

JULIE J. INGERSOLL

BUILDING GOD'S KINGDOM

INSIDE THE WORLD OF
CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTION

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*Inside the World of Christian
Reconstruction*



JULIE J. INGERSOLL

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Justin L. Ingersoll, Jr.

*Dad and I would set out just before sunrise
in a rented rowboat. As the morning fog lifted
it would reveal the mirrored surface of the silent lake;
the only sound, the oars rhythmically slapping the still water.
We'd fish in silence, barely a word said between us.
Thanks, Dad.*

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Preface

THIS PROJECT BRINGS together ethnographic fieldwork with historically informed close reading of the original work of several Christian Reconstructionists. I have worked to present religion as it plays out in the world (rather than presenting only the beliefs of elites) and to present it in ways that show clearly the complexity, variety, and divisions within fundamentalism and evangelicalism. I am committed to the academic study of religion; I believe we need scholars who strive to describe and explain religion apart from engaging in polemics.¹ To that end I see myself standing outside the groups I study, as a translator explaining how they see the world. I am under no illusion that I do so in a purely objective manner, but I do strive for neutral, accurate descriptions and explanations in terms of the variety of theories in my discipline. In showing how the Reconstructionists' world makes sense, to them, in terms of their own framework, it should be clear I am not advocating their views or their framework. I try to show the internal coherence as it appears to them. Ironically, while some will read this work as a defense of the people I am studying, Reconstructionists would say that my presuppositions are humanist, naturalist, and materialist (and they would call me liberal). They would deny that one can study religion without "doing" theology, and while this is a criticism I understand, it is not one I embrace.

Religious studies scholars often explain our discipline as an attempt to make *the strange familiar and the familiar strange*, and this is exactly what I seek to do. In fact, I think that this is the most important skill that religious studies scholars bring to scholarly discourse—and maybe to public discourse: the ability to comprehend someone else's perspective as it makes sense to them, to then see our own taken-for-granted-assumptions as they look to people who do not share them, and finally to reframe that effort in ways that help us better understand how "religion" functions in our world.

This book is the culmination of nearly thirty years of research, much of it informal, and I have published earlier versions of some sections along the way.² My interest in this topic began when I was an undergraduate political science major at Rutgers College in the early 1980s, when I first encountered Christian Reconstruction. During those years, and those immediately following, I worked in political campaigns and in a number of Washington-based groups as a volunteer, an intern, a writer, and a researcher. Those groups included the National Conservative Political Action Committee, the Free Congress Foundation, and the American Life Lobby. I attended the campaign schools conducted by the National Conservative Foundation, the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, and the College Republican National Committee Fieldman School. In 1983 I married a member of one of the Reconstructionist families about whom I write and met many of the others whose work I explore here. We were divorced in the early 1990s, but since those days I have carried with me a collection of books that have been invaluable to this project. One brother-in-law owned Thoburn Press and Fairfax Christian Bookstore; another worked for the Moral Majority. My father-in-law was a Westminster Seminary graduate who pastored an Orthodox Presbyterian Church congregation and with my mother-in-law founded and owned one of the original Reconstructionist Christian schools. I also cofounded a privately owned Christian school.

My place in that world was always uneasy. My politics were more libertarian than conservative, though those two perspectives seemed closer together to me then than they do now. My libertarianism was formed in the context of a small, generationally connected city in southern Maine, shaped by a puritan ethos in which we are all obligated to care for one another (the “city on a hill” as invoked by John Winthrop rather than the one invoked by Ronald Reagan); individualism tempered by communitarianism if you will. I now see serious problems with how contemporary libertarianism fails to recognize the degree to which we are interdependent.³

Moreover, I think I was born a feminist.⁴ This was always a source of tension during my years in the Reconstructionist world. I remained an advocate for the Equal Rights Amendment and embraced what we called biblical feminism, arguing for women’s equality in the home and in the church. I kept my name when I was married (something my husband supported but no one else did) and constantly chafed under the gender-based limitations placed on me. I was also a pro-life activist. I worked with

a number of right-to-life groups, including Operation Rescue, with which I was arrested a handful of times, and Feminists for Life, where I served for a time as the California chapter president. I was aware of the antifeminist agenda of many right-to-lifers, but I was convinced that my feminist convictions and my opposition to abortion were not mutually exclusive, and there were many more like me. In the years since that time, the pro-life movement has shifted toward the larger agenda that I now see as irreconcilably opposed to women's rights. In the 1980s only a part of the pro-life movement, for example, had any misgivings about the use of contraception. Most understood that widely available contraception prevents unwanted pregnancies and abortion. Even more clear to me now, if pro-lifers really believe life begins at conception, preventing conception also prevents untold numbers of deaths by spontaneous abortion. Certainly Catholics opposed contraception in those days, but very few Protestant pro-lifers did. While conservative Christian families often had many children, there were no churches where this was the norm and the expectation. Quiverfull was not yet a movement, though in hindsight I can see that the seeds of it were there. In fact, in the 1980s, biblical feminism, or evangelical feminism, was in the ascendancy. Now, some thirty years later, while much of the culture has embraced women's equality and even LGBT rights, these corners of the conservative Christian subculture seem more patriarchal than ever. And while the pro-life movement has changed, I've changed a lot since then too. It was the certainty about truth this world promised that once appealed to me; but everything seemed more black and white then, in a way that nothing does anymore.

It has taken me so long to write this book because I needed the distance from that time. I am now trained as a scholar of religion. I completed my master's degree in history and religious studies at George Washington University, where I wrote my thesis on Christian schools, homeschooling, and conservative Christian efforts to change public schools.⁵ I received my PhD in religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where I wrote a dissertation on conflict over women's roles in conservative Protestantism, later published as *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles*. My interest is understanding the social-cultural dimensions of religion in general, and in the contours and details of the religious right in American politics in particular. But this book is not a memoir, nor is it an exposé; I share these autobiographical details here only because they inform my work. When I say that Rushdoony influenced Jerry Falwell, for example, that observation

begins with (though, of course, does not rest on) the fact that I knew Reconstructionists on his staff and saw Rushdoony's books in his office all those years ago. I leave it to readers to decide whether my former ties strengthen or weaken my work.

I can envision a number of criticisms that will be made of this book. Reconstructionists will think that, on the basis of my presuppositions, I cannot comprehend their view of the world. While I no longer share their presuppositions or their view of the world, I think they underestimate the possibility of "trying on" someone's presuppositions to see how the world might make sense from a different worldview. There will be evangelicals who are also unhappy, some, because I have treated Reconstructionists as "Christians," since they will think they miss the "real" message of Jesus. To them I take refuge in the academic study of religion in which we are (thankfully) not charged with, and are methodologically incapable of, discerning who is the "real" Christian (or Jew or Muslim or Buddhist) or whether there even is such a thing. Those normative debates belong among members of religious groups, not between religious groups and religious studies scholars. Other evangelicals will argue that no one really follows these folks and that they are such a fringe group that most people haven't even heard of them. I'm not convinced by this argument, because I think we are rarely aware of our intellectual ancestors. How many of those same Christians are aware of Plato's influence on their belief system? How about Avicenna's? Lack of awareness of an influence does not prove that it is not there. Still other evangelicals will have an interest in arguing for the irrelevance of Rushdoony and the Reconstructionists because they want to distance themselves from them.

Some progressives and activists will likely think that I have been too easy on Reconstructionists. As I remind readers throughout the book, it is not my goal to argue for or against Reconstructionism. I invite readers to use the knowledge they gain from this book to do their own normative work. Other readers will be dissatisfied with the lack of quantitative data on Reconstructionists' influence in terms of book sales or website hits. Unfortunately, quantitative data seem, by design, impossible to obtain; these folks are notoriously secretive. In some cases the groups I have studied are registered as nonprofits, making some data available through IRS records. I include that where I am able, but similar data on privately owned companies are rare. Reconstructionists publish their own books, sell them through "bookstores" that are run by people in their sympathetic networks, and maintain their own websites. They do not share such data

and, indeed, kicked me out of a conference just for being there. Even if they did share book sales the value of self-reported data is suspect. I engaged several colleagues who specialize in either quantitative research or investigative journalism, to no avail, in an effort to develop strategies for more quantification. That leaves the strategy of trying to trace the influence in more subtle, nuanced, and admittedly interpretive ways. I propose that in the absence of substantial hard data, softer ethnographic evidence is even more valuable than it would otherwise be.

Finally, others will say that—as commenters have on my essays at *Religion Dispatches*—Reconstructionists are just “crazies,” and it’s a waste of time to try to understand them. To these folks (and others) I say that to see the influence, you have to know the Reconstructionists well enough to hear the echoes of their work. If all you know is that Rushdoony advocated the death penalty for gays and incorrigible teens (he did, and we’ll get to that) you won’t recognize the influence when you hear it. Please keep reading and give me a chance to change your mind.

Terminology

Studies of conservative Protestantism, evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and the religious right are plagued with difficulties related to language and terminology. One key problem stems from a tendency to try to define a movement based on some central characteristics without recognizing that boundaries and identifications shift over time. Is fundamentalism, essentially, as some have argued, separatist? It was at one time, but these days that is less clear. Are there central beliefs that can help identify fundamentalism, like premillennialism, or, more recently, opposition to women’s ordination? Perhaps, but conservative Christians have disagreed over these issues too. What about biblical literalism? As we shall see, the claim to read the Bible literally is much more a rhetorical device used by conservative Protestants to legitimate their interpretation than it is an adequate description of how they use the Bible.

I use the terms “religious right” and “New Christian Right” interchangeably to refer to the politically conservative bloc of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians whose influence ebbs and flows in American culture and politics, around issues tied to what they see as family values, since at least the middle of the twentieth century. This movement replaced an older one that historian Leo Ribuffo called the Old Christian Right.⁶ Randall Balmer has critiqued the Old Christian Right label, “Try as I might as

a historian, I've never been able to determine what that [the Old Christian Right] was—unless it was the crusty anti-Communism of people like Carl McIntire and Billy James Hargis in the 1940s and 1950s or the stubborn segregationism of the Jim Crow era. Either attribution, I think, demeans the faith.”⁷⁷ But Balmer speaks here more as a member of the faithful looking for authenticity than as an historian. It may or may not “demean the faith,” but that is not an argument against its use. The Old Christian Right, indeed, refers to exactly those leaders and their followers’ concerns over those issues. There is also technical theological language that must be used to explain the subtle similarities and differences among the groups of people I discuss. Throughout I strive to write in a manner that is clear and accessible, and I define technical terms when I use them. But the fact remains that when I explain how Reconstructionists’ technically framed, theological views were popularized, I will need to use technical language.

Finally, there are issues relevant to my effort to portray Reconstructionists in a manner that is an honest representation of their views. The first has to do with gender-inclusive language. I find Reconstructionists’ reliance on masculine pronouns jarring and even offensive. But I have not taken it upon myself to “correct” it when summarizing or quoting them. You should discern two voices on this point. In describing and analyzing I use my own language, which is gender inclusive. When I am presenting what they say, I use the terms “he,” “man,” and “men” as they do. Reconstructionists would often (not always) insist that those terms include women. When citing the creedal formulation “Who for us men and our salvation” the masculine is assumed to be generic. The difficulty is that, in Reconstructionist readings of the Bible, the masculine form often does *not* include women: “Elders in the church should be men of character, the husband of one wife” is understood to explicitly preclude women from leadership. More complex, for example, is “man’s call to dominion.” In some cases men and women are understood as called by God to exercise dominion. But in others dominion is primarily the calling of men, and the exercise of dominion by women is understood as limited to assisting men in their dominion. Ultimately readers must decide when to interpret them as intending masculine forms to be inclusive and when to not do so. There are other language-usage issues as well. I use the term “Hebrew Bible” to refer to the scriptures that Reconstructionists and other Christians call the Old Testament. Nonetheless, in describing their work and especially in quoting them I use the terminology they use. Rushdoony continued to use the archaic “Negro” as a term for African Americans

throughout his life. As with gender-inclusive language, I replicate his language in quoted material, despite my discomfort with it. A final point is the manner in which I present quoted material from their work, both in terms of editing and emphasis. Because the topic of Christian Reconstructionism is fraught with division and disagreement (from scholars who disagree over their relevance, to activists who disagree over what they teach, to Reconstructionists themselves who disagree amongst themselves and insist that no one “gets them right”), I make use, in the chapters that follow, of material directly quoted from their work. I have occasionally edited the quoted material for length but have been careful to preserve the original meaning. Such edits are indicated by ellipses. Finally, Reconstructionists often use bold and italics for emphasis, and I have faithfully reproduced that here. Unless otherwise indicated, italics and boldface in quoted material were in the original texts. Many of the sources from which these quotes come are now available online for free, and I encourage readers to check for themselves to decide if I have accurately reproduced them.⁸

Acknowledgments

I WELCOME THE opportunity to say thank you to all the people who have helped bring this project to publication and am, at the same time, intimidated by the knowledge that I will never be able to do so adequately. While I could not have completed this book without the help of many, and it is much stronger thanks to the generosity of those noted below, the shortcomings, of course, remain mine.

To the people who talked with me and shared the details of their lives and their understanding of the issues about which I write, I am grateful. I encountered many such people at conferences and events and even more contacted me when they learned of my work on Rushdoony and the Christian Reconstructionists. There are too many to name but most importantly Mark and his family come to mind. Other people inside this world and outside of it have shared books and ideas over many years. Together they represent the core of this project and without them there would be no book.

My work on this project has been generously supported by the University of North Florida in the form of numerous summer research grants and a 2009 sabbatical grant. The Florida Blue Center for Ethics at the University of North Florida funded the research and writing of chapter 6 with a summer grant in 2009. Parts of chapter 7 were written in the context of a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar “Religious Diversity and the Common Good” directed by Alan Wolfe, also in 2009. Alan and the other seminar participants helped me hone the argument and connect the project to larger conversations about the role of religion in society. I have presented on this work in a variety of other academic venues, including a conference sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation as well as the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR). Those sessions facilitated conversations with colleagues that have been

extraordinarily fun and have helped me sharpen my arguments and be clearer about their limits.

I have been the beneficiary of invaluable support and mentoring throughout my academic career but most especially from my teachers and colleagues in the Religious Studies department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I enjoyed many late-night conversations on the topics in this book with Walter Capps when he and Lois allowed me the use of their guest room during the year I commuted from Santa Monica to Santa Barbara. Of course Wade Clark Roof remains a most important friend and mentor. But no one at UCSB took more interest in this project than Mark Juergensmeyer. We first began discussing Christian Reconstruction when he was working on *Terror in the Mind of God* and I was finishing my dissertation. He told me then, and every time I saw him after graduating, that I needed to write this book, and he supported and encouraged me all along the way. My long-time friend from those Santa Barbara days, Diana Butler Bass (thanks, Clark, for introducing us), has also been relentless in insisting that I bring this project to fruition.

Some of the framing and some of the content of the chapters that follow have previously appeared in print in “Religiously Motivated Violence in the Abortion Debate” in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Margot S. Kitts and Michael Jerryson (Oxford University Press, 2013); “Rank-and-File Evangelicals and the Activist Elite: Views of Pluralist Democracy,” in *The Conservative Christian Movement and American Democracy*, edited by Steven Brint and Jean Reith Schroedel (Russell Sage Foundation, 2009); and “Religion and Politics: The Impact of the Religious Right,” in *Faith in America*, edited by Charles Lippy (Praeger Press, 2006). In each case the anonymous reviewers and the editors of the respective volumes made valuable suggestions prompting revision and rethinking. In recent years I have greatly enjoyed being part of a public conversation about religion, American politics, and the culture wars. Many of the opportunities to do this have roots in my work at *Religion Dispatches*, where I have also published earlier versions of some of what follows. I am grateful to Sarah Posner, Evan Derkacz, Lisa Webster, and Gary Laderman for their work on the magazine and for the terrific work they have done as editors and as teachers as I have endeavored to learn to write for a non-academic audience.

Speaking of the value of skilled (and even merciless) editors, I am also grateful to Theo Calderera at Oxford University Press and the anonymous reviewers he solicited for comments on my manuscript. The reviewers

helped me address important challenges and Theo's no-holds-barred critiques made me make changes that greatly improved the finished product. His expertise and professionalism made it easy to trust him; the book is better for it.

Over the years I have had the great fortune of challenging conversations with colleagues whom I am lucky to also be able to call friends. These include Diana Butler Bass, Randy Balmer, Anthea Butler, Shawn Landres, Russell McCutcheon, Colleen McDannell, Kathryn Joyce, Sarah Posner, and Winni Sullivan. Other generous colleagues whom I know not as well have, nonetheless, read all or parts of this manuscript and offered very helpful criticisms and suggestions. These include Cythina Burack and Michael McVicar.

Finally, I thank my dad (to whom this book is dedicated) and my mom, for always giving me room to explore, most recently literal "room" as I have worked on this book, in my writing space in their home in Maine.

Building God's Kingdom

Introduction

THE LATE HOWARD Phillips, one of the political operatives credited with building the religious right, called Rousas John Rushdoony the “most influential man of the 21st century,” and someone who caused “historic changes in the thinking of countless leaders.”¹ Yet that influence was largely hidden. When Rushdoony passed away in February of 2001, his son-in-law, Gary North, reflected on this:

Rushdoony’s writings are the source of many of the core ideas of the New Christian Right, a voting bloc whose unforeseen arrival in American politics in 1980 caught the media by surprise . . . *Newsweek* (Feb. 2, 1981) accurately but very briefly identified Rushdoony’s Chalcedon Foundation as the think tank of the Religious Right. But the mainstream media did not take the hint. They never did figure out where these ideas were coming from . . . Rushdoony in 1981 was almost unknown outside of the leadership of New Right/New Christian Right circles. So he remained at his death.²

The religious right was one of the defining forces of late-twentieth-century American politics, and Rushdoony was one of its intellectual godfathers—but he is often treated like a crazy uncle. He started a movement—Reconstructionism, which sought to remake the whole of society to conform to his reading of the Bible—that didn’t attract much support, but the movement’s ideas became a driving force in American politics. Reconstructionists found a home in Washington-based political organizations, such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Voice, that were prominent in the early 1980s. Reconstructionist books could be found in the offices of religious right organizations and Reconstructionists who worked on Capitol Hill.³

But while the movement’s key theological positions echo throughout the fundamentalist worldview, the religious right never followed through

on the implications of those ideas. Reconstructionists argue that American Christianity (including the religious right) is in thrall to individualism, the notion of freedom of conscience (Reconstructionists reject the autonomy of human reason), and a heretical discontinuity between the New Testament and the Old. In Reconstructionist terms, the religious right is philosophically schizophrenic, so its efforts to return America to its Christian moorings are doomed. The piecemeal character of the adoption of Christian Reconstruction is the reason, according to the Reconstructionists who refer to it as a lack of “epistemological self-consciousness,” that the religious right has not, as yet, been able to transform society.⁴ Reconstructionism hasn’t failed; it’s never been tried.

When I spoke with Howard Phillips during the summer of 2007, as part of my research for this book, he stood by the earlier statement, “the whole Christian conservative political movement had its genesis in Rush.”⁵ (Rush is the name many of Rushdoony’s followers called him.) He then elaborated his point, telling the story of how the two met and illustrating Rushdoony’s appeal to those who sought to put the Bible at the center of their politics:

I first met him in the mid-1970s when I was handed a tract he’d written on socialized medicine; the best argument I’d ever seen against it, and it was all based in the Bible. Rush became a close friend and personal mentor; I devoured his books. Together we testified in cases of the “IRS assault” on Christian schools. Rush was “early and often” on all the big issues, and he was a pioneer in the homeschool movement.

Phillips described how he had played tapes of Rushdoony’s lectures in his car all the time—his son Doug, he said, was practically raised on Rushdoony’s Christian Reconstruction. Doug Phillips went on to build a homeschool ministry called Vision Forum, grounded in the principles of Christian Reconstruction. Until its collapse in 2014 it aimed to facilitate the development of a Christian worldview in families, in what is now known as the biblical patriarchy movement.⁶ No doubt the elder Phillips overestimated the influence of Rushdoony. But another of the early religious right leaders, Robert Billings, the Moral Majority’s first executive director, also credits Rushdoony with an important role in the movement’s creation.⁷

In fact, the contemporary religious right is a complex movement, weaving together a variety of smaller movements that date as far back in

American history as one cares to look. Nonetheless, it is possible to trace the intellectual, theological, and strategic lineage of attempts to build a thoroughly Reconstructed culture rooted in biblical law through three generations—or four, if you count the children being shaped by the Christian homeschool movement and biblical patriarchy movement.

As we shall see, well into the twenty-first century, the arguments made by conservative Christians about biblical government that focus on the character and structure of families, free-market economics, the legal status of religion, the critique of public education, care for the poor, the right to own guns, the funding of health care, and more have their roots in the work of R. J. Rushdoony.

By the 1950s the steady decline of conservative Protestantism seemed well established; observers had written the obituary for American fundamentalism and ignored any counter-evidence as insignificant vestiges of the past—or as it was often put, “the last gasps of a dying movement.” Following the 1980 elections, scholars scrambled to make sense of the seemingly meteoric rise of the religious right. A flurry of studies appeared, examining its organizational structure and worldview, evaluating its real impact and size, and exploring its similarities and dissimilarities with other fundamentalist movements around the world.⁸

A dominant narrative formed, which went something like this: with the public ridicule in the wake of the Scopes Monkey Trial, fundamentalists withdrew from public life and built their own parallel subculture including Bible colleges, publishing houses, and radio networks. They focused internally on maintaining fundamentalism and interacted with the larger culture only to evangelize and bring others into the fold. Fundamentalists became increasingly concerned about social and political changes in the 1960s and 1970s when, according to historian Randall Balmer, “a Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher, Jimmy Carter, began to lure Evangelicals out of their apolitical torpor.”⁹ But the engagement with Jimmy Carter and the Democrats was something of a false start. Conservative Christians came to see Carter as a poor representative of their interests, and then, in Balmer’s words, “rapturous leaders of the religious right crawled into bed with the Republican Party in 1980 and heralded Reagan’s election as a harbinger of the Second Coming.”¹⁰ Scholars gradually came to the conclusion that what was generically called “the moral majority” (referring to the movement rather than the specific organization) was first and foremost not as large as it had seemed. Clearly, creating the perception of big numbers was of benefit to the religious

right leaders. And since sensationalism sells newspapers, the media accepted and perpetuated the perception that a major political realignment was taking place. Those same scholars observed that, instead of a populist groundswell, the religious right in the 1980s was primarily a coalition of Washington-based political action committees (PACs) and lobbying groups that had built a paper giant with sophisticated direct-mail techniques.

With few exceptions these early studies focused on one of three primary questions: What do these Washington-based groups look like, and how did they come into existence? How does the movement play into the “culture wars”? And what impact does the vitality of the religious right have on the widely held notion that the world was growing more secular by the day? These studies typically assume that the movement originated with those Washington-based political groups and begin their narratives with the months leading up to the 1980 elections. In this version of history, the religious right is described as “bursting” onto the American political scene, with little or no warning, in 1980.

In fact, early scholarly versions of the beginnings of the religious right are nearly identical to the one put forth by the movement itself. Richard Viguerie is a conservative political operative and one of the pioneers of direct-mail outreach to voters and donors. His self-published book *The New Right: We're Ready to Lead* (1980) spells out how he and several other conservative leaders (including Paul Weyrich and Howard Phillips) created several special interest groups to raise money and mobilize religious conservatives. According to Viguerie, widespread dissatisfaction in America's heartland created an opportunity on which he and others capitalized. Religious conservatives around the country were unhappy over the decline of religious influence in the public sphere as a result of broadening interpretations of the First Amendment's establishment clause. They were enraged over the increasing availability of legal abortion, disturbed by the gender and sexual revolutions and the rise of communism, and fearful of what they saw as the increasing willingness of the government to intrude in their churches and private Christian schools. Some scholars cite Viguerie's interpretation of the origins of the Christian Right and others merely repeat it as the conventional wisdom.

More recently scholars have sought to document earlier roots of politically engaged conservative Protestantism, including several pushing the origins back to the 1950s.¹¹ Darren Dochuk traces the Depression-era migration of Southern “plainfolk” to California, where their Southern religion

was transformed, giving rise to a religious-political culture in California that shaped Nixon's infamous "Southern strategy" and elected Ronald Reagan before becoming the crucible in which the religious right developed. Donald Critchlow connects the Old Christian Right's anticommunism with the New Christian Right's emphasis on family and morality by tracing the rise of Phyllis Schlafly as an anticommunist activist and then later as the architect of the Stop ERA campaign. Daniel K. Williams pushes the origins of politically engaged conservative Protestantism back even further to the early twentieth century. He argues that conservative Christians did not retreat from political life in the mid-twentieth century to return in 1980. According to Williams, their involvement remained consistent since the early part of the century; what changed in 1980 was not their political involvement, but their consistent commitment to the Republican Party.¹²

Debates about the origins of politically mobilized conservative Protestantism notwithstanding, each time the modern religious right has seemed to be in decline, it has reemerged in a new form. While subsequent cycles seem to come at increasingly rapid intervals, this movement continues to be a force in American culture and politics—most recently, as we shall see, as one component of the Tea Party movement.¹³

In this book I address one aspect of the story shaping contemporary conservative Christian subculture and the rise of the religious right: the impact of a small group of fundamentalists known as Christian Reconstructionists. While Reconstructionists have influenced the rise of politically mobilized conservative Protestantism, that is but one aspect of their broader effort to transform the larger culture to bring it in line with what they see as the requirements of biblical law. As early as the 1960s, Rushdoony and other Reconstructionists framed what they termed a "biblical worldview." They sought to spread that worldview through what they call the exercise of dominion, after the mandate given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the book of Genesis, God told Adam and Eve that they should go forth from the garden and have dominion over all of creation. Dominion theology has become the most recognizable and widely controversial component of Christian Reconstruction. The chapters that follow seek to explore the Reconstructionists' understanding of this biblical concept and trace its dissemination throughout the larger conservative Christian world.

Well before the establishment of the Washington-based political organizations designed to harness the growing dissatisfaction among conservative Christians, Reconstructionists were laying an intellectual foundation that

would shape the twenty-first-century conservative Christian subculture, developing what would become the religious right's critique of the American social order, and plotting strategies to bring about change. They wrote on these topics extensively and made their writings widely available, actively promoting what they called "epistemological self-consciousness" and a blueprint for transforming society to align with their biblical worldview. Reconstructionist ideas made their way into evangelical and fundamentalist churches through study guides and Christian school (and later home-school) curricula, giving rise to an integrated worldview and a distinct subculture. In fact, their early work was foundational to the philosophical and theological critiques of public education and the argument for a distinctly Christian education that they believe flows from biblical requirements. Reconstructionist work influenced the mid- to late-twentieth-century leaders of the religious right who found, in that distinct subculture, fertile ground for their organizing efforts in the 1970s and 1980s. That influence continues, although often until recently unacknowledged and sometimes denied.¹⁴

There is now a growing body of work on the religious right that acknowledges the importance of Christian Reconstruction, though often in passing.¹⁵ These works often lack a thorough focus on the movement or its significance, or are alarmist in tone, warning of an impending theocratic takeover.¹⁶ The alarmists are dismissed by scholars who point to the very small numbers of people who claim the label Reconstructionist, the absence of significant self-described Reconstructionist groups, and the assertion that most conservative Christians have never heard of them. I contend that both the alarmists and their critics misunderstand the influence of the Reconstructionists. While it is true that many of the early thinkers have passed away or moved on, and that there are few clearly identifiable leaders who embrace organizations explicitly identifying with Christian Reconstruction, they *are* influential. But their influence is subtle, implicit, and hidden. It is neither consistent across, nor acknowledged by, the movement we know as conservative Protestantism, which is itself complex and composed of many smaller movements.¹⁷ But the popular translation of Reconstructionist ideas to the broader conservative Protestant subculture is so consistent, often even including the obscure terminology and phrasing used by the Reconstructionists, and the evidence of ties between the Reconstructionists and the early leaders of the religious right are common enough, that the influence is undeniable and that a more thorough treatment of Christian Reconstruction is warranted.¹⁸ I am not saying that Reconstructionists birthed the

religious right, nor am I denying that there were other influences—such as Francis Schaeffer or the anticommunist movement—that were equally if not more important.¹⁹ Finally, to argue that Rushdoony and his followers have had a role in shaping contemporary conservative Protestantism is not to claim that contemporary Protestants will ultimately embrace the theocratic extremes of Christian Reconstruction. I make a more modest claim: that Reconstructionists have been an important influence that has been inadequately studied.

Religion and Politics in America

Many people believe that the religious right is violating a longstanding tradition of separation between church and state when, in fact, there are few things more “American” than political activism rooted in religious conviction. The notion that religion and politics have ever been separate in America is something of an illusion put forth by liberal Protestants who saw their brand of Protestantism as neutral. This is evident in the fact that Protestant prayer and Bible reading were not successfully challenged in the public schools, despite Catholic claims that they inculcated Protestantism, until the 1960s. When the Puritans came to the Americas it was not to establish freedom of religion but rather to embark on a holy experiment: to build a model of the Kingdom of God on earth. The American Revolution followed on the heels of what has been called the First Great Awakening, and the case can be made that the evangelists, traveling the disparate colonies and giving rise to a national consciousness, made the Revolution possible. Likewise, the Second Great Awakening immediately preceded the Civil War, with both sides drawing on revivalist religion and contributing to regional divisions that caused major religious bodies to split over slavery.

By the end of the nineteenth century, American domestic politics was dominated by a series of social reform movements that all had their roots in revivalist evangelicalism: women’s suffrage, Prohibition, and the labor movement. Internationally, at this same time, a desire to “share the Gospel” took missionaries around the world. They brought American democracy and capitalism with them, legitimizing expansionism and giving rise to both a peace movement and, ultimately, anticommunism. In the early twentieth century, revivalist religion split into two camps we now call fundamentalist and modernist and provoked a political fight over evolution. By the middle of the twentieth century, religious groups

were on both sides of the debate over the Vietnam War, with some advocating peace and others concerned that communism threatened faith and freedom. The civil rights movement, the fight against nuclear power and nuclear weapons, the environmentalist movement, and even the feminist movement all had roots in religion. Religiously motivated political activism is not limited to one side of the political spectrum.

In fact, in some cases, religiously motivated people defy our contemporary model dividing the Left from the Right: the movements for women's suffrage and Prohibition, for example, were intimately tied together to the point of sharing leaders. There is a core group of antiabortion activists who are also peace activists and center their notion of the Gospel and their political goals on meeting the needs of the poor.

Yet, for nearly fifty years American politics has been dominated by the religious right and its concerns that center, overwhelmingly, on issues of gender and family: specifically the roles of women (including abortion), gay and lesbian rights, and the education of children. The Christian Reconstructionists were one important force in the development of the character of that political movement, but Reconstructionists insist that their movement is not primarily political. Indeed, to suggest that they have had political influence is not to say that political influence is their primary goal. As we shall see, they define "politics" as having to do with the regulation of power within civil government, and, in that sense, political goals are but one small part of their vision for a Reconstructed society. Since the 1960s conservative Christians have slowly and steadily built an institutionally integrated, mutually reinforcing, and self-sustaining subculture that exists alongside the world in which most of us live. The religious right may be one of the most visible manifestations of that subculture, but it is not the full expression, nor the most influential aspect, of it. This subculture is often invisible, but it is so pervasive that there are now adult Americans who were raised in Christian homeschooling families, who believe that America is a Christian nation; that there is no separation of church and state implied in the Constitution; that authoritarian patriarchy is the God-ordained structure for families; that the functions of civil government are limited to providing for national defense and punishing crimes outlined in the Bible; that the Bible speaks to every aspect of life; and that we are all obligated to live under the law contained therein, law that is anchored in the literal six-day creation described in Genesis. Furthermore, this integrated worldview includes an ideological structure

for identifying, explaining, and then dismissing any alternative ways of seeing things.

There are two key aspects of Christian Reconstruction expressed theologically as presuppositionalism and postmillennialism, culturally as theonomy and dominion, and cast in accessible popular terms as the critique of secular humanism and the effort to restore America as a Christian nation. These ideas will be explored in the chapters that follow, but, briefly, presuppositionalists hold that all knowledge is derived from presuppositions; reasoning always begins with premises that cannot be proven. One cannot, for example, prove that God exists. But you cannot prove that God does not exist either. Christianity and atheism each requires a “leap of faith,” as it were. Reconstructionists operate from the presupposition that God exists and that the Bible is true; everything must be seen through that lens. They acknowledge this presupposition, but they contend that the alternative view is equally presuppositionally dependent. The corollary to presuppositionalism is “theonomy” (meaning God’s law), which asserts that there can be no neutral, objective way to determine ethics and law, and that God’s law, as revealed in the Bible, is inescapable. Humans must either choose to live under God’s law or reject it and substitute some humanistic value system; the only alternatives are an objective, absolute standard (the Bible) or abject moral relativism resulting in chaos. For Rushdoony the fundamental issue is one of authority, thus the title of his early work: *By What Standard?*²⁰

The second key point in Christian Reconstructionism is postmillennial eschatology. Briefly, Reconstructionists hold that Satan was defeated by Christ’s resurrection and that we are currently living in the millennial reign of the Kingdom of God. They have a trifold understanding of individual salvation. Christians are saved instantaneously at the point of conversion, they increasingly experience the fruits of that salvation as they work through it in their daily lives, and they are finally and completely sanctified at the culmination of history, when Christ returns. Postmillennialist Reconstructionists see a similar process at work in creation, which was redeemed with the resurrection. The Kingdom of God, they believe, becomes increasingly apparent as history progresses (and as Christians acknowledge God’s authority and labor to build it) and will be perfectly established at Christ’s second coming (thus, his coming is postmillennial). The task of furthering the Kingdom falls to the epistemologically self-conscious Christians as they exercise dominion and seek to bring all aspects of life under the authority of biblical law.