven by websites, their own websites or by publications or by magazines, by the agenda, by curricula, by other kinds of conferences and events. But if they choose to fight somebody else's platform I think they're really going to struggle with that. So you know I would be astonished if they don't develop their own very successful video platform before too long.

They've done everything else DIY, do it yourself. I think there's no reason why they might not want to do something similar with that. So I think you know to answer your question I think it's going to grow.

I think it's going to become more successful. I think that there might be some issues in terms of continuity. A lot of the work of the movement you know is a reasonably large congregation by UK, Irish standards you know heading up towards a thousand people, a couple of thousand people in the community in the area.

But you know by American standards that's pretty small. But even so it's driven I think

by the intellectual labour of a very small number of very well connected people. I mean people connected to one another.

And so I think that in any church situation and continuity, leadership continuity is an important thing to think about and plan for. And I think that's especially true in a community which deals I think with some you know pretty tricky issues and some very unfashionable positions. I think that it would be very easy for that kind of ship to get rocked in a very destabilizing way.

Within your book you're arguing for this as very much a continuation of earlier reconstructionist movements. Michael McVicar and others have argued that reconstructionism is largely dead and yet you see some sort of continuity between the early reconstructionism of Rush Dooney and North and others and this later form. And it seems to me that I find that position convincing in many respects.

And the form of reconstructionism that Rush Dooney stood for is largely you don't see much of that around. I think McVicar is right if you're defining it in that narrow sense. But there's a lot that has come downstream from reconstructionism and its various forms of ferment I think even my own work is in many respects influenced by the legacy of reconstructionism through Rush Dooney, then North, then James Jordan, through James Jordan, Peter Lighthouse and then to my work.

I'm very much standing in a line of people who have been influenced and passed through that movement and been influenced by it and it continues certain aspects of its legacy. How do you see the gradual leavening of the movement of reconstructionism into the wider evangelical world and what do you think will be the long-term legacy of that movement and how do you think people maybe 50 years time will look back at a figure like Rush Dooney and see his legacy played out in their own situation? Oh there's so much to say there Alistair. I mean I think it's really striking, I think Michael's book is a really really helpful biography of Rush Dooney and it was eye-opening in lots of ways.

I think it's really significant that it's only now, which is what 50 years after reconstruction really was born, that it's begun to get I think credible academic attention and I find that in a way, I say credible academic attention because obviously Rush Dooney's been much discussed in sort of drive-by shooting style and in a lot of kind of exposés, American fascist, and other really tendentious books like that. So but I think it's only now that he's been taken seriously in this particular sphere, academic sphere, and I wonder why that is. I wonder if that's changing patterns within academia or you know simply a couple of people in the right moment in the right place were able to do something because of their own private interests.

I don't really know. So I mean 50 years from now, if it's taken 50 years to get this amount of critical attention, where will we be 50 years from now? I don't really know, I

don't really know. I would, I would, if I was a Rush Dooneyite, I would, I would imagine that his influence would grow and grow and grow.

I think it will, but I don't know it'll necessarily be around him. I don't think it'll be his memory that will be, that will be key to all of this because I think in a, in a way it's the younger, more entrepreneurial, visionary types who are taking his core ideas and running with them who are actually the ones that are setting the agenda. So if you look at Rush Dooney's foundation, Chelsea, which still exists today, it's, it's quite small.

It doesn't have the presence it once had. I don't, I'm not sure necessarily it has the vitality it once had. I think the people who are really running with these, these ideas now are people that the Chelsea Institute, an institution might not be in but, but they're the ones who are making the gains.

They're the ones who are hitting the headlines. They're the ones who are even being retweeted by president Trump. So, you know, I think that this will become much less of Rush Dooney's movement and really much more of a movement associated with people like Doug Wilson who will still be controversial just as Rush Dooney was controversial, who will be controversial for different reasons but I think who are much better placed to really push forward this agenda and to make something of it.

I mean, I think that one of the really key differences between the first and second generation of reconstruction is the way in which community works. I think it's really striking that Moscow is a functioning community. You know, I don't mean Moscow town, I mean Moscow, the congregations that are in Moscow associated with this movement.

You know, they have a complete ecosystem. They've got a life cycle. You can raise a child there.

You can send your child to a Christian school, a Christian college, a Christian music conservatory. They can be employed in a Christian business. They'll meet a life partner.

They'll get married at a very early age. They'll have an unreasonable number of children and the same thing will happen all over again. And, you know, if the group can maintain stability, there's no reason why that shouldn't continue.

But, you know, there are lessons in religious communities and I suppose you can often see that by the time the third generation comes around, everything has become so normal within the community, but it loses sight of its original vision. And, you know, I know it's a cliché, all institutions become their opposite, but I see no reason why that might not become true of individual communities within this movement as well, which again raises the issue of leadership. Who's in charge? Who's setting an agenda? Never mind all the issues of pastoral care, theology, teaching, and so forth.

You know, it's very easy for a lively group to end up moribund, but, you know, questions

of leadership will always come into play whenever you're trying to avoid that. I think this will really be a big issue for Moscow in the future as Doug Wilson passes on. The question of succession, I think, is a very live one there.

How to move from having a very dynamic figure at the very heart of a community and just the denomination and the educational institutions and to move from that to having strong institutions that don't depend so much upon certain charismatic figures or influential families at their heart. One of the questions I'd like to conclude on is you've just written a book on the rise and fall of Christian Ireland and it seems to me that... Indeed, yeah, it's half on the shelves. I've already ordered my coffee, so I recommend that my readers do the same and I, of course, have a deep personal connection with the story of Christian Ireland having been brought up there, but it seems to me that we're both looking at the situation in the Pacific Northwest, Western Moscow in particular, as those who have visited and seen it close up, but as those who are some considerable distance and the cultural context in which we operate is very contrasting with that of America and Moscow.

I'll be curious to hear how from the perspective of Northern Ireland or Ireland more generally and the perspective of England, we should actually draw lessons from a place like Moscow. What can we learn? Is there anything that we can take in dialogue with our Christian contexts and histories that we can learn from the American Christian experiment and forms in Moscow? What a fascinating question. Well, Alistair, you've emphasized there the cultural difference between these islands in the Pacific Northwest, but I think in answer to your question, I would emphasize the cultural differences within these islands.

So I would want to preface my response to that question by reminding listeners they may not know this, that the religious cultures of Northern Ireland, especially in the place where I live in County Antrim, and especially in my town, Balomina, are utterly unlike any religious culture anywhere else in the British Isles, so-called, anywhere else in Europe, as far as I'm aware, and probably outside of the Pacific Northwest and maybe some Southern states anywhere else in the world. And, you know, what really struck me as ironic, I don't write about this in the book for obvious reasons, but what really struck me as ironic coming from Balomina, which is, you know, a town that's been profoundly shaped by evangelical religion over the last 400 years, going from here to Moscow, is that all the effort of the Christians in Moscow was to turn their town into mine. So, you know, my town, Balomina, strongly shaped by Presby- I mean, there's Presbyterian churches everywhere.

I mean, in other towns in Ireland, for example, Clonmel, you can't go anywhere without seeing a pub. In Balomina, you can't go anywhere without a mission hall or a Baptist tabernacle or a Presbyterian meeting house or an Anglican church or a gospel hall or, you know, religion is absolutely everywhere. The largest employer in the town is run by

an evangelical Christian who's just built a 3,000 seater capacity building for the congregation that he also leads.

You know, this is the constituency that used to elect Ian Paisley year after year after year after year, you know, probably the only place in the United Kingdom, perhaps in the world, that when Ian Paisley stood up in the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 1998, denouncing the Pope as anti-Christ, that there were eruptions of yells of support, you know. I think the cognitive dissonance in doing this project was in remembering who I was and where I came from and going to visit this other community that wanted to turn their town into basically an American version of mine. And, you know, I am a Christian and I came back to my town and just realized actually what an extraordinary place I live in.

You know, I'd always been a little bit embarrassed by it but now I came to see that it really was unique and that other people might want to live in a town like this. So I'm not sure, I can't remember what your question was, Alistair, before I went down this anecdotal lane, but I suppose I would say that, you know, if Moscow doesn't work out for these people, house prices in Balamina are very, very reasonable. In fact, they're half of the UK average and, you know, if the migration movement to Moscow doesn't work out for some people because they can't afford it, you know, Balamina could be a very attractive second best option.

I would also recommend people move to Stoke for similar reasons. I mean, it's achievable to buy a house here. That's one of the things that it has in its favor.

I'm not sure about great cultural change that could be achieved. Stoke-on-Trent, well, I mean, it's excellent for things like China and, you know, Burleigh and all those lovely pottery things, isn't it? It is, yes. I'm fortunate enough to live within walking distance of Portmeirion and Spode and places like that.

Absolutely beautiful. I once had a window wiper in my car, gave out in Stoke-on-Trent. So one thing I do know is that none of the garages actually can sell you a motor to replace it.

Thank you so much for joining me for this discussion. I highly recommend that people get the book. It's Survival and Resistance and it should be available wherever good books are sold.

Likewise, The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland. And I hope we'll have the opportunity to discuss that book at some point. It would be good to get into, not least because I greatly miss Ireland, having grown up there and not being back for many years.

Well, thank you, Alistair. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate your interest and time.

God bless and thank you for listening.