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**Theresa Keeley. "Reagan's Real Catholics vs. Tip O'Neill's Maryknoll Nuns: Gender, Intra-Catholic Conflict, and the Contras." *Diplomatic History* 40:3 (June 2016): 530-558.**  
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Review by **Lauren Turek**, Trinity University

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Theresa Keeley's examination of intra-Catholic conflict over U.S. relations with Nicaragua during the 1980s illuminates the influence that religious interest groups exerted on the Reagan administration's foreign policy. Through her careful analysis of gendered discourse, she exposes the fault lines between the Catholic right and left, revealing how each side framed the debate and shaped executive, congressional, and public opinion about the Contra war. Keeley also argues that President Ronald Reagan drew on conservative Catholic views to promote his interventionist policies in Central America. Bringing both gender and religious analysis to bear on the questions of how Reagan made sense of the crisis in Nicaragua—and how he formulated and sold his policies to the American people—adds depth to our understanding of the religious dynamics of the Cold War. It also reminds us of the denominational diversity of the religious right as well as the vibrancy of the Christian and Catholic left.

The article focuses on Democratic Congressman Thomas P. "Tipp" O'Neill and his reliance on the Maryknoll Sisters, an order of Roman Catholic nuns, for information about events on the ground in Central America during his tenure as Speaker of the House of Representatives. Maryknollers had an extensive missionary presence abroad as well as a reputation for promoting social justice through their ministry to the poor. Keeley notes that O'Neill's primary Maryknoll contact, Peggy Healey, provided him and other members of Congress with extensive information about what she saw as the root causes of the violence and social dislocation plaguing Nicaragua (536-537). Many Democrats in Congress found the critiques that she leveled against U.S. policies in the region and her reports on the increasingly dire human rights situation there compelling. Although O'Neill certainly had other sources of foreign policy intelligence, he trusted Healey's accounts implicitly and credited the nuns with shaping his opposition to the Contras (536). Keeley draws on O'Neill's autobiography to link this sense of trust with his upbringing, describing his Catholic schooling as well as his close relationship with his Maryknoller aunt, Sister Eunice, as formative experiences that instilled in him a lifelong respect for nuns (538). Yet, as Keeley demonstrates, his faith in the Maryknollers opened him up to gendered and religious criticism from the Reagan administration and conservative Catholics.

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According to Keeley, Reagan and his advisors felt besieged by the mounting attacks that the Maryknollers and other religious groups levied against their Central American policies, partly because the nuns' moral authority and "firsthand experience" in the region lent their activism considerable weight in the eyes of the public (540). When Congress temporarily suspended aid to the Contras in 1984 and passed the second Boland amendment to prohibit appropriations for military assistance to Contra forces, it heightened the administration's exasperation with O'Neill and his Maryknoll contacts (542). Keeley suggests that "the Maryknoll Sisters' participation in foreign policy debates also disrupted the image Reagan projected of himself as an exemplar of masculinity," an image rooted in his muscular approach to fighting communism abroad (540-541). This reading of the situation relies on inferences about how Reagan and his supporters viewed the nuns' foreign-policy advocacy, which Keeley seems to draw from the tactics the Reagan administration used to counter O'Neill's opposition to its agenda.

Accordingly, Keeley argues that once the administration realized the threat O'Neill and the nuns posed to Reagan's ability to support the Contras, it launched a vigorous public relations campaign aimed at winning back the moral high ground in the debate (541). Contra supporters "challenged O'Neill's masculinity and his standing as a Catholic" because he relied on advice from the Maryknollers about U.S.-Nicaragua policy, rather than on the administration or the intelligence community (543). To bolster this argument, Keeley cites press releases from the Reagan administration and newspaper editorials from Contra supporters that cast O'Neill as "a parochial schoolchild" following the "naïve" nuns (543). She also references Reagan's efforts to characterize himself as "tough and masculine" and O'Neill as 'emotional' by linking himself with the movie character Rambo in some of his speeches, a contrast that many observers parroted as well (550). The relationship with the Maryknollers proved central to the attacks that O'Neill faced, as Keeley observes that "although O'Neill first publicly opposed U.S.-Nicaragua policy in the spring of 1983, the critiques of him did not begin until he disclosed his association with Maryknoll Sisters" (540). Their political liberalism and gender made the nuns suspect, and O'Neill's association with them led Contra supporters to call his legitimacy into question.

Conservative Catholics piled on as well, though their critiques emerged out of broader ideological fissures within the U.S. Catholic community itself. Many conservative Catholic leaders, such as White House Communications Director Pat Buchanan, Republican Congressman Henry Hyde, and activist Paul Weyrich, saw the Maryknollers' political advocacy as emblematic of the changes that Vatican II had brought to the church, changes that they found deeply objectionable and antithetical to traditional Catholic values (552-553). These Catholics denounced O'Neill and the Maryknollers for their opposition to the Contras (not to mention for their support of Liberation Theology), which they viewed as enabling the spread of communism and thus threatening the survival of the church in Central America (547). Keeley notes that Contra supporters and the Reagan administration encouraged "faithful" Catholics to write letters to the editor and to Maryknoll Sisters directly, condemning them as traitors who allowed the persecution of Christians under the Sandinistas to go unchecked (553-556). She also argues that when Congress voted in June 1986 to provide aid to the Contras, several congressmen lambasted O'Neill for taking advice from the Maryknollers, "impl[y]ing that as women, they were ignorant about politics" and "the reality of Nicaragua" (556, 554). Keeley concludes by asserting that when the measure passed, "the United States bolstered one side in the intra-Catholic battle" and revealed the extent to which "the White House exploited Catholic divisions" to win support for its policies (558).

The article makes a compelling case that Contra supporters, including politically conservative Catholics and members of the Reagan administration, used gendered language and stereotypes to undermine the opposition to U.S.-Nicaragua policy. Such language infused the editorials, speeches, and political cartoons that Keeley

cites. It is less clear from the archival sources that Reagan waded into the intra-Catholic conflict deliberately. As such, Keeley is right to play up the role of Catholic advisors in formulating a strategy to discredit O'Neill and the Maryknoll nuns by calling the legitimacy of their religious practice into question. While doubts about O'Neill's masculinity and faith certainly did not drive decision-making in Congress, the gender and religious dynamics of the public relations campaign that the Reagan administration launched did shape some contours of the Congressional and public debate over Contra aid.

Keeley's analysis of the gendered language that the Reagan administration and Contra supporters used when discussing U.S.-Nicaragua relations builds on work by scholars such as Kristin Hoganson and Robert Dean on gender, foreign policy, and public opinion.<sup>1</sup> Yet by bringing gender into her discussion of the intra-Catholic conflict that exploded over U.S. policy in Central America and the direction of the Catholic church in the 1980s, she offers a new avenue for exploring how the Reagan administration instrumentalized religious groups—and their anxieties—to support his policy objectives. Beyond this, while there is considerable scholarship on gender and religion, as well as on gender and U.S. foreign relations, there is certainly room for more work of this type on the nexus of gender, religion, *and* U.S. foreign relations in the late twentieth century.

As for her contribution to our understanding of how religion shapes policymaking, early on in the article Keeley asserts that her “examination of intra-Catholic conflict in debates over U.S.-Nicaragua policy challenges scholarship that stresses evangelical Protestants’ influence on Reagan” (534). This overstates the case. Religious group influence on the President was not a zero sum game, and ample scholarship demonstrates that evangelical Protestants influenced Reagan on a range of policy issues.<sup>2</sup> Her article does serve as an important reminder that evangelicals were not the *only* influential religious interest group of the Reagan era. This is not so much a challenge to scholarship on evangelical political power as it is a welcome, valuable, and engaging addition to the literature on religion and U.S. foreign relations. To this end, Keeley also makes clear that in backing Contra aid and Reagan's policies in Nicaragua, conservative Catholics provided a powerful counterpoint to the more well-known peace activism of the Catholic left.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Kristin Hoganson, “Honor Comes First: The Imperatives of Manhood in the Congressional Debate over War,” in *Whose America? The War of 1898 and the Battle to Define the Nation*, edited by Virginia Marie Bouvier (Westport: Praeger, 2001), 123-146; Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012); Axel R. Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Stephen R. Rock, *Faith and Foreign Policy: The Views and Influence of U.S. Christians and Christian Organizations* (New York: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2011); Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998); William C. Martin, *With God On Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right In America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Timothy A. Byrnes, *Reverse Mission: Transnational Religious Communities and the Making of US Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2011).

**Lauren Turek** is an Assistant Professor of history at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Virginia. Her recent publications include “To Support a ‘Brother in Christ’: Evangelical Groups and U.S.-Guatemalan Relations during the Ríos Montt Regime,” *Diplomatic History* 39:4 (September 2015): 689-719 and “Religious Rhetoric and the Evolution of George W. Bush’s Political Philosophy,” *Journal of American Studies* 48:4 (November 2014): 975-998. She is currently working on a book manuscript that traces the emergence of evangelical Christian foreign policy lobbying groups in the United States and the influence these groups exerted on U.S. foreign relations and human rights policies from the 1970s onward.

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