

Patrick Allitt

CATHOLICISM IN THE UNITED STATES: BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM

Harvey Mansfield has always taken the long view. As he sees it, the way to approach an American topic is to ask first what the Founding Fathers said about it, then see what Tocqueville added. In the same way, his approach to any European issue starts out with a word from Plato and Aristotle, then moves along through Augustine and Aquinas to the opinions of Machiavelli and Edmund Burke. In this sense he's just like the Catholic Church, which has always specialized in taking the long view, while trying to avoid being paralyzed by the weight of tradition. Taking the long view means being aware of oneself as part of an extended historical process, of being indebted to the insights of earlier generations, without being blind to those generations' limitations. It usually guards against provincialism of time and place steers us away from utopianism, while helping us to see sensible ways forward.

Mansfield, just as he knows how to make the most of tradition, also knows how to take a familiar concept and make it look a little bit strange. He certainly did that in his book on manliness, showing how inadequate to the concept is the scientific approach of social psychologists and evolutionary biologists. Here too he shares a breadth of insight with the Catholic Church, which has never rejected science out of hand but has often issued reminders about the limits of its explanatory powers. The Catholic idea of nature, for example, is fuller and more involved than the modern scientific definition; the Catholic idea of natural law has a complex moral component which modern scientists' claims about the laws of nature lack.¹

Let's not take the analogy too far; I'm certainly not going to argue that Harvey Mansfield is a figure of papal stature or that he can speak infallibly on qu-

¹ H. Mansfield, *Manliness*, New Haven 2006.

estions of faith and morals. On the other hand, he prompts anyone who engages with his work to think about politics in a richer way. The same is true of a serious encounter with Catholicism, even for people who have lived their entire lives outside the Church. Think, for a moment, about the binary opposition of “liberal” and “conservative,” two of the most familiar terms in the American political lexicon. In the Catholic context they take on additional layers of meaning, enabling us to see more clearly into the paradoxes of political labeling.

Both terms have complex histories. In the United States “liberal” in the early nineteenth century meant support for the free market economy and a minimum of government intervention. Starting in the early twentieth century, however, and increasingly after the New Deal of the 1930s, “liberal” began to connote *advocacy* of government intervention in the economy. The Great Depression convinced many American intellectuals and politicians that only the federal government had sufficient power to counteract the downward economic spiral of the 1930s and promote social equity. The liberals of recent decades have been their heirs. “Conservative” was more often used in the nineteenth century as an adjective than as a noun, and it implied a willingness to keep things as they were and to acknowledge the authority of tradition. After the Russian Revolution, however, and particularly after World War II, “conservative” came to signify ardent anti-Communism, and now *it* was the label given to supporters of the free market. Traditionalists who also claimed to be conservative often found themselves at odds with free-market or anti-Communist conservatives, who showed little reverence for ancient things.²

American politics, unlike British, has never featured an encounter between a liberal party and a conservative party. Since 1950 the Republicans have *tended* to be the more conservative party, more enthusiastic about the free market, more likely to include traditionalists, more likely to be religious, and (pre-1990) more fervent anti-Communists, whereas the Democrats have *tended* to be the more liberal, favoring big government, less deferential to religion and tradition, and generally less bellicose. These are only tendencies, however. The two great parties are assemblies of interest groups from all over the nation, whose ideological character is muted by the need for party discipline and a search for electoral majorities. The social upheavals of the 1960s, meanwhile, created a set of new political constituencies: African-Americans, who were now able to vote en masse for the first time, feminists, advocates of gay liberation and gay marriage, and environmentalists. In almost every case these new groups linked their political fortunes to the Democratic Party and urged it to become more liberal than it had been in the foregoing decades (liberal in the sense of extending government economic programs and securing legal protection for groups whose members were the victims of discrimination). Some socially conservative whites, in reaction to this process, began to switch the-

² L. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, New York 1955; P. Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History*, New Haven 2009; G. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, New York 1979, p. 57–83.

ir allegiance to the Republican Party, especially southerners who had previously supported racial segregation and “ethnic” white urban northerners. The rise of the new “lifestyle” issues in politics also provoked the creation of the New Christian Right, a populist conservative group, which first came to prominence in the general election of 1980, and has remained politically influential ever since. These were the shifting groups, circumstances and definitions among which American Catholics (about a third of the total U.S. population) struggled to situate themselves.³

Catholics, at first glance, might seem like obvious conservatives. They are beholden to the leadership of a hierarchical organization, an elective monarchy, which is legitimated by two thousand years of tradition and by claims of divine authority. They worship in a way that would have been recognized more than a thousand years ago and they accept a moral code much of which is older still. Throughout the nineteenth century American Protestants, making exactly these arguments, doubted whether it was possible for any man to be, at the same time, a good Catholic and a good American citizen. After all, said Lyman Beecher, Samuel Morse, and many other luminaries of the American pulpit, their first loyalty goes to a monarch in Rome, not to a republic on this side of the Atlantic.⁴

American Catholics worked very hard to deny the charge of dual loyalty and to insist that they could be just as American as anyone else. At the same time they had no wish to repudiate their religion and its long heritage. Accordingly, they walked a tightrope, emphasizing that in the prudential realm of politics they were as free to make judgments as everyone else, while simultaneously affirming that in spiritual affairs the doctrines of their faith were inviolable. When John F. Kennedy ran for the presidency in the election of 1960 he asserted, in a speech to a group of Protestant ministers in Houston, that if an issue arose creating an intolerable conflict between his religious conscience and the demands of his office he would resign. He added that any other president who found himself in a similar predicament should do likewise, and that the dilemma was no more acute for Catholics than for members of any other church (his opponent was a Quaker).⁵

The election of Kennedy itself indicated a decline in American anti-Catholicism, which corresponded to the religious revival of the early cold-war years. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which began during his administration, also had the effect in America of reducing tensions between Catholics and other citizens. For the first time Catholics were encouraged to think of Protestants not as heretics but as “separated brethren,” and to look favorably on the condition of religious freedom and the First Amendment to the Constitution which protected it.⁶

³ L. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, New York 1955; P. Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History*, New Haven 2009; G. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, New York 1979, p. 57–83.

⁴ B. Welter, *From Maria Monk to Paul Blanshard: A Century of Protestant Anti-Catholicism*, [in:] *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America*, ed. R. Bellah, F. Greenspan, New York 1987, p. 43–71.

⁵ J. Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste*, New York 1978; T. Carty, *A Catholic in the White House? Religion, Politics, and John F. Kennedy's Presidential Campaign*, New York 2004.

⁶ *Vatican II and U. S. Catholicism*, ed. D. Bromley, Greenwich 1991.

If at first glance Catholics seem like obvious conservatives, then, at second glance they seem like obvious liberals or radicals. Jesus never urged his followers to preserve the status quo, and Catholic history provides countless examples of political upheavals and experiments undertaken in his name. Besides, the particular history of the Catholic people in America tended to put them in opposition to the local forces of conservatism. As immigrants, first from Ireland, later from Germany, Italy, Poland, Slavic southeastern Europe and Latin America, they usually arrived in the United States poor, ill-equipped to compete strongly in an industrializing nation, and victims of ethnic and religious prejudice. The vast majority of American Catholics, immigrants and their descendants, voted Democrat up to and beyond the middle of the twentieth century, strongly favoring President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. Their support for the Democratic Party, however, was more often linked to their search for economic security than to an interest in personal liberation, and it weakened after the mid 1960s.⁷

Just as the American Catholic population's political loyalties divided in the 1960s and 1970s, so an incongruity between Catholic ideas and American politics became increasingly apparent. Prominent Catholics in American public life during the last few decades have been "conservative" on some issues and "liberal" on others. A linear political spectrum from left to right cannot be imposed on most American Catholics' political ideas without distorting both. Since the mid twentieth century, moreover, the Catholic laity have outstripped their clergy in education and expertise. Where once the bishops spoke unaided, confident of their authority, on a wide array of political, economic, and moral issues, they have recently come to depend on the advice and guidance of lay specialists. In the nature of things the specialists themselves often disagree. On the question of poverty and its resolution, for example, the old Catholic tradition, embodied in the phrase "the poor ye shall have always with you," no longer seemed adequate to America's condition of astonishing material abundance in the mid twentieth century. Whether big welfare states offered the best solution to the residual problem of poverty was controversial; representative Catholics addressed it from all points on the political compass and could always support their arguments not only from secular authorities but also by quoting and construing the most sympathetic passages from papal encyclical letters and other Church teachings.⁸

Under these conditions, the nature of Catholic leadership changed. Depending on the context the phrase "Catholic leaders" could signify bishops and archbishops, or it could signify prominent figures in public life—governors, senators,

⁷ On the social and immigration history of American Catholics see J. P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, Garden City 1985; C. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church*, New York 1997. On electoral behavior see *Catholics and Politics: The Dynamic Tension Between Faith and Power*, ed. K. Heyer, Washington 2008.

⁸ D. Brown, E. McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare*, Cambridge 1997; *The Catholic Church Speaks Out on Poverty*, Washington 1988.

congressmen, judges, and businessmen—who were also Roman Catholics. The steady rise in lay assertiveness reached a crescendo in the opening years of the twenty-first century during the scandal over priests' sexual abuse of children and teenagers, and revelation of the recurrent clerical tendency to cover it up. In 2000 a group of enraged laity created "Voice of the Faithful," which described itself as "a lay organization of faithful Catholics" whose members intended "to actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Church." By then the sheer fact that the bishops (indeed all priests) could only be men, and only celibate men at that, had vexed feminists inside and outside of the Church for decades and contributed to the perception that Catholicism was conservative in the worst sense: hide-bound, backward-looking, resistant to change, and hypocritical.⁹

Another caveat is necessary. People who in religious affairs could be thought of as "liberal Catholics" were not necessarily political liberals. Similarly "conservative Catholics" on religious questions might not be political conservatives. In *religious* affairs, a liberal Catholic is someone willing to choose among Church teachings and to emphasize some far more strongly than others, whereas a conservative Catholic is one who insists on the "full magisterium," and seeks to follow Church teaching to the letter, whatever its secular and political implications might be. In the 1960s, for example, a group of Catholic laymen led by William F. Buckley, Jr. ran "National Review" magazine. They were outspoken political conservatives, passionate anti-Communists and opponents of the New Deal and Great Society. At the same time they were liberal Catholics in the sense that they were reluctant to act on Church teachings that they believed inappropriate or ill-considered in the context of the Cold War. They openly deprecated Pope John XXIII's encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra* (1961), which in their eyes misled Catholics about the character of the Cold War.¹⁰

When one member of the "National Review" group, L. Brent Bozell, split off to found a journal of his own, "Triumph", in 1966, he took with him the group's most religiously conservative Catholics. Their adherence to the letter of Church teaching, however, soon led them to contradict their old friends' ideas on foreign policy. They began to criticize American conduct in the Vietnam War because it failed to conform to Catholic "just war" teaching. In other words, their Catholic conservatism put them in the company of American political liberals, who were also becoming disenchanted with the nation's conduct in Vietnam.¹¹

A comparable dispute about nuclear weapons showed many of the same incongruities in the 1980s. The American Catholic bishops had been, from a political conservative's point of view, reliable Cold War allies in the 1940s, 1950s

⁹ See for example, M. J. Weaver, *What's Left: Liberal American Catholics*, Bloomington 1999; R. McBrien, *The Leadership Crisis*, www.catholicvote.org/index.php?/forums/viewthread/23. On Voice of the Faithful see www.voiceofthefaithful.org/whoweare/who-we-are/100. For the Catholic feminist position see R. R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston 1993.

¹⁰ P. Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985*, New York 1993, p. 93–97.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 141–160.

and 1960s. Fiercely anti-Communist, they had more or less accepted that American policy must be based on the threat to use nuclear weapons, whose effect would be to deter Soviet aggression. In the 1980s, however, a new generation of bishops, many of whom had been horrified by American conduct in Vietnam, revisited the question and wrote a pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*. Taking Catholic just-war teachings more to heart than their predecessors, they came close to arguing, especially in early drafts, that the use of such indiscriminate weapons could never be justified, because they could never meet the criterion of non-combatants' immunity, or the proportionality criterion (that the damage done in war must be commensurate with the good sought by those who resort to arms).¹²

Catholics who were political conservatives deplored the letter, regarding it as tantamount to an endorsement of unilateral disarmament, from which the Soviet Union would gain a strategic advantage. Michael Novak, an energetic Catholic controversialist and a political conservative, wrote a long rejoinder to the bishops, *Moral Clarity in the Nuclear Age*, which was reprinted in "National Review" and circulated widely. Novak approached the proportionality question from a different direction than the bishops. As he saw it, the fact that for nearly four decades both sides had possessed nuclear weapons and yet had *not* fired them against one-another was a demonstration that deterrence worked. In other words, they fulfilled the criterion of proportionality *better* than conventional weapons by creating the maximum of deterrence with the minimum of destruction. The way to *use* a nuclear weapon, said Novak, is by *not* firing it at the enemy, even while indicating unmistakably that you *will* fire it if he attacks first. To non-Catholic observers, this kind of reasoning probably seemed weirdly sophistical, but for Catholics dedicated to squaring the tradition of Church teaching with their political views it made perfect sense.¹³

Whatever the rights and wrongs of these foreign policy questions, some of the most divisive American domestic issues of the 1960s and 1970s also provoked intra-Catholic disputes. The bitterest issues were contraception and abortion. Catholic teaching prohibited artificial contraception. In the 1960s, however, American popular opinion swung strongly in favor of contraception, partly because of changes in social mores ("the sexual revolution") and partly because of growing fears that the Earth faced a crisis of overpopulation. When Pope Paul VI appointed a pontifical commission to study the question, a wide variety of Catholics anticipated a change in Church teaching such that married couples would be permitted to use the contraceptive pill, recently invented by a Catholic doctor, John Rock. In the event, however, the Pope rejected the majority report of his commission, and issued instead the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* (1968), upholding the old prohibition.¹⁴

¹² National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington DC 1983. The most comprehensive treatment of the question can be found in G. Weigel, *Tranquillitas Ordinis: The Present Failure and Future Promise of American Catholic Thought on War and Peace*, New York 1987.

¹³ M. Novak, *Moral Clarity in the Nuclear Age*, Nashville 1983.

¹⁴ L. W. Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History*, New York 2004; L. McLaughlin, *The Pill, John Rock, and the Church*, Boston 1982; P. Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, p. 162–180.

Humanae Vitae generated sharp debate and divided the Catholic community. Religiously conservative Catholics accepted it because they regarded loyalty to the Pope as the first principle of their faith. Religiously liberal Catholics, by and large, deplored it and began to use contraceptives anyway, sometimes with the covert cooperation of their priests, who declined to reproach them in the confessional. Studies from the 1970s and 1980s suggest that lay Catholics who were *politically* conservative were just as likely as those who were politically liberal to avail themselves of contraceptives. After 1970 big Catholic families, conspicuous in America throughout the middle decades of the century, began to disappear; the Catholic birth rate became indistinguishable from that of Protestants.¹⁵

Abortion was even more contentious than contraception and the issue has wracked the whole of American society, not just its Catholics, for the last forty years. Illegal throughout the United States until the late 1960s, abortion reform came under consideration in several state legislatures, whose members were influenced by fears of overpopulation, by feminist arguments ("a woman's right to choose"), and by concern that rubella and drugs like thalidomide caused severe birth defects. In 1973 the Supreme Court declared, in *Roe v. Wade*, that a constitutionally protected right to privacy entitled pregnant women to decide for themselves whether to have abortions. The right was made almost absolute in the first trimester of a pregnancy, with a growing set of limitations for women whose pregnancies were more advanced. The decision overturned laws in all fifty states and has remained to date one of the court's most controversial decisions.¹⁶

American Catholic opinion had split sharply on contraception. It showed greater unanimity on abortion. The Catholic bishops and most prominent Catholics in public life condemned *Roe v. Wade* as an attack on human life at its most vulnerable moment. The politics of the issue were, however, complicated. Catholics who held elective office were beholden to Protestant and Jewish as well as Catholic constituents and recognized the need to tread cautiously. Catholic religious leaders, moreover, were restrained from intervening too openly in politics lest they jeopardize their cherished tax-free status. As individual citizens they were free to denounce abortion and denounce candidates for office who favored it, but if they organized their parishioners to vote for particular anti-abortion candidates they would be breaching the wall of church-state separation.¹⁷

Different Catholic politicians thought about the issue in different ways. In 1984, for example, Mario Cuomo, the governor of the state of New York, was invited to speak on the issue at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, America's most renowned Catholic university. In a widely reported speech he made a distinction that many Catholic politicians, especially Democrats, later

¹⁵ A. Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics*, New York 1990.

¹⁶ J. T. Noonan, *A Private Choice: Abortion in American the Seventies*, New York 1979; P. Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, p. 180–203.

¹⁷ C. Morris, *American Catholic*, p. 424–428.

quoted in justification of their own approach to the question. As a Catholic, he argued, I believe abortion to be morally wrong. However, I am governor of a pluralistic society whose citizens hold a wide variety of opinions on religious and social questions. I am aware that many of them do not regard abortion as wrong. I am also aware that, according to the Supreme Court, abortion is a constitutionally protected right. Therefore I ought not to use my office to try to prevent abortion. All citizens are free to agitate for constitutional amendments and to petition their legislators for reforms. Catholic citizens should agitate for anti-abortion laws or constitutional amendments but in the meantime Catholic elected officials, myself included, are required to uphold the laws of the state as they stand.¹⁸

Widely praised for this approach to the issue, Cuomo had in effect given all elected officials a convenient justification for not raising the abortion issue too strenuously. Politicians of both parties and of all religions were uncomfortably aware that the abortion question did not divide along party-political lines; plenty of Democrats were pro-life and plenty of Republicans were pro-choice. Office holders knew, therefore, that any remark they might make about abortion was likely to cost them votes.¹⁹

Robert Casey (1932–2000), like Cuomo, was a Democrat and a Catholic. As governor of nearby Pennsylvania, however, he took a very different view from Cuomo and declared his intention to end or reduce the incidence of abortions if possible. As he saw it, the law has a teaching function—if citizens see that abortion is legal they will assume that it is right, and the moral imperative against it will diminish. He actively supported passage of the Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act of 1989, which imposed waiting periods on applicants for abortion, required parents to be notified if the applicant was a minor, and prohibited late-term “partial birth” abortions. The pro-choice organization Planned Parenthood sued for what it regarded as a violation of the protections enumerated in *Roe v. Wade*. When the Supreme Court adjudicated the case in 1992, however, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, they found that the state government had *not* exceeded its authority, and that it was entitled to regulate abortion and restrict access.²⁰

Most Catholic religious leaders regarded the decision in *Casey* as a welcome, if partial, victory. But it infuriated many Democrats, who retaliated by preventing Casey himself from speaking at the 1992 Democratic convention. As the Catholic journalist and editor Peter Steinfels wrote, “At the party’s national level, opposition to abortion was becoming literally unspeakable,” even in a party that still depended on millions of Catholic voters. On nearly all the other important political issues of

¹⁸ M. Cuomo, *Religious Belief and Public Morality: A Catholic Governor’s Perspective*, www.pewforum.org/docs/index.php?DocID=14, September 13, 1984.

¹⁹ N. E. H. Hull, *The Abortion Rights Controversy in America*, Chapel Hill 2004; M. Haussman, *Abortion Politics in North America*, Boulder 2005.

²⁰ The decision of the Supreme Court in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* can be found at www.caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=505&invol=833. See also R. P. Casey, *Fighting for Life*, Nashville 1996.

his era Casey held what would normally be regarded as typical liberal views, which coincided closely with those of mainstream Democrats. Son of a coal miner, he favored trade unions, improved access to subsidized health care for the poor, and most of the heritage of the New Deal and Great Society.²¹

Constitutional Amendments require two-thirds majorities in both houses of Congress and then ratification by three quarters of the fifty state governments. Although moderate anti-abortion sentiment was widespread, among traditionalist Protestant and Jewish voters as well as among most Catholics, it was never able to gather that kind of support. *Roe v. Wade*, limited by such state laws as Pennsylvania's, therefore remained as national policy. Catholic intellectuals continued to polemicize against it, chiefly in the "Human Life Review" (founded in 1975 by the Catholic conservative James McFadden) and then in an influential new journal, "First Things," founded in 1990 by Richard J. Neuhaus. A Lutheran minister who had converted to Catholicism and become a priest, Neuhaus was at the same time very Catholic and very ecumenical, believing strongly in the need to bring Jews, Protestants, and Catholics together in support of moral and political reforms. His emergence as a conservative leader among all of America's religions in the 1990s was itself a sign of the times. Increasingly in the late twentieth century, political affiliations were overriding religious ones. Where once sharp religious antagonisms had kept Protestants, Catholics, and Jews apart, now liberal Protestants, Catholics and Jews were coming together on one side of controversial political issues, and conservative Protestants, Catholics, and Jews on the other.²²

Neuhaus himself had published an influential book, *The Naked Public Square* in 1984 and his contributions to "First Things" were gathered in a section named "The Public Square." In his view the United States, misunderstanding its own heritage, had undertaken to exclude religion from public life, a process aided by a succession of odious Supreme Court decisions. This trend, he wrote, was a perversion of the Founders' intention, which had been to prevent the creation of a state religion but had not been to exclude religion and religious points of view from public debate altogether. He feared that the United States was inadvertently coming to espouse an ideology of dogmatic secularism, a doctrine that was "demonstrably false and ... exceedingly dangerous." It was, accordingly, vital for right-minded Catholics, Protestants, and Jews alike to fight back on behalf of religion itself. He added, however, that the Catholic Church's long history and intellectual richness gave it a natural leadership role for this counterattack.²³

²¹ P. Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, New York 2003, p. 92.

²² R. Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, Princeton: 1988. On McFadden and Human Life Review see P. Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals*, p. 191–199. On Neuhaus see the autobiographical sections of his *Catholic Matters: Confusion, Controversy, and the Splendor of Truth*, New York 2006.

²³ R. J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, Grand Rapids 1984, p. vii; R. Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World*, San Francisco 1987.

If Neuhaus and “First Things” were widely—and plausibly-regarded as politically conservative in their attitudes and interests, many of America’s Catholic bishops tried hard to avoid this kind of labeling. Two prominent figures of the late twentieth century, Cardinal John Joseph O’Connor of New York and Cardinal Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle illustrate the point. O’Connor, a former military chaplain, was treated by secular media like the “New York Times” and National Public Radio as a staunch conservative, because of his support for the government’s Cold War posture, but his opposition to the death penalty put him sharply at odds with most American conservatives. Hunthausen, conversely, had such a lively reputation for liberalism that he was twice investigated by the Vatican, even though his anti-abortion statements equaled Robert Casey’s in their capacity to annoy most secular liberals. Both men shared the “seamless garment” or “consistent life ethic,” eloquently voiced by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, that the Church must be consistent in its respect for human life wherever it was threatened.²⁴

Bernardin (1928–1996) had hoped that the “seamless garment” might bring together a Catholic community that, by the 1990s, seemed increasingly fractured along political and ideological lines. The historian Garry Wills commented in 2001 that “it is a sign of the fragility of the Catholic Church’s present structure that a man of such good will, tact, and dedication had to work so hard to maintain even basic cordiality between contending forces.” The fragmentation, apparent in foreign policy and “life” questions, was equally apparent in the area of Catholic higher education. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries American Catholics had built an impressive array of colleges and universities, designed to ensure that young Catholics could gain high levels of education without enrolling at secular or Protestant institutions. Powerful trends in American intellectual life and higher education, however, gradually led the faculty at many of these colleges to transfer their loyalty from the Church to their particular academic disciplines. That in turn led them after about 1960 to abandon the natural law philosophical principles by which the Catholic colleges’ curriculum had initially been unified. Eagerness for federal funding and eagerness not to appear prejudiced also tempted them to recruit non-Catholic students and to diminish their explicitly Catholic character.²⁵

A papal apostolic constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990), tried to reassert greater uniformity over Catholic higher education throughout the world, but fell afoul of the American traditions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Universities like Notre Dame and Georgetown, which were nationally distinguished, feared that their reputations would suffer from the appearance of censorship

²⁴ On O’Connor see P. Steinfels’ insightful obituary, *Death of a Cardinal*, “New York Times”, May 4, 1980. On Hunthausen, see T. P. Schilling, *Conflict in the Catholic Hierarchy: A Study of Coping Strategies in the Hunthausen Affair*, Utrecht 2002. On Bernardin and the “seamless garment,” see G. Wills, *A Tale of Two Cardinals*, “New York Review of Books” 2001, No. 48 (April 26) and P. Steinfels, *People Adrift*, p. 17–29, 85–86.

²⁵ G. Wills, *A Tale of Two Cardinals*. On Catholic higher education see in particular, P. Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century*, New York 1995; A. Gallin, *Negotiating Identity: Catholic Higher Education Since 1960*, Notre Dame 2000.

if they submitted too readily to *Ex Corde*. In general the only American institutions that welcomed it were the handful of self-consciously traditionalist Catholic institutions, such as Christendom College, the University of Dallas, and the Franciscan University of Steubenville. Each university in its own way came to terms with *Ex Corde*. It remained true by 2000, however, that some Catholic schools had a reputation for liberal Catholicism and others for conservative Catholicism. In a nation that favored a maximum of consumer choices in all things it was perhaps not surprising that political and religious fragmentation, apparent in other areas of American life, should be duplicated here also.²⁶

In 2004, for the first time since the era of John F. Kennedy, one of the two major political parties chose a Catholic as its presidential candidate. This was the Democrat, John Kerry. The religious issue was far less salient in the 2004 campaign than it had been in 1960, indicating the overall retreat of anti-Catholicism in America, but church-state questions did intrude periodically. Kerry was pro-choice and favored stem-cell research (another controversial human life issue). Arguing in the idiom of Mario Cuomo, he claimed to be personally opposed to abortion but to favor the pro-choice position for America as a whole. Some Catholic leaders were indignant—a few bishops even warned that he would be refused communion if he came to their churches. Kerry deftly avoided a direct confrontation on the question, while journalists speculated that such a refusal might even help his campaign: “Catholics who are loyal to neither party,” wrote one, “and who hold more liberal social views might be attracted to his candidacy, as might non-Catholics upset by what they see as an intrusion into American politics.” The showdown never came, however, and Kerry eventually lost to George W. Bush in the election.²⁷

This brief overview of recent American Catholic history indicates, I hope, that the relationship between Catholic ideas and the political divisions in American society is complicated, and has been for the last half century. It would be wrong to describe America’s Catholic population or the Church as an organization as either *essentially* liberal or conservative. Political societies are entirely this worldly, whereas the Catholic Church treats politics as only one, and not the most important, realm in which its people move. It has spiritual objectives and supernatural beliefs entirely beyond the grasp of worldly politics, and their implications inform Catholic thinking about the world. No wonder “liberalism” and “conservatism” are conceptually inadequate to encompass American Catholics’ beliefs. At the same time, of course, even the most spiritually exalted and otherworldly individuals cannot avoid living in particular times and places, and cannot avoid being affected by their contemporaries’ practical ideas, beliefs, and actions. In the spring of 2009

²⁶ Catholic Church, Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities, United States Catholic Conference, Washington D.C. 1990. On variety of Catholic campuses in recent US, see A. Wolfe, *Catholic Universities Can be the Salvation of Pluralism on American Campuses*, “Chronicle of Higher Education” 1999, February 26, B6.

²⁷ T. Eastland, *John Kerry’s Catholic Problem*, “Weekly Standard” 2004, April 15.

President Barack Obama spoke at the University of Notre Dame on the 25th anniversary of Mario Cuomo's address there. He acknowledged the intractability of the abortion issue while urging the holders of different views on the controversy to respect one another. Some Catholics condemned the university for permitting him to speak; others acclaimed it for doing so. By then, the long decline in denominational differences and the steady rise in ecumenical alliances on behalf of shared political objectives had made it harder than ever to label any set of political views as distinctly "Catholic." Actual Catholic people held a wide array of views on the era's controversies but nearly all of them, to the degree that they were serious about their religion, held beliefs that jarred against the secular political orthodoxies of their age.