Culture
Book Reviews



From left: San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone; Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò; Leonard Leo; Steve Bannon; and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas (CNS/Courtesy of Franciscan University of Steubenville/Ryan Nolan; Paul Haring; Courtesy of the Federalist Society; Gregory A. Shemitz; Courtesy of University of Notre Dame/Peter Ringenberg)



by Tom Roberts

View Author Profile
troberts@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

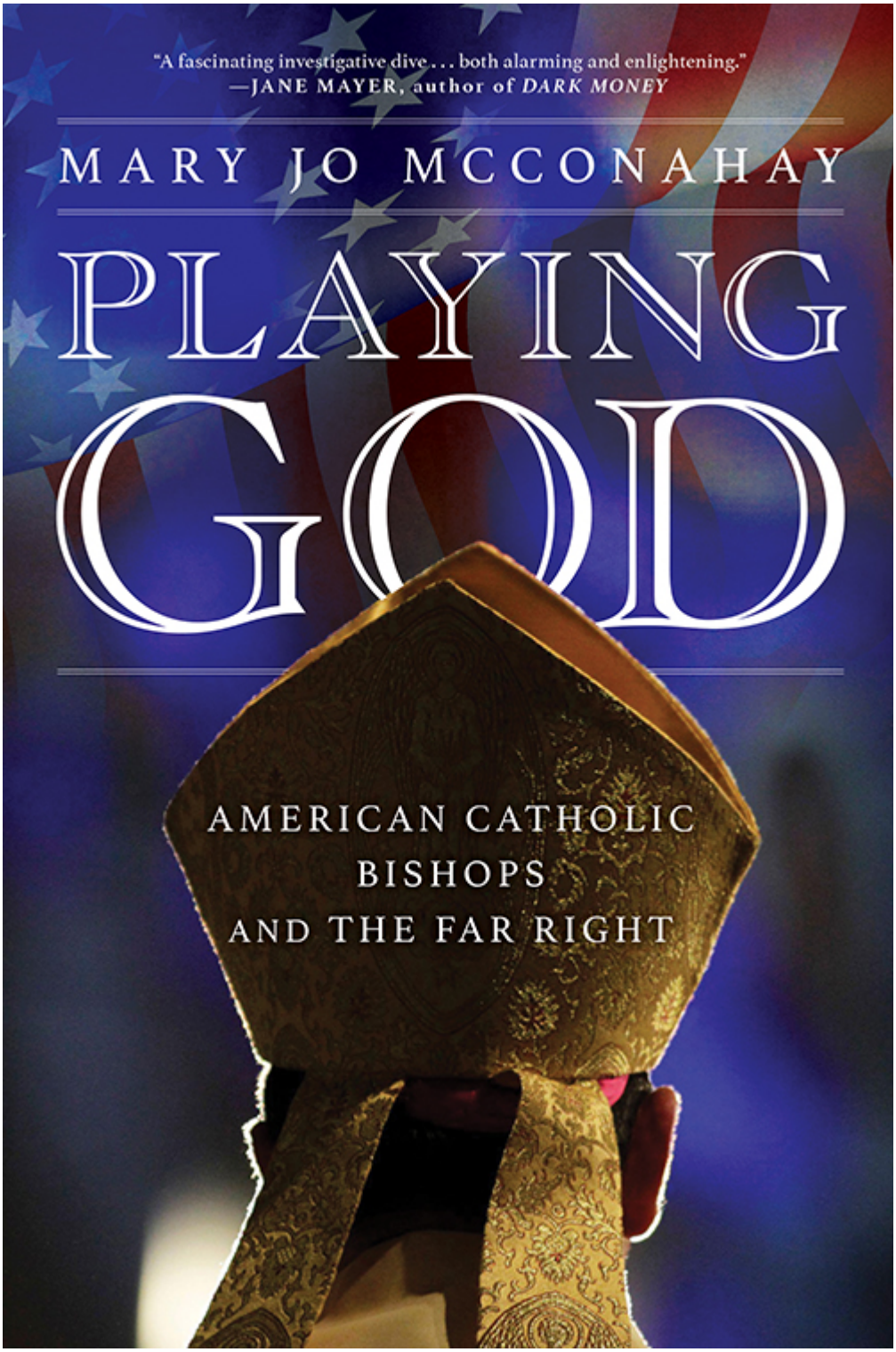
May 19, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A disturbing symbiosis exists between the disruptive, norm-trashing far right in our national politics and a similar force that has become prominent within the Catholic hierarchy in the United States. The relationship is alarming, given the established wisdom of church-state separation, but hardly surprising. As Mary Jo McConahay illustrates in *Playing God: American Catholic Bishops and The Far Right*, the two entities have become, over decades, increasingly dependent on and subservient to each other in a mutual pursuit of cultural influence.

Neither the political nor religious — in this case Catholic — right has gained its impressively disruptive power overnight. The evolution has occurred over decades.

Scholars and journalists have established in detail the arc of development in the political realm. Such works as *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* by Duke University historian Nancy MacLean; *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, both professors of government at Harvard University; *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* by investigative reporter Jane Mayer; and, earlier, *Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent* by Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne Jr., are several that come immediately to mind.



Playing God: American Catholic Bishops and The Far Right
Mary Jo McConahay
288 pages; Melville House
$29.99

McConahay has provided an ecclesial and episcopal version of that same history, showing the development of a brand of Catholic conservatism gone extreme. It is a corner of the U.S. Catholic community deeply aligned with and influenced by wealth. As such, it is willing to sideline the bulk of the Catholic social justice tradition in favor of a few "hot-button" issues that have distorted our national political discourse for decades.

Playing God is an important book, especially valuable in the detailed research guiding McConahay as she connects the dots along history's trail. Unlike the inanities of conspiracy theories that have infected both our political and religious cultures, McConahay finds abundant evidence in the words, writings and associations of bishops and influential Catholics to make a convincing and compelling case.

The author is no stranger to the demands of the craft. A distinguished Catholic journalist, she initially established her reputation under far more difficult circumstances, reporting on the insurrections in Central America. She knows the church well and has chronicled the institution at its best and worst.



Author Mary Jo McConahay (Macmillan Publishers/Nancy McGirr)

What she documents in *Playing God* is a church embarrassingly malleable to those prevailing cultural and political forces, often destructive of healthy democracy, that have taken shape through movements and institutions larded with Catholics on the far right of the political and ecclesial spectrums.

The COVID-19 pandemic unfortunately provided a platform for some of the most unhinged in the hierarchical ranks, and McConahay uses that recent era to introduce a core cast. For San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, the government mandates to temporarily close churches were not protective of people, but an act of "willful discrimination" against Catholics. With no medical background, he declared that the vaccines "don't give any immunity at all."

Bishop Jerome Listecki of Milwaukee, announced that "fear of getting sick, in and of itself, does not excuse someone from the obligation" of attending Mass in person. Likewise, Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, who had been vaccinated, proclaimed that he made no exception to attending Mass in person because "eternal life is the most important consideration."

Cordileone was joined in language and outrage by Cardinal Raymond Burke, a COVID-19 vaccine opponent who eventually became infected with COVID and spent several days in 2021 on a ventilator at the Mayo Clinic, as well as by Tulsa Bishop David Konderla and the irrepressible Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas. They were among the first to openly support the rantings of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, another opponent of COVID vaccines who openly engaged with QAnon conspiracy theories, the extreme-right Catholic and one-time Trump White House official Steve Bannon, and who in a 2018 letter openly called for Pope Francis to resign.

In collecting the record and placing them and a sampling of their fringy ideas all in one space, the effect becomes a kind of chorus of, as she puts it, the delusional.

Pandemic politics, however, was a sideshow. The focus of such bishops — and there are more in the national conference — is reducing Catholicism in the public square to a few issues dealing with sexuality and reproductive rights, prime among them the abortion debate, while aligning it with libertarian economics and small government extremists.



U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke attends the ordination of eight deacons from Rome's Pontifical North American College in St. Peter's Basilica Oct. 1, 2020, at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Inadequately addressed — and perhaps it is merely an inadequacy of language in need of address — is that these hierarchical characters are beyond any reasonable meaning of the term "conservative" or even "ultra-conservative." The term "extreme" will have to suffice for the moment, particularly when applied to their affiliations with and endorsements of individuals and organizations that make up what has become known as the Catholic right.

The Catholic right was a long time in development. Paul Weyrich, treated at length in this book, was the prototype far-right Catholic-as-political-activist. A behind-the-scenes organizational genius, he was integral to the marriage of Catholics and Protestant evangelicals as a new conservative, religious political force in America. Weyrich, who died in 2008, was an anti-Vatican II Catholic with a passion for right-wing politics wrapped in conservative Christian language.

Bringing to reality his view of how Catholicism should exist in culture, he was a principal architect of the infrastructure — the alliance of organizations and the webs of personal relationships — that became a major Catholic presence in the wider culture. It is difficult in a short space to portray the depth and breadth of his influence that continues to resound today. In 1973 alone, for instance, he was a founder of the Heritage Foundation, a now well-established conservative think tank; helped created the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC, which pumps out state-level model legislation fashioned by "insiders from oil, mining, finance, big pharmacy, gun manufacturers and other industries"; was in on "formation of the Republican Study Committee to promote the archconservative voices in the party over moderates among members of the House of Representatives. Today it is the largest ideological faction in Congress."

Said leading conservative Grover Norquist, "Most of the successes of the Conservative movement since the 1970s flowed from structures, organizations and coalitions [Weyrich] started, created or nurtured." The organizations and individuals founded and nurtured by Weyrich were, and continue to be, most interested in reducing government and, like their secular counterparts and partners, fostering and protecting a libertarian economics that envisions a market completely unrestrained by government regulation.

A primary concern for those reporting on the Catholic Church in the United States today should be following the money. Not the money that comes to the bishops via the standard Sunday collection basket, but the money that pours into alternative organizations from relatively new, independent and very conservative sources. These new sources are well outside the control of the U.S. bishops' conference and are increasingly important in spelling out a Catholic agenda for the wider culture. Here McConahay excels in lining out the players, the money flow, and their interaction with politics and beyond.

Advertisement

Her chapter titled "Unholy Trinity" takes what now can be noted as an especially prescient look at the entanglement of conservative Catholics — Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, he of recent scandal notoriety; his wife, Virginia, a conspiracy theorist and far-right activist; and Leonard Leo, who, as an official of the Federalist Society, was instrumental in Trump's remake of the Supreme Court and

other levels of the federal judiciary. Leo is also the repository of vast sums of dark money spread around a network of his organizations and think tanks advancing the work of Weyrich and others of decades ago.

There are dots aplenty to connect. The late William Simon, former U.S. treasury secretary and a conservative Catholic, in the 1980s was stung by two influential, countercultural pastorals produced by the U.S. bishops on militarism and the economy. Pushing back against the documents, Simon "was responsible for the new tsunami of corporate money that began to flow to influential conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s," writes McConahay.

She details the connections and the new generations of conservative money and influence: Thomas Monaghan and his Legatus, an organization of wealthy businessmen; Timothy Busch and the more recent Napa Institute and its influence on the Catholic University of America; and EWTN, a far-right media empire. Woven into all of it is the ubiquitous funding of the Koch family, especially in the person of Charles Koch. He, not a Catholic, pro-choice and little bothered by gender issues, perhaps provides the most glaring proof that the greatest motivating issue of the Catholic extreme right, its bishops and organizational leaders, is money, not religion. The prime ambition is protecting the market and essentially working against the bulk of traditional Catholic social teaching, which gives special place to society's margins, not its gatherers of wealth.

Catholics today, still recovering from the deep betrayal by bishops in the ongoing sexual abuse scandal, may be reluctant to consider that their church is being further distorted and turned inside out by unseemly forces in their midst. But Catholicism in America is metastasizing into a thoroughly American Catholicism, subservient to the culture's most rapacious instincts. We need to be aware of the history leading to the current moment. McConahay has done us a great service by laying out the case.

A version of this story appeared in the **June 9-22, 2023** print issue under the headline: 'Playing God' traces the history of Catholic conservatism gone extreme.