

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXII-43

Theresa Keeley. *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781501750755 (hardcover, \$49.95).

7 June 2021 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT22-43>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Michael E. Neagle | Production Editor: George Fujii

Contents

Introduction by Lauren Turek, Trinity University.....	2
Review by Natalie Gasparowicz, Duke University.....	5
Review by Brian S. Mueller, Independent Scholar.....	9
Review by Debbie Sharnak, Rowan University.....	13
Response by Theresa Keeley, University of Louisville.....	16

INTRODUCTION BY LAUREN TUREK, TRINITY UNIVERSITY

In 1912, Mother Mary Joseph Rogers founded the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, a community of Roman Catholic women headquartered in Ossining, New York. They operated independently from but alongside the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, founded in 1911. By 1920, the Maryknoll Sisters had received official recognition of their order from the Vatican, becoming “the first order of Catholic nuns in the United States dedicated to foreign mission.”¹ During the early decades of the Cold War, the Maryknollers cooperated with the U.S. government and espoused strong anti-Communist views, but over time—and especially after Vatican II in 1962-1965 and the subsequent emergence of Liberation Theology among their Latin American co-religionists—they grew much more critical of U.S. Cold War policies.

They especially concerned themselves with justice, care for the poor, and the protection of human rights. In December 1980, Maryknoll Sisters President Sister Melinda Roper signed an open letter published in the *New York Times* from the interfaith organization Clergy and Laity Concerned to President-elect Ronald Reagan. The letter decried the gross human rights abuses occurring under authoritarian, anti-Communist countries that were allied with the United States, such as El Salvador, abuses the Maryknollers had witnessed firsthand through their missionary work. They also noted that “many rightist figures in these countries believe that [the Reagan] administration will condone terror, torture, and murder as the price of a favorable climate for U.S. investment.”² Just over two weeks earlier, members of El Salvador’s military had kidnapped, raped, and murdered two Maryknoll Sisters and two other Catholic churchwomen in retaliation for their work with the poor and their association with Liberation Theology. Throughout Reagan’s time in office, the Maryknoll Sisters offered vocal opposition to his policies in Central America and support for repressive regimes. As Theresa Keeley’s exciting book, *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America*, reveals, the Maryknoll Sisters became a bête noire and political target of Reagan administration and its conservative Catholic supporters.

The reviewers in this roundtable offer Keeley well-deserved praise for her book, which skillfully explores the complex mix of gender, politics, and intrareligious conflict that shaped the Maryknoll Sisters’ opposition to Reagan’s foreign policy and his negative characterizations of the churchwomen. *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns* makes fruitful interventions into and connections between a number of fields of historical inquiry. In terms of U.S. foreign relations history, Keeley’s book joins many recent (and forthcoming) works that are reappraising the Reagan administration and its foreign policy, particularly with regard to U.S.-Latin American relations and international human rights.³ Keeley also, of course, focuses on intra-Catholic conflict, making clear that the “Maryknoller’s reassessment of U.S. foreign policy and adoption of liberation

¹ Maryknoll Sisters, “Our Foundress,” maryknollsisters.org/about-us/our-foundress/ (accessed 15 April 2021). For additional background on the order, see Penny Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).

² “Text of Religious Leaders’ Human Rights Statement,” *New York Times* (18 December 1980): B16.

³ See, for example, Jonathan R. Hunt and Simon Miles, eds., *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming December 2021); Sarah B. Snyder, “The Defeat of Ernest Lefever’s Nomination: Keeping Human Rights on the United States Foreign Policy Agenda,” in *Challenging U.S. Foreign Policy: America and the World in the Long Twentieth Century*, eds. Bevan Sewell and Scott Lucas (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 136-161; Vanessa Walker, *Principles in Power: Latin America and the Politics of U.S. Human Rights Diplomacy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Lauren Frances Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); David Bassano, *Fight and Flight: The Central America Human Rights Movement in the United States in the 1980s* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016); William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Carl J. Bon Tempo, “From the Center-Right: Freedom House and Human Rights in the 1970s and 1980s,” in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, eds. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 223-244; Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the end of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

theology outraged conservative U.S. Catholics,” who targeted the Maryknollers politically because they came to see them as “Marxist dupes” who were “no longer true Catholics” (249). These conservative Catholics became key allies of the Reagan administration, and Keeley contends that the antipathy of conservative Catholics toward their liberal Catholic adversaries shaped Reagan’s Central American policy in significant ways and ratcheted up the intensity of the debates over U.S. relations with the region. Targeting the Maryknoll Sisters, often with gendered language and ideology, enabled the administration to “critique Central American opponents and promote the conservative Catholic viewpoint.” (250) The approach that Keeley takes here in helping us understand the outsized symbolic role of the Maryknoll Sisters in this discourse adds a fresh and dynamic perspective to the growing literature on the role of religion in U.S. foreign relations, both by bringing intra-Catholic political conflict into a space that tends to focus more on the influence of Protestants and by expertly integrating gender analysis throughout the text.⁴

Natalie Gasparowicz draws our attention to Keeley’s “meticulous” archival work and careful consideration of the category of religion, particularly the messy “complexities of ‘lived religion.’” She notes that religious beliefs and practice are not fixed, but are rather ever-evolving, a reality that may help us to understand the shifting and at times conflicting perspectives of U.S. Catholics; even in a hierarchical faith, believers do not vote or approach politics monolithically, despite the fact that they may closely relate their political commitments to their religious beliefs. In thinking through how Keeley categorized U.S. Catholics, Gasparowicz wonders about the shades of gray that may have existed between politically “liberal” and “conservative” Catholics in the United States. She also asks “what about those American Catholics who thought that the Vatican II Council had not gone far enough? Second, how representative were conservative U.S. Catholics of the entire Catholic Church in the United States?” and ponders how the answers to these questions might bear on Catholic political views in general, on U.S.-Central American relations in particular, and on how we understand the history of Vatican II and Liberation Theology. Gasparowicz also praises Keeley for recognizing that “Catholicism was not only lived but also gendered,” and asks to what extent sexuality, gender, and the politics of abortion figured into intra-Catholic conflict in foreign relations.

In his review, Brian Mueller emphasizes the important contributions Keeley makes to our understanding of both the contested transformation of the Catholic Church after Vatican II and the significance of the role that conservative Catholics played within the Religious Right. He notes that one of the most intriguing parts of *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns* is that “her focus is less on how anti-Communism linked Reagan to Catholics than how close contact with *conservative* Catholics colored his understanding of religious opponents of his foreign policy, especially the Maryknoll Sisters.” Furthermore, as he explains, Keeley reveals “that by questioning the religiosity of the Maryknoll Sisters, the Reagan administration sought to undermine its critics by distinguishing between tried and true Catholics and imposters.” Keeley’s exploration of how conservatives linked their political beliefs to a notion of religious “authenticity” is illuminating as well as timely. Mueller does raise a key question about causality, asking “does Reagan’s appropriation of Catholic arguments indicate that the Catholic Church shaped foreign policy in the 1980s, as Keeley suggests?” This is often a challenge when considering the influence of non-state actors, not to mention religion, in the making of U.S. foreign policy.

⁴ For recent work on religious influence in U.S. foreign relations, see Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); David C. Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor: Global Social Christianity and the Latin American Evangelical Left* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); David Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); David Swartz, *Facing West: American Evangelicals in an Age of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); David P. King, *God’s Internationalists: World Vision and the Age of Evangelical Humanitarianism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Daniel G. Hummel, *Covenant Brothers: Evangelicals, Jews, and U.S.-Israeli Relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Ronit Y. Stahl, *Enlisting Faith: How the Military Chaplaincy Shaped Religion and State in Modern America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Matthew Avery Sutton, *Double Crossed: The Missionaries Who Spied for the United States During the Second World War* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); Mark Thomas Edwards, *Faith and Foreign Affairs in the American Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019); Andrew M. Essig and Jennifer L. Moore, “U.S.–Holy See Diplomacy: The Establishment of Formal Relations, 1984,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 95:4 (October 2009): 741–764.

Like Gasparowicz and Mueller, Debbie Sharnak praises Keeley for “break[ing] new ground in focusing on intra-Catholic debates” about U.S. foreign relations during the Reagan era, as well as for her examination of the role that gender played in those debates. She highlights Keeley’s discussion of how the Reagan administration blamed the murdered churchwomen for their own deaths, while liberals (Catholic and otherwise) tended to see them as innocent victims. As Sharnak rightly points out, “the notion of pushing or subverting gendered and innocent victimhood is central in this analysis.” Sharnak also underscores Keeley’s attention to “how the Reagan administration questioned Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill’s Catholicism and masculinity by critiquing his reliance on the Maryknoller’s evaluation of events in the region,” and in so doing, how it cast liberal views on Reagan’s Central American policy as “feminine” and conservative views as “masculine.” For her part, Sharnak would like to hear more from Keeley on what the events she details in her book tell us about how the Reagan administration understood and talked about human rights.

In her response, Keeley provides nuanced, detailed, and thoughtful answers to the questions that her reviewers have posed. *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns* merits all of the high praise that these reviewers have bestowed upon it. It provides a model for incorporating gender as well as religion into our analysis of U.S. foreign relations history. It fully lives up to the promise of its fantastic (and provocative) title.

Participants:

Theresa Keeley is an assistant professor of the U.S. and the World at the University of Louisville. Her first book is *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America* (Cornell University Press, 2020). Her publications include articles in *Diplomatic History*, *Gender & History*, *The Catholic Historical Review*, and *U.S. Catholic Historian* as well as a chapter in Wiley’s *A Companion to U.S. Foreign Relations*. Before entering academia, she was a human rights activist and attorney.

Lauren Frances Turek is an assistant professor of History, the director of Museum Studies, and the Director of the Mellon Initiative for Undergraduate Research in the Arts and Humanities at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Turek’s articles on religion in American politics and foreign policy have appeared in *Diplomatic History*, the *Journal of American Studies*, and *Religions*, and she has contributed chapters to several edited volumes. Her first book, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations*, was published with Cornell University Press in 2020 and is part of the United States in the World Series.

Natalie Gasparowicz is a Ph.D. candidate at the History Department of Duke University. Her dissertation examines the intersection of Catholicism, gender, sexuality, surrounding questions of birth control and reproduction in late-twentieth century Mexico.

Brian S. Mueller is an adjunct lecturer and independent historian. His first book, *Democracy’s Think Tank: The Institute for Policy Studies and Progressive Foreign Policy*, will be published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in May 2021. He also has published articles in *Diplomatic History*, *Peace & Change*, and *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*. He is at work on a study of the U.S. Central America peace movement of the 1980s that looks at the relationships between religious and anti-interventionist solidarity activists, tentatively titled *Faith & Solidarity: The Central America Peace Movement of the 1980s*.

Debbie Sharnak is Assistant Professor of History and International Studies at Rowan University. Her book, *Of Light and Struggle: The International Histories of Human Rights and Transitional Justice in Uruguay* is under contract with the University of Pennsylvania Press. Her scholarship has appeared in *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, the *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, *TALLER*, the *Washington Post*, as well as several edited volumes on topics such as U.S. foreign policy, Latin America, human rights, and transitional justice.

REVIEW BY NATALIE GASPAROWICZ, DUKE UNIVERSITY

Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns is a compelling and methodologically innovative study of the Reagan administration's policy towards Central America in the late-twentieth century. Keeley argues that this was a Catholic conflict. According to Keeley, not only had President Ronald Reagan allied himself with conservative Catholics, but he also participated in Catholic discussions regarding human rights and the Church's place in the world. This is most evident when we consider the Maryknoll Sisters. Keeley places at the center of her study the murder of "four American churchwomen" (two Maryknoll nuns, a Maryknoll lay missionary, and an Ursuline nun) by Salvadoran National Guardsmen in El Salvador in December 1980 (2). Keeley argues that in the eyes of the Reagan administration and conservative Catholics, the Maryknoll Sisters became "synonymous with wayward Catholicism and the protest movement against U.S. policy toward El Salvador and Nicaragua" (2). To liberal Catholics, the murder was unjust and "prompted an interest in U.S.-Central American policy" (3). To capture the nuances of what she describes as an "intra-Catholic conflict," (7) Keeley meticulously analyzes a range of sources: American and foreign newspapers, periodicals, correspondence, as well as government documents such as congressional hearings, first-hand accounts by government actors, and so forth. As a student of lived Catholicism in Latin America who focuses on themes of gender and sexuality in Mexico, I found this book to be profound, and one which raises many questions. In this review, I will explore what scholars of Catholicism in and outside of Latin America have to learn from Keeley's monograph.

Due to its multi-faceted analysis, *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns* contributes to scholarship on Catholicism and the Cold War United States. Recent scholarship on Mexico and the Americas has used the transnational approach to study Catholicism and illuminate new connections.⁵ Although Keeley does not use the term 'transnational' to describe her work, she clearly shows how ideas and thoughts traveled in between American missionaries (for example, the Maryknoll sisters stationed in Central America) and the United States.⁶ Maryknoll sisters, by the virtue of their belief in "reverse mission," lived abroad and educated people back home about their work (58). Conservative American Catholics clearly saw the stakes of their faith in Central America and the region's outcome. Furthermore, *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns* offers the 'Catholic' story of human rights activism, which complements emerging Cold War scholarship that has depicted the histories of evangelicals and peace activists.⁷ Like these recent studies, Keeley's book offers a complex, heterogenous picture of the actors—in this case, American Catholics. What distinguishes *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns* is Keeley's analysis of the lived, religious experiences of its historical actors.

Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns illustrates how to place the complexities of 'lived religion' at the center of historical analysis.⁸ In the introduction, citing Robert Orsi's work on 'lived religion,' Keeley shares her approach: "I view religion expansively to

⁵ Stephen J. C. Andes, *The Vatican and Catholic Activism in Mexico and Chile: The Politics of Transnational Catholicism, 1920-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Julia Young, *Mexican Exodus: Emigrants, Exiles, and Refugees of the Cristero War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶ For an introduction to the questions of transnational history of the United States, see C.A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connolly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," *The American Historical Review* 111:5 (December 1, 2006): 1441-1464, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.5.1441>; Ian Tyrell, "Reflections on the transnational turn in United States history: theory and practice," *Journal of Global History* 4:3 (2009): 453-474, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022809990167>.

⁷ Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Petra Goedde, *The Politics of Peace: A Global Cold War History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁸ David Hall "Introduction" and Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion" in David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

include theology, lived faith, and culture. The difference between these lines is not always clear” (10). These lines were, indeed, messy, as American Catholics debated what it meant to be faithful and how that faith might inspire their politics in the late-twentieth century. At the end of the monograph, in her “Notes on Research Methods,” Keeley admits how often she has been asked how she “‘looked for religion’ in the archives” (251) and shares her meticulous study of a range of primary sources. In addition to archival research, Keeley also spent time with the Maryknoll sisters at their retirement home. This work clearly paid off, as Keeley is able to capture the nuanced perspectives of the Maryknoll sisters and their approach to faith.

Part of her approach to religion is recognizing that the faith of her actors was always dynamic and contingent, and never static. Keeley argues that in the 1950s, the Maryknoll Sisters were “model anticommunist, Cold War Americans,” but by the 1960s and 1970s, due to their experiences in Latin America, they began to challenge U.S. foreign policy (39). Furthermore, she argues that this intra-Catholic conflict carried such weight because of the Cold War context and the policies of the Reagan administration. She writes: “this intra-Catholic debate would not have impacted U.S. foreign policy if Ronald Reagan had not won the presidency” (250). By 1989, Keeley illustrates that the intra-Catholic debate in response to the murder of Jesuits in El Salvador did not carry the same influence. Not only had the Cold War ended, but President George H. W. Bush prioritized appealing to Protestants, as opposed to Catholics.

In order to capture the complexities of intra-Catholic debate, Keeley categorizes Catholics. For scholars of Catholicism, this categorization raises questions about how to discuss differences between Catholics.

Keeley broadly classifies Catholics in the United States as “conservative” and “liberal.” According to Keeley, Vatican II was the point of division. American conservative Catholics were composed of two factions, “traditionalists,” those who wanted to return the Church to pre-Vatican status, and “neoconservatives,” those who “generally supported the Council but disagreed with how its reforms were implemented” (9). “Liberal” American Catholics were those who “saw Vatican II and its reforms as ushering the Church into the modern world” (10). While Vatican II is the clear point of division for how Keeley organizes American Catholics, for the Latin American Church, its meaning is vague. The categories “traditionalist,” “modernizing,” and “prophetic,” taken from an article published in 1983, seem to convey attitudes toward change in the Church and social order (10). Traditionalists were fervently anti-Communist, modernizers wanted reform and “‘more democratic church structures,’” and the prophetic “pushed for a church that sided with the poor and powerless masses” (10). Instead of debating the usefulness of these categories for the study of Catholicism in either region, I will consider the implications of these categories and the questions they inspire.

For the American Church, I am compelled to ask: what about those American Catholics who thought that the Vatican II Council had not gone far enough? Second, how representative were conservative U.S. Catholics of the entire Catholic Church in the United States? I examine these two questions because on the global stage, particularly in scholarship on the issues of gender and sexuality, American Catholics are often understood as having been broadly liberal. For example, my own research centers on *Humanae vitae*, the 1968 encyclical that prohibited the use of birth control. Scholarship on *Humanae vitae* in the United States has highlighted the dissent of American Catholics, meaning their failure to apply these teachings to their personal lives.⁹ These same works often highlight how American Catholics were disappointed that the

⁹ For works that analyze the impact of *Humanae vitae* among American Catholics, see William D’Antonio, Michele Dillon, and Mary Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013); Leslie Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); Robert McClory, *Turning Point: The Inside Story of the Papal Birth Control Commission, and How Humanae Vitae Changed the Life of Patty Crowley and the Future of the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1995); Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behaviors and Beliefs of American Catholics* (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1990); John Seidler and Katherine Meyer, *Conflict and Change in the Catholic Church* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Robert Blair Kaiser, *The Encyclical That Never Was: The Story of the Pontifical Commission on Population, Family and Birth, 1964-1966* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1987); Robert Blair Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion: A Case History in the*

Vatican II Council had not allowed other reforms, like priests who could marry, women priests, and so forth. Would these Catholics fall under the category of ‘liberal,’ or perhaps ‘progressive’? And how did these particular Catholics, who were disappointed in Vatican II, consider U.S. policy toward Central America? Keeley’s study turns our attention to a very different kind of American Catholic – a conservative American Catholic who believed that the Maryknoll sisters had lost their way and that liberation theology was a threat. How representative was this kind of Catholic at the time for the United States? Future studies can build upon Keeley’s contributions and further probe these issues.

For scholars of Catholicism in Latin America, this study raises questions about how to consider Vatican II in the history of liberation theology. Keeley argues that Jesuits and Maryknollers were central to spreading liberation theology in Central America. Since the Jesuits and Maryknollers had to apply changes to their orders following Vatican II, Keeley sees Vatican II as a significant turning point. Other scholars have different ideas about how and why liberation theology arose in the region. Scholars of Mexico argue that an important antecedent to liberation theology was social Catholicism, inspired by Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical, *Rerum novarum*.¹⁰ On the other hand, Lilian Calles Barger argues that it was a specific and long history of “freedom and oppression” that inspired its development.¹¹ With a longer historic view, scholars of Mexico and the rest of Latin America might, therefore, see Vatican II as the last factor that ignited the theology of liberation. One might ask: if we consider the development of social Catholicism, do the categories of “traditionalist,” “modernizing,” and “prophetic” still hold up? Did the Maryknoll sisters interact with social Catholicism in the early-twentieth century, and if so, how? Although the topic lies outside of the period of study in *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns*, future studies might try to investigate this topic in the context of the entire twentieth century.

Another part of Keeley’s approach to religion is that she precisely analyzes how and why these figures were acting politically, religiously, or both. Not only does Keeley illustrate how central and public these Catholic debates were to the Reagan administration in the 1980s, but also, she reveals how her historical actors themselves were debating and redefining the relationship between religion and politics. As a result, Keeley convincingly illustrates José Casanova’s thesis regarding the deprivatization of religion but does not engage it or recent iterations of it.¹² Quite simply, Casanova argues that in the 1980s, religions became public, citing liberation theology and American Catholicism as a few examples. Calles Barger has recently advanced Casanova’s thesis, arguing that “[l]iberation theology acted as a catalyst for the secularization and de-privatization of religion.”¹³ For Calles Barger, liberation theology “redefined the relationship between religion and politics.”¹⁴ If we consider Calles Barger, who argues that liberationists saw no separation between faith and politics, how, if at all, would that inform Keeley’s analysis? In one instance, Keeley argues that “Maryknollers, like other religious, approached the situation from a faith-based perspective, but their decision to side with the poor had political implications” (70). In other words, for Keeley, the Maryknollers were thinking strictly in terms of faith. However, did Maryknollers perhaps proclaim a focus on the poor, so it would appeal to all people, regardless of political affiliation? Was it possible that faith and politics did overlap

Development of Doctrine, 1962-1984 (Kansas City: Leaven Press, 1985); Charles E. Curran, *Contraception; Authority and Dissent* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

¹⁰ *Local Church, Global Church: Catholic Activism in Latin America from Rerum Novarum to Vatican II*, edited by Stephen J. C. Andes and Julia Young (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2016); Silvia Marina Arrom, *Volunteering for a Cause: Gender, Faith and Charity in Mexico from Reform to the Revolution* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016).

¹¹ Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

¹² José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹³ Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age*, 262.

¹⁴ Calles Barger, 5.

for the Maryknoll sisters? Keeley similarly weighs the question of religion and politics when she explores Conservatives more generally. She claims that “while the anticommunist New Right wanted to politically isolate the Sandinistas, conservative Catholics also wanted to do so for religious reasons” (105). For conservative Catholics, Keeley argues, Central America was key to “determining the church’s future direction” (105). In this case, the religious and political motives of conservative Catholics overlapped. The work of Casanova and Calles Barger invite us to put Keeley’s critical and nuanced analysis in a new light.

Finally, part of what makes Keeley’s analysis of Catholicism so effective is that she illustrates that Catholicism was not only lived but also gendered. Because Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill opposed U.S. policy towards Nicaragua, largely thanks to influence of the Maryknoll sisters, Keeley argues that the Reagan administration doubted O’Neill’s “authenticity as a Catholic and his masculinity” (162). When the Maryknoll sisters opposed U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, Keeley argues that they “challenged the shared male culture, or ‘imperial brotherhood,’” of the U.S. foreign policy establishment and of the Catholic Church” (162). Keeley’s evidence is striking. She finds critiques of the Maryknoll sisters and O’Neill that employed gendered stereotypes and questioned their sexualities, and even offers evidence of Reagan appealing to the movie *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (175-6). What Keeley’s book does not engage deeply—which is due to its focus on liberation theology and human rights—is how religious questions of sexuality and gender were made public at the same time. Anthony Petro, advancing Casanova’s thesis, argues that the debate over abortion was what made the American Catholic Church public in the 1980s.¹⁵ Of course, Keeley does not completely exclude a discussion of abortion from the book. She mentions how Catholics in the United States began to vote Republican due to this concern and other ones, and how even O’Neill was “already persona non grata in conservative Catholic circles because he avoided vocal pro-life advocacy” (104; 161). However, if we consider Petro’s argument, one wonders whether these intra-Catholic debates look take on a different appearance if we include sexuality and gender? For example, did U.S. Catholics ever protest the forced sterilizations of Latin American women, and if so, how would that fall in the complex landscape of U.S. Catholicism? And if debates about human rights, gender, and sexuality never overlapped, what does this omission say about U.S. Catholicism? Future studies could take up this inquiry. It does hint at the limitations of what was considered as ‘human rights,’ suggesting that these rights did not automatically include what we today refer to as reproductive rights.

Once again, *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns* is a fascinating study which places the messiness of religion at its center and illuminates the Catholic dimensions of U.S. policy towards Central America. For scholars of Catholicism, it offers insights into how to study lived religion and gender, as well as how to consider liberation theology in the American context. It is a thought-provoking work, inviting us to grapple with the significance of religion to this particular historical moment.

¹⁵ Anthony Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, & American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

REVIEW BY BRIAN S. MUELLER, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

One of the most interesting developments in U.S. diplomatic history over the past decade is the “religious turn,” as one of its chief promoters, Andrew Preston, has described the phenomenon.¹⁶ Yet there is a tendency within this literature to focus on Protestantism, particularly conservative evangelicals. This is especially the case with the recent spate of books on foreign missionaries.¹⁷ Similarly, studies on the Catholic Church generally point to longstanding Catholic support for U.S. empire across the continent and abroad. American Catholics stood at the forefront of the anti-Communist campaign for much of the Cold War, though this changed somewhat following the 1960s as Vatican II and the Vietnam War forced a reckoning among Catholics and led some to contest U.S. imperialism.¹⁸ Theresa Keeley complicates this narrative in several ways throughout her engaging and well-researched book, *Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict Over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America*.

As Keeley’s eye-catching title makes clear, the book is about Catholic infighting, primarily over U.S.-Latin America policy, though submerged within these debates is a fundamental disagreement over the transformation of the Catholic Church and its practices in the post-Vatican II era. The title is in reference to the four churchwomen—Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan—who were murdered by Salvadoran national guardsmen in December 1980. Reagan administration officials displayed no sympathy for the nuns and accused them of being involved in revolutionary activities that resulted in their untimely deaths. “The image of a nun as a violent revolutionary not only challenged the murdered churchwomen’s status as victims; it also revealed conservative Catholics’ objections to nuns’ and priests’ social activism,” Keeley writes (13). In short, Keeley highlights two parallel developments. There was a war over the Catholic Church as much as there was a battle for control of U.S.-Latin America policy. Since evangelicals’ embrace of President Ronald Reagan’s crusade against the “evil empire” is well-known, it is refreshing that Keeley looks at the understudied Catholic element of the Religious Right. After all, it is important to note, as Keeley does, that the Reagan administration included devout Catholics, most notably Central Intelligence Agency Director William Casey and national security advisers Richard V. Allen and William P. Clark. Moreover, Reagan met with both Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa, the latter of whom was also a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Consequently, “an entangled political-religious outlook” guided the Reagan administration’s handling of Central America policy, according to Keeley (113).

Both Reagan and his Catholic supporters shared strong anti-Communist beliefs, which makes their close partnership unsurprising. What is unique about Keeley’s approach is that her focus is less on how anti-Communism linked Reagan to Catholics than how close contact with *conservative* Catholics colored his understanding of religious opponents of his foreign

¹⁶ Andrew Preston, “Bridging the Gap between the Sacred and the Secular in the History of American Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 30:5 (November 2006): 783-812; Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Knopf, 2012).

¹⁷ A list of recent works, by no means inclusive, on the role of missionaries includes Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Heather D. Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Lauren Frances Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ On the involvement of the Catholic Church in the U.S. imperial mission, see Katherine D. Moran, *The Imperial Church: Catholic Founding Fathers and United States Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020). On the growing disenchantment of Catholics towards anticommunism, see Richard Gid Powers, “American Catholics and Catholic Americans: The Rise and Fall of Catholic Anticommunism,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22:4 (Fall 2004): 17-35; Joseph G. Morgan, “A Change of Course: American Catholics, Anticommunism, and the Vietnam War,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22:4 (Fall 2004): 117-130.

policy, especially the Maryknoll Sisters. His “absorption of conservative Catholic views” encouraged his disdain for the Maryknoll Sisters (2). Reagan found common cause with conservative Catholics who found the congregation’s lackluster anti-Communism and opposition to U.S.-Central America policy disconcerting and indicative of their “wayward Catholicism,” according to Keeley (2). Because of their standing as nuns, the Maryknoll Sisters posed a unique threat to Reagan’s foreign policy, which made it difficult for the administration to tar them as atheistic Communists. Moreover, Maryknoll had the respect of most U.S. Catholics

With the support of conservative Catholics, the Reagan administration carried out a full-scale propaganda war against the Maryknoll Sisters, portraying them as radicals who were more interested in spreading Marxism than the word of God. In fact, when forced to respond to the murders of the four churchwomen, president-elect Reagan and his allies attacked the victims instead of promising to pursue those who were responsible for the horrific acts. The Reagan administration parroted the sometimes outlandish theories regarding the nuns’ supposedly revolutionary activities. As Keeley argues, “The rhetoric shifted focus from those responsible—individual perpetrators, the Salvadoran government, and the United States as arms supplier and military trainer—to the women” (118). Reagan administration officials accused the women of acting in ways that were unbecoming of nuns and women. Without explicitly saying so, officials like Secretary of State Alexander Haig and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Jeane Kirkpatrick much preferred the figure of Mother Teresa, who served the poor without seeking significant structural changes to global capitalism

Keeley shows that by questioning the religiosity of the Maryknoll Sisters, the Reagan administration sought to undermine its critics by distinguishing between tried and true Catholics and imposters. A similar dynamic played out when the president accused the Sandinistas of crushing religious freedom. The Reagan administration’s strategy was showcased during a standoff with Nicaragua’s Foreign Minister and Maryknoll priest Miguel d’Escoto. In July 1985, he carried out a twenty-six day fast, which he called a “Fast for Peace, for the Defense of Life and Against Terrorism.” He considered the action necessary to fight what he called the “theological war” being waged by Reagan. When Reagan continued to promote U.S. intervention in Nicaragua as an effort to save religion, d’Escoto began holding Stations of the Cross in February 1986 in towns throughout Nicaragua. The actions of d’Escoto brought him into conflict with Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, a powerful critic of the Sandinistas. The Reagan administration attempted to counter d’Escoto by giving its full support to Obando, who, in the eyes of the CIA, served as an impeccable critic of the regime due to his standing in the Catholic Church.

Just as conservatives sought an alternative to the Maryknollers in Nicaragua, they scoured the United States for a voice to serve as a stand-in for the radical nuns who were seeking to derail Reagan’s plan to roll back Communism. To this end, the president and his allies began promoting the views of a former Maryknoller, Geraldine Macías, or “the White House’s Maryknoller,” as Keeley describes her (154). Macías went to Nicaragua with Maryknoll and eventually left the congregation in 1974. In 1982 she moved to the United States with her husband Edgard. She also became a critic of the Sandinistas. Macías achieved prominence after testifying before Republican Senator Jeremiah Denton’s hearings on *Marxism and Christianity in Revolutionary Central America*, where she accused Maryknollers of being “naive romantics” (149) that nonetheless worked to further the spread of Marxism at the expense of religious freedom. Though her arguments rehashed many of the same claims made by conservative Catholics over the last decade, her past as a “former Maryknoll nun” gave her words added weight as she offered a critique of Reagan’s mortal enemies. Thus, the Reagan administration and conservative press happily spread her ideas in print and through national and international speaking tours, all while denying the religious devotion of the Maryknoll Sisters themselves.

The gender dynamics of conservative Catholics’ dismissal of the Maryknoll Sisters is possibly the most interesting part of Keeley’s story, which she tells by looking at the relationship between Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill and the Maryknollers. Democratic critics of the president’s Latin America policies complicated the Reagan administration’s campaign to portray the Maryknoll Sisters as dangerous and disingenuous nuns. According to Keeley, O’Neill’s willingness to seek out their counsel “legitimized both the women’s opposition to U.S. policy and their view of what being a Catholic meant” (161). When this advice led O’Neill to oppose Reagan’s Central America policies, conservative critics pilloried him as a lapsed Catholic and called him unmanly for his failure to confront the Communists. During debates over a bill in 1986

to provide military aid to the contras, Reagan's allies likewise blasted Speaker O'Neill for heeding the advice of the Maryknollers rather than a true Catholic like Obando.

Reagan's willingness to intervene in intra-Catholic debates might appear to have been political pandering on the part of the president to secure the Catholic vote. Yet, as Keeley argues, Reagan's charge that the Sandinistas represented a threat to the Catholic Church served as more than just a political ploy. Rather, it allowed Reagan to reframe the debate over human rights in Nicaragua. To counter the charges made by the Maryknoll Sisters and other religious critics that the administration ignored human rights abuses committed by U.S. allies in Nicaragua and El Salvador, Reagan adopted a new strategy that aimed at defending the Church against the Marxist Sandinista government. Linking religious freedom to the right to worship, Reagan administration officials and conservative Catholics decried efforts supposedly undertaken by the Sandinistas to prevent traditionalist Catholics from preaching and to create a new church, a "popular church." In the eyes of Reagan administration officials, these sins merited more attention than the brutal methods employed by the U.S.-supported contras.

Though on the surface this is a book about Catholic debates over U.S. foreign policy, Keeley's ability to link these conversations to conservative Catholic concerns about the post-Vatican II church makes this book relevant to not just diplomatic, but also religious and political historians. For instance, Keeley shows how the growing chasm between Reagan's Catholics and the Maryknoll Sisters pointed to the changing religious scene of the 1980s. The intra-Catholic conflicts detailed in the book show that denominational affiliation mattered less than where an individual stood on the liberal-to-conservative spectrum. Thus, conservative Catholics preferred working closely with conservatives from other denominations rather than liberals in their own church. A figure who shows up repeatedly in Keeley's book is Paul Weyrich, the Catholic founder of the Moral Majority who symbolized this inter-denominational alliance that gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. Like so many other Catholics during this era, Weyrich combined his displeasure over the profound changes to liturgical practices brought on by Vatican II with the church's advocacy of a new approach to both U.S. foreign policy and missionary activities abroad. Regarding the latter, Weyrich voiced concerns about U.S. bishops' support for the Panama Canal treaties and the growing popularity of liberation theology among Maryknollers. Although he is not a central player in Keeley's story, Weyrich's ability to move freely within Catholic and Protestant circles points to the need for additional study on the role of Catholics in the Religious Right, beyond their involvement with hot-button issues like abortion and education. Weyrich is the perfect example of how a conservative Catholic shared more with evangelical Protestants than some of his own fellow Catholics.

This is a superb book that deserves much praise and a wide readership. That said, in any book that deals with non-state actors, there is the problem of determining how much these figures influenced the officials who were involved in policymaking. After all, as Keeley shows, President Jimmy Carter, who was worried about the role of religion on the Iranian revolution, instructed the CIA to investigate not only Islamic movements, but also what Carter described as "dissident" (87) Catholic movements in Latin America. Although El Salvador remained secondary to Nicaragua within the Carter administration, the actions of Archbishop Óscar Romero distressed officials, who viewed him as too radical and political for a religious leader. In fact, officials discussed Romero with the Vatican foreign minister and secretary of state; called on Jesuit leaders to convince Romero's Jesuit associates to encourage the archbishop to temper his views; convinced archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo to talk to Romero; and reached out to various Catholic clergy seeking allies. Additionally, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote a letter sent by the State Department to Pope John Paul II asking for assistance with its campaign against Romero, even if, in the end, the Carter administration could not silence him. Yet, it remained unwilling to accept Romero's criticism of the new, supposedly moderate junta, even as Maryknollers sent Carter letters backing up the archbishop's description of conditions in El Salvador. After Romero's assassination, the Carter administration, which received most of its reports from the Salvadoran government and military, refused to accept the information gleaned from missionaries on the ground in El Salvador, viewing these actors as uninformed and easily manipulated. Though the Reagan administration took the concerns of conservative Catholics more seriously and declared an all-out war against liberation theology, Carter seemed just as unwilling to countenance the views of the Maryknollers.

Thus, does Reagan's appropriation of Catholic arguments indicate that the Catholic Church shaped foreign policy in the 1980s, as Keeley suggests? Both his predecessor and successor remained committed to keeping El Salvador out of Communists' hands, even if they were unwilling to go to the lengths that Reagan did to achieve this goal and tempered their attacks on the Maryknollers. It seems more likely that the Maryknoll Sisters served as a convenient boogeyman for Reagan to use as a weapon in his anti-Communist crusade and for his supporters to defend illegal activities like Iran-Contra. This allowed the president to appeal to his conservative Catholic base and bolster his Central America policies. In fact, Reagan's efforts to paint the Maryknoll Sisters as a sinister force were part and parcel of his administration's larger campaign to silence the president's religious critics. For instance, Reagan instructed his Justice Department to wage a war against the sanctuary movement, a national interfaith campaign to provide a safe haven for refugees fleeing violence in Central America, which led to a series of political trials meant to weaken the movement.¹⁹ On a related point, Keeley's excellent analysis of the Reagan administration's penchant for transforming the Maryknoll Sisters into the boogeyman tends to obscure the specific policies favored by the Maryknollers. Too often they appear as invisible antagonists of Reagan and conservative Catholics. Consequently, I did not get a true sense of their views.

Despite these minor quibbles, we should applaud Keeley for introducing a new cast of characters that will allow us to gain a better understanding of the factors that influenced Reagan's foreign policy. Hopefully Keeley's work will inspire future scholars to look closely at the various actors, religious and otherwise, involved in the tense debates over secular and spiritual affairs during the Cold War, and how they sometimes bled into one another.

¹⁹ "Break-ins at Sanctuary Churches and Organizations Opposed to Administration Policy in Central," *Hearings before the Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights*. Committee on the Judiciary. House of Representatives. 100th Congress, First Session, February 19 and 20, 1987; Ann Crittenden, *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988); Sophie H. Pirie, "The Origins of a Political Trial: The Sanctuary Movement and Political Justice," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 2:2 (1990): 381-416.

REVIEW BY DEBBIE SHARNAK, ROWAN UNIVERSITY

Joseph R. Biden's inauguration on 20 January 2021 brought only the second Catholic president of the United States to the White House. His faith, however, did not guarantee strong Catholic support. As various exit polls have demonstrated, Biden and former President Donald Trump split the Catholic vote almost evenly, 50-50.²⁰ The divide demonstrates the polarization among those of Catholic faith, a phenomenon that Theresa Keeley's wonderful book, *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns* traces throughout the Reagan administration in the 1980s and its implications on his administration's Central America policy.

Although President Ronald Reagan was not a Catholic, Keeley argues that Catholicism played an important and particular role during his two terms in office. Reagan surrounded himself with conservative, anti-Communist Catholics who shaped his Central American policy on the basis of those beliefs. According to those officials, El Salvador's brutal right-wing government needed U.S. support because it fought godless Communists and progressive clergy who sought to use a twisted version of Catholicism (liberation theology) to threaten the government. With Nicaragua, however, the U.S. had to support contra fighters against the Communist Sandinista government in part because the Sandinistas did not allow for religious freedom. Thus, under this framework, Reagan was supporting human rights in Nicaragua by privileging religious freedom as the central and most important rights claim. In this sense, Reagan's advisers were not only fighting a Communist threat, but also exploiting a divide among Catholics that pitted conservative and traditional Catholics against Catholics who believed in a more progressive version of the church and believed it had a "responsibility to care for people's needs on earth, not just prepare them spiritually for the afterlife" (5).

As Keeley adeptly argues, although Reagan courted conservative Catholics into his administration, he also faced fervent opposition from Catholic actors who embraced this more liberal idea of Catholicism and liberation theology. As such, these other Catholic actors lobbied for a change in Reagan's policies toward Central America on a religious basis that talked about prioritizing the human rights to be free from hunger, illiteracy, sickness, and political and economic domination in their country (8). In many ways, this argument was epitomized by the Maryknoll Sisters, who became a lightning rod for discussions over the role of religion in U.S. foreign policy and intra-Catholic debates over who could claim to be and speak for Catholics both in the U.S. and abroad.

The book consists of eight chronological chapters that follow the shifting debates about the direction of Cold War Catholicism from the perspective of the Catholic faithful and their diverse influences on U.S. foreign policy. Keeley begins the story with how Maryknollers evolved in the early Cold War from fervent allies of U.S. policy in Central America to critics by the 1960s as a result of their applying new church teachings after the Vatican II and seeing the disastrous effects of U.S. policies because they lived under right-wing dictatorships. In this respect, Maryknoll missionaries went from complementing U.S. objectives in the region and promoting anti-Communism to prioritizing social justice and questioning Communism as the cause of poverty in Central America. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Maryknoll activities in the 1970s in promoting liberation theology in Central America and their efforts at what Keeley explains was a "reverse mission." This mission included U.S.-based activities to raise awareness about what was taking place in Central America and to lobby Congress about the human rights impact of supporting the Somoza dictatorship or right-wing governments in El Salvador (58). During this period, Latin American governments and some U.S. conservatives painted Maryknollers as subversives because of their focus on empowering the poor and critiquing U.S. policy. As Keeley shows, President Jimmy Carter's human rights policies "meant little to nothing when it came to El Salvador policy" and Maryknoll lobbying went largely unheeded (100).

Chapters 4 through 7 focus on Reagan's engagement in Central America and the influence of these intra-Catholic debates. In many ways, the book hinges on chapter 4, which explores the murders of four churchwomen in El Salvador (including

²⁰ Frank Newport, "Religious Group Voting and the 2020 Election," 13 November 2020, accessed 4 January 2020 at <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/324410/religious-group-voting-2020-election.aspx>.

two Maryknoll Sisters and one Maryknoll lay missionary) in December 1980, right before Reagan took office. Keeley explains how the event showcased the widening divide among Catholics. Reagan and the conservative Catholics in his administration blamed the nuns for their own murders because they were political activists and bad Catholics, whereas progressive Catholics used the murders as a rallying call to protest unjust U.S. support for the country and to advocate for the cutting of aid to the government. The subsequent chapters follow the development of Reagan's policy in the region throughout his two terms, and how he used these politicized Catholic debates to court conservative support and to attempt to neutralize Catholic protest movements. The book concludes with a discussion of how conservative Catholic influence declined during the George H.W. Bush administration due to the changed geopolitical climate, Bush's decision not to court the influential block, and the way Bush sought to avoid congressional confrontation over these issues. To cover these intricate intra-Catholic debates in the U.S. and Central America, Keeley draws on extensive research in a wide range of U.S. and Central American archives, news sources, congressional databases, correspondence, and oral history interviews.

In this narrative, Keeley breaks new ground in focusing on intra-Catholic debates that reveal Catholics to have been both fierce proponents of and opponents to the Reagan administration. Her work pairs well with new research from other scholars that explores the role of religion in U.S. foreign policy, perhaps most poignantly with Lauren Turek's *To Bring the Good News to All Nations*.²¹ Turek focuses on the evangelical influence in U.S. foreign policy, which had particular resonance during the Reagan administration, and includes a fine chapter on Guatemala, one of the Central American nations Keeley chose not to focus on for this book. Indeed, as Keeley points out, conservative Catholics more frequently aligned with conservative evangelicals and Jews than they did with progressive Catholics in pushing certain foreign policy goals in this region (142).²² Catholicism, however, has much resonance for studying Latin America because the region overwhelmingly identified as Catholic.²³ Thus, religion was a particular point of politicization both in the U.S. and in these countries to further diverse political aims during the violence of the 1980s.

Yet the most interesting aspect in Keeley's book is on the role of gender in these debates. The topic arises most centrally in chapters 4 and 6. In chapter 4, Keeley explores how Reagan's administration, epitomized by Secretary of State Alexander Haig, challenged portrayals of the murdered nuns as victims. Instead, officials painted these women as engaged in political activities that were not appropriate for nuns—and implicitly for women and religious women as a whole—and thus blamed the deaths on their own dangerous and subversive actions. This argument even extended to the administration's pushing of entirely false claims of the women dying in a shootout after driving through a blockade instead of what really happened—that they were kidnapped, raped, and murdered by National Guardsmen upon their return to El Salvador from an international conference. The notion of pushing or subverting gendered and innocent victimhood is central in this analysis. Then, in chapter 6, Keeley explores how the Reagan administration questioned Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill's Catholicism and masculinity by critiquing his reliance on the Maryknoller's evaluation of events in the region. In this way, the administration trafficked in multiple and contrasting gender-based critiques of the Speaker to try to neutralize those opposed to Reagan's policies. First, they claimed the nuns were naïve and childlike, thus labelling O'Neill's citation of their work and critique of U.S. policy in the region as naïve as well. Other claims attempted to portray the nuns as strict Catholic schoolmarm, and O'Neill as weak and less masculine by following their advice. Last, other critiques focused on disparaging the nuns as subverting the traditional male church hierarchy in an effort to delegitimize their criticism and mark it as invalid to speak for Catholics. In all these contradictory ways, the Reagan administration attempted to use various

²¹ Lauren Frances Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

²² Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard also touches upon conservative religious influence in Reagan's Nicaragua policy in his book *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights: Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²³ Even though these numbers have been on decline since the 1970s, estimates largely put the number of Catholics at above 90% in the region for much of the 1980s. See "Religion in Latin America," Pew Research Center, 13 November 2014, accessed 21 December 2020, <https://pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/#history-of-religious-change>.

gendered lenses to portray the administration's strategy towards Central America as masculine, and the critiques, whether they came from liberal Catholic protestors or Catholic politicians, as feminine and weak.

These issues also lay bare problems in the way the murdered Maryknoll women were politicized for contrasting purposes by both sides in these intra-Catholic squabbles. While villainized on the right, those on the left worked equally hard to paint them as innocent victims. Thus, both the left and right largely stripped the women of their agency and their legitimate political pursuits in the aims of furthering Cold War policy on both sides of the aisle. During Reagan's two terms in office, women were almost entirely sidelined from the halls of power—at its height there were only two women senators serving simultaneously and only twenty-four women in the House at any one point.²⁴ That powerful men in the U.S. utilized these gendered arguments for various political pursuits begs even further questions about how this dynamic might have been just as politically salient in the male-dominated, machismo societies and press in Latin American.

In a book as comprehensive and nuanced as Keeley's, the one lingering question that remains centers on the legacy of Reagan's Cold War human rights policy in the region. The last chapter of the book is an epilogue, largely following the enduring relevance of Catholicism in U.S. foreign policy to the current day, and the lasting stains in the region left by Reagan's destructive policies. Yet, what are the conclusions about Reagan's human rights framing and discourse during his administration? Does Keeley largely side with Turek in arguing that, most importantly, Reagan defined human rights along religious freedom terms, a relevance that can be traced to former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Commission on Unalienable Rights report from 2020?²⁵ Did liberal and conservative Catholics demonstrate the way in which the discourse about what human rights split almost completely along political lines in the 1980s in regards to Central America, perhaps so much so that the two sides were speaking about two different ideas? Human rights plays a secondary role to the intra-Catholic wars throughout the text, and this reader would have liked to hear more about what conclusions human rights historians could take away from Reagan's policies as well.

Interestingly, although the current Catholic president Biden served in the Senate during the entire time of this narrative, his name is mentioned only once in the book, when he, along with two other senators, wrote a letter to Reagan urging for the murder investigation of the churchwomen in El Salvador to be a "key determinant of our relationship with El Salvador" (120). Yet, as a presidential candidate, Biden proposed an extensive "Security and Prosperity Plan" for Central America, laying out how he would reverse much of President Donald Trump's policies.²⁶ Perhaps a further investigation into how this particular Catholic approached the issue during the Reagan administration, and potentially fell within the intra-Catholic debates, will be the topic of a future historian's study. If so, it will necessarily have to build on Keeley's deeply researched and well-written narrative about the various debates within Catholic circles and their influences on broader US policy.

²⁴ "Women Members by Congress, 1917-Present," accessed 2 January 2021 at <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Data/Women-Representatives-and-Senators-by-Congress/>.

²⁵ Department of State, "[Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Draft-Report-of-the-Commission-on-Unalienable-Rights.pdf)," 16 July 2020. A draft copy is available here: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Draft-Report-of-the-Commission-on-Unalienable-Rights.pdf>.

²⁶ "The Biden Plan to Build Security and Prosperity in Partnership with the People of Central America," *Biden Harris*, accessed 10 December 2020 at <https://joebiden.com/centralamerica/>.

RESPONSE BY THERESA KEELEY, UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

Thank you to the reviewers, Natalie Gasparowicz, Brian S. Mueller, and Debbie Sharnak, and to Mike Neagle for organizing this roundtable on *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict Over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America*. When I was working on my project, I focused on the publication process. I did not contemplate next steps, which is why I am so grateful for this opportunity to converse with reviewers who have different areas of expertise. I was happy to see that in reading *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns*, the reviewers recognized how conservative Catholics influenced Ronald Reagan's understanding of his religious opponents and of Central America more generally, how intra-Catholic divides shaped U.S.-Central America policy, how gender played a role in these debates, and how, as Gasparowicz notes, the book shows the "lived, religious experiences of . . . historical actors."

Brian Mueller raises the question of non-state actors' influence on policymakers and Maryknollers specifically, noting that President Jimmy Carter seemed just as unwilling to countenance the views of the Maryknollers" as Reagan. I agree with Mueller regarding Carter's response. My initial interest in the project was not to determine how Maryknoll Sisters may have influenced policymaking. Instead, I wondered, why did the Reagan administration and its allies focus on the Maryknoll Sisters when they were just one of many groups that were critical of U.S.-Central America policy? Why did these women seem to take on larger-than-life status, at least in terms of President Ronald Reagan and his allies? I concluded that part of the reason for this inordinate amount of attention was based on the fact that two Maryknoll Sisters, along with another nun and lay missionary – the four churchwomen – were raped and murdered in El Salvador in December 1980. But, at its heart, it was because of what Maryknoll symbolized to conservative Catholics. If Carter had won a second term, I do not believe we would have seen the same Catholic tensions play out or the same Catholic influence on U.S. foreign policy. Catholics disagreed regarding U.S. Cold War policy before Reagan's election. They played central roles in Carter's cabinet, such as Secretary of State Edmund Muskie and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. But Muskie was no Alexander Haig, secretary of state, or William Casey, CIA director. Instead, it was the confluence of several factors during Reagan's tenure that were key. He and his advisers prioritized Central America and saw it through the lens of the Cold War. Advisers, especially those who were involved in shaping Latin America policy, were conservative Catholics who saw liberation theology as akin to Communism, and therefore as a national security threat to the United States. A growing opposition movement to U.S.-Central America policy was largely led by Catholics. Finally, conservative Catholics with political influence clamored for more anti-Communist action regarding Central America, and Reagan wanted the support of these conservative Catholics, or at least did not want them turned against him.

Mueller also asks whether "Reagan's appropriation of Catholic arguments indicate that the Catholic Church shaped foreign policy in the 1980s, as Keeley suggests?" Perhaps this does not address Mueller's point, but I see a difference between the Catholic Church as an institution and individual Catholics. I was most interested in exploring how U.S. and Central American Catholics' faith interacted with their political views, not official church positions. I did not focus primarily on U.S.-Vatican relations. Overall, I concentrated more on tensions among Catholics who were politicians, policymakers, and advocates.

Debbie Sharnak asks whether the Catholic divide over human rights regarding Central America followed party lines. Although conservative Catholics were more often Republicans and supported Reagan's policies, the Reagan era underscores the shift of more conservative Catholics into the Republican Party. Paul Weyrich was among the key Republican strategists who worked with the White House and at other times, pushed the Reagan administration to do more, especially regarding Central America. But not all Catholics who supported Reagan's Central America policies were long-time Republican party members. A group of lay Catholics formed the American Catholic Committee (ACC) in 1982 in response to what they described as a U.S. church hierarchy that was too politically involved. Among their three main areas of focus was Central America. The ACC shared some of the same views as Weyrich, but the majority of the organization's founding members were labor-affiliated Democrats, some of whom voted for Reagan in 1980. Conversely, a shared outlook on U.S.-Central America policy did not mean agreement in other areas. Supporters of the U.S. contra policy included both antifeminist Phyllis Schlafly and feminist Phyllis Zagano, who critiqued the all-boys' network of the priesthood that covered up pornography and sexual abuse among its ranks.

Sharnak wonders whether opposing Catholics seemed to be speaking two different languages regarding human rights. The short answer is yes. Opponents accused the U.S. government of furthering and facilitating human rights abuses, while Reagan and his supporters focused on religious freedom, which they argued the Nicaraguan government denied. We can most see this divide in how Reagan framed Nicaragua in his run for re-election and the early part of his second term. The president, some cabinet members, and his allies spoke of an aggrieved Pope and accused the Sandinistas of trying to destroy the church and replace it with a “fake church,” as I discuss in Chapter Five. The White House Outreach Working Group on Central America invited guests who already supported the president’s policies to weekly meetings to hear speakers who described the religious persecution of Catholics as well as Jews, evangelical Protestants, and Miskito Indians. This emphasis on religious freedom was not new, nor was the attempt to demonize opponents by accusing them of religious persecution. What was new was how and why the Reagan administration framed those appeals. The White House wanted conservative Catholic support for the president’s re-election. At the same time, conservative Catholics surrounded the president. The result was a campaign that portrayed a Pope and a church in Nicaragua that were under attack by Communists using language that had been circulating among conservative Nicaraguan and U.S. Catholics for years. The White House was simultaneously echoing conservative Catholics and catering to them. At the same time, the laser-beam focus on religious persecution in Nicaragua served to distract from the conversation about human rights in El Salvador, especially the churchwomen’s case, and the U.S. government’s role in the country.

One side did not have a monopoly on the conversation about religious freedom; the two Catholic groups characterized the issue in different ways. While conservative U.S. and Nicaraguan Catholics tended to define religious freedom as the right to worship, their liberal counterparts stressed a more expansive understanding that included the right of the church to exercise its social ministry. Liberal Catholics also argued that context mattered. The Nicaraguan government was in the midst of a political feud with the church hierarchy as it also faced an undeclared war with the United States. For conservative Catholics, the important context was the Cold War and any threatened Communist influence. Liberal Catholics accused members of the Nicaraguan church hierarchy of inappropriately interjecting themselves into the revolutionary project by opposing the draft and at times, by aligning with the Reagan administration. Conservative Catholics made similar charges against U.S. church leaders they regarded as inappropriately involved in debates over the economy, nuclear arms, and even U.S.-Central America policy.

Catholics’ differing framing of human rights connects to Natalie Gasparowicz’s question regarding how representative conservative U.S. Catholics were. Her query points to one of the aspects of my research that surprised me. Conservative Catholics were numerically the minority in the United States, yet their fingerprints were all over U.S.-Central America policy both because of their access to Reagan and Reagan’s desire to win their support. By Reagan’s second term, even non-Catholic conservatives were echoing conservative Catholics’ arguments that the Sandinistas disrespected the Pope and were muzzling the church and that the Maryknoll Sisters were a danger to both the church and the United States. I found it quite jarring to read some Protestants defending Pope John Paul II by condemning the Sandinistas for disrespecting the pope and other non-Catholics lecturing Catholics on who was a true Catholic.

Gasparowicz also raises the question of Maryknollers’ motivation. She asks, “for Keeley, the Maryknollers were thinking strictly in terms of faith. ... Was it possible that faith and politics did overlap for the Maryknoll Sisters?” Yes, the women knew that their stance had political implications. I tried to stress the difference between motivation and result because of the critiques the women faced at the time. Opponents argued that the Maryknoll Sisters were naïve and that, as women, they could not understand politics. Following this line of thinking, the only possible explanation for their viewpoints was that they had been manipulated, most likely by Communists. In response, the sisters repeatedly had to explain and defend their views. As Sister Nancy Donovan, who was kidnapped by the contras testified before a House committee: “I do not owe my faith, convictions, nor my mission, to any ideology, economic or political system but to the life and message of Jesus Christ and the living tradition and teachings of the Catholic Church. Together with my Sisters in Maryknoll I have chosen to understand and interpret our world today in the spirit of the Gospel and from the point of view of the poor with whom

we live and work.”²⁷ As Donovan’s words make clear, she was well aware that as a woman and a religious sister, her views would not be taken seriously in some quarters. For Donovan and others, it was lived experience coupled with faith that inspired their outlook. It was a radical view to assert that the poor deserved rights, especially in countries like El Salvador and Nicaragua, where the poor comprised the overwhelming majority of the population. The sisters knew the potential political consequences of their position. I tried to highlight the fact that the Maryknoll Sisters’ faith was the starting point for their understanding of politics and human rights.

The sisters’ motivation also underscores the reality that for them, human rights were not tied exclusively to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When the women spoke about Central Americans, they stressed the right to human dignity and self-determination, the right to be free from hunger, illiteracy, sickness, and political and economic domination in their own country as well as globally. For Maryknollers, it was about prioritizing the poor. As Sister Madeline Dorsey, who served in El Salvador with the murdered women, explained, the powerful felt threatened when the Salvadoran poor became “more aware of their rights, human rights and equal rights as children of God.”²⁸ In this way, the Maryknoll Sisters’ understanding of human rights differed from someone not motivated by faith.

Gasparowicz also asks about the role of abortion in these Catholic debates and the larger questions of sexuality and gender. One of my goals with the book was to show that the culture wars of the 1980s were not just about domestic political issues, such as abortion, but also involved foreign policy disagreements, such as those over Central America. Abortion – then and now – tends to overshadow other issues. Gasparowicz’s question, however, prompted me to reconsider where discussions about abortion appeared in my sources. Abortion often seemed to be lurking in the background. The conservative Catholic press used abortion as a litmus test. In articles not focused on abortion, the press used someone’s position on abortion as shorthand to quickly bestow someone with credibility or to discredit the person. The reader only needed a reminder that Speaker of the House Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill was not a vocal pro-life advocate to know that his views on Central America policy should not be trusted. On the other hand, I got the sense that the liberal Catholic press was frustrated by conservative Catholics making abortion their primary issue of concern. One writer frustratingly observed that Mother Teresa used her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech to condemn abortion.

The issue I was more concerned with, and that I was surprised to see disappear from the conversation, was the rape of the four churchwomen. The discussion centered on their brutal murder, not the sexual violation and what the rape signified in both religious and political terms. Some women, including nuns, railed against that omission at the time. Less than three weeks after the women’s bodies were found, a few sisters wrote to president-elect Reagan. As they asked, “Let us not forget that these women were raped prior to being killed? [sic] Or is this unimportant because it has also been the fate of many poor El Salvadorean women – and even children?”²⁹ Even today, the rape is not always mentioned when the women are commemorated.

This project began with a single moment: the gruesome rape and murder of four U.S. women in a foreign country by state forces the United States armed and supported. In following the story as I saw it, I explored human rights, religion, U.S.-Central America relations, gender, and social movements. The project raised larger questions for me. How do people’s religious beliefs shape their outlook on the world and their understanding of what the U.S. role in the world should be? How can faith supersede national borders? How can differences within one faith community have larger political impacts? What does it mean to say that human rights should influence U.S. foreign policy? Who counts as a credible source regarding

²⁷ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Support for the Contras*, Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, 99th Cong., 1st sess., 1985, 270.

²⁸ Madeline Dorsey to Penny Lernoux, April 18, 1988, folder SMES1969–1993, box 1, El Salvador: Martyrs, Maryknoll Sisters Archives, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, NY.

²⁹ Mary O’Keefe and Merle Nolde to Ronald Reagan, December 18, 1980, Sr. Betty Ann’s files, Maryknoll Sisters, New York.

U.S. foreign policy? In grappling with these questions, my hope is that *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns* highlights the need to consider how intra-faith conflict has impacted U.S. foreign policy and politics as well as how faith has inspired human rights advocacy, including transnational activism.