Historians of American conservatism since World War II have often remarked on its highly visible Roman Catholic component, exemplified by William F. Buckley, Jr. and a host of contributors to National Review. Not only has a disproportionately number of self-defined conservative intellectuals since 1945 been Catholic, but there have also been a surprising number of converts who, in Patrick Allitt’s words, “found a special congruence between Catholicism and political conservatism.”

In the book before us, Allitt, a historian at Emory University, systematically examines the contribution of Catholic lay intellectuals to the development of the American conservative movement from the early days of the Cold War to the mid-1980s. It is a story, as he sees it, of “early unity and subsequent fragmentation.”

According to Allitt, in the early 1950s the Roman Catholic community in the United States was remarkably homogeneous, marked by clerical dominance, lay deference, and a relatively narrow spectrum of difference among those members of the faith who engaged in social commentary. A vigorous, deeply rooted ideology of anticommunism, patriotism, and opposition to secular liberalism united nearly all Catholics. According to Allitt, anticommunist nationalism (even unto McCarthyism) was away for many Catholicsto enter the American cultural mainstream and overcome residual Protestant suspicion of Rome.

From this point of departure Allitt turns to the multiplying impulses, issues, and controversies that, in the late 1950s and beyond, shaped the American Right and increasingly fractionated the Catholic Church. Growing battles between Catholic conservatives and liberals over the relationship between Christianity and capitalism; disputes about the magisterium of the Church on this and other issues; differences among Catholic intellectuals over the civil rights movement, the decolonization of Africa, and the Kennedy presidency; the trauma of aggiornamento and Vatican II; the Vietnam war; and the sexual revolution and Roe v. Wade: the list of divisive, even tornadic episodes is long, and the often agonized responses of Catholic intellectuals are explored with clarity.

By the 1980s, Allitt demonstrates, the monolithic, pre-Vatican II American church was gone, and Catholic intellectuals were all over the ideological map. Even the Catholic...
Right was sharply splintered, as once-dominant, National Review-style conservatism came under attack from ultraorthodox Catholics (such as L. Brent Bozell) and from certain Catholic traditionalists who disliked National Review’s anticommunist and pro-capitalist Americanism. Although Allitt does not emphasize the word, the ideology of National Review was always fusionist, seeing no ultimate cleavage between Christianity and capitalism, or between Christianity and American civilization. By the 1970s some Catholics on the Right had their doubts (or more than doubts) about the validity of this marriage.

It is a fascinating story. In recounting it, Allitt skillfully surveys the contributions not only of such familiar luminaries as Buckley, Bozell, John Lukacs, Michael Novak, Frederick Wilhelmsen, and Garry Wills, but also less familiar figures, including Ross Hoffman, Francis Wilson, John T. Noonan, E. Michael Jones, and many more. Along the way he rewards the reader with thoughtful observations. He emphasizes, for instance, how much Catholic conservatism since the 1950s has been a lay phenomenon, reflecting the emergence of a generation of educated and independent laity who “transformed U.S. Catholicism and participated in its pluralization, or fragmentation.” He duly notes the role of converts in invigorating and at times unsettling the Catholic Right. He shows how Catholic writers applied the church’s natural law teachings to perplexing issues, with ambiguous results. In two chapters of “parallel lives” (Lukacs/Molnar and Novak/Wills) he perceptively traces the very different odysseys of four distinguished Catholic intellectuals who, at one time or another, have been considered men of the Right. Collectively their intellectual journeys illustrate one of Allitt’s principal points: the loss of coherence in the American Catholic subculture.

Above all, Allitt documents the shattering impact of the 1960s and 1970s on Catholic conservatives and the church as a whole. From the Second Vatican Council to the Vietnam conflict to the great debate over abortion and contraception: in the span of less than two decades American Catholicism experienced a cultural cataclysm. Allitt’s chapter on Catholics and the sexual revolution is particularly illuminating.

Although one suspects that Allitt’s personal views are closer to Garry Wills than to Michael Novak (he is certainly more critical of Novak than of Wills), on the whole he keeps his biases to himself and relates his story impartially. His conceptual framework, however, raises some questions. He chooses to end his story in the mid-1980s. In part because of this, he says very little about the pontificate of John Paul II (1978-present) and the response of Catholic conservatives to his actions. Yet surely one of the important themes of the past fifteen years of Catholic history has been the attempt of the current Pope to rebuild his church after the hurricane of the 1960s. Allitt’s book would have benefited from an analysis of American conservative Catholics’ relationship to this counterrevolution.

More seriously, for most contemporary conservatives—Catholic and otherwise—the fundamental story of their movement since 1945 has been one of success, moving from obscure and marginalized beginnings to political prominence (though not cultural dominance) during the 1980s. If there has been a “conservative crackup,” as some allege, it occurred after 1985—after Reagan, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Allitt’s paradigm, as applied to American Catholicism, is different. His is an account, not of success, not of increasing cultural influence, but of what he calls “fragmentation”—a term he uses repeatedly.

How accurate is this perception? With respect to the Roman Catholic church itself, Allitt appears to be quite accurate. If 1950 is...
one’s starting point, then by the 1980s the Catholic church had undeniably suffered not only fragmentation (with the hierarchy becoming more liberal on some issues than the laity) but a considerable loss of authority as well. In the early 1980s, for instance (as Allitt points out), the Catholic bishops of the United States decided to promulgate pastoral letters on nuclear weapons and the economy. In the end, after much intramural sound and fury and critiques from Catholic conservatives led by Michael Novak, the bishops revised and issued their carefully wrought documents. According to Allitt the political effect was “negligible.” What the sociologist Robert Wuthnow has called “the restructuring of American religion” is true of Catholicism, too: the deepest fissures in Christianity today are not between denominations but within them, between Left and Right.

But is Allitt’s interpretive paradigm equally applicable to Catholic conservatism? Certainly by the 1980s the spectrum of opinion on the Catholic Right was more variegated than it had been a generation before. If the founding of National Review was in a sense the “big bang” for post-1945 Catholic conservatism, the velocity of events in the conservative universe since then has sent some fragments flying far from the center. Nevertheless, while American Catholicism has changed radically since 1950, Catholic conservatism’s resultant diversity can be misconstrued. Intellectually as well as institutionally, William F. Buckley, Jr., Michael Novak, and now Richard Neuhaus represent the “vital center” of contemporary Catholic conservatism. The idiosyncratic Garry Wills and various Catholic traditionalists do not.

Indeed, the most salient feature of the conservative religious firmament since the 1970s may not be “the fragmentation of Catholic conservatism.” Instead, it might be the increasing alliances between conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants in the “culture wars.” To his credit, several times Allitt alludes to this phenomenon, which emerged during the debate over abortion and has become still more pronounced since the time period covered by his book. One is reminded of the remarkable manifesto “Evangelicals & Catholics Together” published in the March 1994 issue of First Things. One thinks also of the following that the Roman Catholic William Bennett has won among politically active fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants. All this should remind us that life goes on and that the destructive legacy of the Sixties may not last forever. Whatever its political and cultural prospects, American conservatism—including its Catholic variant—may not be as internally fragmented as it sometimes appears to be.

This caveat aside, Patrick Allitt has written a valuable and informative book. All who wish to enrich their understanding of American Catholicism and American conservatism since World War II should read it. What is needed now is a comparable study of conservative Protestantism.