

1-1-2003

## Pope John Paul II: Prophetic Politician (book review)

Kevin P. Lee

*Campbell University School of Law*, leek@campbell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarship.law.campbell.edu/fac\\_pubs](http://scholarship.law.campbell.edu/fac_pubs)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kevin P. Lee, *Pope John Paul II: Prophetic Politician*, *J. Religion*, April 2003, at 274 (book review).

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Scholarly Repository @ Campbell University School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Other Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository @ Campbell University School of Law.

## The Journal of Religion

These minor blemishes notwithstanding, Robinson's book provides an excellent introduction to one of the most original mystics of the Christian tradition. An appendix includes three texts related to Marguerite's condemnation, followed by extensive notes and a bibliography.

PAUL LACHANCE, O.F.M., *Chicago Theological Union*.

FORMICOLA, JO RENEE. *Pope John Paul II, Prophetic Politician*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002. 227 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

The thought of John Paul II has been the object of serious academic study for nearly twenty-five years. Over that time the nature of the scholarship has changed significantly. Early on, in the 1980s, most of the scholarly writing focused on examining his personal background and roughing out the thought of the new pontiff. Later, as his pontificate made distinct contributions to Catholic thought and geopolitics, the scholarly commentaries shifted to more detailed examinations of the pope's teachings and speculations about his agendas. This second period of John Paul II scholarship continues but is giving way to a third phase focused on assessing the legacy of John Paul II. This third phase is exemplified in fine works like George Weigel's massive biography, *Witness to Hope* (New York, 1999), Jarosaw Kupczak's *Destined for Liberty: The Human Person in the Philosophy of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II* (Washington, D.C., 2000), a detailed study of the young Karol Wojtyla's phenomenological personalism, and Kevin P. Doran's *Solidarity: A Synthesis of Personalism and Communalism in the Thought of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II* (New York, 1996), a study of his social teaching. To this growing list, Jo Renee Formicola's *Pope John Paul II, Prophetic Politician* must now be added.

In the book's seven chapters, Formicola examines "the interrelationship between John Paul's religious ideas and political practices." (p. 4) She sees in him a "prophetic politician," by which she means one for whom political activity must always be oriented toward transcendent values. Like Moses, the prophetic politician brings divine criticism of earthly politics. The prophetic politics of John Paul is theologically grounded in the irreducible dignity of the person as the bearer of the *imago dei*. It is therefore global, seeking to bring all persons within its scope. And it is nonideological, focused on reconciliation and religious engagement rather than the ideals of the political right or left.

The first chapter offers a brief but insightful discussion of the personal background of the pope, and his first-hand experience of the two largest formulations of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, Nazi Fascism and Soviet Communism.

Chapter 2 examines John Paul II's understanding of the traditional values of the Roman Catholic Church, focusing on early encyclicals, especially *Laborem Exercens*. The chapter contains a brief critique of the role of women as understood by the pope. Unfortunately, Formicola does not provide much depth in her analysis of issues, such as a critical engagement with the rationale for the Holy See's rejection of the outcome of the Beijing Conference on Women or the steadfast reservation of ordination for men in the Apostolic Letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.

The third chapter illustrates prophetic politics in action, presenting the pope's active concern with specific parts of the world, in particular Africa, Latin America, and the Philippines. Formicola uses the term "militant evangelization" to describe the pontiff's active preaching style, which she views as "a type of fearless preaching designed to advance transcendent values such as human rights, social justice and economic advancement" (p. 91). Although one might question the use of the

word "militant" here, she is correct to point out the significance of the pontiff's rhetorical skill and charisma for the success of his pontificate.

Chapter 4 treats John Paul II's social teaching on economics, setting out the conception of a market system that pays due respect to the dignity of the person. Neither communism nor unfettered capitalism can do this, and so the pope's approach to economics for the post-cold war era suggests a "third-way." Formicola is thus rightly critical of those who would read *Centesimus Annus* as a "cataclysmic" endorsement of free-market capitalism (pp. 123–25). Formicola rightly argues that the pope sees a form of well-regulated, limited capitalism as "authentic" or "genuine."

The final three chapters are more synthetic. The fifth chapter details some of the political successes of the pontiff, focusing primarily on Israel and Cuba. This is followed with a more speculative chapter 6 about likely challenges for the Church and prophetic politics in the near future. Unfortunately, this sixth chapter deals primarily with China and Russia but does not speculate on the future of America's war on terrorism. Finally, in chapter 7, Formicola speculates that the legacy of John Paul II's papacy will be a change in the perception of the Church's role in global affairs.

Formicola's work is a welcome addition to the burgeoning scholarship on the life and thought of this remarkable pope. I found Formicola to be at her best when explicating the nature of John Paul's prophetic politics, and the significance of his life and thought for the geopolitics of the late twentieth century. But the book falls short at times by covering complex and subtle aspects of John Paul's thought with brief overviews and passing glances. (This is most notable in its scant treatment of his philosophy of phenomenological personalism.) Still, it provides a fine introduction to John Paul II's thought, and the bibliography seems particularly useful.

KEVIN P. LEE, *Chicago, Illinois*.

LAYMAN, GEOFFREY. *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics. Power, Conflict and Democracy: American Politics into the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. xiii+435 pp. \$49.50 (cloth); \$22.50 (paper).

Since the publication of Robert Wuthnow's *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J., 1988) and James Dawson Hunter's *Culture Wars* (New York, 1991), a sizable literature has developed investigating whether and to what extent contemporary U.S. society is indeed divided between two warring camps holding fundamentally divergent and conflicting worldviews. In the most recent contribution to this growing literature, *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics*, Geoffrey Layman investigates the influence of the so-called progressivist-orthodox cultural divide on U.S. electoral politics. In so doing, he engages the culture wars thesis in several important respects. For one, Layman challenges Hunter's assertion that "the contemporary cultural cleavage makes 'the distinctions that long divided Americans—those between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—virtually irrelevant'" (p. 12). He argues instead that traditional "ethno-religious" differences are still influential in determining political practices.

Therefore, when it comes to explaining one's political predilections, whether one has orthodox versus progressivist leanings does not now supersede in importance whether one is, for example, a working-class Catholic or an African-American Protestant. Layman puts forth what is, in essence, a synthesis of the

