

Honorable Mention
Henderson Prize
For the Best Senior Thesis on a Law-Related Subject
2008

Jon di Cristina
“Blood It Defileth the Land:
Conservative Christianity and Capital Punishment in the United States”
Department of History

Jon di Cristina has written an elegant senior thesis, “Blood It Defileth the Land,” which weaves together diverse literatures to understand conservative religious mobilization around capital punishment in the United States. The thesis makes sense of the complicated relationships among conservatism, religion and law by reversing the usual understandings of their interconnection. Instead of arguing that religion has shaped American conservatism which then has put pressure on law (the usual view), di Cristina argues instead that American conservatism has profoundly shaped the religious commitments of both Catholics and evangelicals, and that this joint conservative enterprise has found a particularly effective target for expression in the campaign around capital punishment.

The thesis is extraordinary for the way in which it takes the theological arguments about capital punishment seriously, using scripture, papal bulls and the writings of Catholic theologians to understand the changing views of the Church on the subject of capital punishment. The thesis then cleverly pivots to examine the American Religious Right, including both Catholics and Protestant evangelicals in the mix, to show how conservative Catholics defied the new abolitionist Church teachings on the matter of capital punishment to align themselves instead with evangelical Protestants in a broader conservative movement determined to maintain the death penalty. Pivoting again, di Cristina then examines the wavering decisions of the US Supreme Court as it first abolished and then revived the death penalty, making it an easy object of political pressure. By the time the thesis ends, one has seen the way in which the changing values of the Catholic Church and the changing values of the US Supreme Court were assailed by Christian conservatives who were outraged that a moral subject so crucial could be rethought – and therefore relativized – at all.

Jon di Cristina is a talented writer, whose spare and graceful style removes a hot-button subject from the battle of the culture wars and places it firmly in a scholarly context where it can be examined without hysteria. His immense historical sympathies cast all characters in this drama as comprehensible and sincere; his understandings of the development of religious and constitutional ideas are deep and generous. The literatures consulted and mobilized here are as far-reaching in style and content as they are persuasively and sparely presented to their best advantage. This is a thesis written with maturity of style, scholarly sympathy for his subjects and unselfish sympathy for his readers. As one of his departmental readers observed, the thesis “does all of this with real grade and economy of style, with considerable learning and great clarity of thought and expression. It is, in short, an outstanding thesis.”