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By Allen Mendenhall

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R.J. Rushdoony published *The Messianic Character of American Education* in 1963 as American troop levels were surging in Vietnam, Americans were digging bomb shelters in their backyards, hippies were experimenting with recreational drugs and free love and generating an antiauthoritarian counterculture, the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum even against state-sponsored opposition, President Kennedy was assassinated, music and fashion were changing, a second wave of feminism was spreading after the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Great Society programs were being proposed, and governments everywhere were experimenting with new forms of espionage and intelligence-gathering. Statism was on the rise. It isn't surprising that the American educational system, both in terms of standards and curriculum, was destabilized during this time.

“Education in this era,” Rushdoony claimed, “is a messianic and utopian movement” for which the state had “become the saving institution” and the schools proclaimers of “a new gospel of salvation.” Against the “superimposition of the state ... on every order of life and every sphere of human activity,” Rushdoony sought to restore education to its classical, religious foundations. His book tracts the growth of statist education from the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century and profiles several educators (too many to list) who represent pedagogical paradigm shifts.

A Presbyterian theologian, philosopher, author, and grassroots organizer, Rushdoony was influenced by apologist Cornelius Van Til and opposed Statism, which he considered idolatry if not a religion. He was at the forefront of the Christian homeschool movement and challenged the fashionable practices and ideals that elected officials and public school administrators were championing in government schools at the expense of biblical education.

“Education today,” Rushdoony said, “occupies an equivocal position in contemporary life, functioning both as a scapegoat for every failure and as a catch-all for every hope and

expectation of society.” It is striking the extent to which these words still describe the current morass in public education.

The U.S. Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 with bipartisan support and thereby expanded the role of the federal government in local education to unprecedented levels. This Act imposed strict but arbitrary guidelines on teachers, shifted decisions from local school boards to the federal government, mandated school accountability to the federal government, and standardized student testing. Such centralization of power exceeded anything that Plato could have imagined for his fictional Republic.

And the federal government was not done. Government subsidized failure in the economy resulted in the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009, which redistributed \$100 billion (the figure differs from analyst to analyst) from taxpayers to the public education system to prevent teacher layoffs; increase teacher salaries; fund Pell-Grants, special education, and the Head Start Program; and encourage the construction and repair of school facilities. This Act was not benevolent or charitable; it gave away money taken by force and demanded, in return, the allegiance and obedience of local schools and school boards. Nor was the Act, as the White House maintains, part of a “nationwide effort to create jobs and transform our economy to compete in the 21st century.” Instead it was a mechanism to ensure the continued worship and viability of state education; for the system works only if its members remain happy and the illusion of integrity and protection can be maintained.

As if that were not enough, President Obama, in his State of the Union Address this year, proposed “early learning” that would compel parents to turn their children over to the government at a younger age. Rather than attending private preschools, churches, synagogues, or daycares of their parents’ choosing, four year olds apparently will become indoctrinated into Statism and all its accessory ideologies (radical egalitarianism, nationalism, central planning) in the public schools before they can even read or write. The pretext for “early learning” is that education must be universal so that American children can excel and compete in a global workforce; but a more sinister and unstated purpose is, in Rushdoony’s words, “the exaltation of the group, whether humanity, democracy, the proletariat or the folk,” which “has steadily become religious, and the state school a religious institution.”

Rushdoony submits that the following assumptions undergird Statism:

1. That “the child is the child of the state or the property of the state, which can therefore interfere extensively with parental authority.”
2. That “[t]he state ‘priesthood’ of educators are best able to rear the child and prepare him for life, viewed as statist life.”

3. That “Statist education is alone ‘objective’ and hence true, the state having the impartiality and transcendence of a god.”

Accordingly, he says, statist education is an “entrance into the true catholicity of the civil religion of the modern state.” Established ostensibly to teach our children, public schools in America socialize and shape children to be allegedly upstanding citizens in an allegedly participatory democracy. They normalize the idea that the State is the paternal authority to which biological parents must turn for the rearing and nurturing of their children.

As go the children, so goes society. Rushdoony himself puts it this way: “If the child educationally belongs to the state and to its care or oversight, it is then a far lesser thing to ask that property be likewise surrendered to the state.” Why should we be surprised when the state exercises its eminent domain powers if that which is, or ought to be, most precious to us — our children — has been voluntarily handed over to the government? In other words, public schools are merely one mechanism among many for the State to supervise and discipline our children into psychological obedience and conformity so that it might insert itself into other areas of life, including private ownership. Children become adults and pass their inculcated values onto their children; the cycle continues, the State ever-increasing its power over time, involving itself with matters once thought to be outside the province of government.

“Since in the civil religion the state is god, and there is no right beyond the state (or the state’s concept of its goal and the goal for humanity),” explains Rushdoony, “it follows that right is what the state requires, and the normal or healthy man that which the society requires man to be.” The control of a few zealots can be preserved only when and if a vast majority can be trained into docile submission to compulsive standards and regulations, persistently instructed to accept certain ideas and habits as unconditionally true, and versed in the rhetoric of Statism and punished for any deviation therewith. The State offers lavish incentives and rewards (public loans, scholarships, grants, public sector jobs, benefits) for proselytizing on behalf of its religion.

Acts 5:29 teaches that it is proper to disobey State dictates that are contrary to God’s instruction. The first two commandments listed in Exodus 20 prohibit our present idolization of the State as well as the iconography, narratives, and rituals that seek to sanctify and validate the religion of Statism. The history of Western Civilization teaches that Christians have, at various times and to various degrees since the age of Christ, struggled against oppressive State power. Resisting the public education system in America is not just a good idea; it is a duty.

Not only proponents of Christian private schools and homeschooling are aware of the increasing messianic justifications for, and celebrations of, state education. As early as 1872, Friedrich Nietzsche, who despised Christianity, acknowledged that government subsidized education was meant to condition the masses into following “the guiding star of the State!”

That so many politicians and teachers fail to acknowledge this fact suggests they are either willingly complicit or thoroughly indoctrinated.

Fifty years after publishing *The Messianic Character of American Education*, Rushdoony remains relevant and perhaps even more important than he was then. His words endure as a frightening reminder of what needs to be done: “There is no escaping this dilemma of [educational] socialization, with its subversion of learning to the goals of the state, *except by the radical disestablishment of the schools, the separation of school and state.*” May the disestablishment and separation begin.

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