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The pope, the president and the neoconservatives

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It is with no small amount of fascination that I watch the interplay going on between leading neoconservative Catholics and the papacy of Benedict XVI. In a sense, the leaders of that brand of conservative thought in U.S. Catholicism appear to have lost their partner in the civil religion rumba they enjoyed for so many years during the John Paul II papacy.

With the recent death of Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, it is left to George Weigel and Michael Novak, as the primary credible voices remaining, to carry the burden of explaining the neoconservative American Catholic (heavy emphasis on American) project to those in Rome at a time when the landscape is shifting in rather unexpected ways.

So many of the old markers have become unreliable. First there were the string of articles in L?Osservatore Romano that viewed the Obama presidency, including his appearance at Notre Dame, in a far more benign and even favorable light than the third of U.S. bishops who made a big public huff of it. There was a time when L?Osservatore Romano held an almost biblical authority for certain neoconservative Catholics. Suddenly, however, Novak and Weigel deemed it ignorant, ill-informed, naïve and worse.

Then there was the former theologian of the papal household gushing over Obama?s approach to the world and a range of issues, including abortion.

Even encyclicals no longer are reliable. Mr. Novak groused to The New York Times about Benedict?s latest on social justice, saying that he would have liked to see less emphasis from the pope on centralized governing apparatus and more of small governments. Mr. Weigel deemed the recent work ?a duck-billed platypus,? apparently trying to make the point that it was a hodge podge of thinking -- no slight intended, one presumes, to the platypus, one of God?s good creatures however ungainly, nor, one presumes, to the pope, though the suggestion is that he has suddenly become incapable of writing an internally logical document.

Mr. Weigel?s latest attempt to explain both the Vatican and American realities came in a posting on the Newsweek [1] site in which he determined that President Obama had such influence in Catholic circles that he was attempting in his Notre Dame appearance, by favorably mentioning the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, to mediate a dispute between two factions within the Catholic community, presumably the pro- and anti-Bernardin forces. He further concludes that the president is seeking to manipulate Catholic identity and become the one who decides the nature of the Catholic ?brand.?

Are we to soon expect a ?Catholic brand? task force inside the White House?

And he is certain that Pope Benedict will give the president a dressing down because of Obama?s approach to the ?life issues,? while talk of all the other problems of the world, some of which the pope has just written about at great length, Mr. Weigel believes will be left to lesser lights.

Those several breathless leaps of fantasy aside, there is a telling comment in his piece that illuminates far more

of the landscape than speculation about a presidential conspiracy to win an intra-church tussle. Mr. Weigel claimed that for those who supported the president?s visit to Notre Dame, ?the politics of the moment? trumped all other concerns.

This I take to be a conclusion advanced from his own experience and one that gets to the nub of the issue, and that nub is neither theological nor moral nor ecclesiological, but political.

The religious and political neoconservatives had quite a ride through the Reagan, Bush I and Bush II years. It wasn?t bad for them, either, during the Clinton years, given the material the inhabitant of the White House generated as fuel for outrage.

Little happened during the combined 20 years of Republican rule on the matter of ?life issues? and certainly much occurred that drew the criticism of the pope. But then none of the inhabitants of the White House during those years was particularly religious nor particularly well-versed in Catholic social teaching or the Catholic ethos. It was mostly Republican and American that trumped all other concerns and those elements were essential to the neo-conservative U.S. Catholics.

That?s why they all went ballistic in the 80s when the U.S. bishops published a long and deeply considered document on economics that was fairly critical of the drift at the time toward unbridled capitalism. It is why they dared to argue with the pope they loved, John Paul II, when he regularly criticized U.S. war policies, especially the latest Iraq misadventure. Imagine, the head of the largest Christian body on earth criticizing massive, pre-emptive violence.

But the neo-conservatives didn?t want their politicians to come under such public church criticism. It ruined the script which says that America and capitalism and extreme individualism and our use of war are all justified, compatible with our understanding of the New Testament. On such issues, according to the script, America, and its Catholics, are beyond reproach.

What?s at stake now is even bigger. Obama may not say the right things about abortion or stem cell research but he is perhaps more conversant than any president in my memory with Catholic social thought ? all of it. Put that together with the fact that none of his predecessors during the past 28 years had any intention of pushing to make abortion illegal, and the real nub becomes clear. His politics, not his morality or his theology, is wrong.

Realizing there is precious little chance of this sort of thing occurring, still I must say I hope that in the future the bishops never become as ardently partisan in a Democratic direction as they have become partisan Republicans. It?s a tawdry role for religious leaders, and it becomes embarrassing, because bishops, especially at this point in history, really have no power to wield in the legislative corridors. They only come away looking foolish for having been used, time and again, to attempt to deliver constituencies to politicians who rarely, if ever, deliver on their abortion promises and who ignore the rest of the social agenda.

The Obama administration provides an opportunity for the hierarchy to regain some balance and bearings regarding its dealings with secular powers. But first it has to turn down the volume on the neoconservative tune and allow some others to be heard.

For nearly 30 years, the neoconservatives have lived the dream. They?ve had access to the White House and the papal palace. They have justified U.S. wars, economic excesses and politicians for whom the ?common good? was an unknown concept. The evidence would strongly suggest that we are now left to deal with the utter failure of that dream on nearly every front. Our Catholic identity, indeed, is in need of an overhaul.

My little bet is that the pope and the president have a surprisingly productive and wide-ranging discussion.

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[1] http://www.newsweek.com/id/205624