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Catholic Colonization of the American Right: Historical Overview

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Catholic background, in the ideological building of the contemporary American right, seems to be a secondary issue in the history of the conservative movement. However, with very fine studies in recent years on the right-wing tendency of Catholic population or on the long lasting relationship between Catholics and political life¹, this peculiar aspect of the American right was recognized by George Nash²; it gave rise to some enlightening analyses from John Diggins, Michael Miles, John Judis or Melvin Thorne³; it offered a unique and substantial matter to Patrick Allitt, from the Thirties to the Seventies.⁴ Then, the Eighties opened a new era for the Republican Party, which receives more frequently the Catholic vote, while the Republican political staff began to be ‘catholicized’ – without ever been a majority in the Party- with some great national figures, often converted but not only, and presenting themselves as orthodox or devoted Catholics in their political and confessional display. Things have changed since the Sixties, characterized by an antithetical “Kennedy ‘s model” with its Catholic voters, loyal to the Democratic Party.

I. Ideological contribution of Catholics to the nascent Conservative wing in the 1950s

The Fifties were the first decade when the term *conservative* and its claim appeared, in the writings of extremely varied authors and commentators. We are simplifying this variety by grouping them in four clans, at the risk of caricaturing and forgetting other emerging tendencies. The four ones formed a recognizable block: their common and avowed

¹ *Being Right, Conservative Catholics in America*, Mary Jo Weaver & R. Scott Appleby, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1995, 352 p. *Catholics and Politics, The Dynamic Tension Between Faith and Power*, Kristin E. Heyer, Mark J. Rozell & Michael Genovese, Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2008, 239 p.

² George Nash in *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America, since 1945*, Chapter 3 and 4, Wilmington, ISIS Books, 2006, 656 p.

³ John P. Diggins, *Up from Communism, Conservatives Odysseys in American Intellectual Development*, NY, Columbia University Press, 1994 ; Michaël W. Miles, *The Odyssey of the American Right*, NY, Oxford University Press, 1980, John B. Judis, *William Buckley Jr, The Patron Saint of the Conservatives*, NY, Simon & Schuster, 1988, Melvin J. Thorne, *American Conservative Thought since World War II : The Core Ideas*, NY, Greenwood, 1990

⁴ Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectual and Conservative Politics*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1993, 315 p.

objective was to break American liberalism, as it was thought by American intellectuals and practiced by Democratic Administrations since Roosevelt, under the name of liberal Progressive. Those four groups were also fiercely anti-communists. They had no connection with the tenants of the *Old Right*, this isolationist and nativist vestige of the Twenties in the Republican Party. For the rest, the four groups of the first conservatives compounded two different sensibilities, one resolutely philosophical, with two sub-components, libertarian and new Democrat, and the other openly Christian. The philosophical branches did not consider themselves as conservative. They did not use the term and some authors constantly refused to wear it. Instead, they thought themselves as the restorers of original liberal ideals, that have been distorted in their times.

Tradition in New conservatism

The two latter groups were more singular. They defined themselves for the first time in American history as real 'conservatives.' They even claimed this name as their own, but in order to distinguish themselves from the bad reputation of the term - negatively referring to the agrarian Southern society or to the old Europe and its privileges- they represented themselves as *New conservatives*. These so-called conservatives wanted to restore a political ideal of the past that sat forth its Christian nature. The first one of the two groups was referring as *Traditionalist*. It intended to restore the true American *tradition*, as proposed by the scholar Russell Kirk, in his 1953 bestseller *The Conservative Mind*. In doing so, Russell, a catholic convert, disputed definition of American democracy, as trivialized by the liberal authors of his time. He preferred a subtle genealogical reading which traced the origin of the said Tradition to natural Christian law, defended -according to him- by Edmund Burke. The group that surrounded Kirk went back up thread of genealogy to St. Thomas and his Aristotelian predecessors. Ultimately, the *Traditionalists* asserted that America was not a regime of modern rupture, but quite the reverse: it was the sum (and the summit) of the highest wisdom produced by European thought. It represented the legacy of its most successful political model, that one of an accomplished Christian Republic. The *Traditionalists* constituted the hard core of *New conservatism*.⁵

⁵ Patrick Allitt, "American Catholics and The New Conservatism of the 1950s", *US Catholic Historians*, Vol 7, n° 1, *Transitions in Catholic Culture, The Fifties*, (Winter 1988), pp. 15-37

Civilization in New radical Right

The second group of conservatives had a more radical imagination. It could be categorized as *McCarthyist*, because two of its principal theorists, William Buckley and Leo Brent Bozell, had justified and supported Senator of Wisconsin methods, in their book *McCarthy and His Enemies* (1954). Crusaders of America, the *radical conservatives* also thought their country as the most complete conservatory of the West, but a conservatory on the edge of abyss, then struggling with acting evil, the USSR, in an apocalyptic colored fighting. Defenders of Christendom and of Greco-Roman civilization, which carried Christian Revelation, these Manichean conservatives constituted the heart of the *New (radical) Right*.

For these described groups, Christian reference was different from traditional religious and political referents in American history. The new providential world of the Conservatives was not charged by God to succeed, where mad Europe has succumbed to its sinful errors-according to the puritan version. It was nor the New World, given to men of goodwill to build a regenerated political society – in its Deistic version. America of the new and radical Conservatives was a surprising heiress, the most faithful heiress of a political tradition dating back to the peak of the scholastic period in Europe. For these radical right-wing conservatives, it was the precious depository of an unequaled and unmatched civilization, Christianity, carried by the truth of Revelation. The two conservative groups were literally rebuilding the foundations of American exceptionalism. The advent of America was now the fruit of a holy chain. It was the perfect accomplishment, although threatened, with an inestimable heritage.⁶

This approach introduced a profound reversal on American political thought and imagination, which did not escape its first commentators, considering the ideas of these newcomers as un-American and smoky. But yet, Kirk formulated a thought of inheritance that existed before him in Europe, but that he had had, with others, the genius to affirm as American as well. This affirmation was anticipated, shared and surpassed by an enthusiastic and small network, a restricted audience of intellectuals and media men, with one unlikely peculiarity: those who proclaimed themselves traditional conservatives or new right-wing

⁶ Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1948, Introduction. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, (first edition in 1953), Laverne, BN Publishing, 2008, Chapter I, The Idea of Conservatism, Chapter II Burke and The Politics of Prescription, Chapter III, John Adams and Liberty under Law. Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America. The Thankless Persuasion*, NY, Knopf, 1955, 326 p.

radicals were overwhelmingly Catholic. Their Traditionalist or Westernist sediments betrayed this Catholic particularism, as the source of New Conservatism and New Right, which appeared together in the 1950s.

The ideas of the first Catholic intellectuals of conservatism, armed with different conceptual frameworks, helped to attack the quiet front of the liberal vulgate and its history, represented then by authors like Arthur Schlesinger or Lionel Trilling. The Traditionalist and Westernist groups brought a different imagination of the American Experiment and a strong reluctance to liberalism, as it deviated too much from natural or Christian morality that these groups professed. They were among the first to formulate their hostility to American political liberalism, anticipating the future stand of Evangelicals and protestant Fundamentalists, who penetrated the conservative arena some twenty years later.

Where did these intellectuals come from and how did they even emerge? According to what French scholar Gérard Deledalle wrote in 1954 in his *History of American Philosophy*, there was indeed no Catholic (political) philosophy in the United States that could have explained it. There were, of course, Catholic men of letters, famous writers, renowned for their contribution to American literature, during interwar period and immediate aftermath of war. There was also a Thomist network, but it had no audience.⁷ There was no philosopher or political thinker who could stand as a great man of public authority. So, that emerging of unknown and illegitimate Catholic political thinkers, who displayed and reflected themselves as Catholic, was therefore a double revolution.

Quite non-existent until then in the political debates, American Catholics were also completely absent from the networks of the Old Right, still deeply hostile to the Jewish and Catholic minorities in the country. New Catholic Republican militants emerged in an apparently artificial political space, with ideals that did not correspond to their expected universe, the one of Democratic Left, for which they massively voted with the blessing of their episcopate. Thanks to the Cold war which excited their nationalism, thanks to the economic growth which facilitated their social advancement, thanks to the religious openness and secularization of the time in Protestant ranks that enshrined their mainline

⁷ Florian Michel, *La pensée catholique en Amérique du Nord, Réseaux intellectuels et échanges culturels entre l'Europe, le Canada et les Etats-Unis*, Florian Michel, *La pensée catholique en Amérique du Nord, Réseaux intellectuels et échanges culturels entre l'Europe, le Canada et les Etats-Unis*, DDB, 2010, Bruxelles, DDB, 2010, 629 p.

integration, Catholics emancipated themselves from their closed universe and, among them, this conservative political minority hatched, self-outing from protective conformism. This group was accompanied by a small horde of center-European intellectuals, fled from war and communism, and for whom liberal progressive was a dangerous cousin of socialism. The double equipage contributed to the birth of first conservatism, ever labeled in the United States, but whose legitimacy was rejected on all sides.

Among them, Eric Von Kuehnel-Leddin (exiled), Ross Hoffman, Francis Graham Wilson, Richard Weaver, John Luckas (exiled), Peter Viereck (exiled), Frederick Wilhelmsen, Thomas Molnar (exiled) and above all, Russell Kirk, (convert). *American Review*, *Burke Newsletter* and *Modern Age*, founded by Kirk and his friends in Chicago, give us today an overview of Traditionalist conservative corpus. Similarly, William F. Buckley, Leo Brent Bozell (convert), Whittaker Chambers (convert), Willmore Kendall (convert), Frederic Wilhelmsen, Frank Meyer (convert) or Gary Wills in his younger years, as well as the original contents of the *National Review*, built together the ideological corpus of radical Conservatives.⁸

Fusionism in the 1960s

Due to its dual origin, between traditionalists and radicals, the Catholic vein that irrigated conservatism, first negotiated its own unity and sought in the same movement for timely alliances. In the 1950s, conservative Catholics were pioneering with Libertarians and New Democrats.⁹ Almost concluded, this friendship did not succeed. Libertarians and New Democrats could not bear the famous tradition of new Conservatives. At the beginning of the 1960s, the group pretended to play solo by monopolizing the conservative label, with a synthesis of both traditionalist and radical movements, still embellished with a zest of libertarianism: *Fusionism* was born,¹⁰ as elaborated by Frank Meyer, former philosopher of

⁸ Patrick Allitt, opus cit.,

⁹ Murray Newton Rothbard, *The Betrayal of The American Right*, Auburn, Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007 (first editing in 1979), 231 p. Chapter 7 and 12.

¹⁰ Murray Newton Rothbard, “ Frank S. Meyer, the Fusionist as Libertarian manqué”, in George W. Caey (ed.), *Freedom and Virtue, The Conservative/Libertarian Debate*, ISI, 1998, pp. 135-160. Frank S. Meyer “What is Conservatism?”, in Donald T. Crichtlow & Nancy McLean, *Debating the American Conservative Movement, 1945 to present*, Lanham, Md, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009, pp. 177-181

The American Communist Party. This synthesis was applied to Barry Goldwater, Republican primaries winner for presidential elections, a real political coup for this small family.¹¹

Las, the failure of Barry Goldwater, which telescoped with the libertarian turn of the Sixties and the ecclesial reforms of the Second Vatican Council, shook fusionism and broke the rallying of Catholic conservative tendencies to form ideological unity. During the second part of the 1960s, the small network exploded. Reactions to the Council and the remarkable success of Leftism in American Catholicism as well as in political and cultural life of the country, marginalized its ideas and divided its members. Vatican II, initiated at the time of Kennedy's great presidency, the first one ever gained by a Catholic, caused an unprecedented earthquake in the American Church. For Catholics, this period was one of internal fragmentation that still characterizes them, between advocates of progress in the Church, liberals from Americanist sensitivity, Feminists, pre-conciliar nostalgic or defenders of ecclesial Tradition. Fusionist Conservatives were torn between those who wanted to stay in the normal political game, like William Buckley, Franck Meyer or Jeffrey Hart, and those who wanted to dissent and to conspire against what America had become, like Brent Bozell, Neil McCaffrey, Frederick Wilhelmsen, Garry Potter, John Wisner or Michael Lawrence. A winning movement in the early 1960s, Fusionists seemed out of breath in the early 1970s and weighed down by a new radical fringe, *Catholic ultras*. This fringe used, on the politically new issues of sexual ethics, contraception and abortion, same apocalyptic vocabulary of yesteryear McCarthyism and introduced these themes up to now into the political debate. The main arguments of the *ultras* were put in form in confidential reviews like *Ramparts*, *Triumph*, *The Wanderer*, *Remnant* and *Rough Beast*.

II. Catholic influence on Conservative Republican Display in the 1970s

Neoconservative Catholics

As we said, in the early 1970s, the Fusionist right lost its superb. It was not ensured about cultural-racialist views of some members against civil rights, while a lot of others thought affirmative action a very bad idea, what sociologist and dissenter Democrat Pat Moynihan explained with more brilliance and rationality. It was not very solid in its South-Vietnamese

¹¹ Goldwater's book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, (1960, re-edited in 2007 by BN Publishing) was written by Buckley and Bozell. On that coup, see from Marie C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties. The Conservative Capture of the GOP*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 210 p.

cause, while all members -except Gary Wills- thought the US should not withdraw nor leave the hand to the Soviets or their minions, as Henry Kissinger and Nixon were doing. This Fusionist movement was unable to stop a more radical wing, emerging from its own traditionalist roots and later inventing political militancy against abortion and free sex. Some certainties remained between them. 1. The providential character of the US commands to save the world from the deadly danger of Communism. The détente politics followed by the Presidents Nixon, then Ford and Carter was a fatal error. 2. The deleterious character of the American Left would ruin American civilization. Despite the basis of these common strong beliefs, the Fusionist movement split up. It restarted on the rubble, with two new but antagonistic components

So close to debacle, Catholic conservatives succeeded to share with others the alleys of power, ten years later. Their story in the 1970s is that of a resurrection. The ex-Fusionist core, loyal to the spirit of the *National Review*, sealed a reasonable alliance with *neo-conservative wing*, coming from the Democratic side and composed by secular Jewish middles of scholars and journalists like Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Nathan Glazer.¹² These dissenters strongly disagreed with the Leftist atmosphere of their maternal party. Same academic references were found (Tocqueville, Burke, Smith, Voegelin, Friedman), same slogans were built, like faith versus secularism, moral capitalism, fight against adversary culture, white ethnic conscience, powerful Foreign policy (meaning interventionism). These themes became the converging and long-lasting ingredients between Left dissenters Democrats and Catholic Conservatives. They formed the second generation of American neo-conservatism.¹³ Specific contribution of Catholic thinkers to this family can be found in the writings of Michael Novak on White Ethnic Defense, on social subsidiarity and even on the 'catholicity' of capitalism.¹⁴

¹² Mark Gerson, *Neoconservatism and the 1970s in Retrospect*, in *The Neoconservative Vision, From the Cold War to the Culture Wars*, Lanham, Md, Madison Books, 1996, 368 p.

¹³ David J. Hoeveler in *Watch on the Right: Conservative Intellectuals in the Reagan Era*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, (reed. 2009), 333 p.

¹⁴ Michael Novak, *The Rise of Unmeltable Ethnics*, New York, McMillan, 1973, 376 p. Further Reflexion on Ethnicity, Middleton, Pa, Jednota Press, 1977, 85 p. David Hoeveler, "Michael Novak. Capitalism and Catholicism", in *Watch on Right, Conservative Intellectuals in the Reagan Era*, Madison, Wis., The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, pp. 233-269.

Radical Catholics of the Religious Right

The radical part of Catholic conservatives found itself close to Evangelicals and fundamentalist Protestants. They created the Religious right, the other great conservative ideology that emerged in the 1970s, quite different from the one we have just described. The founders of this movement undertook to distinguish themselves as clearly as possible from neo-conservatives and succeeded in a disputing alliance among all those who supported restoration of divine authority as the source of politics. We could call them *theo-conservatives* and advance the idea that their ideological unity was realized in a creative way, in which recourse to an intransigent Catholic tradition was quite clearly articulated.

Before an official Christian conservative alliance into the so-called *Moral Majority*, Catholic radicals ignited the *Stop ERA* battle (1972-1975), led by Phyllis Schlafly, sponsored by the past Dixiecrat Richard Viguerie, known at this time as an exceptional fund-raiser for the Republican party, Paul Weyrich, very pious tycoon, founder of the *Heritage Foundation* and other conservative think tanks, John Terrence Dolan, anti-gay rights militant but yet dead from HIV in 1986, then talented and overactive founder of the *Christian Voice* and the *National Conservative Political Action Committee* in the Republican Party. All these people shared religious rejection of abortion and sexual liberation, religious rejection of homosexuality, religious defense of traditional family and marriage. They also built a narrative around the theme of endangered (Christian) religion, as the religious freedom became 'their' big deal. One another big deal - and this one had clearly a Catholic savor, yet present in Bozell's writings of the Sixties- was to obtain constitutional recognition that American political order and American society were based on Christian principles. Catholics brought their juridico-political arguments and their idea of the God-natural political order. Protestants brought their prophetic emphasis, their sensitivity for the Holy city and their fidelity to the Divine Law. The fusion of these universes is one of the most interesting aspects of *theo-conservatism*, because it brought from Catholic womb, a political authoritarian thought that can be shared with non-liberal Protestants.

Theo-conservative Catholics have launched the recurrent theme of the constitutional amendment as a political solution, to affirm the subordination of all American legal and political order to the God of Christians, as wanted, according to them, by the Founding

Fathers. They demanded not only a constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion as a criminal offense against the sacred principle of life, gift of God (abortion amendment) but also a more general amendment that recalled the God-source of the American Constitution (God amendment), defended over years by distinguished and eminent scholars as Charles Rice. The latter amendment would have made impossible to legally accept societal changes, whether they were the result of jurisprudence or law. The debate on new amendments led to a feverish search for a constructed and simple thought of divinely ordained society.

III. Catholic influence in the GOP since Reagan's era

Ronald Reagan or the conservative shift of the Catholic vote

The "Families Debauch" is one of the recognized factors - apart from the hostage crisis in Iran, the issue of economic stagnation and all the oratorical talent of Reagan - which contributed to detach Evangelicals from Carter, the last year of his term. Democratic disaffection among Catholics was older, but the Family values debate had also played a major role in transferring Catholic electorate to the Republicans, who were seduced by the fire alarms of the religious right. For members of the New Christian Right, this *Moral Majority* founded by Jerry Falwell, Howard Phillips, Richard Viguerie, Paul Weyrich and John Terrence Dolan in 1979, President Carter did not face moral crisis that the country was going through. Ronald Reagan would be the candidate who could fight secularism and immorality of American life since the 1960s. The decisive shift of the Evangelicals towards the Republican vote (GOP), like that of the Catholics, more divided between liberal and conservative tendencies, would lead to decades of polarization, between a Republican party that became that of most intense or assumed piety, facing a Democratic party even more religiously tempered or even more indifferent vis a vis religion in general.

Reagan became the President of the Catholics, like Roosevelt was before him, forty years earlier. His popularity continued to grow as he seemed so close to John Paul II, likewise him a victim of gun attack, a convinced adversary of Communism. Reagan denounced the moral degradation of American society and succeeded in making himself the mouthpiece of the

middle classes. Trade unionists, blue-collar workers and practicing Catholics moved massively towards him, because of his positions on busing, crime, drugs, communism, school prayer and abortion. The pro-life agenda of the Republican Party won the traditional Catholic electorate more than any other subject. The Catholic vote continued to come and go, and Democrats continued to win with the Catholic voices, in many elections, but in 1988 George H. Bush Sr. could count on Reagan's Catholic connections. Appearing more patrician than his predecessor, President Bush Sr. won the presidential election with the majority of the Catholic voices.

Predominance of the God-guidance discourse under President Reagan

What was the evolution of the religious conservatism under Reagan? Its radical slope was darkened: the internal enemy appeared more powerful than ever. The supporters of this pessimistic fringe judged the American elites responsible for all the misfortunes. The theme of openly Christian public philosophy had imposed itself by the rigorous demonstrations of its well-made heads. Pastor John Richard Neuhaus used reference to the most classical Catholic tradition to offer it, as a platform for Evangelical and Fundamentalist troops, in order to force, through legislative changes and federal appointments, the advent of a true Christian public policy. Neuhaus, a Lutheran ministry and radical left-wing protester in the 1960s, has called to conservative revolution during the Seventies, supposed to save American Babylon and liberate its enchained People. Then, he invented the concept of Public naked square, title of a book now considered as Theoclon Manifesto.¹⁵ He offered to restore the American Experiment in its 'communal covenant under God', thanks to the Catholic Church recalling Caesar his obedience to God's purpose.¹⁶ Becoming a Catholic priest at the beginning of the 1990s and the founder of *The First Things* magazine, Neuhaus has become since that time one of the tutelary figures of integral Catholic conservatism.¹⁷ Neuhaus' synthesis contributed to marginalize remnants of Catholic *paleo-conservatism*, represented

¹⁵ John Richard Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1984, 292 p.

¹⁶ John Richard Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home: The American Experiment as Revelation*, New York, Seabury Press, 1975, 231 p. *Christian Faith and Public Policy: Thinking and Acting in the Courage of Uncertainty*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing, 1977, 224 p, - *The Catholic Moment, The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1987, 292 p.

¹⁷ John Richard Neuhaus, *America Against Itself: Moral Vision and The Public Order*, Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre-Dame Press, 1992, 199 p.

since the Seventies by Pat Buchanan and set aside the power by neoconservatives under President Reagan's rule.¹⁸

For his part, George Weigel, new Catholic neo-conservative brain with Michael Novak, seized critique of the modern world, developed by John Paul II, which French political scholar Philippe Portier defined as intransigent. George Weigel used it as the proof of his perfect Catholic orthodoxy as well as the perfect Catholic compatibility with the conservative movement. From his demonstration, it appears that true Catholics can only be true conservatives.¹⁹ The Roman support for this movement seems to him, as to his network, such evidence that, on the slope of truth, the Catholic conservatives eventually anticipated the support of Rome as a quasi-certainty. It must be said that the rapid transformation of the American episcopate in the 1980s, helped convincing them they were on the right path, both spiritually and politically. Intimate enemies of conservative Catholics - the 1983 *Letter of the Bishops* on the perpetual illegality of the nuclear use of weapons had been like a declaration of war for them and for Reagan- the American bishops eventually presented signs of convergence with the conservative movement, by the play of episcopal replacements. John Paul II finally transformed a largely pacifist, third-worldist episcopal body, sensitive to the theology of liberation and rather Democrat, into a firm contempt of God given authority, publicly active on the political elections in order to give moral direction and recall intangible principles.

The Holy Alliance in the 1990s

In the 1990s, radical conservatives continued their ecumenical alliance between Catholic *ultras*, some Evangelicals and Fundamentalist movements, particularly in the Christian Coalition. A famous platform, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*, was written in 1994 by Richard Neuhaus and Charles Colson. They were labeled *Evangelical Catholics*, or *Taliban Catholics* by their opponents. New fields were opened to their vindictiveness: extension of the equality rights to homosexuals, in matters of marriage, research on embryos or stem cells, adolescent sexuality, secularization of American society, seen as a conspiracy. Their aims were to defend natural marriage, to rebuild a Christian

¹⁸ Pat Buchanan, *Right From the Beginning*, Boston, Ms, Little Brown, 1998, 392 p

¹⁹ George Weigel, "The Neoconservative Difference: a Proposal for the Renewal of Church and Society", in *Being Right*, op. cit, pp. 138-162.

education system and to create a compassionate civic commitment, which could replace state's assumption for social improvement. On the other hand, Catholic neoconservatives asserted their interpretation of Catholic Magisterium and succeeded, while proving their orthodoxy, to defend capitalist system without regulation, to reject Welfare state and tax legitimacy.²⁰ For all Catholics who didn't share rigorousness of orthodox habits, George Weigel invented the formula *Catholicism Lite* in 2002, especially aimed against American Jesuits, their journals and their universities, which were now suspected of secular drifting, at the contrary of new authentically Catholic colleges, which then multiplied, as Christendom College in Virginia, Thomas Aquinas College in California, Magdalen College or the Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in New Hampshire. The Nineties were time of incredible inflation of "religious" proposals, before the Republican Congress, which passed number of Federal laws or tried to pass number of amendments projects, connected with the religious freedom and the protection of religion.

Catholic Neo-Americanism in the 2000s

In the 2000s, under the presidencies of George Bush Jr, Catholic thinkers formed an intellectual backbone at the service of the conservative movement and their ideas were strongly represented in the entourage of the President. Bush was a parishioner of the Episcopalian Church in Washington and a member of the Methodist Church in Texas, but he was surrounded by intellectuals, counselors, pens, politicians from Catholic faith. The day of his 2001 investiture, he received the archbishop of Washington to dinner. President Bush Jr. moved with his father to the funeral of John Paul II, worldly offering stunning picture of two American Presidents, father and son, gathering on the remains of a Roman pontiff.

Throughout his mandates, G. Bush Jr. never ceased to show his reverence for the Catholic religion. His welcoming of Pope Benedict XVI, who visited the United States in April 2008, is also memorable, for the magnificent birthday reception of the pontiff at the White House, with 250 guests, including George Weigel, Michael Novak and John Richard Neuhaus. According to journalist Daniel Burke, these Catholics have had for eight years a major influence on George Bush's speeches, politics and legacy, "to an unprecedented extent in the

²⁰ George Weigel and Robert Royal, *Building the Free Society. Democracy, Capitalism, and Catholic Social Teaching*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1993, 268 p.

history of the United States”²¹. President Bush Jr. was then labeled by Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum (1995-2007), “the first Catholic president of the United States”, in opposition to the secularist figure of John Kennedy. As William McGurn humorously quoted, there was in the team of presidential pens, “more Catholics than all the Notre Dame University gathered since the last half –century”²².

Indeed, the White House Adviser, Leonard Leo, representing the Catholic tendency on the National Committee of the Republican Party during these years, said that Bush shared the perspectives of the (conservative) Catholics in a unique way in American history. The three “figures” of Catholic conservatism and its neoconservative and intransigent tendencies, Weigel, Novak and Neuhaus, were very close to this administration and justified by their theorization of the just war, the high hand of nationalist falcons on defense policy. Shield, or armed arm of Providence, Salvation of the Christian civilization, the United States were blessed, in their writings and speeches, to start preventive wars, a new concept, to preserve them and the world from the new evil axis of Islam, despite a very cautious American episcopate and all attempts of the Holy See to avoid the war in Iraq.²³

The two Catholic branches of conservatism, united around the President, strengthened their legitimacy by doubling their political position with orthodox ecclesial fidelity. The most radical branch Petrized its intellectual influence on the Evangelicals and Fundamentalists, giving a philosophical background to the evoking of Divine Law. Its program, re-submitting the US Constitution and particularly its first amendment, to the content of the God-alliance, leads the Conservatives to demand a closer proximity to the administrative apparatus, with religious claims in general. In concrete terms, the American state has never been so ready to collaborate, including financially and at heights never reached, with religious denominations. Compassionate conservatism is thus a great idea of the Bush Administration, which allowed

²¹ Daniel Burke, “A Catholic Wind in the White House”, *The Washington Post*, 13 avril 2008. URL: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/11/AR2008041103327.html>

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Michael Novak, “Asymmetrical Warfare & Just War. A Moral Obligation”, Rome, 10 February 2003, Speech at the Embassy of the Us before the Holy See URL : <http://www.nationalreview.com/novak/novak021003.asp>. George Weigel, *Just War and the Gulf War*, Washington D.C., Lanham, MD, Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1991, 169 p. *Faith, Reason and The War against Jihadism, A Call to Action*, New York, Doubleday, 2007, 208 p .

a series of legislative attempts to finance faith-based charities or schools,²⁴ rather than public social services or education, with no religious orientation. In these battles, the Catholic episcopate was predominantly in favor of the Executive initiatives.

Catholic conservatives in the GOP since 2008

Here we are, at the end of a sometimes-Byzantine path, in the midst of this still-unrecognized family, the American Catholic right. From the distinction between *Traditionalists* and *Westernists* in the 1950s, we arrived in the 2000s to a sometimes-*evanescent* distinction between *Neoconservatives*, disciples of the Judeo-Christian moral law and *Theoconservatives*, adepts of Christian public order. Between these two epochs, there were many events and quarrels. Catholic conservative ideas give rise to publications, websites, lobbying activities carried out by associations or specialized think tanks. They are not marginal. They are studied and taught at renowned Catholic universities or new radical Catholic universities. They have a great influence on the political debate, at this extent their arguments, connected by their users to a system of thought which animates them, have become arguments of current conversation. They are now exporting themselves outside the Republican Party, to Europe and with the hope to create a large Westerner and under God conservatism.

Unthinkable, nonexistent fifty years ago, Catholic ideas and people moved to the core of the GOP. In the run-up to the Republican primaries in 2012, three candidates personified the new Catholic profile of Republican politicians: Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich in a more unexpected way, if one doesn't know this iconic figure of the Conservative right converted to Catholicism in 2009. Paul Ryan, the Vice-president candidate, chosen by Mitt Romney in the second part of the 2012 elections, corresponded to the same profile.

The conversion of Newton Leroy Gingrich can be read as an additional episode in the bouncy life of this colorful politician. But it could be symptomatic of the Catholic taste that has seized the Republican elites since the 2000s, and which shows at the same time the success of Catholic theses and networks in the construction of conservative ideology. Gingrich is a remarkable example of the Republican elites rapprochement to the Catholic habitus, at the

²⁴ led by H James Towey, the (Catholic) director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives

point that conversions to this religion became frequent. These conversions are explained as much by a great social tolerance for the phenomenon of spiritual choice in the country of religious freedom, as by an "elitist" fit of Conservative middles with dignity and antiquity of Catholic institution.

Becoming a Catholic is in fashion in the circles of the Republican nebula. Before its politicians, there were right-wing intellectuals who set examples of conversion. Among the authors we quoted here, Russell Kirk, Willmoore Kendall, Ross Hoffman, Brent Bozell, Frank Meyer, Richard John Neuhaus, Francis Graham Wilson were convert and their conversion helped them to thing their ideas. Gingrich's Catholic shift was reflected in the very Neuhausian and Weigelian character of his writings in the 2000s. In 2007, he published a book, *Rediscovering God in America*, in which he stated that Founding Fathers' clear intention was not only to authorize but also to encourage religious expression in Public square. Gingrich produced with his wife and the company *Citizens United*, a documentary on Poland freed by John Paul II, *Nine Days That Changed the World*. Similarly, in a speech at the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington in Spring 2011, he recommended George Weigel's book, *The Cube and the Cathedral*, capturing -according to him- "*the crisis of European civilization as militant, government-imposed secularism (which) undermines and weakens Christianity*". The same phenomenon was occurring in the United States, did he warn, because "*American elites are guided by their desire to emulate the European elites, and as a result, anti-religious values and principles are coming to dominate the academic, news media and judicial class in America.*"²⁵

Richard Santorum was the other 'Catholic' candidate at the 2012 primaries, a little more hand-made by the movement. As a Senator, he chewed his words on social issues, denouncing all the time the social mismanagement of the state and the misery of the American working classes. He offered as a solution his doctrinal inspiration in economics, like local subsidiarity, for replacing government social programs. In a 2003 article, for the conservative Catholic magazine *Crisis*, Santorum declared himself critical on the scientific theory of evolution, and later he considered climate change as a fake. Family as source of common good, investments, prosperity, education, morality, was the key word in Santorum's program, yet summarized in his 2005 book, *It takes a Family*. The size of his own

²⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/17/us/politics/newt-gingrich-represents-new-political-era-for-catholics.html>

family earned him to receive the *Pro Dei and Patria for Distinguished Service to God and Country Award*, delivered by the new Catholic conservative Christendom College of Virginia... Like most Republicans, Santorum was against abortion, but he displayed an extreme position on the subject. He opposed it, in all cases, except when the mother's days are in danger. He would have not made other exception either in cases of rape or incest and said he would be in favor of laws which would allow prosecuting abortionist doctors.

Surviving Trump, the future of Catholic Conservatives in the Republican Party

Gingrich and Santorum could be said typical of the current Republican Catholic profile. This influence on the Republican Party is now strong and deep, with long lasting ideological roots, two distinct conservative tendencies, an extended network and direct access to the highest ranks of the power. Nevertheless, in the last Presidential campaign, Donald Trump seemed to have been the worst candidate for them.

Indeed, in March 2016, George Weigel and Robert P. George wrote in *the National Review*, *An Appeal to Our Fellow Catholics*,²⁶ signed by more than 30 outstanding Catholic conservative intellectuals and lobbyists, including Robert George, Law Professor at Princeton University, Mary Rice Hasson, director of the Catholic Women's Forum at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and Thomas Farr, director of the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University. The letter denounced Trump as a man "manifestly unfit to be President of the US", who has driven 'American politics down to new levels of vulgarity". Citing Trump's ethnic prejudices, promises to punish the families of terrorists, and his sudden about-face on pro-life issues, the signatories pleaded with Catholics, not to vote for Trump in the primaries. Robert George wrote another statement on Ted Cruz' website, some days later and after Marco Rubio's waiver. He called voters to support Cruz, a call relayed by 50 conservative Catholic activists and political leaders.²⁷

The website *Breitbart News*, directed by Steve Bannon, second Trump's campaign COE, and now special adviser of President, considered Paul Ryan at that time, as the Number One enemy. Described by the Medias as a radical Catholic, Ryan, ex-candidate at the Vice-

²⁶ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/432437/donald-trump-catholic-opposition-statement>

²⁷ <http://religionnews.com/2016/03/19/conservative-catholics-endorse-ted-cruz-as-trump-alternative/>

Presidency under Romney's race, disowned Trump's racist statements during 2016 and didn't hide his disagreement on different topics until then.²⁸

Despite this apparent disaffection, the rightist part of the Catholic conservatives finally declared its support. Phyllis Schlafly, before she passed, made the case for Trump and encouraged Christians to get behind him in her final book, *The Conservative Case for Trump*. She said Donald Trump was "an old-fashioned man who prioritizes family".²⁹ Her website, (Philly.com) published, in September 2016, a counter-list of 33 prominent conservative Catholics, who accepted to 'advise' Trump, among whom Rick Santorum, once again candidate for the Republican primaries, calling after his own renouncement, to vote for Sen. Marco Rubio. The September list of Trump's Catholic advisers included Joseph Cella, founder of the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast. Cella became, during the summer, the chief liaison to the Trump campaign for 'Catholic Affairs', despite he had signed the Appeal against Trump's candidacy. Other prominent figures joined the counter-list, like Jim Nicholson, former national Chairman, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and former ambassador to the Vatican. Without surprise, Richard Viguerie is in.³⁰ To this list we can add other rallied, more silent as tycoon and scientist Robert Mercer, generous donator for Cruz's super PAC, before he threw his allegiance to Trump, giving him some people of his own, like counselor Kellyanne Conway.

However, the half-reluctance of the Republican Catholic politicians and intellectuals to support Trump's program and current policy, could signal that their ideas, apparently shared by the new President –as restoring moral and Christian America, Christianizing public square and Justice decisions, dismantling gay marriage, suspending Obamacare, protecting religious freedom and persecuted Christians overseas, eradicating Islamist terrorism - were in fact distorted in a populist, hatred, nativist and isolationist way the Catholic conservatives never supported, no mention to the international deleterious politics or the commercial disclosure this new Administration seems to conduct. For the first time since 1994, Catholic Republicans at the Congress are less numerous than Catholic Democrats.

²⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/paul-ryan-trumps-refugee-ban-does-not-target-muslims/2017/01/28/e0cf1fe4-e56e-11e6-a547-5fb9411d332c_story.html?utm_term=.26d4ae9cf453

²⁹ <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/07/politics/phyllis-schlafly-donald-trump-book/>

³⁰ <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2016/09/23/struggling-catholics-trump-taps-conservative-catholic-advisers/>

So, Catholic conservatives could disappear in the current ideological turmoil of the GOP, under strong pressure of the new *Alt Right*, the Tea party network and other sovereigntist branches. They could also break again, in two opposite families, one extending the religious right from intransigency to religious authoritarianism of Christian majority or extending the Defense of Christian West to all regimes which are not Islamic OR liberal, including an illusory support to rightist and anti-Union parties in Europe. The other one can refuse this extremist coupling, preferring better tactical solution, as swiftly joining the core of the Republican opposition to all these "Trump tendencies", including the economic one, and to push its own champions, as Paul Ryan for example, to incarnate this opposition, for the future and decisive days the Republican Party will have soon to face.