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New Book Explores Role Of Catholic Church Throughout The World

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DURHAM, N.H. -- A new book co-edited and co-authored by Chris Reardon, associate professor of political science at the University of New Hampshire, examines the political, religious and diplomatic actions – both admirable and regrettable – of the Catholic Church that have profoundly shaped our world.

"The Catholic Church and the Nation-State" paints a rich portrait of a complex and paradoxical institution whose political role has varied historically and geographically. The collection of essays covers 16 countries and five continents. Among the scholars who have contributed pieces are Reardon, UNH assistant professors Alynna Lyon and Mary Malone, and professors Christine Kearney and Paul Manuel of St. Anselm College in Manchester. Manuel, professor of political science, and Clyde Wilcox, professor of government at Georgetown University, also are co-editors.

"The Catholic Church, from its origin, always has been a transnational actor and had a global presence in individual lives, within the nation-state and in collaboration with nonprofit institutions. This book is a testament to the enduring nature of religion, not only its importance in the United States but its great importance around the world," said Michele Dillon, professor of sociology at UNH who is an international expert about the Catholic Church in society.

The initial idea for the book was developed by scholars in response to ongoing problems of child sexual abuse in the American Catholic Church and pursued because of a general lack of academic study about the subject. "Before Sept. 11, there was very little discussion about religion and politics. After Sept. 11, people realized that religion does play a significant political role in society. Still, I was surprised that there had not been a major comparative study about the Catholic Church and its political role throughout the world," Reardon said.

With an in-depth exploration of the five primary challenges facing the church — theology and politics, secularization, the transition from serving as a nationalist voice of opposition, questions of justice, and accommodation to sometimes hostile civil authorities — the book demonstrates how national churches vary considerably in the emphasis of their teachings and in the scope and nature of their political involvement.

There are many recent instances, the contributors assert, where the church has acted as both a moral authority and a self-interested institution: in the United States it maintained unpopular moral positions on issues such as contraception and sexuality, yet at the same time it sought to cover up its own abuses; it was complicit in genocide in Rwanda but played an important role in ending the horrific civil war in Angola; and it has alternately embraced and

suppressed nationalism by acting as the voice of resistance against communism in Poland, whereas in Chile it once supported opposition to Pinochet but now aligns with rightist parties.

By demonstrating how national churches vary considerably in the emphasis of their teachings and in the scope and nature of their political involvement, the analyses presented in this book provide a deeper understanding of the role of the Catholic Church in the world.

"A book that astutely crosses the theology-political science divide to probe the relation between faith and culture. The authors capture multiple tensions and ambiguities as the Catholic Church faces challenges of secularization, nationalism and democracy across the globe," said Clarke E. Cochran, professor of political science at Texas Tech University.

The book was supported by the UNH Center for the Humanities and the NH Institute of Politics at St. Anselm College.