

Preface 5

Ecclesiastes 12:12

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R. J. Rushdoony's THE BIBLICAL PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

by Gary North

The all-too-typical response of pagans and even nominal Christians, when they see a title such as *The Biblical Philosophy of []* is this one: "What does the Bible have to do with [], anyway?" But in the field of history, there is some comprehension that the Bible does speak to history, for the life of the Israelites and the life of Christ were real lives, in historical time. Modern theologians and philosophers may seek to separate the history of salvation from the history of the man, Jesus, but they are generally forced to admit the existence of someone named Jesus who had a great impact on the world as the result of His earthly ministry.

R. J. Rushdoony's book goes beyond the academic discipline of history in order to discuss the operating presuppositions of those who study historical events and write about them. He returns to many of his familiar themes, most notably the myth of neutrality. In no academic discipline is there greater willingness to admit that there is no neutrality than in historiography (the writing of history). Historians have been self-conscious relativists for over two generations, thanks to the writings of Carl Becker and Charles A. Beard, who both gloried in the relativism of historiography. Therefore, Rushdoony's critique of relativism's baneful effects on historiography is a seed planted in fertile soil in the field of historical writing.

He believes that both Church historians and secular historians "give a version of history as totally the product of impersonal natural forces, so that God and Christ become not only abstracted from past history but very remote from the present" (p. 1). That Christ and God are abstracted from the writing of history is unquestionably true. However, the term "impersonal" should be understood to mean more than "natural" in the sense of nature. Modern historians are very willing to admit that men's institutions are reshaping history. What the majority of them believe, especially the Marxists, is that the construction and extension of these institutions are beyond the power of any one man to influence greatly. When "natural forces" are invoked, mankind is seen as the major force, but not individual men. This is why any "great man" theory of history, or any conspiracy view of history, is regarded with suspicion and even hostility by most historians. The only major exception is intellectual history; here certain key men are regarded as important—"turning points in history"—especially thinkers who have promoted the doctrine of impersonal history.

There is no disagreement by historians with Rushdoony's statement of the problem: "What is history? Out of millions of events and persons of the past, how are certain events selected as significant?" (p. 1). This is indeed the crucial question for historiography, and the historians absolutely cannot agree on an answer, or even how they might discover an answer.

Oddly enough, Rushdoony does not explore this continuing debate over the selection of historical facts. Even more oddly, he virtually never mentions any historian or philosopher of historiography (historical writing) who has been prominent in this debate, from Herodotus to the moderns. Instead, he goes straight to the true dividing line between Christian philosophy and non-Christian philosophy: the sovereignty of God in creation. He spells out the premises of biblical providential history. The doctrine of creation implies at least nine things: 1) all creation is the handiwork of a totally sovereign, all-controlling, omnipotent God, 2) the meaning of history derives from this God, for "the ground of history" is in **eternity**, not in time, 3) creation was a creative, supernatural **act**, not a process; 4) creation is under the government of God; 5) the source of energy and power is God; 6) God, being omnipotent, can and has revealed Himself infallibly in the Bible; 7) the origin of time is in eternity, not chaos, for time is **predestined**, and its source is in the **future**, not the past; 8) man is passive toward God, his Creator, but active toward nature, which is ultimately the reverse of what the non-Christian philosopher believes; and 9) all factuality is inescapably and totally **personal**, for all events take place in terms of God's comprehensive plan for the universe.

Man, the Manipulated

Man is supposed to be meek before God but active toward the creation. He is to be **dominion man**. But anti-Christian philosophies rob man of his status as a dominion man. He becomes passive man, under the domination of a new god, the social planners.

It is significant that, despite the dreams of total control, the psychologies formulated by non-Christian man are *passive* psychologies. Man is made a product of his heredity and environment. His mind is passive and malleable. The mind of man has been compared to a blank sheet of white paper, and his nature seen as neutral. This neutral, bland man receives sense impressions from the world and responds to them and is conditioned by them. The explicit faith of non-Christian psychology in the power of conditioned

reflexes is grounded in this passive psychology; the concept of the predestination of man and his society by the elite rests on this passivist psychology of man. *Conditioning rather than education* becomes the function of the statist school. There is a grim irony in this situation: the more the scientific state develops as a god, the more it rests on the premise that man is passive and can be subjected to total conditioning. Man, in brief, is made more and more subject to nature, more and more passive in relationship to nature, while, in the "person" of the corporate state, he wages unremitting and active warfare against God and claims the prerogatives of God (p. 13).

This "passive-active" dichotomy is one of Rushdoony's many **inescapable concepts**. We cannot escape its control. It is never a question of our being able to be either entirely passive or entirely active. We must simultaneously be passive toward something and active toward something else. Servitude is inescapable; we serve either God or Mammon, Christ or Satan. Adam could not be neutral. But at the same time, we must assert that the dominion covenant (Gen. 1:27-28; 9:1-7) is basic to man's very nature. We are called to exercise dominion. So we cannot escape the burden of activism.

Evolutionism, Free Will, and Magic

Man is totally responsible before God for all his actions and thoughts. But if this is true, then God is totally sovereign in calling man to account in every area of life. This perspective is rejected both by evolutionists and Arminian Christians. "The evolutionist seeks to determine the future as a predestinating god, but he is also inescapably bound to a primeval chaos as less than man. He understands himself, to use Cornelius Van Til's phrase, in terms of a psychology of primitivism which is 'integration into the void.'" But man cannot be responsible in the void. The void is ultimate **irrationalism**. Chaos is impersonal and incoherent. Therefore, "Man 'frees' himself from God's predestination only by positing instead an 'ultimate irrationalism' and man becomes as a result free for irresponsibility. [Citing Van Til:] 'Man is responsible in the whole of his personality but only if he is the creature of God. Man *before God* is the only alternative to man *in the void*.'" (p. 12).

The Arminian also preaches a doctrine of chance, of ultimate irrationalism, Rushdoony argues. He, too, wants to escape the implications of God's comprehensive predestination of all things. He, too, wants to make man's decisions in time determinative of the outcome of history. As in his other works, Rushdoony spells out the options: God or chaos, God's predestination or nature's (which includes the planning elite). In perhaps his most eloquent statement in any of his books concerning the warfare between predestinarian theology and all other variants, including evolutionism, Rushdoony equates Arminian free-will theology and evolutionism, a statement which is a slap in the face of virtually the whole creationist movement, which is overwhelmingly Arminian in theology. He says that it is their view of the world which has led to evolutionism, for **creationism excludes free will**.

Because creation is the work of God, it is determined by God. If the universe is self-generated, if evolution be true, then predestination is impossible, because time is primary and determinative, and eternity is at best a product of time and determined by time. Then man saves himself and man determines his eternal condition by his temporal choice. Crea-

tionism and predestination are logical corollaries of each other and cannot logically be separated. Any weakening of creationism is a weakening of predestination and leads to the determination of eternity by time. Arminianism is deeply infected with Hellenic humanism and gives priority, implicitly or explicitly, to time over eternity. But if God created man and the universe, then man and the universe are products of God and are determined by Him. The doctrine of evolution, by denying God's creative act, denies also His determination of creation. Evolution is scientific Arminianism and asserts the determination of all things by time, a universal self-generation and a possible self-generation (p. 30).

This philosophy has not endeared him to the creationists. It also explains why he, as a predestinarian, went to the trouble of finding a publisher for Morris and Whitcomb's *Genesis Flood*, when all other Arminian publishing houses had rejected their manuscript because it was too hostile to all compromises with non-six-day creation positions. It was Presbyterian & Reformed, which is explicitly a predestinarian publishing house (and still publishes *The Biblical Philosophy of History*) which spearheaded the revival of the six-day creationism movement.

Rushdoony then goes for the throat. It is not only that Arminianism rests on the same foundation as evolutionism does. It also rests on the same foundation as **magic** does. Rushdoony's italics shout his position for all to understand:

Magic is the attempt to control and govern the supernatural by means of the natural. It is thus a belief in the determination of eternity by time. Arminianism is thus a form of magical theology and belief: it holds that the individual's decision governs eternity. Man is saved because man chooses Christ. But Jesus declared, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you" (John 15:16). The primary and determinative choice belongs to the eternal order and the eternal decree (p. 31).

Anyone who wonders why Rushdoony's terms and concepts regarding humanism have become the "lingua franca" of the Arminians, but why his name is seldom cited, and his philosophical perspective is never discussed in Arminian Baptist and Pentecostal circles, can see why. He is a theological hot potato, both for his beliefs on providence and his beliefs about God's law and the course of history.

The Triumph of Christianity

Christ is victorious in eternity. Every Christian acknowledges this fact. There will be a final judgment. Satan is going to hell. He cannot "get lucky." He cannot, by some spiritual miracle, be converted to faith in Jesus Christ. He and his angels cannot repent. What alienates the Arminians from Rushdoony's Calvinism is that Rushdoony says the same thing about Satan's human followers that all Christians say about his angelic followers. They will not repent. They cannot repent. They were sealed from the beginning of time as covenant-breakers. Christ no more died for the eternal salvation of Satan's earthly followers than he did for Satan's angelic followers.

Furthermore, since God has decreed victory over Satan in eternity, this triumph is the model for earthly affairs. He shall be victorious in time and on earth. Our required prayer request, "on earth as it is in heaven," will be progressively answered, though not perfectly (because of the effects of sin).

The purpose of Biblical history is to trace the victory

of Jesus Christ. *That victory is not merely spiritual; it is also historical.* Creation, man, man's body, all move in terms of a glorious destiny for which the whole creation groans and travails as it awaits the fulness of that glorious liberty of the sons of God (Rom. 8:18-23). The victory is historical and eschatological, and it is not the rejection of creation but its fulfilment (p. 25).

Humanism's history is meaningless, for it does not rest on the doctrine of creation-providence. Men therefore seek to substitute **power** for meaning. In the face of meaninglessness, and in the face of its humanistic substitute, power, men seek to escape (suicide is the ultimate form of this escape) or else they seek to gain the seats of power. The means of this attempt in the modern world is **science** (p. 19). Men seek to construct a "social science" which will transfer political power and control to those wise (or lucky enough) to unlock the secrets of social science. "History as man's scientific creation means history totally controlled by the scientific elite. Since God's predestination is ruled out, man's predestination or total planning must take its place. History, which for orthodox Christianity is closely linked to theology, now becomes an associate of sociology. The purpose of history ceases to be understanding; it becomes an instrument of control" (pp. 19-20).

To achieve this goal of control, non-Christian religions need a concept of **purpose**. But they do not have it. They are cyclical, or else they borrow heavily from the Bible to construct such a doctrine. History remains, in Shakespeare's words from Macbeth, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." An important factor contributing to the success of socialism in our day has been the default of Christianity, for "Christian eschatology has increasingly surrendered the dimension of victory and emphasized the dimension of tribulation as the essence of the future" (p. 21).

It is this view of time and responsibility which was essential to the success of the American experiment in liberty, Rushdoony argues in *This Independent Republic* and *The Nature of the American System*. Such a vision is characteristic of historic Protestantism.

The vigor and activism of Protestantism came from this Biblical faith in creation and time. The Kingdom of God became central, not the vision of God. Man enters this Kingdom by **grace** and then works to further its dominion on earth in the confidence of predestined victory. Because of this responsibility to conquer in the confidence of victory, time is all important and irreplaceable. It is the arena of history and the domain of meaning: this is "where the action is." The high compliment Charles Chauncey [a mid-18th century theological liberal] paid to Cotton Mather was, "He was the greatest redeemer of time I ever knew." This theocentric perspective on time was basic to the colonial and early American eras of American history. Expressive of the activist Protestant attitude towards time is the hymn, "Work, for the night is coming." The time before the end is limited and important: work is to fulfil your destiny; work, saving time. In America especially, this sense of the importance of time has led to a sense of drive and haste: time cannot be wasted. From the beginning, American inventive genius worked to produce machines in terms of this urgency (pp. 34-35).

"The secularization of the Christian sense of time and destiny led to political and scientific messianism," Rushdoony argues (pp. 37-38). "Salvation and victory were of-

fered through the offices of state and social planners, to whom the power of redeeming the time was ascribed." These elitists were seen as supermen, and the masses were to follow them. But this optimistic faith is waning as existentialism replaces the older humanism. As humanism drifts farther from its presuppositions that were grounded in Christian thought, it cannot discover meaning or purpose. "As a result, instead of men and time and destiny governing history, history is progressively being dominated by political thugs and vultures who feed on the carcass of civilization. The feast of the vultures will continue until again the mainspring of history is faith in the triune God" (p. 38).

The Ultimate Decree

Men need a concept of an **ultimate decree**. Rushdoony devotes chapter 5 to a discussion of yet another inescapable concept. Instead of God, it is scientific planning which is to provide this ultimate decree for the modern humanist. Enlightenment thinkers believed that Nature's laws would provide this ultimate decree, but Darwin blew away this faith in the processes of autonomous nature (pp. 6-7). Nature lost its attributes of divinity, namely, **predestination**, and **infallibility** (p. 46). "Nature was another dead god gone down the drain" (p. 46). Man must now direct nature. This is the perspective of Marxism, pragmatism, and Fabian Socialism. Rushdoony then links religious neo-orthodoxy to these other three, since they are all forms of existentialism, and they are all Kantian (p. 51).

Here is one of the few sections of the book which needs to be revised. Earlier, he argued that existentialism has eroded the older optimistic faith in man, the planner (p. 38). This is why neo-orthodoxy need not be statist, and his reliance on Reinhold Niebuhr to make his case that neo-orthodoxy is statist indicates the nature of his problem. Van Til's critiques of neo-orthodoxy have always focused on Barth and Brunner, neither of whom is a consistent statist. Neo-orthodoxy is concerned with the "noumenal" or irrational side of Kant's dualism, not the "phenomenal," which is the heart and soul of rationalist cosmologies. What we need is an historical survey of the drift of Marxism to pessimism and bureaucracy, but also its continuing commitment to world domination. Similar surveys are needed for pragmatism and Fabianism. How do the existentialist aspects of these rationalist cosmologies affect these movements in history?

Existentialism is close to the last phase of humanism; to mix neo-orthodoxy and Marxism seems peculiar. That was what the "Christian-Marxist dialogue" of the 1960's was all about, but it failed when the Marxists refused to compromise their ideology of revolution and atheism, and the neo-orthodox got more interested in drugs, situation ethics, and emotional escape.

The New World Order

Throughout history, men have often been in rebellion against eternity, but they have been no less in rebellion against time. They resent eternity, because it is beyond them, and they resent time, because it is not eternity. Accordingly, men have repeatedly attempted to externalize time, to arrest history, by creating an unchanging society which is a "final order" (p. 58).

This insight is extremely important. He illustrates it by a discussion of Tibetan polyandry; I would have expected a discussion of Egyptian cosmology. But he uses Tibetan family structure to illustrate an extremely important idea:

An unchanging order was the goal, a society to reflect the quality of eternity. But men die, and, before they

die, they grow old, so that men change and cannot therefore reflect this unchanging quality of eternity. Mutability is inescapably a part of man's physical nature. If therefore time and history are to be immobilized, it must be the social order which is immobilized and rendered unchanging, because people will age and perish. As a result, whenever and wherever time is externalized, man is sacrificed to the social order. The unchanging order must remain, and it must be paramount, and changing man must be sacrificed to it (p. 59).

Renaissance and Enlightenment utopias posited a future unchanging order which would be final. "In this ideal order, the idea of history will become flesh; the idea will take full form." The conflicts of history will at last cease. "Accordingly, the goal of history has become the death of history. God and eternity are denied, but time and history are also denied, in that history must be transcended and history must be eternalized" (p. 60).

This utopian impulse is common to all socialism, he says. **Liquidate or re-educate your opponents.** If you achieve this, utopia will arrive. This hatred of both time and eternity is basic to socialist faith.

Rushdoony then makes this insight: "Because history is movement, it entails birth, maturity and death. Each generation fulfils its destiny, and another resumes the pilgrimage of history, which is man's destiny and privilege." He then discusses marriage as basic to this commitment to time, for a man breaks with his parents' family in order to establish his own family. "Man belongs to time and to history, and, as long as he has time, he must remain in history" (p. 61). Time is not abolished or eternalized; it is to be **redeemed**. It is to be "bought back," and conformed to God's ethical standards.

The implications of such an outlook are many and varied. Those who intend to help shape the future must abandon faith in the goal of creating a fixed social order or a fixed institutional structure. They must recognize that it is the preaching of the fixed principles of God's law which extends God's dominion over His creation.

One of the motivations of a biblical program of evangelism-education is to train recruits to replace us. A creative innovator should seek to impart his knowledge, perspective, and skills to younger men, who will then "carry the torch" after the founder has died or become too old to work effectively. If the torch is to be kept burning, it must be passed to a new generation. Either it is passed along voluntarily or else it will be picked up by the leaders and innovators of the next generation when the founder stumbles or dies. The alternative? The extinguishing of the flame.

The church has always recognized this inescapable fact of the life of each man. By creating an institutional structure which filters, preserves, reinterprets, and applies an innovative man's work over generations, the church creates **continuity**. A man who builds a large congregation, or writes a great book, or creates a new artistic tradition, should strive to train up replacements. Deacons train to become elders; elders and pastors strive to recruit deacons; seminaries train scholars and pastors. The system acknowl-

edges that continuity is necessary if the genius of individual church members is to become a part of Christianity's legacy to future generations. It emphasizes the recruiting of "the best and the brightest."

Because the church has been successful for 1900 years in this program of recruiting, training, and transferring power, it has increased the spiritual capital base of Christians everywhere. Those who ignore this aspect of the institutional church will see their work survive, if at all, only because other men interpret it and apply it in ways that please them. A dead man cannot control what others do with his work. He must take steps while he lives to insure the survival of his efforts. And he must know from the beginning that what he leaves behind will be changed if it perseveres at all. Even geniuses ought to recognize their own mortality, and the implications of this mortality for the survival of their legacy. Sadly, many of them refuse to come to grips with the "facts of death."

The scholar must do his best to write seminal books that help reshape a fallen world, rather than write hoped-for definitive books that will be the unchanging standard for all time. The artist must do the same. Any attempt to lock the present order, or present wisdom, or present intellectual paradigm, in concrete, is a utopian impulse and hence intrinsically evil. Only God's word is eternal; only thought and institutions in conformity to His standard will stand the test of time by being superseded, over time, through **progressive social sanctification**. It is the sign of age, senility, and impending death when men or civilizations attempt to cover their ideas and institutions in concrete. It is this "Vesuvius impulse" which dominates modern socialist and utopian thinking. The city of Pompey was frozen. Graveyards are predictable. Embalmed bodies can be controlled.

Conclusion

When men abandon the Creator God, they abandon the only possible source of meaning. They seek power. They seek academic salvation, as modern scholars do, through proper methodology (p. 128). But they cannot attain their goals. It is God who rules, not man. Thus,

Every non-biblical philosophy of history ends by destroying both man and history. It begins by striving to give a better meaning to history than the one eternity provides, and it ends by robbing history of any human meaning and man of his manhood. In taking counsel against God and His decree, man effectively hurts only himself, not God. In rebelling against the kingship of Christ over history, and in seeking to establish his own autonomous kingship, man reduces himself to the status of a slave (p. 15).

The importance of this book should be obvious. It represents a break with all non-predestinarian, non-Christian forms of philosophy. It is an application in the field of the theory of history of the presuppositional philosophy of Cornelius Van Til, which he ably developed in his first book, *By What Standard?* (1958). It is a controversial book filled with controversial theses—theses that are basic to a proper understanding of his whole philosophy.