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Republican vice presidential nominee Sen. JD Vance, R-Ohio, arrives at a campaign rally at North Carolina Aviation Museum, Aug. 21, 2024, in Asheboro, N.C. (AP/Julia Nikhinson, File)

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Ohio Sen. JD Vance’s 2019 conversion to Catholicism helped shape his political worldview, he has written.

It has also put him in close touch with a Catholic intellectual movement, viewed by some critics as having reactionary or authoritarian leanings, that has been little known to the American public.

That's changing with Vance’s rise to the national stage as the Republican vice presidential nominee and running mate to former President Donald Trump.

The professors and media personalities in this network are generally known as "postliberal." Vance has used that term to describe himself as well.

Here are some takeaways from the AP's reporting on Vance's Catholicism and the Catholic thinkers in his circle of influence.

Related: JD Vance's Catholicism helped shape his views. So did this little-known group of Catholic thinkers

What is postliberalism?

It's a movement primarily among Catholic intellectuals that rejects both the progressive left, with its focus on individual rights and identity, and “economic liberalism,” the ideology that favors a free market and small government.

Postliberals do share Catholic conservatives' longstanding opposition to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights.

But Catholic postliberals want a muscular government — one that they control.

They envision people who share their views taking over government bureaucracies, universities and other institutions from within, replacing entrenched “elites” and acting upon their vision of the “common good.”

“What is needed … is regime change — the peaceful but vigorous overthrow of a corrupt and corrupting liberal ruling class and the creation of a postliberal order,” wrote Patrick Deneen, a prominent author in the movement, in his 2023 book, “Regime Change.”

> Vance has said the next time his allies control the presidency or Congress, “we really need to be really ruthless when it comes to the exercise of power.” He has said Republicans should seize institutions, including universities “to make them work for our people.”
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Is JD Vance a postliberal?

Vance has identified as postliberal, spoken alongside prominent postliberals at public events, met with them privately and praised some of their work.

And he has taken stances similar to those of other postliberals.

He’s said the next time his allies control the presidency or Congress, “we really need to be really ruthless when it comes to the exercise of power.” He has said Republicans should seize institutions, including universities “to make them work for our people.” He’s advocated for government policies to spur childbearing, a notion reflected in his digs at “childless cat ladies” with allegedly no stake in the nation’s future.

The Trump-Vance campaign did not respond to questions about where Vance sees himself in the movement and whether he shares some of the beliefs promoted by many postliberals.

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How big is this movement?

Not big, but it has a following among influential Catholic professors and writers.

But now, postliberals have an avid listener in Donald Trump’s running mate.

“You can go from people writing on an unusual Catholic theology blog to the vice presidential candidate in the course of less than a decade,” said James Patterson, professor of politics at Ave Maria University in Florida.

Some Catholics, including conservatives, have raised alarms about the company Vance has kept. They say postliberalism has historical connections to 20th century European movements that are associated with authoritarian regimes like Francisco Franco’s in Spain.

“We’re talking about people that prefer right-wing authoritarian regimes,” Patterson said. In a postliberal society, he said, citizens become “subjects” and personal liberty subjected to “administrative despotism.”

> Vance told the New York Post in August that Catholic social teaching “certainly influences how I think about issues.” But he said he accepted that there are "a lot of things the Catholic Church teaches that frankly, Americans would just never go for.”
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What do postliberals want?

Postliberals’ ideas vary, but there are common themes, said Kevin Vallier, author of “ All the Kingdoms of the World,” a 2023 book on the modern postliberal and integralist movements and their centuries-old roots.

Depending on who’s talking, a postliberal regime change could involve encouraging childbearing, easing or removing church-state separation, banning pornography for adults and children alike, reimposing laws that limit business on the Sabbath, supporting private-sector unions and strengthening safety nets for the middle class.

It’s common to hear postliberals praising Hungary’s nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orban, who has championed an “illiberal democracy.” Vance himself has praised Orban for Hungary’s financial subsidies to childbearing couples and for “smart decisions” in seizing control of universities.

How has Catholicism shaped Vance's politics?

Vance has said his faith helped shape his political worldview — emphasizing the need to promote both individual moral responsibility and social reform.

But Vance has recently tried to downplay his Catholicism's impact on policy-making.

Trump's Supreme Court appointees provided the crucial majority to overturn Roe v. Wade, which had legalized abortion nationwide.

But the issue has become a political liability, with voters in several states rejecting abortion restrictions.

Vance strongly opposed abortion, even in cases of rape and incest, in the runup to his 2022 senatorial win. But Vance has aligned with the Republicans' first post-Roe platform in 2024, in which it backed off from its longstanding support for nationwide abortion restrictions.

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> For an example of what an administration using state power for postliberal ends might look like, Georgetown political science professor , Julian Waller, pointed to Florida and Gov. Ron DeSantis' efforts to rid public higher education of diversity initiatives and critical race theory.
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Would Vance advocate for postliberalism as a vice president?

Vance has other influences besides postliberals, said Julian Waller, a political science professor at George Washington University.

"Someone like JD Vance can read them, be interested in them, attend talks, know them personally, get insights from them," Waller said. "But he's not on the hook to obey them."

For an example of what an administration using state power for postliberal ends might look like, Waller pointed to Florida and Gov. Ron DeSantis' efforts to rid public higher education of diversity initiatives and critical race theory.

“Forcefully changing institutions, capturing institutions. He’s interested in firing federal bureaucrats. This has been a long standing interest, that he’s interested in reformatting or abolishing certain departments.”

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.