

Catholic Postliberalism in the Ruins of “the Catholic Moment”

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A historically conversant reader interested in the current state of discourse regarding Catholicism and American politics will find a good amount of familiar discord. He will discover, for example, that the life issues continue to bedevil. Can a Catholic vote in good conscience for an abortion-rights candidate over a pro-life competitor if that candidate is more supportive of other policies in line with Catholic Social Teaching? This issue has, of course, been with the American Church for some time now, even if it has taken on renewed urgency given the coincidence of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* with the presidency of Joseph Biden, the second Roman Catholic to hold that office and a recent convert to pro-choice stridency. The action of the Supreme Court and the battles within the various states will ensure that abortion remains at the political heart of American Catholicism for years to come. One can say something similar about other issues, such as immigration, gun control, and economic justice. None of this will be found to be particularly surprising. The same cannot be said, however, of the return of a more fundamental question, one thought to have been settled since the mid-1960s. That question is whether Roman Catholicism and American liberal democracy are incompatible to the extent that Catholics ought to seek, if possible, another constitutional arrangement, one more friendly to the Catholic cause.

Our reader would be familiar with the standard narrative that, while the existence of a medieval Church in a modern polity that upholds religious freedom had been a matter of concern since the dawn of the Republic, it

became serious only in the first half of the twentieth century as the number of Catholics and their influence grew. Until that time, American bishops, such as Archbishop John Ireland (1815–1918), made a special point of speaking publicly on the benefits of American freedom for the Church, just as they made clear that Catholics could be as patriotic as any other citizen. If there were tensions, they came primarily from anti-Catholic bigotry and governmental overreach. Things changed, however, when the point at issue was no longer primarily a religious one of Catholic believers infecting their Protestant neighbors with erroneous doctrine, but rather the threat so many Catholics posed to the fate of American freedom itself. In a postwar America concerned with the spread of Soviet communism, Paul Blanshard found a ready audience for his scholarly anti-Catholic diatribes, *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (1949) and *Communism, Democracy, and Catholic Power* (1951).¹ Without much difficulty, he pointed to various statements of Gregory XVI and Pius IX condemning the separation of Church and state, the freedom of religious conscience, and democracy as the best governmental form. To top things off, he had Leo XIII's *Testem Benevolentiae*, an 1899 letter to the Cardinal Archbishop James Gibbons of Baltimore, warning him and his fellow bishops not to speak of the constitutional arrangement of the United States as a political ideal. While Leo had positive things to say about the American system, his admonition followed the traditional line: while constitutional protections of religious freedom are necessary when Catholics are in the minority, the ideal situation is a state that officially confesses and supports the Catholic religion. Of more recent vintage, Blanshard could quote the response of America's best-known Catholic theologian, Monsignor John A. Ryan, to the question of whether non-Catholics would be permitted to practice their religion in this ideal state:

If these are carried on within the family, or in such inconspicuous manner as to be an occasion neither of scandal nor of perversion to the faithful, they may be properly tolerated by the State, . . . Quite distinct from the performance of false religious worship and preaching to the members of the erring sects, is the propagation of the false doctrine among Catholics. This could become a source of injury, a positive menace, to the religious welfare of true believers. Against such an evil they have a right of protection by the Catholic State. . . . If there is only one true religion, and if its possession is the most important

¹ Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (Boston: Beacon, 1949); Blanshard, *Communism, Democracy, and Catholic Power* (Boston: Beacon, 1951).

good in life for States as well as individuals, then the public profession, protection, and promotion of this religion and the legal prohibition of all direct assaults upon it, becomes one of the most obvious and fundamental duties of the State.²

Blanshard's work had its intended effect. When the Democratic Party nominated the Catholic John F. Kennedy for president, he was forced to confront the charge that his commitment to his Church was at odds with the responsibility of the office to uphold the Constitution.

However, at the same time Blanshard was seeking to frighten his fellow Americans of the threat of Catholicism, a learned Jesuit, John Courtney Murray (1904–1967), was in the process of building a scholarly case that the papal teaching the critics of Catholicism employed did not represent the whole tradition of Catholic political thought.³ Legitimate concerns over the anti-Catholic character of the French Revolution, he argued, had obscured the contributions of writers from the Middle Ages and the early modern period who were more friendly to democratic freedoms without reducing the essential truths of the faith to the liberty of human decision. In addition, Murray could point to recent statements by Pius XII that suggested the possibility of doctrinal movement on the question of religious freedom.⁴ Although Murray faced severe criticism from more traditional theologians and even punishment from Church authorities, he developed a complex interpretation of the American Proposition in which governmental neutrality in religious matters was an expression not of hostility or indifferentism to religious truth, but rather an opportunity for Catholics to help shape the democratic consensus. He interpreted the First Amendment not as a political expression of liberal ideology, in which religious belief is a mere matter of personal choice, but rather the best way for the American polity to allow a plurality of competing voices to engage in argument over the governmental action. Murray presented his mature ideas in his 1960

² Blanshard, *American Freedom*, 53; quoting John A. Ryan and Francis I. Boland, *Catholic Principles of Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 35.

³ John Courtney Murray, "Government Repression of Heresy," in *Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America* (New York: Catholic Theological Society of America, 1948), 26–98; Murray, "St. Robert Bellarmine on the Indirect Power," *Theological Studies* 9, no. 4 (1948): 491–535; Murray, "Law or Prepossessions," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 14, no. 1 (1949): 23–43; Murray, "The Problem of State Religion," *Theological Studies* 12 (1951): 155–78.

⁴ The key text is Pius's address to Catholic jurists on December 6, 1953.

masterpiece, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*.⁵

With the powerful patronage of Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York, Murray had the opportunity to influence the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*. His work constituted the greatest American contribution to the Council and a way for the American Catholic experience to affect the development of Church doctrine. Thanks to Murray's efforts, there are unmistakable American echoes in the new teaching that "all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits" (§2). Too late for Kennedy, but it allowed Catholics ever afterwards to take their place within American political discourse unmolested for being Catholics. As Leon Hooper put it:

With the Second Vatican Council's 1965 promulgation of *Dignitatis*, American Catholics breathed a collective sigh of relief. For the first time in their three-hundred-year history, Catholics could publicly, unequivocally, and loudly proclaim the virtues of civil religious freedom without raising distrust among other Americans or condemnation by their church.⁶

If Catholics were thought to be a political threat, it was because of their individual opinions on matters of policy and party affiliation, and not because of any faith-induced rejection of the American project itself.⁷

Given this history, our curious onlooker can be forgiven for being surprised, and most likely alarmed, to learn that the standard narrative

⁵ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflection on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960; repr. New York: Routledge, 2005, with introduction by Peter Augustine Lawler).

⁶ "General Introduction," in John Courtney Murray, *Religious Liberty: Catholic Struggles with Pluralism*, ed. J. Leon Hooper, S.J. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 16.

⁷ Versions of this narrative are easily found. Recent examples include: John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: Norton, 2003); D. G. Hart, *American Catholic: The Politics of Faith During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *American Catholics: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); *The Cambridge Companion to American Catholicism*, ed. Margaret M. McGuinness and Thomas F. Reznick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

has been upset, what was old has become new once more. The question of whether American Catholics are called by their faith to oppose the religious freedom embedded in the founding ideas of their country has returned. More shocking is that those arguing that Catholicism of its nature opposes freedom American-style are not anti-Catholic critics or Italian popes, but prominent intellectuals within the American Church itself. I have in mind those Catholic thinkers who fashion themselves "postliberals." Their names are by now familiar: Patrick Deneen and Gladden Pappin (political theorists), Adrian Vermeule (legal scholar), Chad Pecknold (theologian), Sohrab Ahmari (writer and editor), and most recently, the philosopher D. C. Schindler. Although differences within the movement are important, they are all united in a desire to overturn the narrative described above and a belief that the critics of Roman Catholicism's compatibility with the American polity were right after all. For them, Murray was wrong when he claimed in 1960:

Catholic participation in the American consensus has been full and free, unreserved and unembarrassed, because the contents of this consensus—the ethical and political principles drawn from the tradition of natural law—approve themselves to the Catholic intelligence and conscience. Where this kind of language is talked, the Catholic joins the conversation with complete ease. It is his language. The ideas expressed are native to his own universe of discourse. Even the accent, being American, suits his tongue.⁸

Murray was wrong not only in his reading of the signs of the times, but more fundamentally in failing to recognize the depth of the problem America's founding ideology presents to the philosophical and theological commitments that constitute Catholic faith. In the words of Schindler, American Catholics must confront the fact that "America is anti-Catholic at its root."⁹ It is anti-Catholic because it is liberal, and liberalism represents a threat to the vitality of the American Church. Indeed, the problem is severe enough that it is worthwhile raising the question of whether Catholicism requires a government which employs its power to support the religious aims of the Catholic Church.

The emergence of Catholic postliberalism and the debate it has incited requires some explanation. How has the discussion of the relationship of

⁸ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 55.

⁹ D. C. Schindler, *The Politics of the Real: The Church Between Liberalism and Integralism* (Steubenville, OH: New Polity, 2021).

Americanism and Catholicism taken such a radical turn? Moreover, why has it occurred within that part of American Catholicism that could be appropriately described as traditional?¹⁰ This essay seeks to give at least a partial answer by viewing Catholic postliberalism as a continuation of a debate among the between traditional Catholics in the 1980s over the legacy of Murray. This debate pitted supporters of Murray linked to *First Things*, a journal of public affairs, against his critics associated with the theological journal *Communio*, with the respective editors Richard John Neuhaus (1936–2009) and David L. Schindler (1943–2022) playing prominent roles. The heart of the debate was over whether Murray had rightly judged the compatibility of the American polity with the internal logic of Catholic faith. How one answered that question would determine the kind of engagement American Catholics could have with the political movements of the late twentieth century. Neuhaus and his supporters were convinced that Catholics could make common cause with non-Catholics conservatives in their defense of traditional morality, democratic capitalism, and a robust anti-Communist foreign policy. While some of their fellow partisans might make pragmatic arguments for this or that policy, Catholics would employ the more solid reasoning of natural law to support policies that uphold the true good for individual citizens and the common good for the nation as a whole. David L. Schindler, on the other hand, saw a deep divide between the American conception of “freedom” and what a Catholic must mean by the term. For Schindler, it was a matter of two contradictory “logics,” between which one must choose. Rejecting the notion that the Church ought to aspire to a seat at the table of America’s policymakers, he argued that the Church best transforms the world, and America in particular, by remaining the Church in its fullness.

Of course, the 1980s was not that long ago, but temporal distance should not overshadow the difference between then and now. Much has changed, regarding both American polity and American Catholicism. The America of 2023 is not the America of the 1980s, and neither is the Church. It is this change, I submit, that accounts for the radicalization of those opposed to Murray’s project. The originating dispute occurred at a moment of general optimism and anticipation about the prospects for Catholicism in the United States, while Catholic postliberalism reflects the general frustration

¹⁰ The rise of anti-Americanism among Catholics on the left is discussed most recently in John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* (New York: Norton, 2022), 307–26, and closer to the time in Gary Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

and even despair of our present moment. This is not to submerge the arguments at play in historical consciousness, but only to acknowledge that the question of how the Church ought to relate to any particular polity must take into consideration the historical character of both actors. Murray made a similar point about Church–state debates in the 1940s:

Doubtless they will always go on; for the political theology of the Church (meaning the theology of her relations to the temporal order) will never be a fully "closed" theology. It cannot be, because it is political, and therefore stands in close relation to the contingencies and relativities of the political order, whose institutionalization is constantly dissolving. The premises and principles of this theology are indeed firm and unchanging, resting on foundations that stand outside time and the corrosiveness of political change. But there will always remain the task of purifying the developed, practically operative structure of this theology from the contingent elements that necessarily accrue to it in the course of the Church's living through, and wrestling with, the political ideas and institutions of particular ages; there will remain, too, the task of organizing afresh this theology, to insure its exactness, its vitality, and its relevance to new contexts and its solidity against new attacks.¹¹

By placing Catholic postliberalism within the history of postconciliar American Catholicism, we can gain a greater understanding of its emergence and, perhaps, avoid simply recycling old arguments in a new day. In what follows, I shall take the recent work of D. C. Schindler, the son of David L. Schindler, as representative of Catholic postliberalism. His recent *The Politics of the Real: The Church between Liberalism and Integralism* is, to my mind, the most developed articulation of this school of thought yet. The connection between father and son also makes the point of continuity nicely.

It is my contention, then, that Catholic postliberalism is best understood as a sequel to a dispute that began nearly forty years prior, but as shaped by a new and worse historical situation. One could, of course, push the argument about the relationship between Catholicism and American liberalism back further. A better starting point might be the contributions of Orestes Brownson (1803–1876), abolitionist and Catholic convert from liberal Protestantism. He argued that the influence of John Locke on the Founding Fathers accounted for the catastrophic failure of the Constitution to

¹¹ Murray, "St. Robert Bellarmine on the Indirect Power," 491–92.

eradicate slavery. Ever the optimist, however, Brownson was convinced that, if one views the Constitution in light of the Declaration of Independence and its “self-evident” truth of divinely bestowed human equality, the possibility arises of reconstructing America’s philosophical underpinnings in a Catholic direction.¹² Archbishop Gibbons took up this idea in his pastoral letter summing up the work of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884: “We consider the establishment of our country’s independence, the shaping of its liberties and laws as a work of special Providence, its framers “building wiser than they knew,” the Almighty’s hand guiding them.”¹³ It was upon this rock that Murray built his rock, and upon it that all subsequent discussions about this topic rest. That said, an explanation of the particularities of Catholic postliberalism points to a shorter timeframe, beginning with the proclamation of “the Catholic moment” and its demise. To tell this story, we must begin with the now.

“The Catholic Moment” in Retrospect

Being an American Catholic of traditional bent in 2023 is frustrating business. We believe with the confidence of divine faith that the Church has been endowed with a message that, if only accepted, would heal what ails our fellow citizens and elevate them to a life far superior to what our desiccated and decadent culture offers. Yet, we watch as destructive ideas and movements, absurd in their folly, dominate every lever of cultural power, holding our children in thrall by the seemingly invincible allure of technology, trashy entertainment, and a gender ideology that threatens to dismantle the premises of Catholic morality. When a pandemic struck our society, a moment of existential fear and disconnection perfectly suited for a Christian response, the leaders of the Church allowed the celebration of the Eucharist by the Body of Christ to be deemed an inessential activity with barely a chirp of protest against the intervening powers of the state.

The failure to make a public stand for the freedom of the Church followed a familiar pattern of disengagement stemming from revelations of priestly sexual abuse in 2002. The scandal had been simmering since the 1970s but

¹² A good place to start in learning about this oft-forgotten figure of American Catholicism is his *American Republic: Its Constitution, Tendencies, and Destiny* (New York: P. Oshea, 1866; repr. Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2003). For a biography of Brownson see Patrick Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹³ *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy, 1792-1919*, ed. Peter Guilday (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1923), 256–60, at 258.

exploded when *The Boston Globe* published a series of articles concerning the numerous crimes of Father John Geoghan against the Church's young and episcopal malfeasance by Cardinal Bernard Law and his predecessors.¹⁴ At its heart, the clergy sex abuse crisis was a refusal of the Church to recognize the legitimate powers of the state. Instead of handing over priests who criminally molested minors to the civil authorities, bishops shielded them from the temporal consequences of their actions, even hiding their perfidy from fellow believers as known perpetrators were shuttled from one unsuspecting parish to the next. Once this domino fell, the Catholic faithful were forced to watch as one diocese after another was forced by lawsuits or the governmental indictments to open their records. The result was a rushing roar of unveiled malignance that has taken more than a decade to subside. Despite real progress made in protecting Catholic children from predators since then, the moral credibility of the bishops of the United States has not been restored to pre-2002 levels. It is not guaranteed that it ever will.

If the bishops have been sidelined by the weight of past misdeeds, what about other elements of the vaunted Catholic subculture built up by the hierarchy in the first half of the twentieth century to ensure that new immigrants were not captured first by Protestantism and then by secularism? Alas, little remains of the Church's own "Benedict Option." Our clubs, schools, and colleges and universities are now mostly all but indistinguishable from the surrounding culture. The loss of our institutions of higher learning is, perhaps, most tragic. They are perfectly suited to the development of responses and alternatives to the destructive ideologies that have engulfed the Church's young adults. Yet, while they have the potential to fortify young minds and souls with the treasures of the Catholic intellectual tradition, few do.¹⁵ This is not to deny or downplay the presence of vibrant experiments in Catholic education scattered across the nation and at every level. They exist and play a crucial role in the life of the American Church. However, there is no use in denying that the institutions built to provide the Catholic faithful with a cultural alternative to American secularism have themselves, by and large, succumbed to the very forces they were created to resist. Moreover, this has happened at the very time when the ordinary Catholic is in desperate need for guidance in navigating the aggressive toxins entwined

¹⁴ For the fuller history, see Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church* (Boston: Little and Brown, 2002). The best book on the beginnings of the scandal remains Jason Barry, *Lead Us Not into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

¹⁵ I relate the failed reception of St. John Paul II's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in "The Death of the Catholic University," *First Things*, no. 332 (April 2023): 37–44.

in American culture. Despite their best efforts, it is nearly impossible for Catholic parents to shield their children from the normalization of vices unthinkable a short decade ago. Redolent of St. Paul's description in his letter to the Romans (1:32) of sin run amok in the pagan society of his day, our youth are enveloped through social media in an ongoing celebration of the moral death-works of vanity, materialism, abortion, and drug use. In addition, there are powerful and well-financed forces seeking to confuse the next generation regarding the most fundamental truths of sexuality and gender. This is a crisis far greater than that posed by COVID-19, but, like it, thus far an unmet moment of *Kairos* for the Catholic Church.

The frustration arising from these dark developments is made all the greater in that, not so very long ago, American Catholics had reason to expect better days. The ascendancy of St. John Paul II in 1978 came at a moment when American Catholicism was flailing about in a quixotic quest for worldly relevance by imitating the world. Whether in aligning the Church with secular political movements to create a better world or by seeking relevance through the adoption of some of the cheesier aspects of popular culture, such efforts revealed a lack of confidence that Catholicism was sufficiently attractive on its own. It was at this moment that John Paul burst onto the world stage with much needed vigor and evangelical creativity. He was in many ways exactly what the moment required. Trained in Thomism and conversant in the personalist philosophy that animated Vatican II, John Paul was equipped to present the Catholic faith in a way that brought the authentic accomplishments of the Council to bear on the ills of the late twentieth century, both those within and outside of the Church. While liberal Catholics were horrified with the thought that the gains of Vatican II would be turned back, more conservative Catholics became instant optimists.

So great was the enthusiasm that Neuhaus, then still Lutheran, followed up his *The Naked Public Square*, which bemoaned the ways in which Christians had been excluded from political discourse, with a buoyant declaration that now, at long last, as his new title announces, *The Catholic Moment* had arrived.¹⁶ In support, the famed pollster George Gallup Jr. claimed to have shown empirically that "American Catholics were in the midst of a religious revival."¹⁷ The stars of 1987 were aligned for a robust intervention

¹⁶ Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹⁷ George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The American Catholic People: Their Beliefs, Practices, and Values* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 42.

of Catholics into American political discourse, a moment for the Catholic Church to assume, in Neuhaus' words, "its rightful role in the culture-forming task of constructing a religiously informed public discourse for the American experiment in ordered liberty."¹⁸ This notion would inform *First Things*, a journal edited by Neuhaus and dedicated to the intersection of doctrinally orthodox religion (Jewish and Christian) and American politics. Writers such as George Weigel and Michael Novak (1933–2017) explored the significance the papacy of John Paul II had for the unfolding story of the distinctly American brand of democratic capitalism. It seemed that Murray's dream that Catholics would provide the service to the American republic for which they were uniquely capable was becoming a reality. The enthusiasm was infectious, and before long prominent members of the American hierarchy were speaking in a similar manner.¹⁹

Neuhaus' *bête noire*, David L. Schindler, shared in the optimism, even as he vigorously disagreed with the Murrayite vision that animated the writers of *First Things*. In a highly critical review of *Catholic Moment*, he could allow:

The book makes for enjoyable and even exciting reading. It is difficult for a Catholic, even a non-triumphalist sort, not to be moved by his suggestion: not to be stimulated into serious reflection upon the meaning of Catholic identity, particularly now in the present cultural situation in America and indeed the West, which seems . . . aptly described in terms of a modernity giving way to postmodernity.²⁰

Like them, he breathed the same air of a Catholicism reinvigorated by the papacy of John Paul II. While these combatants had different visions of how the Catholic Church in the United States best relates to the American culture, each assumed a buoyancy on the part of the Church for its task that was, it turned out, unwarranted.²¹ Neither anticipated the extent to which the internal problems of the Church would dash hopes for renewal. This is so, even if for Schindler the collapse was something of a vindication.

¹⁸ Neuhaus, *Catholic Moment*, 284.

¹⁹ A particularly clear example is the pastoral letter of Archbishop J. Francis Stafford to mark the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution and the centennial of the diocese of Denver, "This Home of Freedom: A Pastoral Letter to the Archdiocese of Denver," May 28, 1987; repr. *Origins* 17, no. 4 (1987): 53–63.

²⁰ David L. Schindler, "Catholicism, Public Theology, and Postmodernity: On Richard John Neuhaus's 'Catholic Moment,'" *The Thomist* 53, no. 1 (1989): 107.

²¹ Ross Douhat has referred to this as "the master narrative of conservative Catholicism in the West" in his prophetic essay "The Crisis of Conservative Catholicism," *First Things*, January 2016, firstthings.com/article/2016/01/a-crisis-of-conservative-catholicism.

David L. Schindler versus the Neo-Conservatives

In the mid-1980s and 1990s, David L. Schindler made something of a cottage industry criticizing the work of Neuhaus, Novak, and Weigel, a group he labeled “the neo-conservatives.” With respect to Neuhaus, Schindler questioned whether his understanding of “the Catholic moment” was sufficiently Catholic. He made a similar charge in his *Heart of the World, Center of the Church* against Novak’s attempt to offer a Catholic defense of wealth creation within a system of democratic capitalism.²² The complaint against Weigel concerned whether American culture could be plausibly described as Christian, much less Catholic. What links each of these dialogues, if they can be called that, is a lack of discernible progress. Schindler was convinced that Neuhaus, Novak, and Weigel could hold the positions they did only because of their embrace of a faulty metaphysics, a notion of holiness inappropriate for followers of Christ, and a view of nature disconnected from the order of grace. In other words, their bad positions were a result of not understanding the true nature of the Catholic faith they all shared. Those under judgment objected, of course, and each did so in their own way. All, however, struggled to pinpoint the precise nature of the conflict. While Schindler wished to speak on the level of fundamental metaphysical and theological convictions, Neuhaus, Novak, and Weigel were convinced that the dispute was not over anything so fundamental, but rather a disagreement within the realm of prudence. They rejected the either/or tenor of Schindler’s attack and maintained that more than one position on the proper relationship between Catholic and the American polity was possible.

Of the three, Novak evinced the least patience with what he saw as Schindler’s mixture of politics and metaphysics.²³ The most theologically confident of the group, Novak dismissed Schindler’s claim that his position on democratic capitalism was based on a Neo-Scholastic view of grace and nature. Like Murray, he was aware of mid-century criticisms of this system and sympathetic to proposals for greater integration of the two orders.²⁴

²² David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

²³ The most direct exchange of view between Schindler and Novak is found their reactions to Michael Baxter’s “Catholic and Liberalism: Kudos and Questions for *Communio Ecclesiology*,” *Review of Politics* 60, no. 4 (1998): 743–64. Novak reacts in “Liberal Ideology, an Eternal No; Liberal Institutions, a Temporal Yes?” in the same journal issue (765–74), and Schindler in “*Communio Ecclesiology and Liberalism*” (775–86).

²⁴ Novak points to Murray’s editorship of *Theological Studies* during this time, and in particular his publishing of Bernard Lonergan’s ground-breaking articles on *gratia operans* (“Liberal Ideology,” 766).

Indeed, if a difference in expertise separated the two parties, it was in favor of Novak's own study of the relevant fields of economics and political science. While Novak put forward specific political proposals, Schindler dealt with untested and "grand hypotheses about how grace ought to work in a 'civilization of love,' particularly with regard to politics and economics." When he deigned to descend from the lofty heights of metaphysical speculation to the practical realm, the proposals offered were "lamely indistinguishable from those he criticizes." This failure to be specific was especially urgent when speaking about an issue as serious as the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

This was no academic exercise, no ideal statement for a theological manual. The final Bill was the product of serious Protestant minds, chastened by the lessons of many experiments in religious liberty conducted in all the original colonies over some two hundred years. For them, it took a great deal of self-abnegation. In two vital areas they declared the lawmaking power of the Congress simply incompetent: Congress could pass no law establishing a religion ("a religion," Madison clarified in the constitutional debate) or inhibiting the free exercise of religion. They denied themselves the power to do these things.²⁵

There remain, Novak conceded, unresolved issues with respect to Catholicism and American democracy, and Schindler and others were free to criticize his or Murray's analysis of what the founders achieved. They ought to do so, however, after acquiring the intellectual habits required for the task or at least be less polemical in their criticisms. After all, politics is not primarily a matter of having the correct theology. If it were, we should expect that Catholicism would have come up with something better: "No doubt the Founders were Protestant, and our understanding as Catholics is rather different. Yet I know of no Catholic body before them that built better."²⁶

Weigel was also perplexed on why the disparity of views regarding American culture was anything more than a matter of emphasis.²⁷ Mark Lowry,

²⁵ Novak, "Liberal Ideology," 769.

²⁶ Novak, "Liberal Ideology," 773.

²⁷ Schindler published a series of essays attacking the idea of a compatibility between America's "bourgeois" culture and "Catholic-creedal Christianity": "Is America Bourgeois?," *Communio* 14 (Fall 1987): 262–90; Schindler, "Once Again: George Weigel, Catholicism and American Culture," *Communio* 15 (Spring 1988): 92–120. The occasion was an article by George Weigel, "Is America Bourgeois?," *Crisis* 4, no. 9

in his appraisal of the back-and-forth between Schindler and Weigel, calls the resulting stalemate “tragic.”²⁸ He notes that both men saw themselves as “working within the service of the Catholic Church as defined by her Magisterium.” Moreover, their disagreement was not about central dogmas of the faith, such as the nature of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist, but rather occurred within the realm of Catholic social thought. Since “social doctrines are about living as a Catholic in the midst of some culture or other, at some point in history,” there is significant room for debate among upholders of orthodoxy. “The apparent flexibility in Catholic doctrine on the question of religious freedom is classic example of the inherent latitude within Catholic social thought.” Thus, when Schindler grants Weigel’s claim that Americans are generous, one might expect, Lowry argues, that Schindler would view this generosity as a participation, albeit in limited way, in the fullness of the Catholic understanding of this virtue. However, Schindler does nothing of the kind, but rather characterizes the way Americans give to charity or personally help those in need as rooted in what he calls “an ontology of extroversion,” and thus the “onto-logical” equivalent of selfishness. Thus, what seems like a virtue to the uninitiated, turns out to be, once its metaphysical frame is unveiled, a vice. Lowry is sympathetic to the metaphysical point Schindler makes and grants that Weigel, in his desire for “the Catholic moment,” fails to deal adequately with the distance between American religiosity and the fullness of Catholicism.²⁹ However, Lowry can accept neither the dichotomous conclusion Schindler draws nor the insults that he directs at Weigel for his lack of interest in doing political theology in a metaphysical mode.³⁰ Irony is at work, therefore, in Lowry’s conclusion that the non-metaphysical Weigel comes out as more attuned to the possibilities of participation than his scholarly interlocutor. There is also the issue of the practical import of the standard that Schindler applies in his judgment upon America. Weigel writes:

(1986): 5–10. For Weigel’s response to the first essay, see his “Is America Bourgeois? A Response to David Schindler,” *Communio* 15 (Spring 1988): 77–91.

²⁸ Mark Lowry, “The Schindler/Weigel Debate: An Appraisal,” *Communio* 18 (Fall 1991): 424–38. The responses by Weigel and Schindler in the same issue support this judgment.

²⁹ See Lowry, “The Schindler/Weigel Debate,” 429: “In sum, Weigel has measured American culture as good, maybe at times too good, but he has minimized the distance between the religiosity of that culture and Catholicism.”

³⁰ Schindler credits Weigel’s lack of interest in metaphysics as a “want of education” and an overall lack of sophistication (“Once Again,” 102).

This brings us to the largest question raised by David Schindler's essay, namely, what kind of culture and polity would satisfy the criteria demanded by what he terms "Catholic-creedal Christianity?" If I read Schindler correctly, only a culture and polity that take "Catholic-creedal Christianity" as its basic religious and moral framework is satisfactory, by Catholic standards. . . . One senses here, however, tacitly, a return to the kind of Catholic monism that marked the approach of the Magisterium to issues of church-and-state prior to the Second Vatican Council and its Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*.³¹

Thus, even if Schindler's ideal had any chance of becoming part of the American story, it would run afoul of Church teaching were it to be anything more than a debate between Catholics. Murray, according to Weigel, is a much better guide on how Catholics can bring natural law arguments to the ongoing formation of the democratic consensus by which the government governs. Schindler, in his response, argued that his adherence to *Dignitatis Humanae* on religious freedom is separable from the question of "why a regime should favor an ontology more proper to a non-Catholic than to a Catholic religious confession."³² Lowry is not convinced. One "cannot have *Dignitatis Humanae* and ask that the regime be weighted toward the integral ontological ordering of Catholicism" without sacrificing the idea of government by the consent of the people. America is, after all, made up of more than traditional Catholics. In sum, Lowry argues that Weigel, for his part, underestimated the tensions between what it would mean to have a truly Catholic moment and the dynamics of American liberalism. That said, Schindler failed to come to grips with the incompatibility between all talk of constructing a regime supportive of the Catholic view of freedom and the development of doctrine accomplished by the Second Vatican Council.

Of greatest relevance for our purposes is Schindler's appraisal of Neuhaus's proclamation of the late 1980s as "the Catholic moment." In his lengthy and thoughtful review of *Catholic Moment*, Schindler laid out Neuhaus's argument and subjected it to severe, if respectful, criticism.³³ He focused on Neuhaus's preference for a paradoxical model of the Church-world relationship over the other possibilities laid out by Richard Niebuhr. Of special interest to Schindler is Neuhaus's view that the transformational

³¹ Weigel, "Is America Bourgeois? A Response to David Schindler," 87–88.

³² Schindler, "Once Again," 117.

³³ Schindler, "Catholicism, Public Theology, and Postmodernity."

model, whereby the Church transforms the world, “smacks of triumphalism,” since it assumes that the Church has all the knowledge required to move history forward, the only issue being finding a way to implement its vision. This model was favored by traditionalists prior to Vatican II, and by leftists after the Council in the form of theologies of liberation. Neuhaus, of course, knows that Christianity is of its very nature transformative, but insisted that, when this way of looking at things is primary, the Church becomes overly absorbed into the projects of the world, either uncritically accepting secular ideologies or claiming expertise in areas beyond its competence. Better to think in terms of paradox. On the one hand, the Church approaches the world with a rationality accessible to non-Catholics, and on the other, the Church knows by faith that reason has access to only a part of reality, and not its most decisive aspect, which is the eschatological reconciliation of all things in Christ. The Christian, therefore, “lives, as it were, in different worlds, different realities. Nature, reason, law, culture—all these mean one thing in relation to one reality, and quite another in relation to another.”³⁴ Catholicism, given its long commitment to holding together faith and reason or grace and nature in ways that maintain the integrity of each side of the equation, is better equipped to straddle these realities than other versions of Christianity. Hence, the *Catholic* moment.

The problem with this approach, for Schindler, is that there are not two realities for Catholics, but only one. There is no nature untransformed by grace and no reason unaffected by faith. The only existent order is one thoroughly infused and informed by God’s salvation of his creation through the gracious work of Jesus Christ and the animation of the Holy Spirit. This insight is the lasting contribution of Henri de Lubac, Joseph Ratzinger, and Hans Urs von Balthasar and constitutes for Schindler “an integral part of the received tradition of Catholic Christianity.”³⁵ In this tradition, nature and grace or faith and reason are not related extrinsically, as if one can simply be added onto the other because each can be understood apart from the other, but intrinsically, “a unity which is simultaneous with their distinctiveness.” Here grace and nature do not relate as discrete parts of a larger whole, but as aspects of a single, organic whole, related in their very being. This understanding of reality yields not a paradoxical model of Church–world relation, but rather a transformational model: the Church transforms the world by offering the truth of reality as revealed in Christ.

³⁴ Neuhaus, *Catholic Moment*, 21.

³⁵ Schindler, “Catholicism, Public Theology, and Postmodernity,” 114.

In sum, then: on the organic-integrated understanding of the grace-nature relation suggested here, Catholic Christianity has an intrinsically cosmic dimension. Grace establishes an ontological orientation in the cosmos: orders every entity from within to God in Christ. It follows that Catholic Christianity has an intrinsic mission truly to enter into, to penetrate, all of human being and activity and hence all of culture: to help carry through this ordering of all of being to God in Christ. The Catholic Church, as a matter of its own inter-essence, must in this way be *of* the world and a transformer of the world, that is, even (precisely) *as* it is—and must remain—above (transcendent of) the world.³⁶

In contrast, Neuhaus limits the Church to engaging in a conversation premised on the terms of whatever culture it finds itself in. Schindler says that it is "only slightly too cynical" to suggest that Neuhaus' preference for the paradoxical model over the transformational serves his desire "to justify the neo-conservative reading of the particular political-cultural project called the American experiment."³⁷ This allows the Church to transcend the world, to speak words of judgment about its failures, but also to stop short of claiming to be able to "transform society and its structures."

To put the matter in its most radical terms, Neuhaus's paradoxical understanding (of grace-nature and faith-reason) entails a privatizing of faith which is simultaneous with a "naturalizing" of nature and a "rationalizing" of reason. That is, Christianity can go public, can speak in and for the public order, but only in the name of a nature just so far unpenetrated by grace and a reason just so far unaffected (internally) by faith.³⁸

In other words, Neuhaus's Catholic moment presents an Americanized form of Catholicism, domesticated and shorn of its prophetic powers to challenge the liberal principles of America's founding and the cultural formations that bear the mark of that founding. Schindler repeated many of these claims against Neuhaus in his *Heart of the World, Center of the Church*, and included an extended critical analysis of Murray, on whom Neuhaus relied.³⁹ Schindler suggests that, instead of Neuhaus's Murrayite Catholic moment, we ought to pursue one informed by the teaching of Pope John Paul II.

³⁶ Schindler, "Catholicism, Public Theology, and Postmodernity," 118.

³⁷ Schindler, "Catholicism, Public Theology, and Postmodernity," 119.

³⁸ Schindler, "Catholicism, Public Theology, and Postmodernity," 130.

³⁹ Schindler, *Heart of the World*, 43–88.

It is to this suggestion that Neuhaus reacted with his 1997 *First Things* essay "The Liberalism of John Paul II."⁴⁰ In it he expresses frustration at Schindler's attacks, and like Weigel, cannot quite understand the precise nature of the criticism of this otherwise "friendly fellow." That said, he acknowledges a serious difference of approach:

I do think there is an important difference between us. It is not, or at least it is not chiefly, a difference over Catholic theology. The difference, rather, is that Prof. Schindler and those who are associated with his criticism tend to put the worst possible construction upon the liberal tradition, and on the American cultural, legal, and political expression of that tradition. In doing so, I believe Prof. Schindler and his friends hand an undeserved victory to those who interpret the liberal tradition in ways that we all deplore. With John Courtney Murray, I suggest that our task is to contend for an interpretation of liberalism that is compatible with the fullness of Catholic truth.

He grants without qualification that America was founded on a liberal tradition different from Catholicism, but since time travel is not yet a possibility, the best we can do is make a case that there is a way to understand America that does not exclude Catholic participation in its common life, but rather welcomes it. Given the number of powerful voices making the contrary argument in an attempt to limit Catholic influence, there is no good reason for American Catholics to give them aid or comfort. Rather, believers ought to expend their intellectual firepower on bad construals of liberalism and toward the articulation of ones more friendly to the deepest commitments of Catholicism.

Doing this will entail coming to grips with the claims of antiliberal Catholics. The first such claim is that liberalism, with its ethos of not bringing religious claims into political discussions, tempts believers to privatize their faith. Neuhaus counters: "If we are hesitant to declare in public that Jesus Christ is Lord, the fault is in ourselves. We cannot plead the excuse that liberalism made us do it." Christians living amongst liberals would hardly be the first faced with an enticement to hide their faith. A second claim is that liberalism presents itself as being procedural, the work of lawyers, but in reality hides an ideology that promotes a voluntaristic conception of social order and undercuts all objective claims to the good. Finally, it is said that

⁴⁰ Richard John Neuhaus, "The Liberalism of John Paul II," *First Things*, May 1997, firstthings.com/article/1997/05/the-liberalism-of-john-paul-ii.

liberalism reinforces the worst aspects of capitalism, producing a "social order that is entirely and without remainder in the service of individualistic choices by the sovereign, autonomous, and unencumbered Self. The wages of liberalism is consumerism, and consumerism is all-consuming," Neuhaus cops to each of these charges against liberalism as it has been articulated and practiced by certain advocates. He argues, however, that individually and collectively they represent distortions of liberalism rather than its soul. This is the argument that American Catholics are called to rather to make, unless, that is, they believe that the American Church requires a government founded on something other than liberalism.

Although the above summary of the debate between David L. Schindler and his opponents hardly does justice to the issues involved, it makes the necessary point that no resolution was attained. Since the sides could not agree on a common definition of liberalism, the argument over the extent to which Catholics ought to fight against it was rendered moot. Neuhaus and company agreed that certain conceptions of American liberalism must be rejected by Catholics, as well as by their fellow citizens. At the same time, they asserted with confidence that the American experiment possessed within itself potencies well suited for Catholic engagement on how Americans ought to order their life together. This engagement, of course, would necessarily include a proposal for how Americans ought to think of the rights and freedoms endowed to them by the Creator and secured by the Constitution. Schindler, in contrast, saw such cheeriness for a Catholic moment as a refusal to appreciate the Catholic difference. Once that difference is seen and operationalized, the impossibility of a Catholic moment in late-twentieth-century America, or any time in American history, becomes obvious. The only question left is whether Catholicism demands a different kind of regime from the one the founders bequeathed. Neither side was interested in answering yes. However, that was then, this is now.

A Catholic Postliberal Moment?

This is not the place to go into the details of the varieties of Catholic postliberalism. Despite the newness of the movement, the literature by both its proponents and its critics grows daily and will continue to for the foreseeable future. It is enough to note what is new and what is not. What is familiar is the criticism of liberalism, although the increase in its sophistication and apocalyptic fervency is worth attention. When the Catholic postliberals speak of liberalism, they follow Alasdair MacIntyre in viewing it as a

tradition, with intergenerational commitments and reinforcing rituals.⁴¹ This means that liberalism can be seen as being in direct competition with Catholicism, not simply as an intellectual alternative, but as another way of living in the world, backed up by governmental and economic power. Moreover, liberalism is reckoned to be in crisis, collapsing in on itself. The promise of neutral space in which citizens would be free to pursue whatever life goals they chose as long as it did not harm others is proving false. Instead of a bulwark against tyranny, liberalism in its last throes has become of source of it. A condensation of the postliberal prognosis can be found in Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed?*

Liberalism has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded. As liberalism has “become more fully itself,” as its inner logic has become more evident and its self-contradictions manifest, it has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims yet realization of liberal ideology. A political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty, in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom. . . . To call for the cures of liberalism's ills by applying more liberal measures is tantamount to throwing gas on a raging fire. It will only deepen our political, social, economic, and moral crisis.⁴²

Catholic postliberalism, therefore, sees liberalism not so much as something with which Catholics should not make common cause, but rather as a direct threat to the continuation of Catholic faith itself. Far from worrying how to conceive of the character of a “Catholic moment,” the question is now whether the Church can long survive in a liberalism come of age.

When Catholic postliberals consider the sorry state of Catholicism in twenty-first-century America, they prefer to focus on the Church's cultural, economic, and political context rather than on behavior of the Church itself, “head and members.” This is not to say that they have no complaints about the postconciliar Church or the papacy of Francis, but rather they tend to blame America's liberalism above all other factors. Enlightenment theories

⁴¹ Adrian Vermeule, “Liturgy of Liberalism,” *First Things*, January 2017, firstthings.com/article/2017/01/liturgy-of-liberalism.

⁴² Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 3.

involved in the founding of the American republic contain toxins that will over time dissolve all individual and group commitments beyond the preference of the moment. Since Catholic faith upholds a world of objective beauty, goods, and truths which human beings are obliged to seek out and bind themselves to once found, it is properly seen as the exact opposite of liberalism. Catholic postliberals are aware, of course, that American Catholicism has had better days, but they take this as evidence that, while the poison may be slow acting, it is nonetheless sure. In other words, the Church is not to blame for its cultural impotency, but rather the liberalism that permeates every aspect of the American culture, and thus the religious lives of Catholics. It is this conception of liberalism that has led Catholic postliberalism to reintroduce the question of a Catholic state. I say this knowing full well that most postliberals wish to distinguish their position from that of the integralists, for whom the solution is the Church and the state integrated into a single whole. As Catholics wishing to be faithful to magisterial teaching on religious freedom, they have rightly avoided any direct endorsement of the reestablishment of the confessional state of old. Given this, it is not clear that they have advanced the argument beyond the stalemate of three decades ago. Let us take the example of D. C. Schindler's *The Politics of the Real*.

The Reality Politics of D. C. Schindler

D. C. Schindler describes his project as an attempt to find a place for the Church "between Liberalism and Integralism." It seems necessary, therefore, that he argue against each end of the spectrum with equal energy, rejecting both in their pure state but retrieving something in each. Given Schindler's remarkable intellectual productivity, I hesitate to pass judgment on whether he will accomplish this feat. That said, a good deal of that energy has been spent on attacking liberalism and emphasizing its radical distance from a Catholic understanding of freedom. He is very, very good at it, and I cannot hope to do justice to his sophisticated and developing position in what remains of this essay.⁴³ I shall rather simply focus on what he says in *The Politics of the Real* as it pertains to our question.

⁴³ D. C. Schindler is proving to establish himself as one of the leading Catholic intellectuals of his time. Here are only some of his works on the topic of freedom: *The Perfection of Freedom* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012); *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2017); *Retrieving Freedom: The Christian Appropriation of Classical Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2022).

Like his father, D. C. Schindler regards American liberalism not as a pragmatic way to order and ensure freedom in a religiously pluralist country, but rather as a metaphysics essentially hostile the Christianity. More than a tradition or set of reenforcing rituals, liberalism is anti-Christian theology. The liberals who founded the United States spoke of God as creator and bestower of human equality and rights. However, their conception of God, according to Schindler, is as *potentia absoluta*, a deity not of truth or reality, but empty and contentless potency. By adopting a God whose nature is power, liberalism upholds the primacy of potency over actuality, the possible and not yet real over the real. Thus:

At the theological core of liberalism is the most radical rejection of Christianity possible, because it posits and enacts an undoing of the very thing that defines Christianity, that makes Christianity Christian, namely, the Incarnation of the Son of God, which is an “extension” of God, so to speak, into time and space, through an assumption of nature in its deepest reality, an extension-through-assumption that aims ultimately to embrace the whole of reality: the cosmic liturgy.⁴⁴

In other words, liberalism is the political expression of a metaphysics of the unreal, one that reduces God to “a possibility” and asserts a universe without any order of goods beyond what human beings can fashion in their endless struggle for power. When potency is given primacy over reality, the real has no existence prior to choice but rather is only ephemerally created by choice. In this sense, liberalism is not a solution to civic violence, but an invitation to it. “The only way to resolve differences that are totally arbitrary is either through violence, the forceful imposition of one ‘particular opinion’ in a way that excludes others, or simply by putting all religious matters *out of play* in the actual order of existence, making them most basically a matter of private conviction, enclosed in a sphere now policed in the name of public order.”⁴⁵ The only way that America could have evaded this outcome would have been if its founders had related “Nature’s God” to the only religious tradition grounded in the reality of this God, that is, the Catholic tradition preserved and embodied in the Catholic Church. It seems not too much to say that, for Schindler, the original sin of America is that it was not founded upon the Rock of Peter. Since that did not happen, every Catholic must choose

⁴⁴ Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 8.

⁴⁵ Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 30.

between these different and opposed ways of viewing freedom, God, and politics. Does this choice require support for a Catholic state in America?

A reader of *Politics of the Real* can be forgiven for expecting the answer to be yes. When describing the form of Catholicism, Schindler goes beyond the typical integration of the Hellenic quest for the truth of reality and the Jewish desire to know the revealing God and adds the Roman "aspiration to gather all the peoples of the world into a harmonious whole, made secure by enduring legal institutions that were not subject to the vicissitudes of natural passions or cultural differences."⁴⁶ Catholicism is, accordingly, of its very nature political and can never be content to be set beside any polity, confined to a separate sphere.

For all of its autonomy, all of its immanent integrity and proper powers, the political order, as the organization of human life in the world, is not a self-enclosed sphere juxtaposed to the reciprocally self-enclosed sphere of the Church; it is not a place outside of the Church and her mission, to which the Church is essentially indifferent and only "episodically" concerned whenever activity in this otherwise separate space happens to transgress into some explicitly religious or moral matter.⁴⁷

Indeed, if faith is viewed as merely a choice made by individuals, instead of an entrance into a communal reality that already exists and whose reality is unaffected by that choice, this Church can be no more than a passing creation of a collection of individuals. It has no prior reality. Catholics, therefore, cannot accept an American understanding of religion as a sphere of freedom unmolested by a government that has rendered itself incompetent to access the value of the choices at hand. Contrary to Murray's famous praise of the American government's refusal, in the form of the First Amendment, to get involved in religious matters, Schindler insists that any polity not opposed to Catholicism must pursue a conception of the common good derived from the Catholic Church. The state must recognize the authority of the Church in some respect over itself. "To put the matter succinctly: *the only way for the state to avoid making itself a religious authority in its service of the common good is officially to recognize the authority of an actual religious body.*"⁴⁸ Schindler leaves no doubt that the only candidate for this recognition is the Catholic Church.

⁴⁶ Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 11.

⁴⁷ Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 17–18.

⁴⁸ Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 96 (emphasis original).

Schindler is aware, of course, that his proposal seems to imply the need for a confessional state in America with support for Catholicism written into the new constitution. While Schindler grants the high improbability, even absurdity, of this turn of events, he has many positive things to say about integralism as a “thought experiment.” He affirms the willingness of its proponents to “think all the way to the foundations” and a recognition of the need to recover “the greater Catholic tradition” to do so.⁴⁹ To its credit, integralism recalls a forgotten dimension of Christianity: “The presence of the Church in the formal structures of the political order, the incarnation of the Christian spirit in the social forms that make up the ‘real world’ beyond the private sphere. It goes well beyond airy talk of the ‘common good’ or ‘justice as fairness.’”⁵⁰ That said, he finds that the integralist approach to the Church–state relationship suffers a similar defect that one finds in the followers of Murray: a view of nature as extrinsic from grace. Integralists think of Church and state as two halves, each concerned with a difficult aspect of the common good and together constituting a whole. The sole difference is that, while Catholic liberals insist that the interactions of the two orders occur solely on the level of culture, with governmental power employed only for keeping the peace, integralists believe that the state can and sometimes ought to use its coercive powers in the pursuit of the religious part of the common good. In contrast to both, a politics of the real, with its more organic view of the nature–grace relation, holds that the state more deeply attains its end by positively relating itself to the Church, and vice versa. “The Church and state are both in themselves *societates perfectae* since both aim at the whole human good, differently. This means that they do not intersect only at the margins, as two separate spheres, but each has its place inside, and indeed at the very core, of the other, though it has this place both as radically distinct in itself, and as a whole comprehending the other in its turn. The polis emerges from the center of the Church, and the Church has her place at the heart of the world.”⁵¹ The end of the state is the human good, and the deepest meaning of that good has been revealed through the Church. Thus, the Church is part of the essence of the state without thereby compromising the integrity of either.

At this point, it is fair to ask Schindler to move beyond the speculative realm and explain how the politics of the real will accomplish this without the state employing force in the cause of the true religion. Schindler insists

⁴⁹ The integralist with whom Schindler engages is Pater Edmund Waldstein, a collection of whose writings can be found in *Integralism and the Common Good: Selected Essays from The Josias*, 2 vols. (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2021, 2022).

⁵⁰ Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 241–42.

⁵¹ Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 275–76.

that to think that the Church could be intrinsic to the working of the state only through coercion is to separate nature and grace. "The office of the Church, as it bears on the political, is not to enforce the good in the practical order but most basically to articulate it, to protect and defend its truth."⁵² This, of course, is something with which Neuhaus could agree and spent his career contributing to the task. The question that divides is not whether the Catholic Church ought to put forward its vision of what is good for human beings as individuals, communities, or nations. This would be an agreed upon truth whether that contribution to public discourse is a thorough denunciation of liberalism as the devil's own or an argument that there is a faint participation of liberalism in a superior understanding of what it means to be truly free. No, the crossing-line is whether one believes Catholicism requires a state that somehow places itself under the authority of the Church. No amount of metaphysical speculation is going to get around this most fundamental of choices. Here, however, Schindler waffles.

That said, it is to his credit that he admits that his rejection of liberalism leads to an affirmation of state support of Catholicism:

We are indeed affirming that, ultimately, a Catholic confessional state is the ideal—not in the sense that a modern, liberal state subordinates itself to the Church, but in the sense of a political order founded in the ecclesial order, at the center of which is the ultimate nature and destiny of man—but we make this affirmation indirectly and through an expansion of the intrinsic meaning of politics. . . . An ideal political order is one that understands itself to be at the service of the whole human common good, and this goal transcends itself, beyond the temporal horizon, opening up to the eschatological order, for the Church is directly responsible.⁵³

In order to explain how his view differs from integralism, however, Schindler claims that a politics of the real, were it every to come to historical reality, would require a political form unknown to the modern world. In this counter-factual, the Church would not be called upon to exercise power of the state directly, at least not under normal circumstances, but rather to inform the political order "indirectly" and "intrinsically." In that sense, the Church becomes most fully itself when the state "has the charge of realizing the Christian order in this world, the charge of organizing society

⁵² Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 277.

⁵³ Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 282–83.

into a peaceful whole according to the measure of justice—understanding ‘peace’ and ‘justice’ here, not in the formalistic manner of liberalism, but as content-full goods, indeed supreme human goods.”⁵⁴ In what amounts to a decisive concession to his liberal opponents, Schindler grants that a faithful Catholic could actively work towards this goal only if there is a development in Church doctrine on the question of religious freedom.⁵⁵ It seems, then, that, for all the added sophistication, the argument has not moved much beyond its former stalemate.

Conclusion

So, are we having a Catholic postliberal “moment”? The answer is obviously yes, in the sense that the present circumstances of the Catholic Church in America have changed radically since Neuhaus’s declaration of a Catholic moment and something new is called for. The American Church is wounded, like the nation in which it dwells. The earlier confidence on either the side of the Church or the country is hard to believe for anyone not old enough to have experienced it. Neuhaus’s 1987 book reads like one from a different world. It is also worth noting that, less than ten years after the publication of *Catholic Moment*, a collection of essays appeared in the November 1996 issue of *First Things* entitled “The End of Democracy?”⁵⁶ The contributors reacted to a series of Supreme Court decisions on abortion, assisted suicide, and gay rights that were deemed both violations of natural law and undemocratic. Russell Hittinger spoke for many of the contributors when he asked: “If the Court does not claim to act merely in its own name, but for the common good and the rule of law, how then should citizens regard the effort to link abortion with the legitimacy of the Court itself and thus, it would seem, with the legitimacy of our current political regime?”⁵⁷ Although Neuhaus would continue his effort to affect American politics and culture until his death in 2009, the tone would change. No more talk of a Catholic moment.

⁵⁴ Schindler, *Politics of the Real*, 289.

⁵⁵ Schindler hints at the direction this development might go by referring to a book coauthored by his father: David L. Schindler and Nicolas J. Healy, *Freedom, Truth, and Human Dignity: The Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom, A New Translation, Redaction History, and Interpretation of Dignitatis Humane* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015). This impressive work of scholarship warrants more discussion.

⁵⁶ The essays as well as reactions can be found in *The End of Democracy?: The Celebrated First Things Debate, with Arguments Pro and Con and “the Anatomy of a Controversy,”* ed. Mitchell S. Muncy and Richard John Neuhaus (Dallas, TX: Spence, 1997).

⁵⁷ Muncy and Neuhaus, *End of Democracy?*, 18.

It is telling that his final book, in 2009, on the situation facing an American Catholic was entitled *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile*.⁵⁸

The times clearly call for a more critical reading of American liberalism, and the Catholic postliberals are to be credited with doing the necessary work. Their contributions are real and lasting. So is the pushback. Although rarely as philosophically or theologically recondite as their postliberal opponents, writers such as Robert P. George, Daniel E. Burns, Robert R. Reilly, and Ryan T. Anderson also provide a needed service.⁵⁹ They add an indispensable dose of realism to what often seems like fantasies shorn of any connection to the real world. They also provide hope in dark times. Catholic postliberalism, at least in its apocalyptic mode, can lead to enervating despair among believers. Even if liberalism has failed, we must live faithfully among its ruins. Accordingly, Catholic liberals rightly press the issue of prudence. The collapse of American liberalism will most certainly lessen the freedom of the Church to preach and sacramentally embody the Gospel, as well as the liberty of individual Catholics to speak the truth in public. It is right to ask whether this is the moment for a Catholic undermining the American heritage of freedom of thought. In my view, Catholic postliberalism is at its best when it makes realistic policy proposals that, if enacted, would bring the American polity closer to the Catholic vision of the common good.⁶⁰ Catholic liberals, on the other hand, are at their best when they take a step back from the practical and take stock of how fallen all political systems are, including the American one.⁶¹ Short of a change in Church teaching and world history, that will be the best we are likely to do. N.V

⁵⁸ For a biographical treatment of Neuhaus's varying perspectives on the American project, see Randy Boyagoda, *Richard John Neuhaus: A Life in the Public Square* (New York: Image, 2015).

⁵⁹ My list is limited by the writers with whom Schindler engaged: Robert George and Ryan T. Anderson, “The Baby and Bathwater,” *National Affairs*, Fall 2019, 172–84; Daniel E. Burns, “Liberal Practice vs. Liberal Theory,” *National Affairs*, Fall, 2019, 127–41; Robert R. Reilly, *American on Trial: A Defense of the Founding* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020).

⁶⁰ I find Sohrab Ahmari's recent work in *Compact* magazine and Gladden Pappin's in *American Affairs* particularly valuable in this regard. I look forward to Ahmari's forthcoming *Tyranny, Inc.: How Private Power Crushed American Liberty—and What to Do About It* (New York: Forum, 2023).

⁶¹ A writer who does this particularly well is Joshua Mitchell. See his *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time* (New York: Encounter, 2022).