Review of Playing God: American Catholic Bishops and The Far Right

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Mary Jo McConahay’s Playing God provides an outstanding analysis of key persons, events, networks, and dynamics that have moved the U.S. Catholic bishops to the social, political, and theological right since the 1970s. Although the book, like any, has its limitations, it is an important new contribution to understanding U.S. Catholicism that combines the sociopolitical power mapping of works like Jane Mayer’s Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right (Random House, 2016) with U.S. ecclesial analyses in books like John Gehring’s The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope’s Challenge to the American Catholic Church (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017). It will be of interest to anyone who wants to better understand the Catholic bishops and broader Church in the U.S.

Playing God begins inductively with a kind of “seeing” that defines the See-Judge-Act method of Catholic social teaching: See the realities, Judge their causes and moral rightness, and Act to facilitate corresponding change. The first chapter, “Plague of Illusion: Catholic Clerics’ Pandemic Attack on the State,” uses the COVID-19 pandemic to See the dynamics she Judges in subsequent chapters. Throughout the chapter, McConahay chronicles how pandemic responses from a handful of socio-politically and theologically conservative U.S. bishops illustrates the broader rightward shift of the U.S. episcopate. In short, bishops who responded by challenging rules that limited the size of religious gatherings and resisted vaccine mandates were more congruent with ultraconservative media and opinionmakers (secular and Catholic) than Vatican teaching. McConahay cites examples from Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone (San Francisco), Bishop Joseph Brennan (Fresno), Archbishop Jerome Listecki (Milwaukee), Bishop Thomas John Paprocki (Springfield, Illinois), and Bishop Joseph Strickland (Tyler, Texas). Throughout the chapter, she insightfully demonstrates how their responses variously mapped onto the anti-elitist populism of Donald Trump, the agendas of influential conservative Catholic networks and media platforms (including the Napa Institute, First Things, Church Militant, and Eternal World Television Network—EWTN), and the Christian nationalism of alt-right conspiracy theorists like exiled Cardinal Raymond Burke (former Archbishop of St. Louis), Rev. James Altman (former pastor of St. James the Less Parish in La Crosse, WI), and disgraced Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò (former pontifical vicar to the U.S. under Pope Benedict XVI).

Against the backdrop of these archetypes, McConahay uses the next five chapters to Judge how and why the U.S. Catholic bishops have become more socio-politically and theologically conservative since the 1970s, as well as the degree to which it is consistent with the Church’s own teachings. Chapter 2, “Christianizing America: the Roots of the Religious Right,” describes how the bishops’ anti-abortion stances of the late 1960s, early 1970s, and years since Roe v. Wade (1973) were strategically leveraged to bring the U.S. Catholic hierarchy into increasing alliance with the ecumenical Moral Majority, political Republican Party, and the conservative culture wars that utilized both. She insightfully describes that a key architect of these coalitions was Paul Weyrich, a Catholic Republican strategist who combined pre-conciliar Catholic piety, savvy
political activism, and ultrawealthy conservative funding to support entities like the Heritage Foundation think tank and the American Legislative Exchange Council that develops and distributes model conservative policies for state legislators. However, the chapter overlooks the ways Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI contributed to the bishops’ rightward shift. As others have observed, these relatively socially and theologically conservative popes cultivated a church that in many ways attracted seminarians, ordained priests, and, eventually, ordained bishops—many current—who were more predisposed to these conservative social, political, and theological alliances and ideological culture wars than those who came of age during and immediately after the Second Vatican Council.

Chapter 3, “Our Lady of the Grapes,” outlines the conservative Catholic juggernaut—there is really no other word to describe it—that is the Napa Institute. Founded and funded by Catholic attorney and businessperson Timothy Busch, the Napa Institute is a nonprofit organization located in Busch’s native Orange, California. Through newsletters, editorials, videos, and its seminal annual summer conference, the Napa Institute convenes, educates, resources, and networks top Catholic bishops, clergy, and philanthropists with an ideology that blends preconciliar Catholic traditionalism with a libertarian political-economic agenda incongruent with Catholic social teaching. As McConahay correctly notes, many of those engaged with Busch and the Napa Institute guide some of the nation’s most influential—and, not surprisingly, conservative—Catholic ministries, including FOCUS, Dynamic Catholic, Amazing Parish, and the Augustine Institute. One extraordinarily influential conservative U.S. Catholic entity that neither the chapter nor the book maps onto this network is Steubenville University and its related Steubenville Youth Conferences that dominate diocesan and parish youth and young adult ministry.

Chapter 4: “Unholy Trinity: Clarence Thomas, Leonard Leo, Virginia Thomas,” describes how Catholicism connects to a rightward shift of the U.S. judiciary. In essence, Leonard Leo is a conservative Catholic legal activist who for a generation has developed and facilitated the appointment of conservative U.S. judges. McConahay describes how Leo has done so by leveraging relationships with powerful allies like Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and his wife Virginia Thomas (both Catholics), funding from libertarians like fossil fuel billionaires Charles and David Koch, and his (Leo’s) leadership positions in conservative political organizations—most especially his roles as the first permanent hire, former vice president, and now co-chairman of the board of directors of the Federalist Society.

Although this chapter astutely chronicles the influential activities of powerful conservative Catholics, it does not clearly show how they relate to the U.S. bishops. This is a notable limitation for at least two reasons. First, the focus on the actions of individual Catholics seems somewhat disconnected from the book’s subtitle focus on American Catholic Bishops and the Far Right. Second, it would not take much for McConahay to explicitly connect Leo’s political agenda to that of the bishops. She notes that the Federalist Society—and thus, by extension, Leo—guided the successful Supreme Court confirmations of key Justices that helped achieve the U.S. bishops’ priority of overturning the Court’s 1973 decision in Roe v. Wade that recognized a woman’s Constitutional right to abortion. Based on this point, McConahay could have developed two others: 1) Many U.S. bishops more-or-less explicitly supported the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump based on the prospect of his appointing justices that would overturn Roe; 2) As a candidate, Trump promised, “We’re going to have great judges, conservative, all picked by the Federalist
Society.” In other words, many U.S. bishops’ support for Trump was, in reality, support for Trump’s deference to Leo. These points would have more directly connected the chapter’s excellent research on Leo to the book’s broader focus on the U.S. bishops.

Chapter 5, “The Pizza King and the Princes of the Church,” is similarly limited in its underdeveloped connections to the U.S. bishops. The chapter recounts how multimillionaire conservative Catholic Thomas Monaghan, founder of Domino’s Pizza, has used his wealth to advance what McConahay describes as Islamophobic Christian nationalism. In particular, McConahay outlines how Monaghan founded Legatus which she describes as “an influential club of extremely wealthy Catholic businesspeople,” the Thomas More Law Center, which has “litigated and sometimes won more than two dozen cases that involve core interests of the bishops,” and Ave Maria University, where the Law School curriculum “was partly designed by the late ultraconservative Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia” and bishops serve on the board. Despite these connections to the bishops, however, the degree to which the network of the staff, programming, and alumni of Legatus, the Thomas More Law Center, Ave Maria, and the U.S. bishops overlap and “cross-pollinate” could have been further developed. This would have helped readers understand the ripple effect that Monaghan’ work has had across the U.S. Catholic Church.

Chapter 6, “The Ministry of Propaganda,” returns to the strength of Chapters 2 and 3 by explicitly connecting the topic, in this case Catholic media, to the U.S. bishops’ conservatism. Throughout the chapter, McConahay adeptly outlines how socio-politically and theologically conservative U.S. Catholic media has developed into a phalanx of opposition against the social and pastoral ministry of Pope Francis. As McConahay astutely observes, the outlets—which include EWTN, National Catholic Register, Church Militant, LifeSiteNews, and First Things—implicate the U.S. bishops insofar as they individually and collectively contribute to the platforms, fail to challenge egregious content on the platforms, or authorize their circulation. The issue of circulation, McConahay notes, is increasingly prevalent after the U.S. bishops unexpectedly shuttered its own 102-year-old Catholic News Service (CNS) in 2022. Since CNS had supplied diocesan papers with relatively moderate content for republication, McConahay wisely observes that “eliminating CNS coverage in the United States allows conservative and evangelical media . . . [often] distributed free, making it attractive to diocesan papers usually strapped for funds…to expand and fill the void of Catholic news and commentary” distributed under bishops’ authority to Catholics across U.S. dioceses.

Chapter 7, “The Bishops and Black Catholics,” extends the book’s strong focus on the U.S. bishops and the political right. The chapter outlines the U.S. bishops’ inadequate response to racism and describes at least two ways response maps onto the sin of white nationalism festering on the U.S. political right. The first is through what Catholic moral theology would call an act of omission. As McConahay rightly observes, most U.S. bishops “do not appear to have placed racism, let alone white supremacy, at the top of their agendas of concern. Part of the problem may be that bishops, who are overwhelmingly white, do not want to roil their white congregations.” Whatever their reason, bishops’ failure to consistently prophetically name and challenge racism and white nationalism allows the virus to persist and grow.

The second way the chapter describes the bishops’ response to racism as connected to white nationalism is through acts of commission. McConahay outlines how these actions justify
Christian nationalism and were acutely embodied in an address given by Archbishop Gomez of Los Angeles and then-president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops shortly after the murder of George Floyd. Therein, Gomez contradicted Pope Francis’s embrace of social action and bifurcated social justice from the Church’s mission by deriding social movements like Black Lives Matter as expressing “secularization . . . which means de-Christianization.” As McConahay describes, “Gomez’s pronouncements were laced with terms commonly heard in the rhetoric of the political right, such as disparagingly equating ‘social justice’ with ‘wokeness’” that constitute, in Gomez’s words, “pseudo-religions” rooted in a “Marxist cultural vision.” McConahay notes these remarks as significant since, as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, they provided a framework for “the most rightist bishops: defensive of Christianity, blaming ‘elites’ for corrupting the national soul.” McConahay further notes that Gomez’s address justified the White Christian nationalist agenda of secular entities like Breitbart News, which is tied to Trump advisor Steve Bannon, and that celebrated Gomez’s remarks.

The bishops’ pattern of omission and commission in Chapter 7 extends into Chapters 8 and 9. In Chapter 8, “Catholic Women, Catholic Girls,” McConahay describes that by omission, the “American bishops with their power and financial clout have failed to be a prophetic voice urging the Church toward the direction of greater leadership and the ordained participation desired by millions of Catholic women.” By commission, she writes that many bishops “attempt to hoodwink women young and older into staying in their place” and gives examples of how some bishops have taken the Vatican option to prohibit laypersons from reading the Gospel and preaching at Mass without the bishop’s approval. On my reading, this latter example is somewhat of a stretch since the prohibition applies to all laypersons. Nevertheless, I think McConahay is correct in saying that the bishops’ omissions and commission that stress women’s “staying in their place,” as she calls it, are largely fueled by a schema of theological and sociopolitical conservatism that together mutually justify and “idealiz[e] ‘traditional—that is, patriarchal—social arrangements.”

This concurrent justification by theological and sociopolitical conservatism is important since it is in many ways the thesis of McConahay’s book. On her reading, it is also once again personified by Archbishop Gomez since his activities illustrate the complicated network of influential conservative Catholic bishops, persons, and entities outlined throughout the book. Theologically, he was formed in the Opus Dei movement that radically emphasizes “separation” of women and men. Sociopolitically, Gomez worked with another conservative culture warrior bishop, Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver, “and three politically conservative Denver women” to found Endow, a nonprofit that advances Catholic patriarchal norms for women. One of the women is Marilyn Coors, “of the Colorado brewing family. . . [whose] father-in-law Joseph funded the Heritage Foundation founded by Paul Weyrich [see above], among the most conservative think tanks in the country; the Coors family remains a major donor to ultraright political and legal causes.”

Chapter 9, “Our Common Home?” reports the U.S. Catholic bishops’ shelving of Pope Francis’s June 2015 ecological encyclical, Laudato Si’, and the Church’s 30-year teaching that climate change is a moral issue. By omission, McConahay cites the study I co-authored with colleagues here at Creighton University (Danielsen et al., 2021): in 12,077 diocesan publication columns written between June 2014 – June 2019 by U.S. bishops from 171 of 178 dioceses, only 93 columns (less than 1 percent) even mention climate change; only 56 columns describe climate change “in
terms that suggest it is real or currently happening.” By commission, she notes how our study found that some bishops actively diminished the pope’s authority to speak about climate change or “minimized focus on climate change within the Church’s broader ecological teachings.”

As a co-author of this study, a limitation of her using our work is the omission of key aspects that would have further substantiated her overarching thesis that the bishops are animated by sociopolitical conservatism. First, our study noted that political identity is the single biggest predictor of climate change position and that conservatism is generally associated with climate change denial. Second, we described the U.S. bishops’ increased sociopolitical conservatism over the past several decades. We thus hypothesized that around *Laudato Si’*, U.S. bishops ignored and diminished the pope’s climate change teachings. Our findings supported these hypotheses, and the text of our conclusion provides empirical data that, if McConahay had included it, would have bolstered the thesis of her book: “Our findings suggest politics may trump religion in influencing climate change beliefs even among religious leaders, and that the American Catholic Church subtly engages in climate denialism even though its top religious leader (Pope Francis) has emphasized the scientific reality and urgency of climate change.”

In summary, *Playing God* provides an excellent analysis of the causes and implications at the heart of the U.S. Catholic bishops’ sociopolitical and theological conservatism that has increased over the past several decades and has significant pastoral consequences. The book is an important contribution to research on the U.S. Catholic Church and will be of interest to both scholars and general readers who want to better understand the current U.S. Catholic bishops.

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