

## Theo-conservatives are a scary bunch

Some years ago a new hyphenated word, neo-conservative, entered the political vocabulary. Eventually it seeped into our ecclesiastical vocabulary as well, applying to such Catholic writers as Michael Novak, George Weigel and Richard John Neuhaus.

Now another hyphenated word, theo-conservative, has appeared on the political scene, surfacing in Andrew Sullivan's recent article in *The New York Times Magazine* (10/11/98), entitled "The Scolds."

Sullivan, the former editor of *The New Republic*, argues that American conservatism of the sort once personified by former President Ronald Reagan has traded liberation from the state for moral righteousness.

No apologist for the current president, Sullivan readily concedes that Mr. Clinton is responsible for the mess in which he finds himself. But not entirely. "For Bill Clinton was responsible for none of the prurient, lip-pursuing moralism of the Starr report ... This moral obsessiveness was the creation not only of Kenneth Starr but also ... of a conservatism become puritanism, a conservatism that has long lost sight of the principles of privacy and restraint, modesty and constitutionalism, which used to be its hallmarks."

"This scolding, moralizing conser-



### essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

vatism," Sullivan insists, is the product of a handful of influential intellectuals, among whom are numbered William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard* and a regular commentator on ABC's "This Week with Sam Donaldson and Cokie Roberts," the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, Robert Bork, failed nominee to the U.S. Supreme Court and author of *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, David Frum, author of *Dead Right*, and William Bennett, author of the best-selling book, *The Death of Outrage*.

With the disappearance of communism and the classic welfare state as enemies that united disparate elements of American conservatism, U.S. conservatives have become increasingly split along economic and social lines. The traditional economic conservatives are driven by a concern

for peace in the world and prosperity in the new global economy, with a minimum of governmental regulation; the new theo-conservatives are consumed by a passion to control the moral lives of their fellow citizens (and of other nations as well), and are eager to call upon the once-hated government to impose and enforce various measures of control.

According to Sullivan, no conservative thinker has done more to advance this new moralism than William Kristol, whose magazine relentlessly portrays the current scandal as a moral crisis for the nation.

In the issue immediately following the release of the Starr report, *The Weekly Standard* published a "long, surreal article" on a four-day World Pornography Conference in which six pages of explicit sex was "interspersed with coy condescension." The article was so lurid that the editors had to post a warning to readers.

"The weird porno-puritanism of the Starr report does not exist, it seems, in a vacuum," Sullivan argues. "It comes out of a degenerated conservative political and literary culture."

Sullivan describes the journal *First Things* as the "spiritual nerve center" of theo-conservatism, providing a "radically theocratic reinterpretation of the Consti-

tution itself." Its editor Richard Neuhaus rejects a "perverse pluralism" that fails to recognize Christianity's privileged place in our nation.

Two years ago, Sullivan points out, *First Things* argued for "seditious activities on the part of conservative Christians 'ranging from noncompliance to civil disobedience to morally justified revolution' against what it called ... the 'morally illegitimate' American 'regime.'"

Robert Bork, on the other hand, personifies theo-conservatism's sometimes "hysterical pessimism" about America's "moral chaos ... punctuated by spasms of violence and eroticism." Our only hope, Bork insists, is the rise of a religious conservatism that is "energetic, optimistic and politically sophisticated."

But if all else fails, Bork has acknowledged that he would favor the use of governmental power to restrict free speech and the dissemination of objectionable images.

Ironically, the rise of theo-conservatism may be the main reason why the president whom the theo-conservatives so despise continues in office. His enemies are so scary.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## Heaven on earth shows what's in store for next life

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 20:27-38. (R1) 2 Maccabees 7:1-12, 9-14. (R2) 2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5.

One day a group of Sadducees approached Jesus with a trick question. The Sadducees accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament, attributed to Moses. Since in these books no mention is made of the dead being brought back to life, they concluded that there was no such thing as a resurrection from the dead. Yet their question dealt with that very belief.

"Master," they said, "Moses prescribed that if a man married and died before he had any children, the next oldest brother should marry the widow and raise posterity to his brother." In their riddle the Sadducees had the widow marry and bury all seven brothers. "At the resurrection," they asked, "whose wife will she be?"

Jesus knew their bad will. Yet he saw this as an opportunity to set the record straight. "In heaven," he explained, "there is no need for marriage, because the resurrected become like angels and are no longer liable to death." Jesus was saying that you can't make assumptions about heaven on the basis of what life on earth is like. As wonderful as marriage is,



### a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

it is nothing compared to the quality of relationship that will exist in heaven. Of course that doesn't mean that we shall not know husband or wife, that relationships will be dissolved.

In fact we will love one another in the resurrected life even more intensely, even more joyfully than we do in the present life. It is utterly unthinkable that there would not be between those who work closely with one another on earth an even more powerful and more rewarding intimacy in the life of the resurrection.

Eileen George loves horses. One horse she especially loved took sick. She asked God to cure it. The horse died. Eileen complained to God. God took her to the next world and showed her her horse

more beautiful and healthy than ever. "You see," God said to her, "I'm saving him for you until you come to heaven." Everything we love on earth that is not sinful, every good thing that makes us happy on earth, will be reserved for us in heaven to be enjoyed in a way no words can express.

When the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre in Paris in 1911 and was missing for two years, more people went to the Louvre to stare at the blank space on the museum wall than had gone to look at the masterpiece in the 12 previous years when it hung there unmolested.

An all-too human tendency is to fail to take adequate note of precious things while we have them. Only when one of them is taken away from us do we become painfully aware of the "blank space" in our lives.

The walls of our lives are crowded with Mona Lisas, but so often we are unmindful of them. Countless blessings attend us daily and often we are insensitive to them. The more often and the more regularly we receive any blessing, the less likely we are to be aware of it. What is constantly granted is easily taken for granted. One of the best ways to prepare for heaven is to realize the heaven God

is giving us now on earth.

Jesus tried to set the Sadducees straight. They needed a lot of straightening out. There are people we meet today in search of the truth, who don't even believe, like the Sadducees, in a heaven. One way we can help them is to radiate the joy and love of the follower of Christ.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

### Daily Readings

Monday, November 9

Ezekiel 47:1-2,8-9,12  
or I Corinthians 3:9-11,16-17;  
John 2:13-22

Tuesday, November 10

Titus 2:1-8,11-14; Luke 17:7-10

Wednesday, November 11

Titus 3:1-7; Luke 17:11-19

Thursday, November 12

Philemon 7-20; Luke 17:20-25

Friday, November 13

2 John 4-9; Luke 17:26-37

Saturday, November 14

3 John 5-8; Luke 18:1-8

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