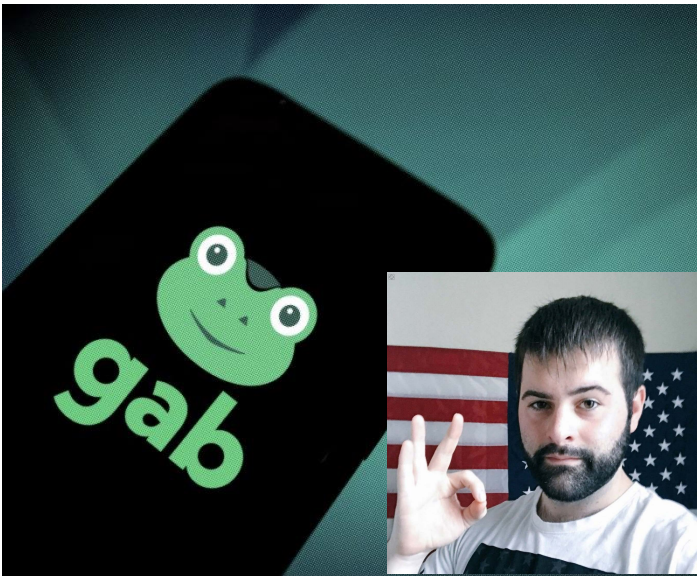


The Critic

Why conservatives shouldn't migrate to Gab



If Gab's ideal of freedom is defined by Christian Reconstructionists and fascist philosophers, then free speech will be the means, rather than the end, of the reconstruction of social media

ARTILLERY ROW

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By

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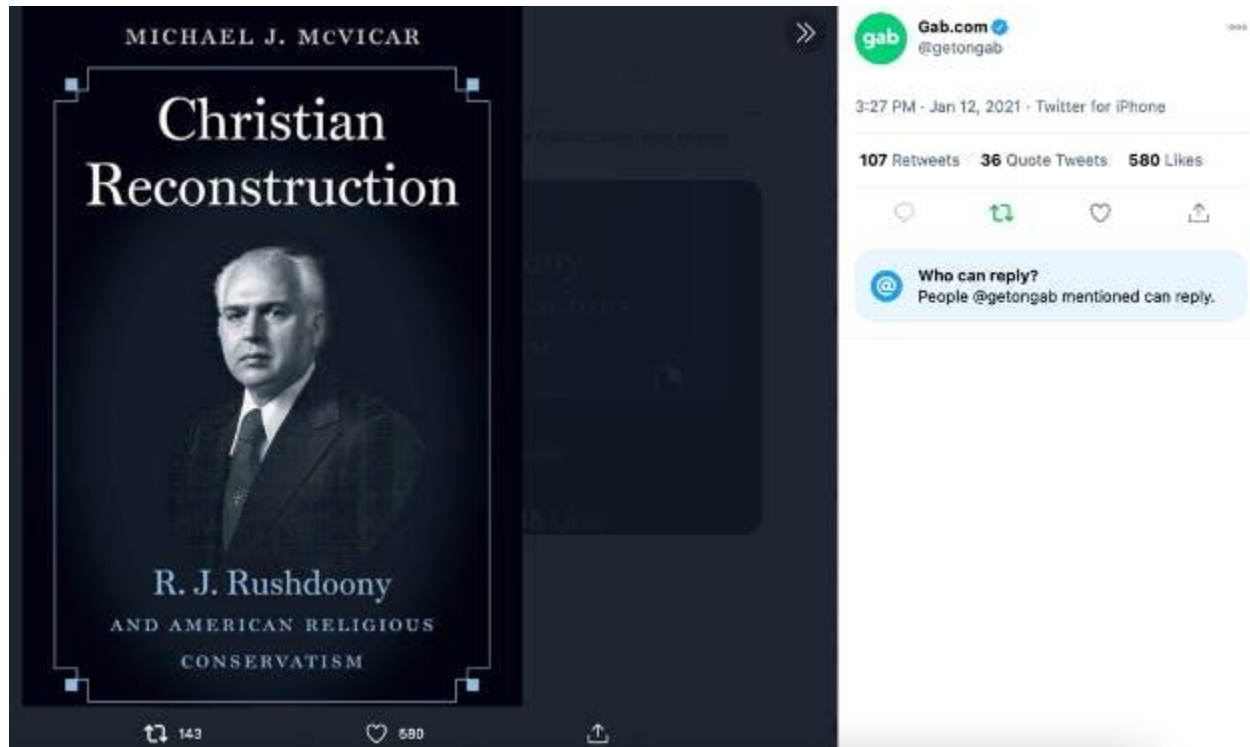
One of the consequences of the events of the “[putsch](#)” at the US Capitol on 6 January has been the [exodus of a large number of users](#) from mainstream to more controversial social media platforms. Gab.com became one of the most obvious beneficiaries of the movement away from Twitter. The platform's new members value its commitment to free speech, which is reiterated in sometimes fiery blogs by Andrew Torba, its founder and CEO. But what exactly does Gab stand for? And is its commitment to free speech unequivocal?

The question is raised by several of the platform's most recent interventions. For, on 12 January, as part of its campaign to reform social media, Gab.com tweeted two items that referred to the idea of social “reconstruction” – a picture of the cover of a biography of R. J. Rushdoony, the founder of the Christian Reconstructionist movement, and a paragraph from an essay by Julius Evola, Europe's leading post-war fascist philosopher.

As these posts suggest, Gab.com is determined to promote the “reconstruction” of social media. Andrew Torba speaks openly about his Christian faith, which he presents in a confrontational style, using images of crusaders, for example, to represent the kinds of attitude that the believer must develop in order to survive the current cultural crisis. These images argue that faithful Christians will need actively to resist the demands of the world, and will survive by waging some kind of spiritual war upon it. These are conventional claims, of course, with a history in Christian

theology that stretches back to the New Testament. But several of Torba's most recent posts give those claims a rather unexpected spin.

On 12 January, Gab's Twitter account posted without comment the cover of a biography of one of the most controversial protestant theologians of the last century.



J. Rushdoony was an Armenian-American Presbyterian minister, who, from the 1960s, moved in the conservative and libertarian circles associated with the socially libertarian Volker Fund eventually to establish his own very different kind of think-tank. This institute, the Chalcedon Foundation, became the clearing house for the movement of "Christian Reconstruction," the core principles of which were set out in Rushdoony's massive exposition of the social organization of the Old Testament, his *Institutes of Biblical Law* (1973).

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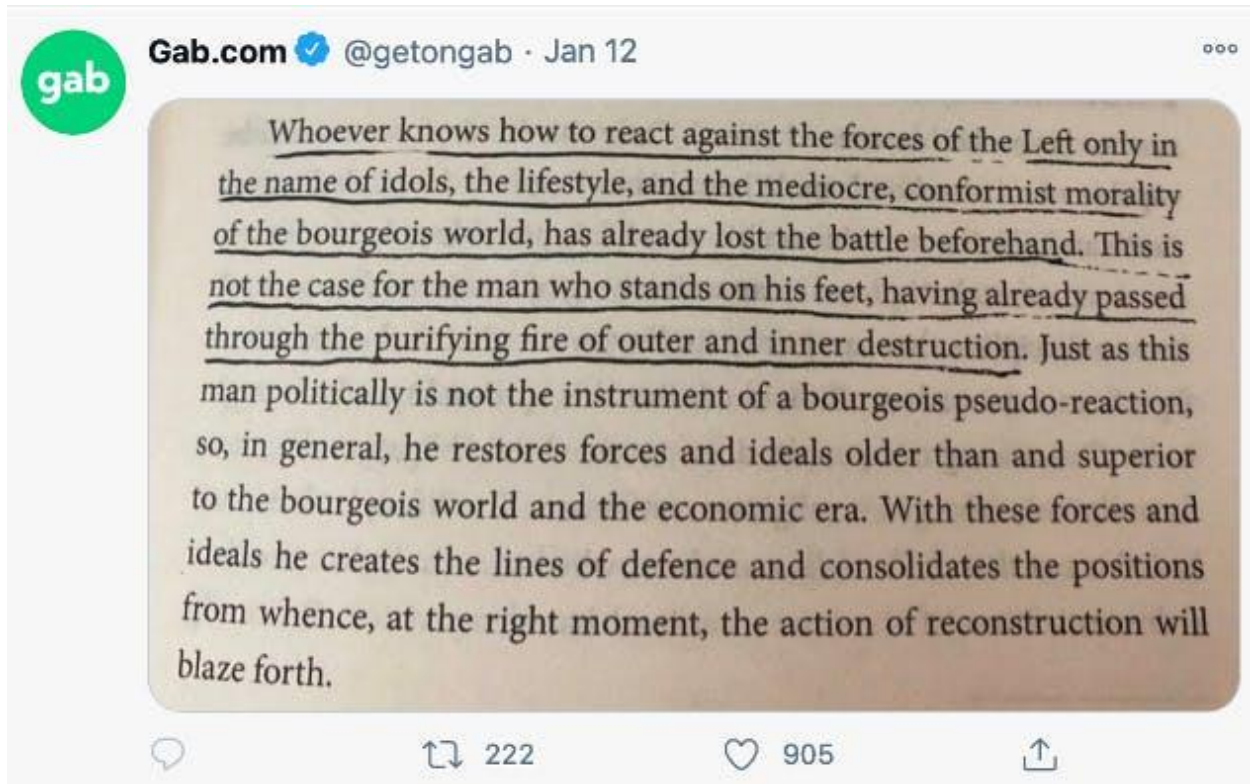
Rushdoony's work was widely celebrated – *Christianity Today* heralded the *Institutes* as a book of the year – but critics were quickly alarmed by the book's alleged Holocaust denial and by its proposal that American society should be reconstructed according to the ten commandments and other Old Testament laws, an agenda that would require a massive extension of capital punishment for crimes including idolatry, adultery and other sexual offences, as well as for the speech crime of blasphemy. Rushdoony emphasised that he was not outlining a programme for revolution – for he abhorred any suggestion of anti-government violence – and insisted that his goals would be realised as individuals, families, local communities and nations voluntarily

embraced the Christian religion and sought to implement the Bible's social norms. Fifty years later, many evangelicals continue to think of these arguments as outlandish. But, for those who have ears to hear, Rushdoony's ideas are more influential than ever before.

In the last few years, as I argue in a [forthcoming book](#), Rushdoony's expanding influence has become much easier to observe. It flourishes in softer forms, [as I have already noted](#) in *The Critic*, in successful intentional communities in the Pacific Northwest, in which authors prepare best-selling novels, theology books, and preparedness manuals, and in which thought leaders host talk-shows on Amazon Prime. One of the largest of these communities was drawn into the political cross-fire in the run-up to the American presidential election, back in November, when [President Trump re-tweeted a video](#) that showed police in Moscow, Idaho, arresting some participants in a public hymn-sing that met in defiance of local public health codes. But Rushdoony's influence has been creeping into mainstream politics, too.

During the campaign for their party's presidential nomination, in 2016, several leading Republicans took up positions that had roots in Rushdoony's work – such as Ben Carson's proposal for a flat tax of 10 per cent, on the basis that the state should never demand a greater share of wealth than that due to God, Donald Trump's suggestion that women who had abortions should be punished, and Ted Cruz's links with the "[seven mountains](#)" variant of "dominion" theology. And now Rushdoony's name is popping up on Gab. But the crucial point to note, for users who might be attracted to Gab's increasingly popular platform, is that Rushdoony did not at all defend free speech. In the Christian state that he idealised and believed to be inevitable, blasphemy would be punished by death.

However, on the same day that it promoted Rushdoony's biography, Gab also posted a marked-up paragraph from "Orientations," a 1950 essay by Julius Evola (1898-1974).



The essay can be found in a recently published collection of Evola's shorter works, *A Traditionalist Confronts Fascism* (2015). Take care with the title: it's important to notice that this work is not a critique of fascism from the left. Evola famously described himself as a "super-fascist" – one who went beyond the followers of Mussolini and sought to realise through better methods what they had failed to achieve. And so, while the quotation gestured toward "the action of reconstruction," its context set out a very different programme from that of Rushdoony. For Evola was not a Christian. While he was as wary of democracy as was Rushdoony, he was an aristocratic traditionalist, committed to occult investigation, and to the racial values by which he became identified as post-war Europe's leading fascist intellectual.

"If Christian Reconstruction were to succeed, Evola's freedom of speech would be violently denied"

Gab's recent social media interventions will not have surprised those who have taken an interest in the ideas that are shaping the company's values. Torba has already drawn on the Christian Reconstructionist movement to expound his ideal of freedom. Back in November, he published an article on "[The Christian Crusade To Save Free Speech, Again.](#)" The article riffs off several quotations from David Chilton, a follower of Rushdoony who was, among other things, author of the Christian Reconstruction manifesto, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (1985). As Torba reconstructs it, Chilton's central argument is that "God wants us to apply Christian standards everywhere, in every area." Torba builds on this argument to conclude that "Christians must once again defend, preserve, and conserve the freedom of speech at any and all costs. We've done it before and by the grace of God we will do it again." But Chilton

sees things differently. In the world that he anticipates, there will be no possibility of intellectual neutrality, and no possibility that critiques of Christianity would be enabled.

For Chilton, the responsibility to “apply Christian standards everywhere, in every area” includes Old Testament laws about blasphemy, which by definitive exclude any defence of freedom of expression. After all, as Chilton also puts it:

If the Church is obedient, the peoples and nations of the world will be disciplined to Christianity. We all know that everyone *should* be a Christian, that the laws and institutions of the nations *should* follow the Bible's blueprints. But the Bible tells us more than that. The Bible tells us that these commands are the shape of the future. We *must* change the world; and what is more, we *shall* change the world.

So, here is the puzzle. While they might all be located on the radical right, Evola and the Christian Reconstructionists offer mutually incompatible varieties of social “reconstruction.” And, if Christian Reconstruction were to succeed, Evola's freedom of speech would be violently denied. So why would Gab want to highlight Rushdoony and Evola – and to do so on the same day?

Given his more sustained interest in Christian Reconstruction, it is Torba's decision to highlight a paragraph from Evola that is so very unexpected. His company's decision to publicise Rushdoony's biography, and to build an argument for free speech around Chilton, might tell us something much more significant about the direction of the Twitter exodus.

The mainstream social media platforms shut down accounts while worrying about the freedom of expression. But Gab might be caught on the horns of a similar dilemma. For, if Gab's ideal of freedom is being defined by Chilton and Rushdoony, then free speech will be the means, rather than the end, of the reconstruction of social media.

Note: Rushdoony's future son-in-law, Dr. Gary North, used a synonymous word to “Reconstruction,” namely “Dominion.”

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