WASHINGTON, D.C. — In 1989, the Salvadoran Army murdered six Jesuits at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas in San Salvador. This tragedy roused the members of the Society of Jesus, four thousand of whom were US citizens, to exert their substantial influence on US policy regarding the war in El Salvador. This instance is not the only time that a Catholic order has played a significant role in US foreign policy. The Maryknoll sisters successfully swayed public opinion and the US government’s practices in Nicaragua in 1983, and Benedictine monks in Vermont have shaped more positive US-Mexican relations. In Timothy A. Byrnes’ new book, Reverse Mission, he investigates transnational religious communities and their impact on US foreign policy by delving into these three cases.

Based on years of fieldwork and on-the-ground interviews, Reverse Mission details how these US citizens who are also Jesuit priests, Maryknoll missioners, and Benedictine monastics engaged actively in a variety of political processes in order to protect and advance the interests of the transnational religious communities to which they belong. Byrnes finds that the ways in which the various orders went about influencing US politics were entirely consistent with structures and practices that defined the communities at their founding—Jesuits as an educational and institutional band of brothers, the Maryknoll sisters as missionaries who serve and accompany “their people,” and the Benedictines as an order dedicated to hospitality.

Peter J. Katzenstein, of Cornell University, praises “this gem of a book,” calling it, “elegantly structured, deeply researched, and beautifully written analysis.” He adds, “Byrnes develops highly original arguments and offers many fresh insights. He reminds us that, at its best, social science writing is intellectually riveting, politically consequential, and normatively engaged.” This provocative examination of Catholic orders in the US taking a strong interest in policies that affect their "brothers and sisters" abroad is a strong demonstration of the complex role that religion plays in world politics.

Timothy A. Byrnes is a professor of political science at Colgate University and the author or editor of several books including Catholic Bishops in American Politics and Transnational Catholicism in Postcommunist Europe.

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