

Lutheran-to-Catholic thinker Neuhaus helped shape religious right: Died January 8 at age 72

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Richard John Neuhaus, an activist Lutheran minister who became a prominent Roman Catholic priest, is being remembered for his influential role in the rise of religious conservatism.

“From the early 1970s forward, Neuhaus was a key architect of two alliances with profound consequences for American politics, both of which overcame histories of mutual antagonism: one between conservative Catholics and Protestant evangelicals, and the other between free market neo-conservatives and ‘faith and values’ social conservatives,” wrote John L. Allen Jr., a senior correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*.

Neuhaus, 72, died January 8 of complications of cancer. He was best known in recent years as the editor of *First Things*, a journal published by the New York-based Institute on Religion and Public Life.

A Canadian who later became a U.S. citizen, Neuhaus was ordained a Lutheran minister in 1960. He became an activist cleric in a predominantly African-American neighborhood in Brooklyn.

During a period of tumult in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Neuhaus was allied with activist figures such as Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who, like Neuhaus, strongly opposed the Vietnam War. In that period Neuhaus frequently wrote for the *Christian Century*.

However, Neuhaus, who served in the theologically conservative Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, later broke with the religious and secular left on a number of issues, including abortion, and converted in 1990 to Catholicism, becoming a priest a year later.

“I was 30 years a Lutheran pastor, and after 30 years of asking myself why I was not a Roman Catholic, I finally ran out of answers that were convincing either to me or to others,” Neuhaus once said about his conversion and planned ordination as a priest.

Neuhaus became a critic of the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches and served on the board of the Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy, an advocacy group critical of those councils’ “liberal activism.”

He was an informal adviser to President George W. Bush on several issues, including stem cell research. “Father Neuhaus was an inspirational leader, admired theologian, and accomplished author who devoted his life to the service of the Almighty and to the betterment of our world,” Bush said January 8. “He was also a dear friend, and I have treasured his wise counsel and guidance.”

Bush also had Neuhaus to thank for forging religious conservatives—evangelicals, Catholics, Mormons and Jews—into a potent electoral coalition, said Damon Linker, a former *First Things* staffer whose book *Theocons* details Neuhaus’s influence.

In the 1990s, Neuhaus cofounded Evangelicals and Catholics Together with former Nixon White House counsel Charles Colson. The organization helped cement a political alliance between two major Christian groups that had long been suspicious of each other.

Republican ballot-box successes are often considered the crowning achievement of that coalition, which wed Catholic intellectualism and evangelical political savvy. After Paul Weyrich in December, Neuhaus was the second leading architect of the modern religious right to die as Bush’s tenure came to an end.

Throughout his Lutheran and Catholic ministry, the unmarried theologian was a prolific writer, arguing in books and essays for religion to play a robust role in American culture. His 1984 book, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, was “one of the most important, debate-changing books in the history of modern conservatism,” said Peter Wehner, a former Bush White House staffer.

Jim Martin, associate editor of the Jesuit magazine *America*, called Neuhaus “an intelligent, impassioned and articulate defender of Catholic orthodoxy, the editor of a superb intellectual journal, and arguably the leading voice in conservative Catholic circles in this country.” —*Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*