

A Partisan Church: American Catholicism and the Rise of Neoconservative Catholics.
By Todd Scribner. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2015.
Pp. xi + 244. \$34.95.

The reporting is accurate, but the title is somewhat misleading. The book would be better subtitled, *Conservative Catholic Intellectuals During the Rise of Neoconservatism in America*.

The author focuses on Michael Novak, Richard Neuhaus, and George Weigel from the mid-1970s to the end of the century. It was a period when US politics were being dominated by the new conservatism that characterized the Reagan years, replacing fiscal conservatism with financial deregulation, reading global developments through the lens of the Cold War, and absorbing the social conservatism of Evangelicals. It was also a period when Catholicism experienced a resurgence of conservative theology under Pope John Paul II, with his courting of traditionalists such as Archbishop Lefebvre, his rejection of new movements in the church such as liberation theology, and his insistence that priests and bishops disengage from politics and confine themselves to clerical matters. The three subjects of this study were religiously conservative and politically neoconservative, or neocons, as they were labeled by those on the left.

According to Scribner, neoconservative Catholics—or more accurately, Catholic neoconservatives, since they were Catholics who flourished in a conservative political milieu—were interested in shaping a conservative agenda rooted in Catholic principles while at the same time affirming a strict separation of church and state. They emerged in the aftermath of Vatican II and the liberal spirit that arose from it, but at a time when Soviet state communism was perceived as a great threat to both capitalism and democracy. Like others on the moral right in the sixties and seventies, they perceived a great decline in moral standards and they disliked the encroachment of government into the private sphere in matters pertaining to business. Neuhaus railed against “the marginalization of religion and religious institutions in public affairs” (29) exemplified by the removal of prayer from public schools and the legalization of abortion.

Novak inveighed against the dangers of communism and other forms of socialism, arguing that tyranny can be avoided only through the promotion of pluralism and democratic capitalism. Weigel proposed that the natural law tradition as developed by Catholic philosophers in the Middle Ages and articulated by the Jesuit John Courtney Murray in the twentieth century could provide the moral foundation needed in a pluralistic society.

On the issue of abortion, Michael Novak initially pleaded ignorance about whether a fertilized ovum is a human being and entitled to human rights, and although he believed that most Americans considered abortion immoral, he also believed that there were some circumstances in which the criminalization of abortion might be relaxed. For a while after *Roe v. Wade*, he adopted the position taken by some Catholic politicians to uphold the Supreme Court decision while remaining personally opposed to abortion. In 1989, however, once it could be shown that each fetus has its own genetic code and is therefore a unique human being, he concluded that “the American people ought to make a decision as to how to address the legal and moral questions around the

issue” (82). Like Novak, Niehaus at first regarded abortion as a social problem that ought to be addressed through family planning and the alleviation of poverty, but later he regarded the legalization of abortion as a step backward in the country’s moral development, and he strongly promoted a human life amendment that would restrict the availability of abortion.

Although neoconservatives could not fault President Jimmy Carter’s emphasis on human rights, they did criticize what they considered his naïve application of human rights to foreign policy. Much more to their liking was Ronald Reagan and his assertion of American power against communism around the world. Likewise, they applauded John Paul II’s opposition to communism and his role in hastening the downfall of the Soviet Union. Both Novak and Neuhaus were on the board of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, a think tank founded to counter the liberal political tendencies of mainline Protestant churches and the US Catholic Church, faulting them for being insufficiently anti-communist. Weigel was less militaristic in his approach to foreign policy, arguing that spreading democracy around the world would improve American security; nonetheless, he criticized the US bishops when they turned from supporting the war in Vietnam to condemning it.

Early in his career, Michael Novak had been critical of US foreign policy and the Vietnam War, and he viewed Marxism as a plausible alternative to capitalism in economically underdeveloped countries. By the 1980s, however, his view had shifted. He insisted on the importance of American military readiness to ensure peace in the world, he was highly critical of communism, and he was skeptical of all forms of socialism. He argued that the US bishops’ pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, put too much emphasis on the destructiveness of nuclear weapons and not enough emphasis on the value of nuclear deterrence. Similarly, he criticized *Economic Justice for All* for becoming “too engaged in the policy-making process” instead of providing a “normative moral framework” and letting experts work out the details (149). Weigel and Neuhaus made similar criticisms of the two pastoral letters, but they did not write as extensively on the topic as Novak did.

S.’s chapter on Latin America and liberation theology provides clear examples of why he ought to have called Novak, Weigel and Neuhaus Catholic neoconservatives rather than neoconservative Catholics. Their criticisms were the same as those of other neoconservatives, but these three happened to be Catholic. Only in the last chapter where the three criticisms take issue with liberal positions espoused by American bishops, can it be said that they were writing primarily as Catholics rather than as neoconservatives.

The book gives a brief but accurate look into conservative political thinking and writing in the closing decades of the twentieth century. In retrospect, however, these three Catholic thinkers shared an optimistic naïveté. Novak’s simplistic notion of an ethical and democratic capitalism bears little resemblance to the ruthless corporatism that was emerging even as he wrote. Neuhaus’s pleas to bring moral values back into government and business fell on deaf ears. Weigel’s hope that US foreign policy would favor the establishment of democracies around the world remain unfulfilled. While

they were writing about political tempests here and there, they were unaware that a historical tsunami was just beyond the horizon.

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Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ.
By Gerald O'Collins, SJ. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 229. \$40.

It is always exciting to welcome a new book by Gerald O'Collins SJ, the eminent and prolific Australian Jesuit theologian. This book on divine revelation is slightly outside his usual home ground of Christology, Resurrection, Trinity, and Fundamental theology. But, as the author points out, a coherent notion of revelation can serve as a lynchpin for the rest of theology, a glue that holds it all together. And despite the word "toward" in the subtitle, this book is a quite thorough and extraordinarily helpful review of very many aspects of its topic.

In the book, O'C. exhibits his usual erudition. He knows and uses the Scriptures to great effect. He shows detailed knowledge about classical, modern, and contemporary discussions of revelation, especially including the Church Fathers and *Dei Verbum* from Vatican II. An added bonus is his occasional reference to Christian art, which is perhaps not surprising from a man who lived and taught in Rome for years.

Traditionally, revelation has been understood as the revealing of propositional truths. O'C. affirms that truth is crucially involved in revelation but he thinks God's revealing of *himself* is primary. He says, "... revelation is *primarily* a personal encounter with God (who is Truth) rather than the communication of a body of truths" (138). Revelation not only shows us God—O'C. points out that it also shows us the truth about ourselves. And he is clear that divine revelation is not revelation unless there is a recipient who receives it in faith (9, 11).

Without wishing to outline the whole book, I will point out that there are twelve chapters. Picking out a few, there are fascinating and illuminating discussions of how revelation engages and transforms the people who receive it (chapter 3), of the difference between revelation and biblical inspiration, which are sometimes mistakenly identified (chapter 10), and of the canon of Scripture (chapter 11). There is also, notably, a sensitive and helpful discussion of divine revelation and non-Christians (chapter 12).

Let me raise two questions about the book. The first has to do with the ongoing character of revelation, which O'C. insists upon. He criticizes the statement in *Dei Verbum* to the effect that revelation reached "its full and definitive climax through the self-manifestation of Christ" (108). He denies that the revelation in Christ is absolute and unconditionally complete, that revelation is now simply over and done with. This is because O'C. holds that revelation is past, present, and *future*. God's final revelation will occur in the eschaton.