

Trump the savior-king

The president, just as the Christian Reconstructionists intended, sits at the top of a violent system as the mouthpiece of a silent, abusive God.

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty and Gage Skidmore)

Pete Hegseth may be the first Secretary of Defense whose tattoos have made [headlines](#). In May 2020, he posted a photo on Instagram featuring the Latin phrase inked onto his right bicep: *Deus Vult*, meaning, “God wills it.”

“Deus Vult” was the medieval Christian crusaders’ battle cry. During the Crusades, Christians killed those who refused to convert, especially their Muslim Ottoman enemies, as they fought to conquer Jerusalem. White supremacists shouted [the phrase](#) as they marched on Charlottesville in 2017, and [one January 6th rioter](#) waved a white flag emblazoned with a red Jerusalem cross and the words “Deus Vult” as he approached the Capitol building. Seeing the phrase on the arm of the Secretary of Defense disturbed [medieval scholars](#), who understood it as “a call to religious violence.” They saw it as clear evidence that Hegseth is “a Crusader fanboy.”

Of course, Hegseth denies the link to any negative connotations his political rivals can dream up. But in his 2020 MAGA tome, *American Crusade*, he frequently references the medieval Crusades, and he urges the religious right to engage in a new “holy war.” He even nicknames Donald Trump “our Crusader in chief” and hints at his willingness to engage in future violence: “Our American Crusade is not about literal swords, and our fight is not with guns. Yet.” Hegseth claims that these statements are metaphors.

But in these words of holy war and cultural dominion, I hear a familiar drumbeat. I was born in 1987, at the end of the Moral Majority’s rise. I grew up within an evangelical Christian culture intent on infiltrating American culture at large, making its own children into “culture warriors.” I was raised to be suspicious of the motives of my secular neighbor.

Many in my generation of evangelicals experienced “culture warrior” training within Christian schools like the one I attended, often to even more extreme degrees. While my classmates and I saluted the Christian flag and wore kilted skirts that covered our kneecaps, I could still run for class president in the ninth grade (and win). As [Logan M. Davis has pointed out](#), the church Hegseth attends in Nashville, the books he’s reading, and even [the educational model](#) he’s picked for his kids mirror the theologies of extremist reformed evangelical leaders like Doug Wilson of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho, who has famously suggested that chattel slavery mutually endeared the races to each other and that women should neither be allowed to vote nor to serve in the military. Wilson is one of many who claim the label of Christian Reconstructionist.

In fact, much of the right-wing Christian culture and theology that we recognize today—the tradwives and [theo bros](#), [the New Apostolic Reformation](#), the Heritage Foundation—finds its roots in Christian Reconstructionism and the thinking of Rousas

John Rushdoony (1916-2001), founder of the Christian education movement, and his mentor, Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987), who taught at Princeton seminary until he and his fundamentalist colleagues resigned in protest at the height of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. Together, Van Til's philosophy and Rushdoony's organizing launched a movement of culture warriors before the term ever existed, and their ideas continue to shape [the theology of the Christian Right](#) to this day.

What is Christian Reconstructionism?

The tenets of the fringe movement known as Christian Reconstructionism are simple: Every inch of the galaxy belongs to the Christian God, and the followers of God are responsible for bringing about God's rule of the galaxy by any means possible.

In post-World War II America, white American evangelicalism focused its evangelistic efforts on individuals. Leaders like Billy Graham and *Christianity Today's* first editor-in-chief, Carl F. Henry, advocated for the transformation of society through individual conversion. Individual Christians would change culture within their personal spheres of influence—their “dominions”—by means of their individual daily submission to the ethics of Jesus as depicted in the New Testament. Paired with communal church accountability, gospel preaching, and mentoring, they believed that God would gradually, mystically change the hearts and actions of individuals, including the way a person voted. Theirs was a gentle dominionism.

Sometimes Christian Reconstructionism is referred to as a type of dominionism, but Rushdoony, whose family had [immigrated](#) from Armenia in 1916 to escape the systematic genocide of Christians by the Muslim Ottomans, did not care so much for this bottom-up approach. Rushdoony believed American society needed a dramatic reordering. America, according to him, was corrupt, ugly, evil “[humanistic garbage](#),” the antithesis of a moral, God-honoring society.

Rushdoony saw the reconstructionist goal as simple: Christians who believed in Christ's supremacy were compelled to “reconstruct” American society based on Old Testament ideals, turning ancient Near Eastern legal codes into policy. Rushdoony believed statism to be a “false religion” that dueled with the rule of God on Earth. The secular state was a religion against God. He [wrote](#) in his 1973 magnum opus *Institutes of Biblical Law*: “All law is religious in nature, and every non-Biblical law-

order represents an anti-Christian religion.” Unlike Graham and Henry, Rushdoony sought to impose a top-down ethic, led by Van Til’s epistemology.

Van Til believed that the human mind, with its faulty perceptions, emotions, and thoughts, could not be trusted. The only true knowledge came from God, revealed directly on the pages of the Bible. [Van Til asserted](#) that if humans relied on their own autonomous human intellect as a means of discernment, then they would commit the same rebellion as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—seeking knowledge apart from God. Therefore, to trust our own human minds and perceptions at all is, itself, a sin. The mind will lie, but God’s Word is always true. This line of thinking formed the basis of his “presuppositional apologetics,” named for his assertion that the one valid presupposition, the foundation of knowledge, is God. And God, being synonymous with the Bible, can provide the knowledge from which all other knowledge stems.

Rushdoony’s son, Mark Rushdoony, [explains](#) that within Christian Reconstructionism, “Thinking becomes a matter of kingship, power, rebellion, and, in the final analysis, warfare. Either human thought recognizes God’s sovereignty, or it does not.”

Both Rushdoony and Van Til favored a fundamentalist, Calvinistic, and authoritarian interpretation of the Bible. Michael McVicar expounds in his book, *Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*, that Van Til understood “Scripture [as] the objective yardstick by which all human thought must be measured, and when found lacking, [the mind] must be discipline....Scripture is both authoritative and *authoritarian*” [italics mine].

Both Rushdoony and Van Til saw the God of the Bible as an authoritarian monarch. Both chose to read the ancient work of literature with little to no hermeneutical gaze, applying “the Mosaic legal corpus” with a literalism that declared the entirety of Mosaic law to be “relevant and binding for modern Christians ... every jot and tittle of biblical law,” summarizes McVicar.

Reading the Bible in this way had political implications. For one, pluralism and democracy had to go. Neither fit within the scope of the Pentateuch as they interpret it. In fact, Van Til and Rushdoony believed that no common ground existed between the “faithful” and non-Christians. Without the belief in the Bible’s inerrant perfection and inspiration, Christians and non-Christians would experience a “[fundamental antagonism](#)” (borrowing the phrase of Dutch neo-Calvinist Abraham Kuyper, another

contemporary both men admired). No bridge could mend the breach. Without a shared foundation of reason—the very words of God—then Christians and non-Christians could not effectively collaborate. Non-Christians could not even be trusted to recognize what a truly “good” society looked like. Therefore, the most righteous model of government would resemble a prophetic dictatorship, with the leader in direct communication with God, mimicking the early Hebraic government during Moses’ tenure.

Paired with a theological understanding that actions on Earth can hasten the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (a theology known as postmillennialism) and a cessationist leaning—belief that the Spirit of God has fallen silent, so only the Bible can speak for God—this philosophy created a violent urgency in Van Til’s followers. While Van Til was content to write books in anonymity, Rushdoony was a man of action. He founded the movement’s think tank, the Chalcedon Foundation, with the goal of supplanting governmental education through a patriarchal Christian homeschool model and raising up an indoctrinated army that could eventually overtake the American government.

What does a Christian Reconstructionist government look like?

Rushdoony and his collaborators outlined the mechanics of a Mosaic American state over years. [Political Research Associates](#) reported that, under the guidance of Reconstructionists, the government would be compelled to perpetuate wide-ranging [violence](#), including capital punishment for the following crimes: for being gay, adulterous or promiscuous (committing “unchastity before marriage,” in Chalcedon parlance, a punishment applied only to women and not their unchaste partners); for proponents of evolution; for committing an abortion as either medical provider or the pregnant mother); for apostasy, heresy, and blasphemy (the theological crimes of denying the Reconstructionist interpretation of the Bible); for witchcraft and astrology; and for children's disobedience, which included “striking a parent” and “incorrigible juvenile delinquency” (“incorrigible” remained undefined). A disagreement over the theology of child baptism would be enough to garner a charge of heresy in some of these circles, for which a theologian could be charged with the death penalty.

The movement also toyed with a return to slavery, as outlined in Old Testament legal codes. James B. Jordan [argued](#) that enslavement could be utilized as a punishment or as a means of paying off debt. Because, as he wrote in his master’s

thesis, “Man is a creature, and as such he is the slave of his Creator.”

In short, these men intended to sit at the top, doling out violent punishments as necessary, themselves the self-appointed mouthpieces of a silent, absent, and abusive God.

Who would opt into that reality?

In his time, Van Til never saw his ideas take root. But Rushdoony, who almost single-handedly built the Christian homeschooling movement as well as the industry of Christian religious liberty litigation, became quietly influential. He lived through the reign of the Moral Majority and its cultural fall, an inevitability for which he had prepared his followers.

As Gary North (a religious liberties lawyer and Rushdoony’s son-in-law) counseled, in times of low public support and waning influence, Christian Reconstructionists must strategically “infiltrate the existing institutional order” unnoticed in order to “smooth the transition to Christian political leadership.” If they could not conquer the American government by force, then they would take it by stealth.

As early as 1994, Frederick Clarkson noticed the increasing influence of the “stealth” movement. He wrote in [Political Research Associates](#):

“[While] Christian Reconstructionism’s ultimate moment may or may not arrive, ... it has had tremendous influence as a catalyst for an historic shift in American religion and politics. ... Christian Reconstructionism is [today] largely an underground, underestimated movement of ideas, the rippling surface of which is the political movement known as the Christian Right.”

In 2022, [Keri Ladner wrote “The quiet rise of Christian dominionism”](#) for the CENTURY, pointing out Ted Cruz’s connections to the movement—Cruz’s father, Rafael, is a leader of the New Apostolic Reformation—sounding the alarm for the potential of a second Trump administration. Paula White, Trump’s pastor and his pick to lead his White House faith office, is also an Apostle.

With the second election of Donald Trump, the confirmation of Pete Hegseth—*Deus Vult* tattoo and all—as secretary of defense, the implementation of Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025’s punitive policies against pluralistic ideals, and the most religiously conservative US Supreme Court in history, I believe that potential has

been realized. What does a reconstructionist government look like? If you ask me, we live in their world now.