As a general rule, confessional lines divide the study of Christianity and politics in the United States. One might think that the literature on Protestants and politics in America would be larger than that on Roman Catholics since the former had a bigger role in shaping the nation, since Protestant institutions (even in secularized forms) have dominated the study of religion, and since contemporary Protestants themselves have dominated public perceptions of major episodes in recent political history (civil rights and the religious Right). As it turns out, a quick search at OCLC’s WorldCat shows that librarians have catalogued more than twice as many books on Roman Catholics and U.S. politics (385) than on Protestants (152). As inexact as that search may be (simply adding “Protestant” or “Catholic” to the subject heading of “Christianity and Politics United States”), the point remains that scholars from Protestant backgrounds generally explore Protestant-related subjects, while a similar trend characterizes the history of Roman Catholicism in the United States. Since this author has contributed to the Protestant side of the academic
enterprise, a short explanation for venturing into foreign scholarly territory is in order.

This book emerges from working in conservative (political and intellectual) circles for the past fifteen years. Before this, I found employment at Protestant institutions during a time when evangelicals and the Republican Party dominated much coverage of religion in national politics and sustained a remarkable flowering of scholarship on born-again Protestants. As early as 1992, Jon Butler observed (but in a plaintive way) that for the “past two decades evangelicalism (and not merely ‘religion’) has emerged as the single most powerful explanatory device adopted by academic historians to account for the distinctive features of American society, culture, and identity.”¹ My prior investigations into religion and politics featured mainline, evangelical, and fundamentalist Protestants and fit generally into the dominant narrative of Christianity and American politics,² which went something like this: white Protestants of a certain stripe (chiefly Calvinist—Congregationalist and Presbyterian) supported a national founding that repudiated an ecclesiastical establishment (Church of England) and yielded a society whose government freed churches to regulate themselves. Fears about deism, the French Revolution, and unbelief in general fueled revivals in the early nineteenth century that produced Protestant organizations to civilize the frontier and revitalize settled territories, and whose cooperation consolidated Anglo-American Protestants as the “mainline” churches. These churches achieved greater unity and gained additional clout after the Civil War, when progressive politics and the Social Gospel movement combined to provide Protestants with political and activist outlets for Christianizing national life. The fundamentalist controversy challenged the mainline, and in the 1940s fundamentalists’ kinder, gentler siblings, evangelical Protestants, took more resources away from the largest denominations and related institutions. But until 1965 or so, white Protestants (whether conservative or liberal) enjoyed unparalleled access to the levers of political and cultural power. When during the 1960s and 1970s the challenges of race, gender, and war undermined assumptions of a homogeneous nation and made secularization plausible, evangelicals, also known as the religious Right, picked up the challenge of maintaining the older Protestant sense of responsibility for the nation and its government. Trying to explain that history and the motivations for
those Protestants was part of what drew me to the topic of Christianity and politics in the United States.

When I left the world of evangelical academics and worked for institutions that are part of movement conservatism, first at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) and now at Hillsdale College, I began to follow more closely Roman Catholic involvement in national debates than I had previously. Not only did I become aware of the rise of conservatism during the 1950s through William F. Buckley, Jr. (ISI’s first president), Russell Kirk, and Whittaker Chambers and the institutions it had created, but the importance of Roman Catholicism to conservatism also became immediately apparent. Buckley himself was devout, Kirk converted, and Chambers went from communism to Quakerism. Meanwhile, many of the authors and colleagues with whom I worked had either grown up Roman Catholic or had converted from Protestant backgrounds. Since I knew something about Protestantism’s inveterate anti-Catholicism and was becoming more aware of Roman Catholicism’s anti-Americanism at least up until the Second Vatican Council, the idea of Roman Catholics in the United States picking up the slack of mainline Protestants’ Christian nationalism became intriguing to say the least.

To be sure, post–World War II Roman Catholic political conservatives (referred to in this book as “neo-Americanists”) did not follow the same script as Protestants had—opposition to alcohol, promotion of prayer and Bible reading in public schools. But by the 1950s, when many Americans believed the nation needed a Christian identity to stand up to Soviet communism, neo-Americanists were ready to defend the United States as the best embodiment of the West’s religious and political achievements. Roman Catholics may have understood the Christian character of the United States differently, but they became formidable proponents of American exceptionalism that political conservatives approved and circulated.

The presence of Roman Catholicism in American political and intellectual conservatism is a subject often overlooked to many who write about church and state or religion and politics in the United States. Recent coverage of evangelical Protestants’ votes for President Donald Trump is just one example. Yes, Roman Catholics are the largest communion in the United States, possess extensive institutional resources, have many fellow
church members serving in state and federal offices, and make up a majority of justices on the Supreme Court of the United States. But those demographic and political realities have not merited the attention of historians and social scientists the way that Protestants have.

The story of how Roman Catholics became such prominent players in conservative circles is one aim of this book, with an implicit purpose being to understand the affinity and tension between national and Roman Catholic traditions and ideals. The long history of anti-Catholicism from Protestants in the United States should make any historian wary of suggesting that Roman Catholics fit awkwardly in American society. At the same time, any historian who considers the longer history of Christendom, the confessionalization of European states, the French Revolution, and the Vatican’s responses to those developments becomes readily aware of the unlikelihood of Roman Catholic authors and public intellectuals becoming the spokesmen for a form of American patriotism that celebrates the very political ideals that Rome opposed until the 1960s. Even more striking is the way Roman Catholics filled the gap of defending the United States’ founding, history, and influence at precisely the same time that mainline Protestants turned from celebrating to debunking the United States. No matter what a reader’s political outlook or religious convictions, the unlikeliness of this story makes it remarkable and perhaps as exceptional as neo-Americanists believed the United States to be.

Former ISI colleagues, especially Mark Henrie, Jeremy Beer, and Jeffrey Cain, deserve credit for introducing me to the literature, authors, and networks of Roman Catholicism and intellectual conservatism. The same goes for colleagues at Hillsdale College, including Matthew Gaetano, Brad Birzer, Nathan Schlueter, Lee Cole, and Dwight Lindley. Participants in the University of Notre Dame 2014 Rome summer seminar, “American Catholicism in a World Made Small: Transnational Approaches to U.S. Catholic History,” led by Kathleen Sprows Cummings, John T. McGreevy, and Matteo Sanfilippo, were of great help in clarifying many points of Roman Catholic history and the dynamics between the United States and the Vatican. A grant from Hillsdale College’s Summer Program for Professional Development made those three weeks in Rome possible. Another generous grant for faculty development from the college helped offset this book’s production costs. Both grants put me in further debt to Hillsdale’s administrators, who have graciously supported my work for the last nine
years and made teaching at the college the most pleasant chapter of my peripatetic career. This Cornell University Press series’s coeditors, R. Laurence Moore and Michael McGandy, along with anonymous readers, all supplied comments and corrections that have improved this book substantially. All remaining weaknesses are mine.

The book is dedicated to a friend who teaches history in Northern Ireland and knows firsthand the challenges that come when both Protestants and Roman Catholics venture into politics. His intellectual and fraternal exchanges during the past eight years have been an unexpected blessing.

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