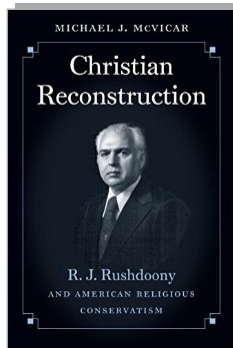


***Christian Reconstruction:  
R. J. Rushdoony and  
American Religious  
Conservatism***

Michael Joseph McVicar  
University of North  
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Reviewed by  
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If one considers libertarianism and classical liberalism in the mid-twentieth century, one typically thinks of figures such as Mises, Hayek, Ayn Rand, and Murray Rothbard. All of these played important roles. But if one pays attention only to them, one is liable to lose sight of an important point: that religious ideas also played a significant role.

These ranged in their character from the Presbyterianism of J. Howard Pew and Jasper Crane (important as business people with strong intellectual interests, and as financial supporters of classical liberal causes) to the unorthodox spiritual ideas of Leonard Read of FEE and of the organization Spiritual Mobilization (on which, see Brian Doherty's *Radicals for Capitalism*). Perhaps the key funding source was the Volker Fund, run by Harold Luhnow (who also had strong religious concerns). Luhnow provided important start-up funds for FEE; paid the wages of Hayek at Chicago and Mises at New York University; employed Rothbard, and provided funding for *Spiritual Mobilization*.

One of the stranger figures in this network was Rousas Rushdoony, the subject of the book under review. (Those with an interest in classical liberalism might find McVicar's earlier "The Libertarian Theocrats," available at the online archives of *The Public Eye* magazine, useful in explaining some of the background.) Rushdoony—who has incorrectly been claimed to have been an influence on George W. Bush—was a Calvinist, of Armenian extraction. He was brought up in the United States, where as a young man he undertook missionary work among Native Americans in Nevada and was struck by the devastating consequences upon their lives of government control.

Intellectually, Rushdoony was impressed by the work of a Calvinist theorist, Cornelius Van Til, who argued for the significance of the intellectual presuppositions from which people worked and of the need for Christians to operate on the basis of their own intellectual presuppositions, which in his view were the only ones adequate for understanding the world. Rushdoony also came across, and was sympathetic to, the free-market approach of Spiritual Mobilization. He developed his own political interpretation of Van Til, on the basis of which Christians should have nothing to do with the state—which, he thought, had usurped the sovereignty which belonged only to God. Instead, they should build networks based on families and churches. In this context, Rushdoony was an important and influential proponent of home schooling.

Rushdoony was an omnivorous reader. He is best understood as a fundamentalist Calvinist, who differed radically in his view from the kind of 'pre-millennial' rapture theology to be found in the annotations in the *Scofield Reference Bible* and as popularized in the best-selling *Left Behind* novels. (In Rushdoony's view, Christians should work independently of the state, and Christ will return only after the conversion of the world—or at least most of it.) Rushdoony also held other distinctive views; in particular, on the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. (There was always an issue as to the extent to which the Old Testament was to be seen as superseded by the New, and just how much of Old Testament legal teaching was to remain in the light of the recruitment of non-Jews into the Christian Church, and St. Paul's arguments about the implications of this.) Rushdoony's view was that much of the Old Testament teaching still held good, including gruesome punishments for homosexuals and for rebellious children. Quite who is to inflict this on whom, given Rushdoony's repudiation of the state, seems to me not too clear: any body that can do this to the non-consenting looks to me all too much like a state.

Rushdoony was also an extremely prolific writer. Many of his works can be downloaded for free from the Chalcedon Foundation, which Rushdoony set up and which is still promulgating his views (see [www.Chalcedon.edu](http://www.Chalcedon.edu)) In addition,

his son-in-law Gary North, who followed Rushdoony's 'reconstructionism,' has written equally prolifically on economic issues. (He was initially influenced by Mises, but developed his own methodological approach; his more recent writing seems to me largely a matter of drawing lessons for economic conduct from Biblical material, rather than economic analysis in the more usual sense.)

McVicar's most interesting book discusses Rushdoony's career, views, and 'reconstructionism' as a movement. While McVicar in no sense shares Rushdoony's views, a resident scholar at the Chalcedon Foundation gave the book a most respectful treatment and thought that there were only minor errors (see Martin G. Selbrede, "First Major Book about R. J. Rushdoony," available at Chalcedon.edu; see also the review in *First Things*, April 2015, for a treatment by a mainstream but conservative Calvinist).

From the point of view of the classical liberal, the most interesting feature of McVicar's book is his account of the involvement of Rushdoony with the final years of the Volker Fund. (McVicar also has a separate and most interesting piece on the Volker Fund, "Aggressive Philanthropy: Progressivism, Conservatism, and the William Volker Charities Fund," published in the *Missouri Historical Review* and available at McVicar's Florida State University faculty page.) Putting McVicar's account together with other sources, the story seems to be this: Ivan Bierly, who had been colleague of Baldy Harper's at Cornell and who had moved with him to FEE, ended up working for the Volker Fund. Bierly was a Calvinist, and he became enamoured with Rushdoony's work.

The Volker Fund had been committed to a policy of anonymity in its giving but found that this started to clash with the attention that its activities were attracting. It sought to resolve this by setting up subsidiary organizations either within or at arm's length from the Fund. (This is how the Institute for Humane Studies got started.) One of these organizations was a Centre for American Studies, run by Bierly. Luhnnow seems to have become

somewhat unstable, and to have come to the conclusion—egged on, it seems, by Bierly—that 'atheists' were trying to take over the Volker Fund. At that point, Luhnnow announced that he had promised, to Volker, that the Fund would be wound up at a specific period, which he proceeded to do (so that Volker Fund employees were given notice, and IHS, which was expecting to receive money from the Volker Fund, was cut adrift with only seed funding).

In one memorandum, however, Luhnnow announced that it would be Bierly's organization (which had explicit religious concerns) which would continue the Volker Fund's work. Bierly had recruited Rushdoony to work for him, but it seems that Rushdoony and some associates of his tried to push a strong line in intellectual Calvinism onto all the staff—with the result that Rushdoony was sacked, albeit with funding to continue some writing. Bierly had also recruited a 'revisionist' historian (this had been a Volker Fund interest). But the man turned out to be uncomfortably sympathetic to Nazi Germany. Bierly and Luhnnow had hoped that they would be able to get some association with the Hoover Institute at Stanford, but with autonomy.

This Hoover were not willing to grant, and Luhnnow seems to have given up and to have donated the bulk of the Volker money to hospitals. A certain amount remained, and after Luhnnow's death, some scholars previously associated with the Fund were approached by James Doenges (who had been on IHS's original board) to see if they had projects which might be suitable for funding. But Doenges died before the post-Luhnnow Volker Fund board meeting took place, and the chair was not interested: the residue of the money seems to have been given to the Hoover Institution.

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