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LAW OR BLASPHEMY:
THEONOMY IN POST-CHRISTENDOM CANADA

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“Every law-system must maintain its existence by hostility to every
other law-system and to alien religious foundations
or else it commits suicide.”¹
—Rousas John Rushdoony

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadian evangelicalism was put on global display as stories emerged describing the responses of a number of churches to the government’s lockdown mandates. Many Christians in Canada believed that they were being unjustly targeted for persecution—if beer stores and supermarkets could be open, how come Christians could not freely gather in their own buildings to worship?² In response to this perceived overreach, several evangelical leaders openly disobeyed government mandates and conducted worship services in closed spaces, eventually drawing the ire of the Canadian public and government officials.³ Alberta pastors James Coates and Tim Stephens, who famously disobeyed lockdowns, were arrested in public fashion, while oth-

1. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 1:4.

2. See Boot, “The Name.” n.p.

3. Constitutional law professor Brian Bird (“Covid-19 and Religious Freedom in Canada,” 623) concludes his study of religious freedom in Canada during Covid arguing that the general Canadian support for lockdown measures and the willingness of Canadians to allow for restrictions on religious freedom “speaks to the status of religion and faith in Canada today.”

ers faced significant fines, such as Jacob Reaume and Aaron Rock, ministers in Ontario.⁴

Besides their shared experience of arrest and fines, these pastors were also united as part of a larger group of Christians surrounding the Ezra Institute for Contemporary Christianity (EICC) and its president, Joseph Boot, who founded it in Toronto in 2009. The EICC and affiliated organizations were vocal in critiquing not only the Canadian government for its strident lockdown measures, but also fellow pastors and churches who obeyed them. Rock, an EICC fellow, published an article on the Institute's website suggesting that compliant Christian leaders were "more concerned about the optics of public opinion ('our witness') than sacrificial obedience to the Word." In a sermon preached at Trinity Bible Chapel in Waterloo, Ontario, on February 21, 2021—a month after the church started to hold services despite the restrictions—Reaume accused pastors of not being men but "castrated geldings." The sermon text drew from Ezekiel 34, where God chastised the false shepherds of Israel who abused his people, an image that Reaume applied to Christian leaders who obeyed the government.⁵ Across Canada, Christians that shared the same evangelical theology were now placed at odds with one another over their different responses to government.⁶

In the aftermath of the pandemic, churches like Trinity Bible Chapel legally settled with the Canadian government, resulting in

4. Busenitz and Coates, *God vs. Government*, 15–24; "Trinity Bible Chapel," n.p.

5. References in this paragraph are from Rock, "A Call," n.p.; Reaume, "The Problem," n.p. After the lawsuits against Trinity Bible Chapel had completed, Reaume shared his post-Covid evaluation of the state of the church in Canada, accusing leaders of pushing compliance to the government "like it was Gospel."

6. Public displays of civil disobedience or complete passivity were not the only evangelical responses to the lockdown measures in Canada. Leaders representing the Christian Legal Fellowship, the Canadian Council of Christian Charities, and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada penned a letter to Douglas Ford, the Ontario Premier, requesting that religious communities should be considered "essential services," as they help with the spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs of Ontarians during the pandemic. Ross, Pellowe, and Clemenger, "Joint Letter," n.p.

reduced fines and dropped charges.⁷ Nevertheless, the churches and leaders surrounding EICC continued their forceful criticism of pastors who had obeyed the lockdown mandates. In November 2022 Trinity Bible Chapel hosted a conference—with Coates and Stephens as keynote speakers—that focused on evangelical responses to COVID and produced an accompanying documentary entitled *Antichrist and His Ruin*, chastising evangelical leaders for their failure to resist the government.⁸

Their consistent public attacks on the Canadian government and fellow evangelicals came to the attention of Canadian media, particularly Canada's national broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). In June 2023, CBC reporter Jonathan Montpetit published an exposé of the “fundamentalism” that was attempting to “remake Canadian politics.” The article, and accompanying documentary, took aim at Trinity Bible Chapel and its pastor, as well as EICC and adjacent institutions like Liberty Coalition Canada, led by Michael Thiessen, another EICC fellow. In his article, Montpetit, who attended Trinity Bible Chapel undercover, noted EICC's link to “reconstructionism,” that he described as “an austere form of evangelism [sic] that seeks inspiration from the Old Testament to guide modern government and culture.”⁹ Montpetit was referring to Christian Reconstruction, a movement that began in the late-twentieth century and had largely been relegated to an American evangelical audience. Due to the global influence of American culture and politics, however, Christian Reconstruction cropped up in other countries, such as Australia, the UK, and Canada, though in even smaller numbers than their

7. Ellison, “Canadian Government,” n.p. Likewise, pastors Coates and Stephens were acquitted from the charges brought against them by the Alberta government. Greer, “Prosecutors,” n.p.

8. The documentary is named after John Bunyan's (1628–1688) book of the same name. Reaume wrote the foreword to the EICC reprint of Bunyan's work. Bunyan, *Of Antichrist and His Ruin*. Ironically, Bunyan has been described in this work as “consistently [urging] patient suffering and obedience to kings and magistrates” and who “distances himself from those who plotted against the government, among them some of his acquaintances.” Knott, *Discourses of Martyrdom*, 190.

9. Montpetit, “Inside,” n.p. For Boot's reply see Boot, “Inside,” n.p.

American counterpart.¹⁰ Christian Reconstruction, or “Theonomy,” as the movement is often called, was at its most influential in the 1970s and 1980s as a series of books, journals, publishers, think tanks, and conferences pushed it into mainstream evangelical life.¹¹ Though it has since lost cultural steam, in the last number of years Christian Reconstruction is seeing something of a revival in America, the UK, and Canada, which has been helped along in no small part due to the efforts of Boot and EICC.

This essay considers Christian Reconstruction in post-Christendom Canada with a particular focus on Boot and his Ezra Institute.¹² Boot has published several books and articles dealing with political theology that have gained in influence since COVID, with pop-culture figures in the US and the UK even recommending his books.¹³ After providing a general summary and definition of Christian Reconstruction, this essay summarizes its early history in Canada through the work of Still Waters Revival Books in the 1980s, who disseminated Reconstructionist literature along with reprints of Reformed and Puritan books across the country. After a lull through the 1990s and the early 2000s, Reconstruction has again become popular in Canada through Boot and the EICC, whose influence has surpassed that of the earlier Canadian Theonomists. This is largely due to the success of his magnum opus, *The Mission of God*, and so this essay critically engages with one aspect of the book, focusing on Boot’s interpretation of Theonomy’s relationship to English Puritanism, with a particular focus on natural law theory. The essay concludes by thinking

10. Reconstructionist Francis Nigel Lee (1934–2011) was a British born, South African raised, Presbyterian minister in Australia. Clarnette, *For Christ and His Kingdom*. For a study of “Theonomism” from a South African perspective, see Diedericks, “Critical Evaluation,” 2–7.

11. Frame, “The Theonomic Urge,” 38–40.

12. By post-Christendom, I am referring to the general trend in Canada since the 1960s towards secularization as evaluated in books like Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*. In the conclusion to their study the authors observe that “Christendom in Canada is no longer a reality.” Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 234.

13. On his podcast, Russell Brand, celebrity convert to Christian, recommended Boot’s *The Mission of God* to American political commentator Tucker Carlson. See Brand, “Spiritual Leaders are Under Attack!”

through Theonomy's place in Canada as the country continues to secularize.

*Christian Reconstruction and Theonomy*¹⁴

R. J. Rushdoony: Christian Reconstruction's Founder

Christian Reconstruction began in the mid-twentieth century with Armenian-American theologian Rousas John Rushdoony (1916–2001), a prolific author and founder of the Reconstructionist think tank, the Chalcedon Foundation.¹⁵ Rushdoony was born on April 25, 1916, in New York City to Armenian parents who had fled the genocide of the early twentieth century. The family later moved to Southern California, where Rushdoony's father served the Armenian diaspora as a Presbyterian minister. A gifted student, the younger Rushdoony earned an undergraduate English degree from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1938, and a graduate degree in Education in 1941. While at Berkeley he was influenced by the German-Jewish medieval historian Ernst Kantorowicz (1895–1963), particularly the latter's lectures in political theology.¹⁶ Rushdoony went on to study divinity at the Pacific School of Religion in 1944, a school that had affiliations with UC Berkeley, preparing for ordination in the Presbyterian Church

14. Elements of this survey are drawn from Clary, "Puritans and Theonomy, Reconsidered," n.p.; Clary, "Christian Reconstruction," n.p. Used with permission.

15. For helpful studies of Rushdoony's life and thought see MeVicar, *Christian Reconstruction* and Worthen, "The Chalcedon Problem," 399–437. Rushdoony's own introduction to Christian Reconstruction is Rushdoony, *The Roots of Reconstruction*.

16. See Schultz, "Interview with R. J. Rushdoony," 33–38. Kantorowicz is best known for his magisterial study of medieval political thought, Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*. In the introduction to the 2016 edition of the book medieval historian Conrad Leyser traces a controversy over Kantorowicz's legacy, defending him against the charge, leveled by the Canadian medievalist Norman Cantor, that though Jewish, Kantorowicz's thought was effectively in line with Nazism. See Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 79–117. This is of interest given the accusation of holocaust denial that has been leveled at Rushdoony for his deflation of the number of Jews killed by the Nazis. See Trueman, "Rushdoony," n.p.

(USA). Initially aligned with the political left, Rushdoony was for a time a member of the American Civil Liberties Union; however, his political ideas began to shift during the 1940s, while serving as a missionary to the Paiute and Shoshone native peoples at the Duck Valley Reservation in Nevada.¹⁷ There, he observed the effects of government welfare programs, which he believed fostered apathy, moral decline, and unrest. These missionary experiences, combined with his embrace of Reformed theology—particularly of the Dutch Neo-Calvinist tradition¹⁸—and presuppositional apologetic methodology, shaped Rushdoony’s development of a theological and ethical framework that would be called Christian Reconstruction. Michael J. McVicar described “Rushdoony’s primary innovation was his single-minded effort to popularize a pre-Enlightenment, medieval view of a God-centered world.”¹⁹ Though a relatively obscure figure in American political life, Hugh B. Urban rightly notes that “Rushdoony’s work has been remarkably influential in the shaping of the New Christian Right,” arguing that Rushdoony provided “the theological justification for the Christianization of politics that has become the central theme of the New Christian Right.”²⁰

Rushdoony also exerted significant influence on other Reconstructionist leaders, especially apologist Greg L. Bahnsen (1948–1995) and libertarian economist Gary North (1942–2022).²¹ The

17. The encyclopedia entry on Rushdoony in *American Conservatism*, authored by Roger Schultz, an historian at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA, who has been published in Reconstructionist works, indicates that Rushdoony had been a missionary to India, seemingly confusing ‘Indians’ whose country of origin is India, with native peoples in North America. Schultz, “Rushdoony,” 754.

18. Rushdoony is not treated in recent major studies of Neo-Calvinism. See Sutanto and Brock, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism*; and Brock and Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism*.

19. McVicar, “The Libertarian Theocrats,” 5. Given Reconstructionists’ antipathy toward the ‘dualism’ of medieval theology there is an irony in noting Rushdoony’s push for a return to medieval Christendom. See Rushdoony, *The One and the Many*.

20. Urban, *The Secrets of the Kingdom*, 38.

21. For quite a critical look at the broader world of Christian Reconstruction see Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*.

term “Christian Reconstruction” itself seems to have originated with North, who claimed to have coined it for the name of his *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, whose first edition was published in 1974.²² Among these figures, Bahnsen stood out as the most rigorous thinker, offering scholarly analyses of Theonomy’s core themes—especially the relationship between Old Testament law and Christian ethics—in his works *Theonomy and Christian Ethics* and *By This Standard*.²³ North, who was Rushdoony’s son-in-law, eventually experienced a bitter falling out with him, which led North to leave Vallecito and the Chalcedon Foundation and relocate to Tyler, Texas, where he established Geneva Ministries and the Institute for Christian Economics. The split, along with Bahnsen’s death, contributed to the movement’s decline. Figures such as Douglas Wilson, Peter J. Leithart, and James B. Jordan, who had varying degrees of association with Reconstructionism, eventually distanced themselves from its main elements of thought.²⁴ After Boot, the next most influential Reconstructionist today is P. Andrew Sandlin, an EICC fellow, who worked with Rushdoony nearer the end of the latter’s life.²⁵

Navigating “Theonomy”

One of those key elements of Reconstructionism is the political-theological concept of “theonomy.” The term, a neologism, is derived from the combination of the Greek words θεός and νόμος and can be translated simply as “God’s law.” Yet, as Neo-Calvinist Robert D. Knudsen (1924–2000) argued, “If one uses the term *theonomy*, however, he should be clear as to what he means, more particularly, what he means by God’s law.”²⁶

22. *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 1.1 (Summer 1974). Though Mark Rushdoony has recently argued that his father first coined the term in a letter dated 1965. See Rushdoony, “What is Christian Reconstruction?” 2.

23. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*; and Bahnsen, *By This Standard*. Compare with Cunningham, *How Firm a Foundation?*

24. Wilson, “Battlefield Surgery,” 17. Compare with Gribben, *Survival and Resistance*. Wilson refers to himself as a “general equity” Theonomist. Wilson, *Mere Christendom*, 165.

25. Sandlin, *A Comprehensive Faith*, 7–20, 239–42.

26. Knudsen, “May We Use the Term Theonomy...?” 35.

Though its use became common in late-twentieth-century American Reformed theology, theonomy has a provenance in English that stretches back at least until the late-eighteenth century. For instance, the British satirist Thomas James Mathias (c. 1754–1835) may have been the first to use it in English in his poem *The Shade of Alexander Pope on the Banks of the Thames* (1799). In it, Mathias spoke of “the sublime, but often fanciful theology, or as I would rather term it, the Theonomy, exhibited in the Timaeus of Plato, and more fully in the commentary of Proclus.”²⁷ Beyond the Reconstructionists’ theological use of the term in the twentieth century, theonomy was fundamental to the writings of liberal Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), who used it in the context of religious socialism. Though he did not offer a systematic treatment of theonomy, the concept nevertheless undergirded his thought. Tillich argued that theonomy was the Spirit-wrought synthesis between the dialectic of arbitrary autonomy (self-rule) and tyrannical heteronomy (other-rule). Instead, theonomy (divine-rule) is synthesized culturally as “the unity of holy form and holy content in a concrete historical situation.”²⁸

Theonomy as a term was also used theologically outside of twentieth-century Protestantism. German Cardinal Walter Kasper spoke of “theonomie” in his 1987 essay, “Autonomie und Theonomie,” correcting the confused relation between the two sources of law in the history of thought.²⁹ According to Kasper, autonomy and theonomy are not antithetical, rather true human autonomy presupposes theonomy. Kasper contrasted the traditional ordering of this harmonious relationship against the modern rationalist reversal that he locates in the thought of René Descartes (1596–1650). To highlight the contrast, Kasper pit Descartes against St.

27. Mathias, *The Shade*, 54. For Mathias see Mabbett, *Thomas James Mathias*.

28. For Tillich on theonomy see Tritten, “First Philosophy,” 29–52; Reijnen, “Protestantism,” 279–92. Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986), had a similar understanding of autonomy and theonomy, arguing against their antithetical relationship due to the human’s relation to God. Thielicke, *Modern Faith*, 14–15, 300–16.

29. Kasper, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 72–103. English translation: Kasper, *Theology and Church*, 32–53.

Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), who represented the classic view of the autonomy/theonomy relationship:

Aquinas maintains an autonomy that is founded on theonomy, Descartes a theonomy founded on autonomy. In Aquinas the movement starts from God and returns to God by way of the human being. In Descartes the movement begins with the human being and returns to the human being by way of the idea of God. In Aquinas God is the premise for human beings. In Descartes the human being presupposes God, as the condition that makes him possible. So in Descartes we see a Copernican revolution resulting in a new anthropocentrism. The human being becomes the starting point of reality and its point of reference.³⁰

It is worth noting that autonomy's harmonious relationship with theonomy is not the exclusive domain of Roman Catholic theology. Cornelius Jaarsma (1897–1966) of Calvin College, argued that the Dutch Neo-Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) similarly related human autonomy to theonomy. In his dissertation on Bavinck's educational philosophy Jaarsma says that,

Bavinck gives to human autonomy a subordinate place and makes it dependent upon a theonomy in which man is subject to the objective and inherent law of God. Autonomy in science, art, economics, etc. can be maintained in an analogical sense, in which these fields of human knowledge and endeavor have their own data and principles of control, but not apart from the absolute norms discovered in reality as a whole. Theonomy represents the whole within which autonomy functions, and in the light of which it must be evaluated.³¹

Though modern Reconstructionists would chafe at the comparison with Platonism, Tillich, or Thomism, Boot's hard bifurcation of autonomy and theonomy nevertheless shares greater affinity with Tillich's more-so than with Thomas' or Bavinck's proportional alignment of the two. For Boot, "Theonomy simply means God's law and implies the abiding validity of the moral law in every sphere of life, including the civil, so that the general equity of

30. Kasper, "Autonomy and Theonomy," 40.

31. Jaarsma, "The Educational Philosophy of Herman Bavinck," 270–71. For Thomism's influence on Bavinck see Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 1–56.

those laws with civil or judicial implications should be candidly applied in society.”³² One must choose between the two laws, the consequences of such choice are dire: “The choice is theonomy (God’s law) or autonomy (man’s self-law), and autonomy leads inexorably to either anarchy or totalitarianism.”³³ This is, one must imagine, the only acceptable dualism for Boot. Curiously, his use of autonomy could include Tillich’s heteronomy, as both autonomy and heteronomy locate law in the human and not in God. As with Tillich, human-centered law (whether autonomous or heteronomous) stands in an antithetical relation to theonomy. Whereas Kasper and Bavinck put theonomy and autonomy into a synthetic relationship where the latter is grounded by and ordered to the former.³⁴

For the purposes of this essay, the term “theonomy” is used in a Christian Reconstructionist context. In this paper, when Theonomy is capitalized, it refers to the movement and is used synonymously with Christian Reconstruction and its ideals, otherwise, in its non-capitalized form, theonomy refers generally to divine law as a subset of Christian Reconstruction’s larger project.³⁵ As such, I adopt James Jordan’s definition of Theonomy, which frames the movement as emphasizing God’s sovereignty under three main principles: postmillennial eschatology, presuppositional apologetics as developed by Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), and the enduring authority of Old Testament law.³⁶ This framework is some-

32. Boot, *The Mission of God*, 62. Boot is no follower of Tillich, nevertheless he has used the liberal theologian positively in the past. In an essay on Darwinism in the first issue of *Jubilee*, Boot used a definition of religion by Tillich that he described as being “as good as any.” Boot, “The Descent of Darwin,” 9.

33. Boot, *Mission of God*, 262.

34. For Bavinck and synthesis, see Sutanto, “From Antithesis to Synthesis,” 348–74.

35. There is a rough analogue to Christian Reconstruction in the more academically sophisticated movement of Roman Catholic integralism. Nowitz, “Fusionism,” 14–26; Spadaro and Figueroa, “Evangelical Fundamentalism,” n.p.

36. Jordan, “The Reconstructionist Movement,” 1. Rushdoony’s first book was a study of Van Til’s thought, see Rushdoony, *By What Standard?* Rushdoony described Van Til’s influence on his thought in a series of essays col-

times referred to as “Dominion Theology,” reflecting its optimistic postmillennial vision of a Christianized society preceding Christ’s return. Scholars have noted, however, a distinction between Theonomy and Dominion Theology, even while acknowledging that there is significant overlap between the two. In presuppositionalism, the claim is that true knowledge requires explicit recognition of Jesus Christ’s lordship. Theonomists argue that, upon Christ’s postmillennial return, society will be governed by Mosaic law. These three pillars of presuppositionalism, postmillennialism, and theonomy collectively articulate their vision of the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation.

Theonomy in Canada: Still Waters Revival

Christian Reconstruction is a movement that began in mid-twentieth-century America and remained largely a phenomenon within American Reformed theology. Its influence would eventually be felt in other countries in the West, particularly those in the British Commonwealth, including Canada. There, the movement began amongst churches related to the Reformed Presbyterian Church of the North America (RPCNA), particularly the Puritan Reformed Church of Edmonton (PRCE) pastored by Reg and Greg Barrow. It was through their book and tape publishing ministry, Still Waters Revival Books, that Theonomy slowly began to spread in Canada and eventually across large parts of the world.

The Barrow brothers had grown up in the fundamentalist wing of Canadian Presbyterianism and were members at Bible Presbyterian Church of Edmonton (BPCE) which was in turn a member of the Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC) denomination. In America, the BPC had split from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC)—the church of Van Til, Rushdoony, and Bahnsen—that in turn had earlier split from the Presbyterian Church (USA) during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the 1930s over the mainline church’s liberalism.³⁷ The BPC’s

lected in Rushdoony, *Faith & Action*, 1:559–80. See also Rushdoony, “The One and Many Problem,” 339–48.

37. Compare with Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country*.

differences with the OPC largely had to do with matters pertaining to fundamentalism,³⁸ with the BPC maintaining its relation to the movement—particularly its premillennial eschatology—whereas the OPC, under the leadership of J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), stuck closely to the Presbyterianism of the Westminster Standards. Over time, the Barrows developed an interest in a stricter form of Reformed theology, particularly that of the Scottish Covenanter tradition, and removed themselves from BPC to form the Puritan Reformed Church of Edmonton in keeping with their growing Covenanter ideals.

The Covenanters were a group of seventeenth-century Presbyterians in Scotland who swore an oath to the National Covenant of 1638 at the Scottish Assembly, uniting the Scots against England in the larger Wars of the Three Kingdoms (1639–1653). They also rejected all forms of episcopal church government as well as the Book of Common Prayer that had been imposed upon Scotland by the English crown in 1637.³⁹ The Covenanters fought against the Scottish-born English king Charles I (1600–1649) in the Bishops' Wars (1639–1640) and joined with Oliver Cromwell (1559–1658) and the Parliamentary Army in the English Civil Wars (1642–1651). Cromwell, an Independent, promised the Scots that Presbyterian church government would form the state churches in England and Ireland, as well as in Scotland, after victory was attained against the Royalists. The Scots signed the Solemn League and Covenant that was agreed to by the English Parliament and the Westminster Assembly in 1643.⁴⁰ After the regicide, the Independents in Parliament rejected the Presbyterian stipulation and as a result the Covenanters joined Charles II (1630–1685), who had subscribed to the Solemn League and Covenant in 1650, in fighting against Parliament. After the 1660 Restoration, Charles II was made king in England and reneged on his agreement with the Covenanters and imposed episcopacy on Scotland. The Covenanters refused to submit to this form of

38. Its early founders, such as J. Oliver Buswell (1895–1977) and Carl McIntire (1906–2002), were key figures in American fundamentalism.

39. Douglas, *Light in the North*.

40. Van Dixhoorn, "Scottish Influence," 55–88.

church government and were summarily persecuted by the king. After several military engagements between the Covenanters and the king's armies, peace was attained at the Glorious Revolution of 1688 wherein Presbyterianism was made the state church of Scotland through the Revolution Settlement.⁴¹

Various Presbyterian denominations see themselves as inheritors of the Covenanting tradition, including the RPCNA.⁴² Their defining beliefs include exclusive psalmody, presbyterian ecclesiology, Reformed confessionalism, and an abiding view of the Covenant. The Covenanters believed that Commonwealth nations are still in covenant with God yet are in violation of its terms so long as Presbyterianism was not the state church in these respective nations, including Canada. The Covenanter tradition in Canada traces back to the early nineteenth century, when Scots-Irish missionaries arrived in the Maritime provinces.⁴³ After taking root in the east, the Covenanters slowly spread to the western parts of Canada in the early twentieth-century, taking root in Alberta.⁴⁴ Eldon Hay described the testimony of the early missionaries to Canada as “inevitably dogmatic and theological.” He explained the harsh political nature of their influence: “The gospel they preached meant difference, distinctiveness, frequently disdain. Covenanter converts were not only or merely centred in Christ, in the Church; they were also inculcated into a new way of understanding the state and the body politic.”⁴⁵ This harshness would shape the continuing legacy of the Covenanters in Canada into the late-twentieth century.

While the RPCUS traces its origins to the Covenanters, the Barrow brothers did not believe that the denomination was true to its tradition. They founded the PRCE with the aim of spreading Covenanter thought more broadly, and founded Still Waters Revival Books (SWRB), to make reprinted texts from the Covenanting tradition and other works of Puritan and Reformed theology

41. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland*, 253–55.

42. Edgar, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*.

43. Hay, *The Covenanters in Canada*.

44. Hay, *The Covenanters in Canada*, 193–206.

45. Hay, *The Covenanters in Canada*, 13–14.

accessible and cost-effective.⁴⁶ Stephen Westcott argued that SWRB was not as selective or as expensive as other publishers like the Banner of Truth Trust, a British publisher that had been re-printing Reformed reprints since the earlier twentieth century:

Still Waters address this problem by taking gems that publishers would not risk reprinting in the normal fashion, and reproducing them in photocopied format. The result is then bound, for cheapness and simplicity, edgewise, making a book that has the page tops towards the spine of the opened page, and displays two leaves at a time. The binding is of two kinds—a simple “comb” type edgebind, or durable hardcover glued version (one cheaper than the other).⁴⁷

SWRB made early and effective use of the internet by setting up a website and making their scanned inventory available for purchase through CD-ROM and eventually for download from their website.⁴⁸

As Reg Barrow was mining the Covenanter past, he encountered Theonomist writings and, becoming convinced of their views, began to publicly promote them in 1988. The break with BPCE occurred over the Barrows’ developing postmillennialism that did not square with the church’s premillennialism.⁴⁹ PRCE was founded in 1989 during a gathering of RPCNA members that had come to Edmonton for the Christian Heritage Party of Canada’s national convention. Joe Morecraft III, a leading figure in the RPCNA, was also a key Reconstructionist and it was through his influence that the Barrows encountered Rushdoony’s Chalcedon Foundation. After establishing PRCE, Greg Barrow was ordained as a ruling elder in 1990. The church hosted its first SWRB conference in May 1990, where Kenneth Talbot (1954–2022), president of Whitefield Theological Seminary in Florida, spoke on Christian education. Eventually the conference was named the “Canadian Reconstruction Conference” and in 1992, Greg Bahnsen spoke on a variety of topics including postmillennial eschatology, covenant

46. Westcott, “Still Waters Revival,” 32–35.

47. Westcott, “Still Waters Revival,” 34.

48. SWRB maintains two websites: <https://www.swrb.com> and <https://www.puritandownloads.com>.

49. Wagner, “Remnant Restored,” n.p.

theology, the apologetics of Van Til, and theonomy.⁵⁰ The PRCE began to grow in influence and drew several churches in western Canada into its association, beginning with a congregation in Prince George, British Columbia. The Canadian churches met like-minded churches in the United States and eventually formed a denomination called the Reformation Presbyterian Church in 1995. The Barrows took a much stronger turn towards the Covenanters at this time and in 1996 reconstituted PRCE more strictly in line with the Solemn League and Covenant. Controversy with the new denomination ensued and PRCE removed itself and adopted the constitution of the Church of Scotland as it was held before the time of Covenanter persecution in the seventeenth century. Going forward, the Barrows, PRCE, and SWRB turned their attention largely to matters dealing with Covenanter thought and history, which they continue to promote through their website, without much reference to Christian Reconstruction.

Joe Boot and the Ezra Institute

After the slow move away from Reconstructionism by the Barrows, the movement came into a lull through the remainder of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, as it did in the United States, largely after the deaths of Rushdoony and Bahnsen.⁵¹ It was not until the early 2000s when Theonomy would start to attract attention again in Canada, with its center not in Alberta but in southwestern Ontario, through the influence of Boot and the EICC.

Born in Swindon, England, in 1974 to British missionaries to Pakistan, Joseph Boot grew up in England where, at the age of 18,

50. Conference talks available in audio from *Covenant Media Foundation*, <https://store.cmfnow.com/DVD200-Canadian-Reconstruction-Conference-Set-p258401223>.

51. One way to obtain Reconstructionist writings in Canada was to visit Reformation Book Service in Toronto, ON, operated by the late Bob Shaker, who had a significant number of their works for sale on his shelves, including editions of North's *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*. This author was one of countless happy customers who bought numerous Theonomist writings, including a set of JCR. For Shaker see, Haykin, "Bob Shaker," n.p.

he began training for a diploma in theology at Birmingham Christian College, founded in 1953 by Anglo-Canadian fundamentalist Henry Brash Bonsall (1905–1990).⁵² Originally a Presbyterian, Bonsall became a Pentecostal leader in the UK, and given the Boots' charismatic leanings, it is not surprising that their son would attend Bonsall's school that Raymond Pfister described as an "interdenominational bridge . . . built between evangelical doctrine and charismatic experience."⁵³ He studied vocational ministry at a school in Nottingham for another year and later conducted graduate studies at Cliff College in Derbyshire, a small Christian theological college and approved partner of the University of Manchester. Boot also served in Christian ministry in the UK both as an evangelist with a Christian theater company in Dudley, the West Midlands, called Saltmine Trust, and as an assistant pastor at Christ Church, Fulham, an Anglican church in London. In 2002, Boot and his family moved to Toronto, Canada, where he became the Canadian director of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), an apologetics ministry started by the late Indo-Canadian apologist Ravi Zacharias (1946–2020). Boot had encountered RZIM through their apologetics work in Oxford, England, where he was a lecturer at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics. Boot authored several books during his tenure with RZIM, including *Why I Still Believe* (2005) and *How Then Shall We Answer?* (2007).⁵⁴ After leaving RZIM Canada, Boot served as the founding pastor of Westminster Chapel, Toronto, in 2008, where he remained for fourteen years, and the founding president of the Ezra Institute in 2009, that he has since brought back to England with him as the Ezra Centre for Christian Thought while maintaining EICC locations in Canada and the United States.

52. McGavin, *Running for Revival*.

53. Pfister, "An Urgent Plea," 9.

54. Boot, *Why I Still Believe*; Boot, *How Then Shall We Answer?* Neither work mentions Rushdoony, though the influence of the Roman Catholic, Jansenist philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) is evident. See Boot, *Why I Still Believe*, 18–24, where he compares Pascal with Van Til; and Boot, *How Then Shall We Answer?* 50–51, 103–9. Given Boot's antipathy to the Catholicism of Aquinas, his admiration of Pascal is noteworthy.

*“The Source of Law”: The Mission of God, Puritanism, and
Natural Law*

Boot first published *The Mission of God* in 2014, a book that has helped revive Theonomy in the twenty-first century, through the now-defunct Canadian publisher Freedom Press International.⁵⁵ The second edition was self-published in 2016 under Ezra Press, the publishing arm of Boot’s think tank, the Ezra Institute for Contemporary Christianity. The book has now gone into a third, ten-year anniversary edition, that was published in 2024. The publication of *Mission of God* earned Boot a doctorate in “Christian Intellectual Thought” from Whitefield Theological Seminary that he obtained after he had published the book.⁵⁶ Boot’s central concern in *Mission of God* is missiology: “part of my motivation in writing this study is to help stimulate and encourage critical reflection on the biblical missiology that did so much to shape our liberties and free institutions that are eroding before our very eyes.”⁵⁷ He argues that in order to confront the moral and spiritual breakdown of society, the church needs to recover a holistic gospel of the kingdom that was exemplified by the Puritans and now the Theonomists.

Though he does not name them, Boot is critical of those who read the Puritans for their spirituality and disregard their doctrine of God’s lordship: “Is it not disingenuous to claim an affinity for the Puritans, delighting in the vitality of their prayers and piety whilst ignoring its source—their vision of God’s covenant and reign in history?”⁵⁸ He insists that “There is no accurate under-

55. Freedom Press International was run by Tristan Emmanuel, formerly an Orthodox Presbyterian minister who gained notoriety over his vitriolic engagement with Canadian politics. McDonald, *The Armageddon Factor*.

56. Whitefield Theological Seminary is an online, unaccredited seminary.

57. Book, *Mission of God*, 45.

58. Boot, *Mission of God*, 27. It is not clear whether Boot has in mind figures like Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who stressed Puritan piety. Yet even Lloyd-Jones valued Puritan teaching on the law. In *The Puritans*, he defended the early Puritans against the charge of ‘pietism’: “They were interested in the application of the Law of God in the life of the believer. They put this great emphasis upon ‘practising’ it. So you get their ‘casuistry’ and their dealing with ‘cases of conscience.’ That does lead to a kind of piety, but it is not the same thing as you

standing of John Knox, Samuel Rutherford, John Owen, John Elliot [sic], John Cotton or Oliver Cromwell to be had, whilst ignoring their view of Christ's present reign at God's right hand as King of kings and Lord of lords, to whom all men are subject, under whose law all men are held to account (whether king or commoner), and by whose gospel alone men can find redemption and restoration."⁵⁹ He points to the "contemporary evangelical indifference" to Puritanism as a reason that the Theonomists, whom he refers to as the Puritans' "most consistent modern heirs," have been denigrated in the church.⁶⁰ Boot argues that the Theonomists have been censured because "they have taken up and revived key elements in our Puritan heritage that the rest of the modern evangelical community has chosen to forget or ignore."⁶¹ He also overlooks substantial scholarship on the Puritan view of law, pre-eminently the work of Ernest F. Kevan (1903–1965), whose *Grace of Law* and *Moral Law* (the latter was described by Bahnsen as a "brilliant study"⁶²) are foundational studies of Puritanism and law, and are not sourced in any edition of *Mission of God*.⁶³ Drawing on the Puritan Anthony Burgess (1600–1663), also unmentioned in Boot's work, *Grace of Law* offers a nuanced picture of Puritan legal theory. Importantly, neither volume supports the claim that

have in Calvinistic Methodism. There, the emphasis was on the teaching of the Law and its application in the daily life of the Christian. Of course, I am not excluding the other element altogether, I am talking about the main emphasis; whereas in Calvinistic Methodism the great emphasis and stress was upon 'experience.'" Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans*, 204. One can find positive expositions of the Puritans and the law in other scholars of Puritanism such as J. I. Packer: "Even a cursory study of their life and thought will show us that what made the difference was this: not that the pull of the world on them was any less strong or insidious than it is on us, but rather that their minds and hearts were more deeply exercised in the law of God than ours are." See Packer, *Engaging the Written Word of God*, 102. See also Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 321–33.

59. Boot, *Mission of God*, 27. It is curious that he includes the Scottish Reformer John Knox in a list of puritans.

60. Boot, *Mission of God*, 27.

61. Boot, *Mission of God*, 27.

62. Bahnsen, "Introduction," 11.

63. Kevan, *The Grace of Law*; Kevan, *The Moral Law*. For Kevan, see Brown, *Ernest Kevan*.

Theonomy represents the consistent Puritan view of the law. The one mention of theonomy in *Grace of Law* comes near the end in a quote by P. T. Forsyth (1848–1921), whom Clyde Binfield called “a Barthian before Barth.”⁶⁴ Theonomy means that Christ is the law and Christians obey not merely as an “outward authoritative Law,” but as one that is interior and life-giving.⁶⁵

Boot often stresses the West’s moral and spiritual decline following its abandonment of Christianity. He calls for a return to the Puritans who taught that biblical law governs all spheres of life. Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), Puritan Parliamentarian and Lord Protector during the Interregnum, serves as Boot’s ideal Puritan/Theonomist—a political leader who honored God’s law and modeled a godly vision for society. Cromwell is “generally seen as the most important Puritan statesman in European history.”⁶⁶ Boot argues that the liberties enjoyed in the West are the fruit of Puritan cultural influence, and to reject them is to reject those benefits.

One of Boot’s targets in *Mission of God* is the concept of “dualism,” derived from pagan Greek philosophy, that posits a mutually exclusive contrast between God and nature. The Reformation dismantled this “secular-sacred” dichotomy by affirming the religious character of all aspects of human life. Boot traces the origins of dualistic thought to philosophers like Aristotle and his form/matter distinction, which Boot argues has exerted a negative influence on Christian theology since the early church, particularly through figures such as Marcion (c. 110–160), who features prominently in his analysis.⁶⁷ According to Boot, the post-Puritan era has been characterized by a “progressive re-Hellenization,” reflecting a regressive movement back toward dualisms not only of form and matter, but also of Thomism’s nature and grace, that

64. Binfield, “Peter Taylor Forsyth,” 33.

65. “Theonomy is not heteronomy. He, our law, becomes also our life.” Forsyth, “The Evangelical Churches,” 578, as quoted in Kevan, *Grace of Law*, 268.

66. Boot, *Mission of God*, 54.

67. Boot, *Mission of God*, 99.

undermine a holistic Christian worldview.⁶⁸ Christianity must reclaim its non-dualistic roots found in the Old Testament and championed by the Puritans. Instead, much of the modern church remains entangled in variations of the Marcionite heresy that pits law against gospel, Old against New Testament—most notably the dispensational premillennialism associated with “J. N. Darby and C. I. Schofield [sic].”⁶⁹ This framework promotes a dualism that elevates the spirit while neglecting the body, shaping evangelistic efforts that prioritize salvation at the expense of cultural dominion. Premillennialists are retreatists, and what the church requires is the Puritan postmillennial vision: non-dualistic, optimistic, and triumphant. Such an eschatology aligns with the reconstruction of society under God’s law, as revealed in the Old Testament and revived during the Reformation. The Enlightenment initiated the West’s departure from this divine order, and the resurgence of dualism within the church signals a subtle reversion to Marcionism.

In addition to his critique of premillennialism, Boot contends that certain expressions of “Reformed Two Kingdoms” (R2K) theology also reflect a form of Marcionite dualism.⁷⁰ In a section titled “Cultural Cowardice,” Boot challenges theologian Michael S. Horton, accusing him of promoting cultural retreat. Although Boot dedicates fifteen pages to criticizing Horton, his focus is directed to a single article published in *9Marks* journal and neglects his sizeable and important body of scholarship.⁷¹ Boot claims that Horton’s two kingdoms theology “seems to be that of *double*

68. This recalls Adolf von Harnack’s (1851–1930) “Hellenization Thesis,” though Boot is influenced in his thinking on this by the Dutch Neo-Calvinist philosopher of jurisprudence, Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977). See Dooyeweerd, *The Roots of Western Culture*.

69. Boot, *Mission of God*, 85.

70. Boot only criticizes the R2K view taught by theologians at Westminster Seminary California (such as Michael Horton, R. Scott Clark, and especially David VanDrunen), not allowing for the variety and nuance of two kingdoms views. For a nuanced study see, Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding*; Littlejohn, *The Two Kingdoms*.

71. Horton, “Transforming Culture,” n.p. Boot cites the article with a different URL with the date of December 2007.

sovereignty or two kingdoms (with similarities to the nature/grace dualism of scholastic philosophy).”⁷² Boot maintains that Horton’s sharp distinction between law and gospel—described by him as “not a Reformed perspective”—gives rise to “neo-Marcionite tendencies,” which contribute to an “antinomian tone” in his writings.⁷³ Two kingdoms theology “leaves space for [Horton’s] ‘secular callings’ (religiously neutral spheres) and ‘common grace’ (or natural theology/law) as areas where a specifically biblical and Christian approach to life is completely unnecessary, from education, to arts, politics and science.” This “strange dualism” is due to Horton’s view of Christ’s absence from the earth.⁷⁴ Boot’s critiques of premillennialism and two kingdoms theology serve to underscore his call for a renewed engagement with the theological vision of the Puritans and contemporary Theonomists.

Puritanism and Natural Law

Boot observes that we inhabit a historically rootless and “barbarian” culture that “ceases to value and identify with the past” and “has no ability to navigate forward responsibly.”⁷⁵ Christians approach history from a “humanistic and antinomian” standpoint, seduced by occult-inspired “positive thinking” philosophies, embracing a form of retreatism that avoids the burdens of cultural engagement. Yet, for all his diagnoses, Boot’s historiographical method fails to offer a constructive path forward. His selective use of history serves less to recover a “usable past” than to model a

72. Boot, *Mission of God*, 380. Emphasis his.

73. Boot, *Mission of God*, 389. Boot refers to Horton as having Marcionite tendencies. Boot, *Mission of God*, 386. His claim that Horton’s two-kingdoms theology is not Reformed is historically untenable. As Robbie Crouse argues, Horton’s version of the two kingdoms is a modification of views espoused at the Reformation, both by Lutherans and the Reformed. Crouse, *Two Kingdoms & Two Cities*, 89–119.

74. Boot, *Mission of God*, 391.

75. Boot, *Mission of God*, 109–10.

cautionary example of how not to allow ideology to shape historical reflection.⁷⁶

One example will have to suffice, namely that of the Scottish Puritan Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661), who appears a number of times in *Mission of God* and is often used by Theonomists as a model of Puritan jurisprudence.⁷⁷ Boot appeals to Rutherford's *Lex, Rex* (1644) to address what he identifies as a foundational question in political theology “about the *source* of law.”⁷⁸ Boot summarizes Rutherford's position by highlighting the Puritan critique of “papist” views, particularly the argument that although the monarch is nominally subject to God, in practice he operates autonomously, unbound by divine law. Drawing exclusively from New Zealand pastor Richard Flinn's article in the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Boot contends that “the heart of the Calvinist view of biblical political theory is that the civil government must be under God's law or be blasphemous.”⁷⁹

Herein lies a significant tension for Boot's thesis. Rutherford's understanding of divine law is situated within the scholastic natural law tradition that flows through Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and ultimately Calvin. *Lex, Rex* is not merely a Theonomic manifesto but a Reformed scholastic engagement with classical and medieval sources. Among the ancient authors cited, Aristotle and Augustine appear most frequently, and Rutherford often engages Roman Catholic natural law theorists such as Aquinas. As historian John Coffey notes, “Although written by a Calvinist, it was in some ways a deeply Thomistic book.” According to Coffey, Rutherford repeatedly invoked Aquinas's dictum, often maligned by Theonomists, that “grace does not destroy nature but perfects it,” a “maxim [that] is perhaps the key to *Lex, Rex*, because

76. For Reformed theology and the “usable past,” see, Clary, *Reformed Evangelicalism*.

77. Though Rutherford does not appear in the index, he is discussed in Boot, *Mission of God*, 27, 64, 266, 310. An edition of *Lex, Rex* was recently published with an introduction by Douglas Wilson. Rutherford, *Lex, Rex*, i–viii.

78. Boot, *Mission of God*, 266. Emphasis his.

79. Boot, *Mission of God*, 266. Flinn, “Rutherford and Political Theory,” 65–98. For Flinn and Theonomy in New Zealand see, Haverland, “Theonomy,” n.p.

Rutherford insisted throughout on the compatibility of natural reason's conclusions and God's revelation in Scripture."⁸⁰ Coffey argues that Rutherford viewed the Old Testament as a "natural-law casebook," illustrating how principles discernible through "human reason" could be validated by Scripture.⁸¹ This was possible because the same God who authored Scripture also inscribed moral law on the human conscience (Rom 2:15). As Rutherford wrote, "the Scripture's arguments may be drawn out of the school of nature."⁸² While he recognized that unaided reason could not lead to salvation, he affirmed its role in the moral and legal order of society. Nevertheless, "Scripture, therefore, may not have added much to what ontologically speaking was part of natural law, but it added immeasurably to what epistemologically speaking men could know through natural reason."⁸³

This context poses a dilemma for Boot's project in *Mission of God*, which asserts, "[F]or Christians to try and save modern civilization by an appeal to natural law (disconnected from the God of Scripture and his revealed law), is to appeal to classical philosophy and constitutes a death wish."⁸⁴ Yet the very Puritans Boot champions were shaped by the natural law tradition, both pagan and Christian.⁸⁵ Ironically, his rejection of natural law deprives his critique of post-Christendom Canada of a powerful resource. The Puritans employed natural law to develop a vision of society rooted in divine order, both biblical and creational. Abandoning this heritage risks intellectual and cultural incoherence. Consider Lee

80. Coffey, *Politics*, 152–53. Compare with Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen*. See also the classic essay Donnelly, "Calvinist Thomism," 441–55, and the collection of essays in Svennson and VanDrunen, eds., *Aquinas Amongst the Protestants*.

81. Coffey, *Politics*, 153.

82. Rutherford, *Lex*, cited in Coffey, *Politics*, 153. For Puritanism and natural theology see Marshall, *Puritanism and Natural Theology*.

83. Coffey, *Politics*, 154.

84. Boot, *Mission of God*, 264.

85. Boot does not engage in the definitive study Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law*. Grabill traces the influence of the medieval natural law tradition on Protestantism, and its use in John Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Johannes Althusius (1563–1638), and Francis Turretin (1623–1687). See also Jennifer Herdt, "Natural Law in Protestant Christianity," 155–78.

Gibbs's assessment of the Puritan theologian William Ames (1576–1633): "Ames' theory of natural law has historical importance because of its contribution to the formulation of fundamental doctrines upon which modern democratic institutions were raised—such doctrines as the duties and inalienable rights of individual citizens, the social contract or government by consent of the people, and the right of resistance when a government exceeds the bounds of its authority."⁸⁶ These are precisely the kinds of ideas that animate Boot's broader mission, yet by rejecting natural law, he turns away from one of the very means that God has used to govern society—one the Puritan tradition used effectively.⁸⁷ Even Oliver Cromwell, Boot's paradigmatic Puritan statesman, recognized the social cohesion made possible through what Anthony Fletcher describes as Cromwell's "natural law contractualism."⁸⁸

Conclusion

In post-Christendom Canada, Theonomy offers a countercultural vision for Christian public engagement, whether that of the Barrows and SWRB or Boot and EICC. As Canadian society increasingly marginalizes Christian influence, Theonomy asserts the enduring relevance of God's law for every sphere of life. It calls for a recovery of a comprehensive Christian worldview in which Christ's lordship is fiercely proclaimed not only in the church but also in the public square. Rather than retreating into a privatized faith, Theonomists like Boot seek to challenge the secular assumption that law and governance are neutral or autonomous. In this framework, divine law serves as the ultimate standard for justice, offering an alternative to the moral relativism that characterizes much of Canadian political discourse. Theonomy in Canada is framed as a principled, if not hostile, response to cultural decline. Canadian Reconstructionists argue that the way

86. Gibbs, "The Puritan Natural Law," 37.

87. See Forsyth, *Common Law*; Raath and de Freitas, "From Luther," 157–77.

88. Fletcher, "Oliver Cromwell and the Godly Nation," 235.

forward lies not in compromise or withdrawal, but in asserting God's law over all creation without compromise and applying His law as the foundation for a just society. Though Theonomy stands self-consciously within the Reformed and Puritan tradition, its failure to make use of intellectual tools like natural law theory renders their Puritan identity dubious and hinders their ability to engage culture as the Puritans did. While Theonomy may provoke resistance, for Boot, "Only in this way will the gospel be unhindered and the wisdom and renewing power of God be effectively released again in our time."⁸⁹

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89. Boot, "Churchianity or Christianity," n.p.

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