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R.J. Rushdoony and Christian Reconstruction (with Michael McVicar)

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Michael McVicar, the author of 'Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism' (https://amzn.to/3kErJ82), joins me to discuss R.J. Rushdoony and the movement that he started.

Transcript

Hello and welcome. Today I'm joined by Michael McVicar to discuss his book, Christian Reconstructionism, R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism. Thank you very much for joining me.

Thank you for having me. I appreciate it. So to get us started, first of all, who was R.J. Rushdoony and why is he someone worth studying? Well, great question, big question.

But I guess the sort of short way of putting it is in terms of why he's important to study is he's the father of the Christian Reconstruction movement, sometimes called Dominionism or Theonomy. You'll hear it labeled different things. There's reasons to be at least hesitant with some of those labels, especially probably the or Dominionism label.

However, that's where a lot of people would encounter him, at least initially. And Christian Reconstructionism is its own ball of wax in terms of the wider, I guess you could say, fundamentalist or evangelical community in the United States with a strict emphasis on Rushdoony's interpretation of biblical law and why he believed that biblical law was necessary to reconstruct American society. And growing out of Rushdoony's conception of Christian Reconstructionism and biblical law were some of his broader sort of influences in American society that are arguably more diffuse and much harder to sort of pin down than Reconstructionism itself.

But probably the most significant and one of the main reasons to study him is his influence on homeschooling in the United States. His influence was not just intellectual or ideological. It was also institutional and legal.

He was an expert witness and he spent a lot of time organizationally sort of building this movement. Likewise, I think personally that if you're looking at Rushdoony, one of his other major areas of influence is on libertarianism and particularly a certain strain of sort of Christian libertarianism that has sort of waxed and waned in American politics, intellectual and religious life since the, we could argue going back to the 60s, but really since the 1980s. And in some ways you can see elements of Rushdoony's influence on more recent developments like the religious right, however you want to parse that phrase, what that is, or even more recently on things like the Tea Party, which is interesting to think now, seems like ancient history in some ways, especially in this sort of Trump era in the United States.

But nonetheless, those are the sort of core reasons that I think he's significant to study, Christian reconstruction and then its influence on homeschooling and sort of a Christian version of libertarianism in the United States. So one of the more surprising details of his personal biography is the influence and the importance of the time that he spent as a missionary on an Indian reservation and how that forged his political and theological instincts. Can you say more about how his attitude towards the state was developed during that period and how other experiences and aspects of his background played into his fundamental posture towards the state and society? Yeah, that's a really interesting aspect of Rushdoony's life.

When I started doing the research, this is something that really surprised me. You know, I began doing this in the early 2000s when there was almost nothing known about Rushdoony in terms of outside of the sort of reconstructionist reform communities that he operated in, where he lectured widely and he talked widely to audiences. But sort of tracking this down and being able to figure this out as a historical researcher, it was a lot harder.

And when I realized that he had served as a missionary in Nevada in the late 40s and 50s, it was an interesting component to his biography because it became really clear that one of Rushdoony's primary insights during that period of time was the way in which the state, and here you're mostly talking about the federal state because of the way Indian affairs and federal agencies regulated life on the reservation in Nevada. Rushdoony became increasingly convinced during that time that he was seeing the logical outcome of the growth of the state in the early part of the 20th century. You know, he was born in the wake of World War I, came of age in the 1920s and the 1930s, and so he was very aware of the development in both the United States and in Europe of a growing both regulatory but also sort of nationalist or hyper-nationalist state, whether it was in the form of fascism and communism in Europe or the New Deal in the United States.

And so by the time he gets to the reservation, for him this sort of crystallizes or solidifies in his mind the danger of this centralized form of governance in people's everyday lives on the reservation. And he could see it in terms of water resources on the reservation. The government could essentially through infrastructural changes change how people got one of the most necessary elements of human life, could regulate food access, could regulate education, could regulate the mail, which was so necessary to any sense of normalcy, especially for a missionary on a reservation.

So Restuini was able to, while he was there, see what he ultimately thought would be the consequence of the growth of the federal state in the United States, but more broadly the state as a concept, as a kind of governmental form that he saw sort of metastasizing in all aspects of human existence in the 20th century, not just American, but more broadly. So this was for him, the reservation became both a representation of that, but a source of both hope and anxiety for him. He thought he could reform it.

He thought he could change things on the reservation, but he also feared that if people didn't come up with a coherent way of thinking about what the state was and how to change it, then people were going to be doomed to sort of live in this totalitarian system. So it seems it was something of a canary in the coal mine for his vision of the state and also the way in which he, a field in which he could really explore what would be an antidote to that. There's one particular passage where you describe a conversation he had with a young man, when the man was talking about the importance of freedom and justice as opposed to just rights, and the fact that rights don't really give you what you need, rather you need freedom and justice.

And that, it seems, was a very important context for him just to root his thought more generally. Yeah, that's a really great point. And it's a really interesting exchange.

He recounts this in one of his diaries where he sits down and recounts this encounter he had with a young man who very angrily, he lived on the reservation, he had a sort of very angry response one day. That's he basically says to Rushduni, look, you know, he says, I think the way Rushduni quotes him is it's, you know, the white man is destined for reservation, just like we've been put on this reservation and Rushduni found this, you know, very evocative. So he sort of pushes the young man and gets him to lay out his feelings here.

And ultimately, it is in Rushduni's perspective, the analogy of the canary in the coal mine is sort of apt here. He believes it's representative of a danger that this specific, I guess you could say in Rushduni's conceptualization of it, it would have been a race of people. This is debatable, right, when you're thinking about the ethnic groups on the reservation, unless he would have thought of them as a race.

And what he saw is because of the destruction of Native culture by, you know, white encroachment and genocide in the West, and also the erasure of Native American religious traditions, he thought that it had culturally so enfeebled the Peyotes in particular, but also other Native groups, that they couldn't resist in any kind of coherent or intelligible way, the encroachment of whites. And it made them both susceptible to say Christianity in terms of missionary work, but it also made them highly resistant to it, because they had already seen one religious worldview sort of swept away, right, and replaced by this mechanistic understanding of the universe of the state. So Rushduni saw as a consequence of that, he believed that this interaction, in the many interactions he had on the reservation, he believed that if only he could convince enough of his charges on the reservation of the effectiveness of Christianity to sort of provide a coherent, not just a worldview, but a sort of practical, you know, manner of living, it would allow them to understand properly this relationship between liberty and justice that you alluded to.

For Rushduni, these were obviously things more than about law, they had to do with the transcendent creative embodiedness that human beings have in their relationship to God and Christ and regeneration and all that kind of traditional reformed theological ideas. And so that exchange really does provide an interesting way of understanding how Rushduni thought he could reform people in their day-to-day lives through Christian reconstruction, what he would eventually call Christian reconstruction. Who would you say were Rushduni's most formative intellectual influences and what distinctive elements did they contribute to his thought? Yeah, this is, if you're to read Rushduni's own telling of his biography, he's going to go, I think, in some ways he'll go to his father in many ways, himself a Presbyterian missionary and minister dealing with, or a missionizing or ministering to Armenian immigrants in California.

And that's an important component of Rushduni's sort of religious development. But in his own bio, he's also going to cite Cornelius Van Til and especially the new modernism and his presuppositional apologetic, his presuppositional apologetics. But when you put those two together, those are obviously highly significant in terms of Rushduni's own theological self-understanding.

But I would argue that if you look at his biography and you look at everything that led up to that moment on the reservation that we've just been talking about, his time at UC Berkeley and his sort of relationship with a professor there, Ernst Kantorowicz, himself an immigrant who had fled Europe during the sort of rise of the Nazi regime. Kantorowicz had a major influence on Rushduni in terms of thinking about the relationship between theology and the law in the Western tradition. And while Rushduni wouldn't in any way sort of downplay Kantorowicz's, I guess you'd say sort of academic influence, he doesn't play it up as heavily in his own writings, probably because he wants to emphasize the Christian sort of origins of his ideas.

Kantorowicz was, I guess you could say anything, but I think in one of his memoirs, Rushduni, or interviews described him as debauched and a fiend or something like that. He was a typical sort of European secular intellectual for that period of time. But nonetheless, I do think that the Kantorowicz really shaped the way Rushduni would eventually want to rethink the relationship between law and society.

Because for Kantorowicz, he saw everything as ultimately theological, which jives really well with Van Til's ideas about both his apologetic method, but also his idea of the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian ways of thinking. And Kantorowicz took that seriously, even if he himself wasn't a believer in a way that Rushduni would have recognized. So I think that those are probably three of the real key intellectual influences, his father, and then Van Til, and then Kantorowicz as a kind of sideways or tangential influence.

But it's also worth noting here that so much of Rushduni's thought was negative. That is, so much of it was focused on self-definition in opposition to the threats of secular humanism, and this sort of antithetical movement of thought that he picked up from Van Til, that it's really hard not to see characters like Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Freud probably the largest of that group, and the Marquis de Sade as being really foundational to the way he was going to try to separate himself from what he saw as a sort of decadent intellectual tradition that many Christians at the time were reading and taking seriously, particularly Freud. Do you see something about that world more generally of, I don't know, of those decades around the time of the war and just afterwards with a certain political, bringing theological thought into dialogue with political thought? Do you think that that was a broader influence upon him, people like Schmitt and others? Yeah, that's a great question.

I assume you're talking about Carl Schmitt in this context. Yeah, that's a good question. I actually tried to figure that out.

And as best as I could tell, where the sort of Schmittian interface would have happened with Rushduni would have been through Kantorowicz and Kantorowicz's work in things like The King's Two Bodies, which I believe he was just publishing when Rushduni would have been sort of an undergraduate working with him. And that sort of movement toward political theology in the 1930s, that was an intellectual tradition. I'm not sure how much of that Rushduni got directly, but more through sort of his dialogue with Kantorowicz.

But I did wonder about that and could never find, Rushduni kept records. Schmitt certainly has the antithesis. Yes, yeah, that's exactly right.

And Rushduni kept a record of everything that he read. And I never saw Schmitt mentioned, which I thought was interesting. But yeah, I mean, you're absolutely right that Schmittian sort of political theology concept is all over Rushduni's ideas at that point.

But it seems to me that in terms of the major European intellectual that he was dealing with in the 30s, it really was Freud. And between that and Kantorowicz's ideas, who's kind of a major intellect, but probably much less well known and widely read today. Most likely, if you encounter him, it's through somebody like Michel Foucault, right, the French philosopher, who Rushduni also read and read closely in the 60s, particularly as a descendant of Nietzsche in that context.

So I mean, the sort of breadth of his reading during from the 30s through, well, I mean, up until the time of his death is really staggering. You know, Rushduni had a little bit of everybody somewhere in his intellectual genealogy. I mean, you mentioned just how much he was a reader, one of the claims that's often made that he read a book a day, six days a week for 50 years of his life.

And his reading clearly was very broad. He was a cosmopolitan in his reading. But yet, he corralled all this vast array of sources into a system of thought that was radically bounded and focused and some would say sectarian.

How, particularly on account of his presuppositionalism, how do you see that cosmopolitanism of his reading and the ideological precisionism of his thinking interacting? Yeah, that's when you encounter, when I had the opportunity to look at Rushduni's diaries, and Rushduni would keep a basically a line item every day, where would be something like, you know, March 1st, 19, this is just I'm making this up, but this is pretty accurate, March 1st, 1968, read Foucault's History of Madness. And the next day would be read, you know, Nietzsche's whatever, Genealogy of Morals, whatever it would be. And you can see this, because he always had a reading project or writing project in line with the reading project.

So you could kind of watch him, for instance, in his diaries, doing the groundwork that would eventually lead to the Institutes of Biblical Law, or something along those lines. And the thing that's so striking is, as you said, he is cosmopolitan, he's reading anything that he can get. As long as it seems to have some kind of, I guess you could say edifying potential, right? He's reading histories of art, he's reading the Marquis de Sade, right? He's reading, for years he read and had a subscription to Penthouse Forum, right? The pornographic stories from Penthouse.

And that became the grounds for the politics of pornography, one of his books from, I believe, the 70s. So you can find him reading everything, and it's always a means to an end. Some kind of theological insight, some kind of sermon that he was researching and preparing to give, a lecture, something along those lines.

And so it can be really fascinating to watch him work through a body of knowledge, whatever it was. But of course, the outcome, as you've alluded to, is it could be incredibly idiosyncratic, or even by, say, the standards of like, teaching undergraduates at a state university, it could be incredibly superficial, right? He may spend months reading works by Nietzsche, and come away with the most simplistic sort of reductionist reading of Nietzsche was an atheist, right? Or something along those lines. And that could always be both humbling to realize how much he read, disconcerting to see the conclusion that he reached out of reading it.

And it all pointed back to this presuppositional approach. He would have, in many ways, sort of loaded the dice right before he rolled them. So he was going to get a fixed outcome at the end of whatever the project was.

And then sometimes he would surprise you where he would do a deep reading of Freud and really have interesting insights, or pin house forum, where there would be really interesting insights at the end of reading those lectures or reading those, that book, The Politics of Pornography. And so I don't know, maybe I've talked around your core question. But what I would say is that was always the fascinating thing of encountering him.

He was a real thinker, who really spent time with these ideas and these authors and these concepts, but would oftentimes come to just the most flattened version of what you would sort of expect coming out of the other end of that reading. We've mentioned Cornelius von Till already and presuppositionalism. And it seems of all the figures within his intellectual biography, von Till is the one who looms the largest.

And he's very clearly important, not just for Rushdini, but for the development of reconstructionism more generally, particularly with concepts such as the antithesis. Why do you think he's so important? And how did von Till give a sort of influence to the cast of the movement more generally? Yeah, this is, you know, von Till is to me such a surprising character in Rushdini's intellectual development, because reading the new modernism is, well, it's awful. I mean, I don't know how else to put it.

I mean, I spent a lot of time reading, you know, period theology. And I don't know if you want to compare von Till to his contemporaries like Barth or Tillage or Niebuhr, or the Niebuhr brothers, right. And the sort of modern Protestant theology that von Till saw himself as developing in opposition to.

Right. And also the Dutch tradition that he was sort of bringing into the Americas, right. Some of that stuff is so difficult, whether it's von Till's work or some of the other thinkers around that.

And when Rushdini encountered von Till, it seemed to have been that von Till's engagement with the ideas of Abraham Kuyper really solidified for Rushdini this both political, epistemological, and theological sort of thing that he'd already kind of hit on, right, in relationship to politics, and the law, and social reform. And von Till seemed to have provided the epistemological foundation for that, while Kuyper might have provided a more practical sort of political and social way of thinking through how you would use this, this concept of antithesis. And in- Can you just explain briefly what the antithesis is? Sure.

This is the notion in Kuyper's idea that, you know, there was a sort of Christian worldview, and then there was a non-Christian worldview that began to emerge, particularly with like the French Revolution in Europe. And Kuyper saw the, these two things as being ultimately sort of incommensurable or impossible to reconcile with one another. One was rooted in, you know, a thousand-year-plus Christian history of understanding life and creation in terms of human beings' relationship to God, right? And then there was this emerging, I guess you could call it secular or anti-Christian or non-Christian view of humans at the center of this world, no longer God at the center of it.

And Kuyper saw this as a kind of, in his own sort of Dutch context, as a, both a political and theological statement, right? And then a generation of thinkers after Kuyper, particularly many of them coming to the United States were foreign thinkers who settled in the upper Midwest of whom Van Til was a, well, he was an immigrant himself, but he was also a descendant of this generation of immigrants. They brought those both theological and political ideas to the Midwest, and Van Til sort of crystallized them into his own epistemological system that didn't simply emphasize the political consequences of the antithesis, say to governing, you know, a commonwealth in Europe or something like that. He now saw it or developed it into an epistemological system of the absolute separation between a Christian and a non-Christian, both worldview, but more broadly a sort of way of putting people at the center of an epistemological system or putting God at the center of that system.

And Rushdini picked that up and sort of synthesized all those aspects, right? He brought Kuyper's ideas, he brought Van Til's epistemological notion, and then he saw it as a way of reforming the United States, because for him, ultimately, the state as it was emerging in the United States, the federal government, represented this non-Christian, anti sort of, I mean, yeah, I mean, essentially an anti-Christian sort of set of presuppositions in which it was based that would then govern human life in the US. And so he wanted to resist that with a new Christian worldview. There seems to have been a particular attraction to libertarian thought, anti-statist traditions more generally, but libertarian thought.

Do you think, how would you describe the difference, for instance, between, I don't know, the sort of vision of Kuyper, maybe a pillarized society and something that you see in Rushdini with his vision of reconstructionism and its affinities to libertarianism? Yeah, you know, that's a great point, because for Rushdini, he really did appeal back to Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty, right? Where you have the state as one sphere and the school and the family, right? And each one of these are kind of silos of governance, right? Where in each one of those spheres, a kind of governance over people happen, right, in those areas. And Rushdini took that, and what he believed is that that was a way to decentralize power and to decentralize governance into each one of these individual spheres. And for Rushdini, the ones that really mattered were the church, the state, and the family, right? He would write occasionally about others, but those were really the three primary ones.

And what Rushdini believes, and he particularly develops this in the One and the Many, which is a really interesting book on sort of political theology, going back to Kantorowicz. He believed that if no single sphere of, you know, the church, the family, or the state could claim primacy over another sphere, what you ended up with were three mutually competing spheres, right? Where the family governed one aspect of human life, the church another, and then the state another. And this became, for him, this sort of division of Christian libertarianism, right? Which in some ways is much more intellectually rigorous and robust than say, the kind of libertarianism that was in vogue at the same time with like the works of Ayn Rand, built on the kind of, you know, neo-Aristotle sort of notion of the objective thought and this kind of stuff.

You know, Rushdini was rigorous and well thought out, and he saw himself as developing this in opposition to that sort of, both Ayn Randian sort of libertarianism, but also just more broadly, the kind of libertarianism that popped up in the 1930s in response to the New Deal, which wasn't particularly intellectually rigorous. It was more, if the federal government is doing this to regulate business, we don't want them to, right? Rushdini thought he really had a system in place coming out of Kuiper and then synthesizing that with Ventile. And Ventile provided him then the intellectual and epistemological roots for making sense of these three spheres, right? Where if God is at the center of each one, God will then rule the way, especially God's law, what Rushdini would have called it, would rule what you could do in each one of these spheres, right? The ways you could think, the ways that you could behave.

And so that's the sort of roots of what he would call Christian libertarianism. Certainly folks like Gary North, his son-in-law, and sort of, I guess you'd say protege. I don't know if North would like that, but I'll stick with that for the moment, would take this in an even more radical sort of direction that looked more sort of conventional like political libertarianism.

But Rushdini never wanted it to go into that sort of direction. He wanted it to be a sort of diffuse political project, but with a very concrete epistemological and sort of practical element in those three spheres. It seems that for Rushdini, the family had a particular importance within his approach, and that plays out in his approach to schooling.

It is a challenge also to the narrowness of the nuclear family. There's very much an emphasis on intergenerationality upon the extension of the family. And then also the idea of, I find it curious, the fact that for a movement that has these three spheres that are concentrated upon, so much energy has been put into the sphere of business, which is not separately conceptualized to the same degree.

I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on the importance of the family for Rushdini, what role it played, and how that differed maybe with other aspects of the Reconstructionist movement. Yeah, this is, when it comes to Rushdini, the problem of the family really is at the heart of a lot of the debates within Reconstructionism itself. So if you think of Reconstructionism as a political movement or as an intellectual movement, or as a sort of sub philosophy within fundamentalist or evangelical American Christianity, Rushdini really thought that the primary seat of governance for human beings took place in the family.

So for instance, in his sort of recounting of what would eventually be called in his own thinking, the dominion mandate, where he develops this in both the institutes of biblical law, but also in works like salvation and godly rule, Rushdini emphasizes the fact that when God created Adam, he gives him some work to do, which is sort of the first act of dominion. And then he gives him a helpmate, Eve, his wife. And for Rushdini, it was that union in marriage that was really the first act of governance, where both Adam and Eve are essentially eternally bound to one another, or not eternally, but in terms of here on earth, are bound to one another in terms of this mutually self-governing relationship.

And then through the generations then that follow from them, that inheritance of government will then be passed on. And so all other forms of governance, even though he emphasized this sphere system where power is decentralized, and all of these competing sort of spheres of governance, in many ways, Rushdini honed in on the family as the primary place of this. And so in a lot of ways, Rushdini's, say, sphere of the church in practice, in his own life, was rooted in the family.

He both, when he develops his ministry later with the Chalcedon Foundation, and goes on to both be a member of the Presbyterian church, well, moves through many different iterations of Presbyterianism and reformed sort of polities as he basically breaks from each one. What he's eventually left with is a kind of nuclear family slash church, right, where those two spheres sort of collapse into one another. And his son-in-law, Gary North, who marries one of Rushdini's daughters, he actually deeply resented this because he believed that the church and the family sphere had sort of collapsed in Rushdini's, both in practice and in terms of theology.

And he wanted to disentangle those and sort of, I guess you'd say, return the church and the family sphere to their separate and equal sort of planes in the sphere of sovereignty. So Rushdini really did emphasize the family in ways that even made some of his followers, especially second generation followers, anxious, partly because, two, it solidified him not only as a father in the literal sort of child-father relationship, patriarch sort of sense, but it also centered him as a kind of intellectual father, right? And so it's not, I don't think there's any accident so many Reconstructionists spend a lot of time with Freud and engaging him. There is a kind of edible dynamic in Reconstructionism, whether it's North and Rushdini or Rushdini and Greg Bonson, some of these other characters, they really do have this very complex patriarchal father-son sort of relationship.

So I think I might've personalized my answer to this question a little bit more than what you've asked here. But in short, Rushdini did emphasize the family as the central sphere, even if in practice or in theory, that shouldn't have been the way he did it. And he got criticized a lot within the movement for that.

It seems also there are aspects of the second generation in which that patriarchalism became much more explicit, whether quiverful or vision forum, things like that. And maybe those forms of reaction against his patriarchal tendencies are also reacting against those second generation expressions where it is coming to very clear and prominent expression. Yeah, that's a really great point.

And I guess that's worth emphasizing here. You do have a generation, especially under the sort of leadership of Gary North who attack the familial sort of aspects of Reconstructionism. And North wanted to put more emphasis on the church sphere.

And so that sort of breaks Reconstructionism into two major factions in the 1980s, where Rushdini and the Chalcedon Foundation emphasize this familial component and patriarchal component, where North and the Tyler movement with Greg Chilton and some of these other folks, they go in this direction, and they want to focus more on the church. And then you do have, by the late 80s and 90s, the emergence of, as you noted, quiverful vision forum, which as I understand now is mostly defunct, although I think elements of its wider network still persist. I haven't followed enough on that after the scandal with Phillips and all of that.

However, they really did hone in on Rushdini's familial component, and really to the sort of, for Rushdini, what was very latent in it, and he never really talked about as much as that quiverful and vision forum sort of subset would, they really honed in on the sort of, I guess, sexual politics within the family. And that's a really fascinating component to it, that, you know, in my own research, I sort of got up to that point by 2015, a lot of that stuff was really coming to fruition, both as a controversy, and also as a movement itself. And I haven't followed it as closely.

But yeah, that's a good observation, that there is a, that is one of the legacies of what Rushdini was trying to do. Rushdini was clearly not just prolific as a reader, but also as a writer, and he seems originally to have aspirations to be involved in the academy that did not really pan out, he didn't have the recognition that he wanted within that realm. But he found a very ready audience among conservative populists.

How did that shape Rushdini's style and intellectual posture, and his relationship with the academy more generally? Yeah, that's an excellent question. So he initially wanted to publish what was essentially his senior thesis with Kantorovits with the University of Chicago, it was a massive work called Visible Sovereignty. And it had a lot of relationship to Kantorovits' sort of work.

And he had also developed it in relationship to George Hunston Williams, who would go on to be a prominent sort of church historian, later, who did get the recognition that Rushdini sort of missed out on or wasn't afforded by the academy. Rushdini came really close to publishing that work with the University of Chicago, they eventually told him no thanks and blamed a number of rationing requirements from the war, and this would have been during World War Two, on paper, and they also thought it was a better fit for a European academic press and less for an American one. And I think that those were actually sincere, I read the letters because they were in Rushdini's library, I think those were actually sincere assessments of the manuscript that it was good, but it didn't fit what they were doing.

And as a result, Rushdini essentially dropped the project, like Rushdini would do in a lot of cases, when he met certain kinds of adversity, Rushdini really dug in his heels, and would fight tooth and nail for a matter of intellectual rectitude, whatever he thought was right, he would fight for. But in some of these more practical matters of who was going to publish what, Rushdini would work so hard and then just kind of throw up his hands and say, I'm going elsewhere with the project. And he did that eventually with this work, and he never was able then to secure an academic job, he would have been very close to it, had he been able to secure a publisher for that work, it might have, I've always wondered what that trajectory would have looked like for Rushdini, had he gone into, you know, he most likely would have ended up at a small liberal arts Christian college somewhere, but he very easily could have done it.

But by the end of the 1940s, instead, as you've mentioned, he really falls in with a network of sort of popular right wing, you could call them conservative, they wouldn't have quite been conservative at that point, you could call them libertarian, but they wouldn't have been quite what we would think of as libertarian today at that point. But he falls into a network of these folks who are developing the ideas that would become libertarianism and conservatism in the 50s and 60s. And he sees himself as being able to offer a more Christian sort of centric intellectual vision than so many of the popular voices that were emerging in that field.

I mean, you could take probably the most well known, a fellow like William F. Buckley, right, who would sort of through national review, establish what many Americans would think of as like intellectual conservatism in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Rushdini saw that and thought, you know, I can do that as well. But I can do it for a even more popular audience.

And so he really focused on writing short, tightly argued sort of essays. And if you read any of his works, almost even the big ones like, you know, in some other manifesto quality to it. Yeah, they all have this sort of really succinct manifesto quality to them.

And he could be erudite, but and you know, use, you know, multi syllabic, but at the same time, he could really hone in short punchy sentences, right? And really develop an idea succinctly for a reader. And he saw that as kind of his mission after this initial attempt at academic recognition. And you know, it's not incidental that when Van Til, after the publication of the New Modernism, and after Rushdini, then wrote by what standard his sort of introduction to Van Til's thought, it's no accident that Van Til's publisher, Presbyterian Reformed, sent every manuscript that Van Til wrote after that directly to Rushdini for revisions.

Because the editors very frequently would say, essentially, I can't make heads or tails out of this, would you rewrite it? And Rushdini dutifully would. In many ways, Rushdini emerged as a kind of ghostwriter for Van Til in the in the 60s. And Van Til's open about that in his correspondence with Rushdini.

So the sort of essence of your question here is that Rushdini decided that he was going to try in his own way to give a kind of popular voice to a very intellectually rigorous and rigid sort of Christian epistemology. And that's what he spent so much of the, you know, the end of his life doing from the 60s forward. And it would, it would be an interesting thought experiment to think about what that would have looked like if he had focused on arcane questions of the Reformation in Europe in, you know, big tomes that would only be marketed to academic leaders.

Something, there would have been a very different sort of history. You've talked about the sort of networks that he got involved with. And one of the curious details I found was within your work was the importance of housewife activism within these.

And also some of the broader issues that provided a backdrop for his particular emphasis. So for instance, reading his emphasis upon biblical law against the background of the concerns about law and order more generally. Can you say something more about the context for those networks and also the character of them? Yeah, that is, that's such a great question.

It actually piggybacks really well off your, of your previous question, because when you think of Rushdini as developing a more populist or readable sort of message that is nonetheless rooted in this very consistent sort of theological and epistemological worldview, Rushdini saw it as his duty to write to reformers in the 50s and 60s who could actually make a political difference. And as he was networking with libertarians and conservative voices, it became very clear to him that a lot of the, say, William F. Buckley type conservatives were focusing on the wrong market. They were focusing on intellectuals.

They were focusing on people who would read National Review and want to be involved in these larger sort of national debates about conservatism and all this kind of stuff. And what became aware of very quickly is that if you wanted to have any impact at a grassroots level, the best place to go would be to housewives at the time. And he was inspired to do that in part because of his work with the John Birch Society.

You know, the John Birch Society is often treated, even in historiography by historians who should know better, as a fringe movement. It was not a fringe movement in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a popular broad-based movement.

And many of the activists that were involved were not the dues-paying men who joined the society. They were the dues-paying men's wives. These were women who had, because of the gender dynamics of the period and also because of the labor market, many of these women did not have day jobs, or if they did, they had part-time work, and they had a lot of time to engage.

And many of them were college-educated and had either secretarial training or some other kind of professional training that made them very good organizers. And so when you look at Rushkin's diaries from that period in time, he's visiting teas and coffee clutches and on all of this kind of stuff in the 50s and 60s. And he may not always list the members present or the people present, but it's clear it's at 11 o'clock on a Wednesday.

It's not a guy from the Chamber of Commerce, it's his wife. And that's who Rushkin is lecturing to. That's who Rushkin is speaking to.

And when you go back to this idea about the intellectual work that he's doing, he's helping those women who were oftentimes at home without their children because they were in public school, he's helping them rethink what they should be teaching their kids at that point in time. This is where a lot of his homeschooling activism is going to come from, too. It's going to open up a door for him to say to these women, what are you teaching your children? What are they learning at school? And a lot of them are going to become educational reformers.

They're going to become the sort of first wave of agitators for homeschooling to remove their kids from school. So those networks were just incredibly profound. And they're so difficult to trace, right, as a consequence.

These are women, these are individuals who didn't sit down and leave archival traces that you're going to find in a state university or at the Hoover Institution, right? At best, they might have left a personal diary or they left a bunch of books that they read that have since been thrown out by their kids or their grandkids, right? So it's hard to trace those networks, but it's clear that's what Rush Dooney's real audience was, especially in the 60s and 70s. Can you say a bit more about his role in the rise of the religious right and Christian activism more generally? And how would generally figures like Rush Dooney, who were more extreme in the positions that they held, were metabolized into a more mainstream and politically powerful and influential movement as the religious right came to be? It also seems that in the earlier part of the movement, there's a lot more interaction with the religious left, the sort of left that's been described by David Schwartz and others, a movement that was quite prominent with Ron Sider and others like that. How would you describe that context of ferment, and then how that developed into the religious right as we know it now? Yeah, this is probably the trickiest area of sort of tracing this history of reconstructionism.

In many ways, I hedge on putting Rush Dooney at, certainly, I would not put him at the center of the religious right. That is a much more complicated story or complex story that Rush Dooney really is in many ways a peripheral or sort of bit player in that finding sort of direct connections between him and, I don't know, Falwell or Pat Robertson or things like that. It's almost a parlor game in some circles where he was on the 700 Club in 1981, and he mentioned dominionism.

Therefore, Pat Robertson's a dominionist, and therefore, you know, the religious right has this kind of heritage or something like that. There's clearly a much more sort of complicated dynamic going on here. But going back to the previous question about housewives, where you really see Rush Dooney's influence is out in these lecture circuits, where he is saying to people, whether you're a Chamber of Commerce type, a young Republican type, or a John Birch Society member, he's saying to those folks, you think that the political sort of worldview that you have connected to these other identities, Republicanism, the John Birch Society, whatever, you think that has some kind of coherent meaning, it doesn't.

It has no meaning without a Christocentric sort of epistemological framework in which you're reading the Bible, and you're chaining your own intellectual and political goals to this larger, more consistent, more rigorous reform sort of worldview. And he finds a lot of people who, where they may not buy into, say, I don't know, the death penalty as he extrapolates in the Institutes of Biblical Law, he does, however, find a lot of people who find the basic core of that message persuasive. And those folks will go on to be important Republican donors at a grassroots level.

They will go on to be important school reformers who want to get a certain textbook out of a certain high school, out of a certain county in a certain state. That's where Rush Ginny's influence is really going to be. And it's at that grassroots level that he cultivated and tended for so long, that you will eventually find the receptiveness, I think, in many ways, more broadly in the Republican Party, to some or bits and pieces of an agenda that cannot rightly be called Reconstructionist or Dominionist in a meaningful way.

But he primed a lot of folks in so many parts of the country to that kind of activism, probably most prominently in California, but also in places like Virginia. He lectured widely in Florida, where I am. And you'll find traces of these lectures in local newspapers where they're promoting him at some church or commencement speeches at Christian colleges and universities across the country.

And so that's where you're going to find Rush Ginny. He planted these seeds. And since

Rush Ginny didn't think of himself as a political activist in the narrow sense of winning an election, he saw himself as a political activist in terms of generational development.

You could argue that he had a lot of success that way by the late 1980s and 1990s, especially with the Christian libertarian worldview, especially with the homeschooling sort of worldview that he developed. So his thought clearly was widely disseminated, not so much as a complete package, but different parts of it. How would you describe the impact of that? Because it seems that it bore many different types of fruit, from someone like Paul Hill, to some of the other movements that were far more ecclesiocentric, to homeschooling movements, etc.

How would you describe something of the diversity and unevenness of his legacy? Yeah, I mean, you raise Paul Hill. I mean, that's, you know, obviously one of the more, I don't know, darker, tragic sort of outcomes of some of the legalistic thinking that Rush Ginny provided, and all the debates about, you know, resistance and violence, and enforcement of biblical law. And then you could, we could go back to like Vision Forum, and the sort of quiverful or patriarchy movement, courtship, right, arguably has some distant relationship to Rush Ginny.

You could go into the more sort of conspiratorial and dark sides and talk about the kinest movement, which your listeners may or may not be familiar with, which is a very sort of arguably ethnocentric or racist interpretation of Rush Ginny's family theology. Or you could go into the broader sort of homeschooling movement, right, where what Rush Ginny did ultimately was provide parents an opportunity to remove their kids from, you know, public schools and provide them with, you know, their intellectual and legal foundation for educating their children as they saw fit. So you've got a darker and more problematic sort of outcome for reconstruction on one hand, and then you have arguably, you know, a much more positive one on the other.

I'm talking about it is one of the things that I find so daunting, because it really is hard to pin down where this is most significant. I think, I think obviously, the homeschooling movement is the real legacy of Rush Ginny. And it's a legacy that stretches far beyond fundamentalist or evangelical American Christianity.

Rush Ginny was working closely with Scientologists. He was working closely with the Amish. He was working closely with, oh my goodness, in basically any group that wanted to either have their own private school system in parallel with the public school system, or wanted to allow parents to educate their children in the home.

And he really did build that network in conjunction with these other network builders. So that's a really profound legacy. His testimony in court cases all over the country was, if not central to some of the judicial decisions that came out of these, he was still an important figure, because he was there, he was on the stand, he was testifying in Texas and Ohio and all of these places where homeschooling would become eventually legal.

When he started, it wasn't in most states. So that's one of the real central areas of his influence. The other, as I think I've kept coming back to, is a certain mode of Christian libertarianism.

It is one that can have very sort of troubling outcomes with like preparedness and sort of survivalist logic, where Rush Ginny was an early pioneer in that line of thinking, that Christians had to prepare for a, if not a total collapse of society, they had to prepare for catastrophes as a theological and practical sort of charge from the Bible. At the same time, he also had a more, I guess you could argue, I don't know, I don't want to weigh these things as positive or negative, but nonetheless, less controversial, I guess you could say, legacy of emphasizing decentralized, you know, you could say pro-business, but more so pro-family, pro-small, local communitarian sort of projects that are to this day quite popular in some evangelical and fundamentalist circles. And so that intellectual and political legacy is very real, even if it is almost impossible to say Rush Ginny led to this outcome.

Right. So. I mean, you certainly see those elements carried on in people like Gary North with Y2K, with his stuff on conspiracy, other things like that.

And it seems that many of the movements that were influenced by or attracted to Rush Ginny had something of his pronounced anti-statism, narrower trust networks, which can often be that emphasis upon the family as narrowing in on the family as a network of trust, and then presuppositional epistemologies that leads to deep suspicion or fundamental suspicion of non-Christians and their basic epistemology and approach to reality. And then some of the conspiracy theorizing that can come in with that. How would you describe some of those instincts and how they have played out in Rush Ginny's successors? Yeah, well, that's a really great question.

It's a complicated one, because when you take Rush Ginny over the arc of his career, he developed his own sort of relationship to what you could call conspiracy theorizing, conspiracy thinking, mostly through his interface with the John Birch Society and its members. So with Robert Welch, he had a long sort of dialogue in writing about the program of the John Birch Society. And what Rush Ginny essentially concluded or what he came to the conclusion of is that Welch was right, that there is a vast kind of conspiracy to either dominate or change or fundamentally sort of reorder American society, but he was wrong in the cause.

And for Rush Ginny, the ultimate cause was Satan and a conspiracy against humanity. And for Rush Ginny, the ultimate outcome of that was the loss for Satan, because God's victory is preordained. So he does have a conspiratorial view of history.

He's very explicit about that. And it is one that, as a result, Gary North and many of his followers would pick up from that second generation of Reconstructionists. They similarly took up those ideas, and they spent a lot, North in particular, spent a lot of time interfacing with the legacy of the John Birch Society, right? And trying to offer a different, even if there was the similar sort of diagnosis, right, that there is a conspiracy trying to change or fundamentally rewire American life, the prognosis was different, right? Because the way you could treat it and the outcome would be fundamentally different if you believed that Christ was at the center of that problem, where Welch in the John Birch Society, and then many of the forms of conspiracy thinking that that spawned in the 70s and 80s, as the JVS sort of declined in its influence.

They had a much more, I guess you could argue, secular sort of perspective on that conspiracy thinking. And so you do see as a consequence, a sense, and this is something that's even this, back to the idea of influence, this is picked up by people like Tim LaHaye in his mind wars, right? And in his sort of diminished version of presuppositional thinking or flattened version of it, where there's a kind of war for your mind and it's caused by Satan, right? So you do see that legacy in other evangelicals, picking up bits and pieces of these ideas. I do wonder if we'd have anywhere near as much emphasis upon worldview thinking, were it not for Rush Dooney and early people taking the legacy of Van Til.

Well, I suspect that's true. And I suspect the other big figure here is obviously Francis Schaeffer, right? Also a sort of student of Van Til and that legacy as well. However, I do believe that Rush Dooney, my strong sense is that Rush Dooney is the pioneer of that line of thinking and that it helped shape a lot of what Schaeffer would eventually do, take into a different sort of direction.

But yes, I think that that's correct. Rush Dooney is sort of central to the worldview sort of problem. Now you've spoken about how widely some of his influence was disseminated in different movements and contexts.

He was clearly a towering figure, which often creates problems in small, non-institutionalized contexts as big men throw everything into their orbits or conflict with others who are near them. And then the problem of succession is very key in those sorts of contexts. It seems that Rush Dooney was definitely that sort of person.

And there was a lot of sectarianism or fractious relationships with people immediately in his vicinity, but extensive co-belligerency with people outside of his immediate orbit. How would you explain that almost contradictory aspect of him? Yeah, I hesitate to reduce Rush Dooney to psychology or to his biography or something like that, because I do believe that in his own, the way he understood himself, it was almost always about movement. It was almost always about epistemology.

It was almost always about theology. I think there could be a case to be made about Rush Dooney's mental health, but I don't want to do that, because he was such a cantankerous and difficult man in many ways, even in his journals, even in his own sort of interior writing that I suspect he might have thought some historian would look at someday. So he did record this in his own way, perhaps for posterity.

Nonetheless, I think ultimately for Rush Dooney, about movement building. And he believed so essentially in the rightness of his position in relationship to his ideas about epistemology, his ideas about reconstruction under the wall, and his idea about a sort of his own take on the reformed worldview that was right, that what he would do is in his closest and most intimate intellectual relationships, he would demand a kind of conformity from those around him. And when that conformity was forthcoming, there was a lot of sort of everybody was working together.

But as soon as there were sort of fractions or factions or splits in that wall, Rush Dooney would start to really work at that crack, right, and start to dig it out and start to expose what was underneath it. And he did that in part because he put such an emphasis on rigor. But as a result, a lot of human interaction can't withstand that kind of probing attempt to uncover, you know, minor differences, minor variations, especially when they're seen as being so central to a sense of identity or a sense of religious rectitude or something along those lines.

And so almost immediately, he would turn on his closest allies or vice versa. It wasn't always that Rush Dooney was the one to do the turning. Oftentimes, especially with his younger, sort of second generation acolytes like Gary North, they were oftentimes as young, smart, ambitious people want to do, they oftentimes would see a difference with Rush Dooney and exploit that as an opportunity to separate from the master, right, start their own school, start their own sort of point of departure.

So you can't say it was only Rush Dooney's fault, but oftentimes, it was located in something deep inside him, where there was an inability to sort of manage or recognize that people have varying opinions, and that those opinions, even if you believe you're ultimately right about your theological position, there's still a lot of debate there and Rush Dooney would not allow for that. And he would very quickly write somebody off if that's what he thought he had to do. And you take five or six very strong willed people like that and put them in a room together, and it's pretty combustible pretty quickly.

And that's what happened with Rush Dooney and a lot of his the folks that followed after him. This has been absolutely fascinating. Thank you so much for coming on.

In conclusion, do you have any thoughts about what contemporary Christians can learn from Christian reconstructionism and Rush Dooney? Oh, that's a great question. What would I offer? You know, one of the things that I don't know if I'm going to answer your question, okay, but I'll give a stab at this and I'll try to be as straightforward as I can. One of the things that I have struggled with over the last few years is Rush Dooney's place in American fundamentals and evangelicalism now, especially because of the way that Rush Dooney is often seen as if not a central figure in the religious right, as we were talking about earlier, nonetheless being some kind of prominent figure in the movement who laid its foundations or something along those lines.

I've really struggled with what is the legacy of reconstructionism in an era when it seems that a the foundational elements of evangelical involvement in politics has receded or at least been given over to something very different than what even as a scholar I took to be what was central to evangelical involvement. I think most recently of the scandal involving Jerry Falwell Jr. at Liberty, right, and all the charges of his hypocrisy and all these kind of things. I can't imagine what a character like Rush Dooney would have thought of that kind of behavior in, say, 1968 or something like that, right, and the kind of worldview that seems to separate that behavior from what Rush Dooney and many of his followers would be advocating for.

And so I'm really at a loss to answer that in the political sort of context, right, today, but in terms of thinking about it in the more, I don't know, maybe a deeper historical sense, Rush Dooney emphasizes the fact that a lot of this is ephemeral, right. Rush Dooney's emphasis on worldview, his emphasis on steer sovereignty, his emphasis on a long reformed legacy going back to Calvin, right, and moving through Van Til as Rush Dooney would have seen it, and ultimately with Rush Dooney. I mean, there's no accident that he called it the Institutes of Biblical Law, right, he's echoing Calvin's Institutes.

That sort of sense of legacy and permanence does emphasize that a lot of what is going on in the contemporary moment is ephemeral, and that I do suspect that even if Rush Dooney himself may not have a renaissance of sort of reconstructionist style thinking, a lot of the ideas that underpin them are probably here for quite some time. And so, you know, in some ways, you could argue that he presents a sort of neo-fundamentalism in contrast to the neo-evangelicalism of his time. Yeah, and I think that's a, you put it much better than I could.

That's kind of what I was leaning towards without being able to say it so succinctly. There is a way in which Rush Dooney's worldview and his sort of political and social program is, I think, going to survive, but it will survive in pockets. And it's something that people need to pay attention to, because it will persist long beyond the current moment, where I do suspect some of the elements of the, as you call it, the neo-evangelical components here may not.

A lot of that is very ephemeral in a way that the reformed tradition is not the Rush Dooney you wanted to embody and sort of transmit from generation to generation to generation. So I don't know if that answers your question. I think I filibustered long enough, but... Thank you so much for coming on.

The book is Christian Reconstructionism. I highly recommend it. It's, as you probably gathered, a very thorough and deep exploration of that movement and also of the world in which it arrived and the world that it left behind in many respects.

Thank you very much for coming on. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.