

Preface 1

Ecclesiastes 12:12

^eInstitute of Christian Economics, 1983

R. J. Rushdoony's

FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL ORDER¹

by Gary North

Subtitled, "Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church," this book is one of the few studies of doctrinal creeds which relates the theology of the creeds to the world-and-life view of the society in which the creeds were hammered out. Even more unique, it discusses in detail the **political** implications of the creeds, an unheard-of thesis, yet all-important. The book analyzes the Apostles' Creed (325), the Council of Constantinople I (381), the creed of Ephesus (431), the Chalcedon creed (451), the Athanasian creed (c. 450), and the Councils of Constantinople II (553) and Constantinople III (680-81). Also included are chapters on several historic theological debates, including the procession of the Holy Ghost (the "Filioque clause") of the late sixth century, and the iconoclastic controversy of Byzantium (787), as well as chapters on canon law, Christ's ascension and the session, and an analysis of the meaning of the more familiar provisions of the creeds, e.g., the church, the communion of saints, the last judgment, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection of the dead.

The opening lines of this book set forth its premise, namely, **the inevitability of creeds**. There is never a question of "creed or no creed"; it is only a question of **which** creed. Creeds are examples of what Rushdoony has elsewhere called **inescapable concepts**. He writes:

It has become popular in recent years for churches to profess that they are creedless and that their membership is an "open" and "living" one. One sect has made heavy use of the phrase, "No Creed but Christ." Every denial of credalism is either based on hypocrisy or ignorance. The word *creed* comes from the Latin *credo, I believe*. A creed is any formula or confession of faith by the members of a church. There is no church that does not require some form of assent as a condition of membership, if nothing more than a desire to join a particular church (p. 1).

Rushdoony points to the **personal** aspect of a creed. This individual affirmation distinguishes Western Christianity from Eastern, and the debate goes back to the early history of the two branches of Christianity. What is a creed?

It is the minimal statement of belief. And it is *personal*: "I believe," *credo*. It is more than the church's faith: it is the believer's faith. A congregation recites or sings it, but they cannot say, "We believe," but "I believe." The creed is the door to the house of faith, and it is intensely personal. The individual affirms every article of the creed, from God as the Father Almighty and the Creator, to the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body, as *his* personal faith. It is this point which separates Western Christianity from the Eastern Church. The first person plural, "we," is the Greek usage (p. 2).

Creeds and History

The Apostles' Creed speaks of God's actions in history: the Creator who sent His son Jesus Christ to earth, at a specific point in time, who died, rose from the dead, and will return to judge men at the end of history. Rushdoony distinguishes the creeds of all other religions from this one. "The faith of all other religions is in a *body of ideas or claims concerning reality*. . . . The Apostles' Creed is radically different: it offers a synopsis of history, created by God the Father Almighty, requiring salvation by Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son. . ." (p. 4). Therefore, Christians cannot legitimately separate biblical faith and history.

Such a creed affirms that God is the Creator and Finisher of history. It implicitly affirms the doctrine of predestination by God rather than predestination by man. It declares an eschatology (doctrine of "last things") of victory. It is therefore **radically anti-statist**. Here is the heart of the political argument of this book, namely, that the **doctrine of creation** affirms the **sovereignty of God** and therefore the **ministerial (subordinate and limited) sovereignty of any human institution**.

The Creed therefore has vast implications concerning history because of its declaration that God is the creator of all things. This declaration immediately makes God the source of all law. In all non-Christian systems, the source of ethics and of law is the state; it is the *polis*, the empire, or the kingdom. There is no understanding of the gulf between Aristotle and Plato, for example, and Christianity, apart from this fact, and the gulf cannot be legitimately bridged. Either God is the true source of morality and law, or the state is. If God is the true source, then the Word of God must be hearkened to by church, state, school, and every sphere of life as the one authoritative source of morality and law. As institutions and orders declare law, they must do it ministerially, as administrators under God. The Word of God therefore speaks to every sphere, including church and state, and the Word of God is *over* the church and corrects and disciplines the church (p. 5).

Because of this perspective, Rushdoony is clearly a defender of **theocracy**, but an opponent of **ecclesiocracy**. The institutional church is not sovereign over the other spheres and institutions of life, and neither is the civil government. All authority is from God, and therefore God rules over nations, institutions, and individuals. We proclaim theocracy: **rule by God's law**.

God is the Creator. Orthodox Christianity affirms this. But Rushdoony argues that this doctrine points to other ones:

Implicit in this declaration that God the Father Almighty is maker of heaven and earth is the claim of God to be the law-giver, determiner, and sustainer of heaven and earth and of all history. He is its maker, and it is totally subject therefore to Him. An assertion of the doctrine of creation is also an assertion of the doctrines of

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sovereignty and of the eternal decree (p. 5).

Not many Christians accept the implication of this logic. But, Rushdoony points out, where these inferences are not affirmed, we see two alternative doctrines: 1) a doctrine of the sovereignty of randomness and chance, where God is a co-worker with man in overcoming history, which eventually becomes 2) the doctrine of autonomous man. But autonomous man is man unrestrained by God or His law. His most powerful institution, the State, is therefore unrestrained by God or His law. Man is therefore defined by the State and saved by the State. Rushdoony calls such a State the "Pelagian state," named after Pelagius, the early fifth-century heretic who rejected the doctrine of predestination and the doctrine of original sin (total depravity), and who was so ably refuted by Augustine. (Elsewhere, he has called it the "Moloch state" and the "society of Satan")

Pelagianism is essentially the assertion of man's ability to save himself; it is a belief that man does not need God to attain the perfect life. . . . In political theory, Pelagianism has meant that the state is not restricted to the role of a ministry of justice. The state becomes man's mediator and savior. The Pelagian state offers cradle to grave security. It faces every problem in the confidence that, given sufficient time and power, it will provide the answer. The Pelagian state is confident that it can abolish sickness and disease, poverty and hunger, crime and lawlessness, and, through nationalized science, possibly even death itself. Pelagianism asserts the plenary ability of man to save himself, and the Pelagian state believes in the plenary power of the state to save man and create a paradise on earth. Because the Pelagian state believes in the *plenary ability*, it works to seize that *plenary power* which it holds necessary for the exercise of its abilities and plans. As a result, Pelagianism in politics is inescapably totalitarian. It cannot place any brakes on the state, nor can it be justifiably suspicious of the state, since it has no doctrine of sin, only a catalogue of sinful acts. The decline of the doctrine of sovereign grace is marked by the rise of the sovereign state (pp. 116-17).

Christianity affirms biblical law, not statist law. Biblical law is the standard for all governments (plural), including church government and civil government, and also self-government. The councils declared the creeds and announced canons (standards), or **canon law**, for the governing of the institutional church (p. 6) Christianity also reformulated the content of **civil law** (p. 7).

Monopolistic Divinity

The heart of the struggle between Christianity's creeds and all rival creeds is the debate over ultimate sovereignty. There are several ways to state this issue. Who is divine, man or God? What is the nature of the relationship or link between man and God? Can man become God? **Is there a "continuity of being" between man and God?** In other words, does man partake of the same being as God, meaning that he is a "near-God" or a "might evolve into God"? Who is sovereign over history, man or God? Or are both struggling, either in concert or as rivals, with the raw data of history in order to master history?

Rushdoony views fallen man as a revolutionary: **a revolutionary against history**, for it is controlled by God and operates in terms of God's decree (p. 10) Fallen man will tolerate God, and therefore history, only if he is allowed to participate in the divinity of God and the authority of God, in **metaphysical union with God** rather than in **ethical union with Christ's perfect humanity**. Otherwise, he denies God.

The overriding theological problem for the writers of the creeds was to come to grips with the **Incarnation**. What is the relationship between God and Christ, and also between Christ and man? Is Christ fully divine? Is He fully human? The proponents of heretical creeds always compromised one of the two aspects of Christ's being. His humanity (e.g., the Mono-

hysites) or His divinity (e.g., the Nestorians).

Monophysitism ostensibly exalted Christ by diminishing His humanity, but it simply endangered or destroyed the reality of the incarnation. It reduced the realm of the Church to the spiritual, which was left poorly related to the world, and again turned over the material world to Caesar. Nestorianism made Christ into a divinized man rather than the incarnate God, and it thereby strengthened statist theology. Any subordinationist Christology, which gave to God the Son a reduced status in the Trinity, similarly reduced the church as Christ's body (p. 72).

The central theme of this book is that **Trinitarianism is the only creed which offers liberty to man**. It is the foundation of the West's social order, and therefore the foundation of Western liberty. In what way is the doctrine of the Trinity the basis of freedom? Because if man is divine, the State becomes the most powerful of all human institutions and therefore becomes the incarnation of man's divinity. On the other hand, if there can be no link to a divine order for **any** man, or else a voluntary association with God for **all** men, then autonomous man becomes the new god by default, and the State again becomes the sovereign order over mankind.

Either the two natures were so divided that no true union took place but rather only a voluntary association, or else the two natures were confused and the humanity absorbed into the divinity. The practical and philosophical result of both Nestorianism and Monophysitism was the apotheosis of man; both represented the triumph of pagan humanism and of imperial theology. Western liberty is the product of Chalcedonian Christology and of the trinitarianism of the Athanasian Creed. Explicit or implicit humanism will attempt either to separate the man Jesus from the person of God except by a voluntary association open to all, or to give him a divinity which is open to all men (pp. 104-5).

How, then, can man defend himself philosophically against the statist tyranny implicit in both heresies? The councils formulated the proper responses to the two types of heresies, with the premier statement provided by the Chalcedon creed (451). **Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine, perfect man and perfect God**. He is not two Persons, for then man's nature would be co-equal to God's, and Christianity would preach "Quadrinarianism." He is one Person with two natures, in true union but without confusion. "To have permitted belief in the confusion of the natures would have meant that man could become an aspect of his own God, aspire to be, in his union with Christ, his own lawmaker and co-creator. Humanity would have been introduced into deity, not in a community of life but in a community of substance" (p. 78).

It is important to understand that man's problem is **sin**, not his humanity. The Council of Constantinople (381) rejected the theology of Apollinaris because he believed that "a complete human nature in Christ would have implied sinfulness, which was in essence the pagan belief that creatureliness of finitude is sin, whereas Biblical faith sees man as a creature, originally created good. Not finitude but the moral transgression of God's law is sin. If finitude be seen as sin, then salvation of necessity is logically deification" (pp. 24-25). **Salvation is never deification**. It is always **ethical**: the restoration of man's fellowship with God because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the perfect human, which is imputed judicially by God to the regenerate man.

Again and again, the Christian emperors of the Roman Empire sided with the heretics (pp. 14, 65, 69). Athanasius was banished at least five times in his life (p. 84). Again and again, it was **statism vs. Christian orthodoxy**. Rushdoony summarizes the nature of the debate:

The Council of Chalcedon met in 451 to deal with the issue as it came to focus at the critical point, in Christology. If the two natures of Christ were confused, it meant that the door was opened to the divinizing of human

nature; man and the state were then potentially divine. If the human nature of Christ were reduced or denied, His role as man's incarnate savior was reduced or denied, and man's savior again became the state. If Christ's deity were reduced, then His saving power was nullified. If His humanity and deity were not in true union, the incarnation was then not real, and the distance between God and man remained as great as ever (p. 65).

Rushdoony spells it out: it is either **Christianity or humanism**. This means **Christianity or statism**. "As long as the old pagan view of being prevailed, the state could be the divine-human order. Divinity then became so greatly immanent or incarnate in the state that there was no appeal beyond the state. The state was, at least for its day, the final order. . . . In this condition, liberty was non-existent" (p. 68).

Biblical Law vs. Natural Law

Foundations of Social Order was first published in 1968, at about the same time that Rushdoony began his voluminous researches on biblical law. There is no question that the issues raised in this book lead directly to a consideration of biblical law. What this little book shows is that the church, from the early years, created a philosophical foundation which would eventually call into question all rival law systems. While the medieval church failed to recognize the contradiction between biblical law and so-called natural law, Cornelius Van Til and Rushdoony have made the point inescapably clear.

Van Til has argued for decades that Protestantism's philosophical defense of Christianity has been undercut by its appeal to the arguments of Roman Catholic scholasticism. He has argued that fundamentalists have used the same arguments as the Roman Church to "prove" the existence of God. Whether they appeal to natural law or to empirical evidence, or whether they appeal to both, it makes no difference. Rushdoony takes Van Til's observations concerning apologetics (the defense of the faith) and applies them to his areas of interest: social philosophy, ethics, and biblical law.

Rushdoony's uncompromising hostility to all forms of natural law doctrine — whether Roman Catholic scholasticism, Protestant scholasticism, or modern conservatism — stems from his commitment to the Trinitarian formula. He argues (following Van Til) that **all forms of heresy** ultimately argue for **subordinationism**. They all argue that Jesus Christ was less than God.

Subordinationism, in its broader significance, had a double implication: *first*, it treated Father as true God but gave a lesser status to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, so that, while nominally trinitarian, it was actually uncongenial to trinitarianism. *Second*, as a result of this subordinationism, the revealed order, i.e., the revelation of God the Word and of His inscripturated word, the Bible, took a lesser place to the natural word of God, creation, and its order of power, the state. In subordinationism, the world became the domain of the state, and the element of revelation was seen as an addition to rather than a necessary part of man's life. In and through subordinationism, the messianic state was re-introducing its claims (p. 119).

In 1970, I heard one of the leading conservative political philosophers in the United States declare that Rushdoony "is one of the most dangerous men in America." He recognized the threat which Rushdoony's interpretation of Trinitarianism represented to him as a defender of natural law. Rushdoony spares no words. he sees modern natural law theory as equally as statist in its implications as the so-called positive law tradition has become. The autonomous logic of natural law theory is no less hostile to biblical Christianity than the autonomous empiricism of positive law theory. **Any alliance with natural law theorists to fight the "common enemy" of positive law theory is bound to fail.** Both are equally statist. Christianity rejects both with equal vigor.

Every heresy in the church has been subordinationist in

some form or another. If, for example, by God, the Almighty Creator, the Father is meant exclusively, and the Son and the Spirit are seen as some kind of junior gods at best, the consequence has been the *priority of natural order to revealed order*. Natural law (or positive law, as a later development) comes to a position of ascendancy over revealed law. The basic order is seen as the natural order, and the revealed order comes as a kind of addition, a complement, to an already operative order. In such heresies, the state becomes man's basic order, and the church is peripheral and subordinate to the state, the basic order (p. 93).

God can be known by man because He has revealed Himself to man, who is His image, through Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Man is therefore without excuse for his ethical rebellion against God. There is a link between man and God: an **ethical link**. But once Christians assert the existence of a unique ethical link to God, they must also assert a unique standard of ethics. This leads directly to the question of the source of such an ethical code. In other words, we come to the issue of revealed biblical law.

In a classic formulation of the concept of law, Rushdoony writes: "Sovereignty, duty, and law are inseparably linked. The source of law in any system is not only the locale of sovereignty but also the god of that system. God only is the true sovereign and the true source of the law" (p. 77). He rejects humanistic law, whether "natural-logical" or "positive-empiricist": "In statist theology, for the rationalist, law is logic; for the empiricist, law is experience. In either case, it is basically a product of nature, man, and history" (p. 77). He argues instead for law which is God-created and God-revealed.

The Fallacy of Simplicity

A constant refrain which has been heard since the late 1960's is the call to return to a simpler life. Very often, proponents of the ecology movement, the zero-growth movement, and communalism have been closely associated with this call to "return to the soil." So have some of the more anti-intellectual Christian sects. Rushdoony's chapter on Constantinople II (553) is an analysis of this idea:

An ancient and persistent danger is the fallacy of simplicity. There is a pronounced resentment on the part of very many men against knowledge that is beyond their capacity. As a result, wherever a democratic impulse governs theology, it seeks the lowest common denominator. The ignorant and foolish piously bleat for "the simple, old-time gospel," when the reality is that their simple-minded gospel is a modern invention. While certain basic doctrines of the Bible are uncomplicated ones, the Bible as a whole is not a simple book, and it gives us no warrant for passing over its complexities to dwell on its simplicities, because both aspects are inseparably one. No one can call the prophets simple reading, nor the epistles of Paul elementary, and the two together make up a major portion of the Bible, and they do not exhaust its complexity. The demand for simplicity is usually a *demand for perversion*, and it is not surprising therefore that the gospel of a democratic era is also a perverted one (p. 96).

Theology is complex. So is life. One of the foundations of Western liberty is the medieval intellectual tradition. It proclaimed a decentralized social, political, and economic order, in which men could develop their skills apart from the controlling hand of a centralized bureaucracy. But decentralized orders are complex orders. It was Napoleon's attempt to codify the laws of Europe which revived the imperial tradition of Roman law — a law-order hostile to biblical faith and Anglo-Saxon common law tradition. We can see the same impulse for simplicity in socialism.

Socialism is an excellent example of the fallacy of simplicity. As society grows more complex, it accordingly needs more decentralization and specialization.

The greater the complexity of a society, the greater its need for growth in terms of its increasingly refined and specialized abilities. The socialist, however, recognizes only one valid and independent form of specialization, that of the statist controllers or managers. His answer to social complexity is an imposed simplicity, an enforced regression to a household economy (p. 97).

What we need is decentralization within a shared moral and religious framework. This is what orthodox Christianity offers. As society grows more specialized, the free market allows the co-ordination of private economic plans through the price mechanism and the private ownership of the means of production. But the socialist fears increasing complexity. He wants a central planning agency to co-ordinate the growing economy. This is beyond the capacity of man, as economist Ludwig von Mises demonstrated as far back as 1920. So the socialist resists greater complexity.

One of the fundamental intellectual legacies to the West of the middle ages is the doctrine of complexity. Edmund Burke revived this aspect of medieval Christian social philosophy in his classic critique of the French Revolution, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). He warned against the attempt to create rationalistic blueprints for society that would have to be imposed by the power of the central government. Armchair philosophers are not able to master the complexities of life and the complexity of information necessary to make such blueprints work. Society is based on custom, contracts, voluntary associations, regional differences, and a whole host of other critical features that cannot be dealt with successfully in a rationalistic blueprint. This intellectual legacy became the foundation of nineteenth-century conservatism, and still is influential in conservative circles.

To the extent that the modern Christian fundamentalist resists complex ideas, complex theological formulations, and the difficulties of serious scholarship, to that extent he is aiding and abetting the socialists and revolutionaries. He is offering a similar false hope to mankind: an escape from reason, responsibility, and difficulty. But all this does is to transfer leadership to rival forces, and in our day, socialist humanism is the most powerful and influential of the rival forces.

It is true that many believers cannot hope to understand the full implications of complex creeds. Indeed, few theologians teaching in seminaries have understood the anti-statist nature of the creeds, which is why this book is so important. But this is only another way of saying that man cannot attain perfect and exhaustive knowledge. There is always more to learn, for simple believers and for men who hold Ph.D's and Th.D's. There is no excuse for Christians to oppose the use of creeds to defend the faith from humanists and other religionists. As Rushdoony says, "The creed defines the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity; the humble believer is required to *believe* it, not to understand it in all its implications. The believer's obligation is to *accept* the faith, to *receive* it, not to become a learned expositor of it" (p. 94).

Conclusion

We need to study the creeds and have confidence in them. Confidence in God produces self-confidence in our dominion tasks under the general sovereignty of God. Those who criticize Christians for their assurance, their confidence in creeds and principles, resent the idea that men can have such faith in God and in His revealed word. Most of all, they resent God, but they mask their resentment, Rushdoony says, by affirming the "reasonableness" of uncertainty and doubt. (The German anti-theologian and incoherent philosopher, Paul Tillich, was the "Protestant high priest of doubt" in this century.) Rushdoony writes:

The hatred of certainty was a major factor in the Roman Empire and its anti-Christianity, and it was a major aspect of the infiltrating humanism then as now. The humanistic parties did everything possible to bring uncertainty to the faith, to render vague the doctrines of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, to cloud with uncertainty the doctrines of creation, salvation, and judgment. This hatred for doctrinal certainty was intense and dedicated. But this hatred of certainty is a pretense and a mask for the advancement of a new certainty, not God but man. It is part of the quest for humanistic certainty (p. 19).

It is indicative of the crisis of twentieth-century Christianity that the creeds are not taken seriously. Even those churches that stress the importance of the creeds never discuss their importance for the social and worlds outside the sanctuary. The early church creeds are ignored, and even in church history classes in seminaries, no mention is made of the anti-statist implications of the early creeds. This is why *Foundations of Social Order* is a very important book. It is also why it is not assigned in seminary classrooms, and why it was never reviewed in the scholarly journals of traditional Protestant churches and seminaries. It is simply too relevant to be safe for the political controversy-avoiding scholars of our day.

This book establishes the theological frame of reference of all of Rushdoony's books. Its many themes can be summarized in one question: **Is God the Trinity sovereign, or is man?** Those who wrote the creeds of the church better understood the implications of the creeds than Christians do in our anti-creedal (or merely formally creedal) era.

There is no escape from creeds. For centuries, the creeds have stood as barriers to universal ecumenical cooperation. Truth cannot be amalgamated with falsehood and still retain its truthfulness. As Rushdoony writes concerning the Council of Constantinople (381), "The foundation of Constantinople's ecumenicism was not smoothing out differences and building bridges to the opposition but, on the basis of the uncompromising faith, to drive out the enemy and to allow him no entrance save conversion. The enemies were plainly termed 'wolves'; they had to become lambs before they could be approached peaceably" (p. 21).