Faith at the expense of freedom

Catholic integralism is not fascism. But the two have often made common cause.

by Rebecca Bratten Weiss in the October 2024 issue
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Century illustration

In Canto 19 of *Inferno,* Dante depicts the damned souls of the simoniacs—those who enriched themselves by selling sacred things—imprisoned head-down in circular holes in the rock, feet on fire. Dante despised corrupt clergy and was especially severe about sins relating to greed, so it’s no surprise that he consigned quite a few

medieval popes to this section of hell.

But for Dante, simony wasn't just about greed. It was associated with the decadence of a church that had amassed too much temporal power—a theme that runs through the whole *Divine Comedy.* It's why the poet inveighs against the emperor Constantine, whose conversion brought the church wealth and imperial jurisdiction. Elsewhere, Dante argues that church and empire should be distinct spheres, neither wielding power over the other, each answering directly to God.

The debate over the relation of church to state has deep roots, and even in the Middle Ages there was no Christian consensus. Today, many progressive Christians take for granted that separation of church and state prevents abuses in both spheres. But as various conservative Christians try to move the dial from democracy and pluralism toward theocracy, some Catholics among them are arguing for the reinstitution of the political order Dante saw as dangerous.

They are known as integralists because they advocate for the integration of church and state. They've been in the news thanks in part to the affiliations of Ohio senator, vice-presidential hopeful, and Catholic convert J. D. Vance.

At a 2022 conference called Restoring the Nation, held at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, Vance delivered the keynote address alongside prominent national conservative movement leaders and integralist thinkers Sohrab Ahmari, Adrian Vermeule, Gladden Pappin, and Patrick Deneen. The conference focused on "reversing the decline of America by recovering the forgotten wisdom of our nation's Western and Christian foundations." On the surface, the group's rhetoric appealed to familiar populist worries about empowering a "narrow elite" at the expense of the working class (though the people involved were elites themselves). The consensus was that progressive justice movements are a threat—and that in order to defeat the left and save society, conservative Christians need something stronger than democratic methods.

At the same event, Rachel Bovard of the Conservative Partnership Institute spoke of "the left's fascist orgy" and predicted that the US would soon see "normalized pederasty; forced euthanasia; postnatal abortion; persecuting dissident faiths; disqualifying religious traditionalists and political conservatives from banking, property rights, and public benefits."

Chad Pecknold, a professor of theology at the Catholic University of America, argued that conservative Christians need to move beyond the approach of engaging debate in a neutral public square. “You can’t respond to left liberalism with liberalism,” Pecknold said.

For integralists, who sometimes identify as “post-liberal,” democracy is a failed experiment. They would like to see our democratic republic dismantled and a new, theocratic regime installed. To this end, they happily make common cause with other conservatives, including those in the MAGA movement. They hope a second Trump presidential term really will dismantle the democratic system so Christians, as Trump put it, will “never have to vote again.” In *Regime Change*, Deneen, a professor at the University of Notre Dame, explicitly calls for a union of right-wing populists with the anti-liberal elite to take control of our political and civil institutions and initiate a new, nonliberal polity.

What would this polity look like? Integralists do not always agree on the details. Some think their post-liberal regime can function using our existing bureaucratic structures. Others think our entire governmental edifice needs to be dismantled.

Popular integralist ideas include a belief that the Catholic Church should oversee schools, hospitals, and government offices, the practical outcome of which would be widespread discrimination against Jews, Muslims, atheists, and other non-Christians. Where non-Catholic Christians would find themselves in such a social system is a little unclear. Integralist writer and Austrian Cistercian monk Edmund Waldstein has argued that Catholics should work to institute a social order modeled on the regime of France’s Louis IX, whose accomplishments included burning the Talmud, forcing Jews to wear yellow badges, and punishing blasphemy by cutting off the tongue. For a staunchly Catholic monarch like Louis, all forms of Protestant worship would have constituted heresy.

Today, integralists support the dismantling of public education and the banning of books, reproductive and gender-affirming health care, and same-sex marriage. They support legal discrimination against sexual minorities and an end to legal divorce. But despite their shared goals, integralism diverges from the populism of Trump’s base in a number of significant ways. Its spokespersons tend to be well-educated and aesthetically discerning, lovers of old books and fine art. They have sometimes followed in the footsteps of the “crunchy conservatives” integralist-adjacent writer

Rod Dreher wrote about 20 years ago, cultivating an earthy, rural aesthetic once associated with progressives. Their tastes and rhetoric are more palatable to an educated elite than those of anti-intellectual evangelicals—and more wholesome than the vulgarity of the hardcore MAGA movement, with its Let's Go Brandon flags.

On the surface, integralism can look like an elegant alternative to progressive politics, secular fascism, and the recent anti-intellectualism of the GOP. But where do the new Catholic integralists fit in the history of Western Christianity? And how are they reshaping American politics according to their medieval predilections?

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In *Before Church and State,* historian Andrew Willard Jones offers a rosy depiction of King Louis IX's regime in 13th century France as the ideal pattern for the integralist realm. One need not be a conservative to find the call of the medieval alluring. The romance of the good king is a deep-rooted western archetype, going back to Arthurian legend and popularized in *The Lord of the Rings*. Vance has said that a lot of his conservative worldview was shaped by Tolkien. There's a strong element of fantasy in the integralist faction.

Yet even in the Middle Ages, not everyone agreed about how church and state should relate. Dante wasn't the only one who thought the church should not wield temporal power. In the 13th century—a time of increasing wealth inequality—a number of emerging religious movements voluntarily embraced poverty. Some, like the Waldensians, were condemned by the church, which felt threatened by the movement's rejection of wealth and refusal to acknowledge hierarchical authority. The church also had to reckon with the widespread popularity of the mendicant orders, especially the Franciscans, who embraced poverty not only as a spiritual discipline but as a critique of a church that had amassed obscene amounts of wealth and power. Naturally, the hierarchy did not enjoy the idea that their treasures and prestige set them apart from Jesus. Even after the Franciscan Rule was approved, debates over poverty raged on, to the extent that some Franciscan leaders were persecuted by papal enforcers. For a time, the Vatican even declared it heretical to say that poverty was holy or that Jesus had been poor.

In the era of humanism and the Reformation, the imperial authority of the Vatican began to wane. Modernity introduced new questions about the relationship between church and state. The enlightenment intellectuals who founded the US rejected the idea of a state religion, having seen the havoc religious disputes and persecutions wreaked in Europe. Like others of their time, they believed human beings would flourish in a civil society that did not enforce religion.

Still others resisted this. In the 19th century various socio-political movements emerged, galvanized by opposition to liberalism and pluralism and intent on re-integrating church and state. These movements tended to be authoritarian, conservative, monarchical, and associated with the more traditionalist branches of Catholicism.

In late 19th-century Spain, following the deposition of Queen Isabella II, the far-right Integrist Party emerged. It favored restoration of the monarchy and opposed religious tolerance. The Spanish Integrists appear to have contributed little to practical politics—though they theorized at length about how they would solve social problems by enforcing their interpretation of Christian principles on civil society. They were eventually absorbed into the Carlist movement, which was dedicated to legitimizing a branch of the Bourbon dynasty. During the Spanish Civil War, the Carlists allied with the Franco regime.

Meanwhile, institutional Catholic leaders saw their influence dwindling as rising academic theorists proposed new methods of interpreting scripture and tradition. Ecclesial leaders tended to be insular, conservative, authoritarian, and paranoid. In his 1907 encyclical *Pascendi Dominici gregis* (“Feeding the Lord’s Flock”), Pope Pius X condemned various new schools of thought under the catch-all term “modernism.”

The condemnation of modernism fueled the integralist fire. Prominent among “integral Catholics” of the time was Umberto Benigni, who in 1909 founded the integralist organization *Sodalitium Pianum* (“the fellowship of Pius”), known in France as *La Sapinière*. Fanatically committed to maintaining the primacy of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, these groups were made up of vigilante theologians who spied on, harassed, and exposed thinkers they viewed as modernist. One of their targets was Angelo Roncalli—who later, as Pope John XXIII, would convene the Second Vatican Council, with its aim to open the windows of the church and let in fresh air.

Integralists may try to distance themselves from fascism. They may even, as Rachel Bovard did in Steubenville, cast fascism as a leftist ideology. But integralism shares many of fascism's basic characteristics, as outlined by Italian philosopher Umberto Eco: emphasis on tradition, rejection of modernism, fear of diversity, appeals to social frustration, a tendency toward nationalism, a cult of machismo and heteronormativity, and selective populism. This doesn't mean that integralists are fascists. But throughout history the two have made common cause.

Brazil's first significant fascist party, which arose in the 1930s, was called the Integralist Party. The Brazilian Integralists, like the fascist movements in Italy and Portugal that inspired it, were anti-liberal, anti-communist, and fiercely antisemitic. Political theorist Guillaume De Thieulloy argued in 2021 that the Brazilian Integralist party should not be confused with French Integralism which, he asserts, was moderate. Maybe it was—for the time.

Unlike neoconservatives, integralists typically favor social programs intended to aid workers and families as part of a pro-natalist agenda that favors high birth rates, specifically for White conservative Catholic families. They reject the tenets of free-market capitalism and claim to advance a communitarian philosophy. But any resemblance to progressivism ends when it comes to issues of diversity and pluralism. Integralists use "woke" as a slur and support politicians like Vance, who has called for the mass deportation of immigrants. Beneath its rhetoric about tradition and family, what integralism stands for is an attack on liberalism, pluralism, and individual rights—including religious freedom. If integralists create social programs, such resources would likely be targeted specifically to the people who check their preferred identity boxes. Immigrants, LGBTQ people, non-Christians, and "childless cat ladies" need not apply.

Catholic ultra-conservatives have been fantasizing about this outcome for decades. What makes their agenda concerning now is that they have allied themselves with politicians capable of drafting their ideas into policy. Vance wrote the foreword to a forthcoming book by Project 2025's leader, Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts. In it, he endorses Roberts's call for a second American Revolution:

The old conservative movement argued if you just got government out of the way, natural forces would resolve problems—we are no longer in this situation and must take a different approach. . . . As Kevin Roberts writes, "It's fine to take a laissez-faire approach when you are in the safety of the sunshine. But when the twilight

descends and you hear the wolves, you've got to circle the wagons and load the muskets."

Of course, the question of how Christians should apply our faith to civic engagement remains complicated. Catholic social teaching, approached holistically, offers valuable guidelines for building a just and humane society. Gospel principles of labor justice, respect for human dignity, protection of the marginalized, and care for the earth are articulated in the writings of the church fathers, and the scholastics expand on these principles. Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* ("Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor"), Pope John XXIII's 1961 encyclical *Mater et magistra* ("Christianity and Social Progress"), the Vatican II pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* ("On the Church and the Modern World")—these are just a few of the magisterial documents outlining how Catholics should live their faith in public life. Today, Pope Francis beckons Catholics to a way of accompaniment with others, in a church where "everyone can feel themselves welcomed." But these are not the aspects of Catholic social teaching integralists want to guide our government.

We've had a taste of what their rule looks like thanks to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by a Supreme Court with six conservative Catholics in the majority. Project 2025 offers a look at a future in which integralist elites support political opportunists like Vance in a second Trump administration, implementing policies that reflect their conservative Catholic beliefs. The promises they dangle may appear enticing to those who could find a place in their fantasy regime. At present, it's still only a fantasy. Let's hope it stays that way.