

Fall 9-1-2003

Author's Response (Review Symposium on the Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church by Paul Lakeland)

Paul F. Lakeland
Fairfield University, pflakeland@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs>

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Lakeland, Paul F., "Author's Response (Review Symposium on the Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church by Paul Lakeland)" (2003). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 57.
<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs/57>

Published Citation

Lakeland, Paul F. "Author's Response (Review Symposium on the Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church by Paul Lakeland)." *Horizons* 30.2 (Fall 2003): 312-318.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

altar (of lay “ministers”) lest the people get confused about who is really in charge here (clerics). Even if a significant number of Catholic laity were motivated to find their voices by reading Lakeland’s enticing volume, and if they were organized in communities of discernment, would it matter? As Lakeland says, an “extraordinarily long-lived culture of lay passivity will be difficult to overcome” (216). But, ecclesiastical defiance is the *pièce de résistance* here. Remember the 1987 Roman Synod on the laity? Two hundred thousand laypeople involved in consultations for a meeting in which nothing happened? About that event in 1987, the editors of *Commonweal* said: it “looked for all the world like one of those cardboard congresses periodically called for by one-party dictatorships to devise filigree of verbiage around decisions made behind the scenes by others” (quoted 125). If this kind of clerical resistance is a recurring theme (consultations in the late 1960s led nowhere, the issues raised by Call to Action of 1976 were ignored), as I think it is, why should the laity care enough to try again?

Indiana University

MARY JO WEAVER

AUTHOR’S RESPONSE

Dorothy Day’s predilection for what she called “clarification of thought” is instructive for us all. None of us possesses the whole truth, and surely none of us can solve this or that problem—theological or any other—alone. Thought is clarified not through the lone voice, however insightful or prophetic, but through the communal discernment that occurs through sharing our ideas with one another, testing them out, submitting to strong and sincere criticism, receiving and responding in a generous spirit. I want, then, warmly to thank my four interlocutors for their careful and generous evaluation of my book. In most instances, as I shall shortly make clear in some detail, they have identified issues of concern that have already occurred to me. No one knows the weaknesses of a book better than its author. Consequently, their remarks have done me the greatest service by forcing me to confront my own authorial decisions, and to revisit the issues they involved. I hope their comments and my responses help to further what I am sure we all believe to be an important dialogue.

As Dennis Doyle so accurately suggests, my book falls somewhere between an academic study and a manifesto. I could not be more in agreement with him on this point, though I am less uncomfortable with this situation than he is. I would want to say that the character of the book is dictated by the nature of the problem it addresses. In any case, I think that a contemporary venture in ecclesiology cannot begin until

we sort out the proper relationship between what we have traditionally called clergy and laity. Otherwise, our thinking about the church will have piecemeal value at best, and at worst be a simple reflection of our many dysfunctionalities. My conviction then is that we need to attend to what it is to be a Christian, what it is to be baptized into the church. This, in modern parlance, is the default mode. When we approach the church in this way, all of us are called to be holy, priestly and apostolic. *Lumen Gentium* has said no less. But the teaching of Vatican II enters a church marked by its history, and while the theological vision is intended as a corrective to the errors that have crept in over the centuries, the sedimentation of those errors in the institution means that a process of cleansing and reformation is necessary if we are to hear the words of the Council fathers clearly.

The first half of my book is an effort to sketch a history of the theological fortunes of the laity in the church. Doyle sees the early pages as an effort to characterize the lay/clergy distinction as one that is inessential, historically-contingent, that “the church of today is free to revise” or “to do away with.” I am sure that the brevity of my discussion of the early church—for which I think I can be justly criticized—has contributed to this perception, and I welcome the opportunity to clarify my position. In sorting through the views of Yves Congar, Alexandre Faivre and Ignace de la Potterie on the meaning of “lay” and “clergy” in the early centuries of the church, one encounters some differences. But there is also considerable common ground. While de la Potterie, unlike the other two, thinks that the term “lay” may have been used to identify a class of people within the church who did not exercise ministerial leadership, all three would agree that laity and clergy were not at first understood to be in a hierarchical relationship with one another, not of power, nor of virtue, nor of worth. The importance of this insight is to throw into sharp relief the subsequent development of a negative definition of laity. And while a definition of laity as not clergy and not monks is not in itself inaccurate, it does not actually say anything about what the laity *are*. Which is where the problems begin.

Doyle has raised the more important issue, however, which is whether or not the historical judgment that the lay/clergy distinction only developed over time means that it is not an essential distinction in the church, and thus can be dispensed with at the will of the appropriate authorities. The answer to this really depends on whether we understand the lay/clergy distinction *as it has developed in the church* as essential to the apostolicity of the church. In my view, following Congar’s modifications of his earlier and less cogent views, the establishment of the leadership of the apostles does not precede the calling of the larger group, but is more or less coincident with calling that

larger group. Thus, apostolic leadership, which for us means the development of the episcopacy which is its true descendent, is a given in the church. No bishops, no church. Other clerical ministerial roles in the church, which means priesthood and diaconate, are venerable and perhaps should never be dispensed with, but they do not share the same theological status as that of the episcopacy. I certainly have difficulty imagining the church without them. But I have no difficulty at all—and this may be where Doyle's problems with my position come from—in imagining them completely freed from what I am convinced are historically contingent issues like the gender of the priest, celibacy or, for that matter, sexual orientation.

To return to the suggestion that I have fallen between two stools, that of a measured theological treatment of my subject and that of a call to arms, it is my view that in this matter the two are inseparable. A careful theological assessment of the place of the laity in the church's life and theological reflection, which I have tried to provide in the first half of the book, suggests the need for major reforms in the way in which the laity live out their baptismal vocations. Lay unrest requires theological justification. Theology without consequences is sterile: action without theology is directionless. But in this particular case the theological examination of the status of the laity leads to conclusions which the current structures of the church do not allow for. Lay voice, lay leadership, lay initiative and lay concern have no institutional home in the current church, have no structures through which they can be legitimately exercised. The only conclusion is then that something about the structures must change. Most people in the church arrive at this kind of conclusion, if they do at all, out of a sense of dissatisfaction, or anger at the current crisis, or a mixture of both. All I am trying to show in the first half of the book is that it is equally possible to arrive at similar conclusions by subjecting the history of a theology of the laity to serious scrutiny. Calls for a greater role for laity in the church can then be identified with a little more confidence as the voice of the Spirit. If this makes my book a manifesto, I plead guilty.

Dennis Doyle recognizes some value in my book, but his overall judgment is that it is "one-sided and polarizing." He thinks I cannot make my mind up whether to be a theologian or a polemicist. And he asks, "does not the current crisis in the church call for solutions that move us beyond left-right dichotomies rather than exaggerate them?" I think it is pretty clear that we would all want to say a resounding "yes!" to this question. The church is not in need of factions, and of the oversimplifications that inevitably accompany overheated responses to real but complex problems. And there is no question that my own

beliefs about a host of ecclesial issues would have to be classified as liberal rather than conservative. I certainly want unity and reconciliation in the church, but am I guilty, however unwittingly, of exacerbating the very problem I set out to solve? It is certainly possible.

I suppose I would have to say that the way in which we can move beyond left/right dichotomies is not by imagining that differences do not exist, nor by assuming that a centrist position is always the correct one, so much as by providing the space in which more conservative and more liberal points of view can be exchanged. Through dialogue, thought is clarified. Of course, many liberals simply dismiss their more conservative counterparts, and vice-versa. This is never helpful and often harmful. It would happen less often if there were a public space in the church in which differences could be aired. Sectors of the church may not be ready for this, as Cardinal Bernardin discovered in launching his Common Ground Initiative. But we are currently caught in a classic "Catch-22." No greater role for the laity in the church will be forthcoming until structures are created which make that role possible. But no such structures seem likely to be created until laity have more of a say in the life of their church.

Three of my four colleagues seem to have problems, greater or smaller, with my discussion of "secularity." I am not surprised at this, and I readily grant that there is much more to be said here to unpack the picture. Given the way that this part of the argument seems to be a flash-point for criticism (and not only with the present reviewers), it could no doubt have been done with more clarity. For example, when Doyle comments that I make the claim that the secular world is "the only world there is," he is surely correct that I say that, but I certainly did not want to imply that the secular world is the only reality there is. Nowhere would I wish to collapse God into the world. Susan Ross asks about the same chapter of the book, whether or not there is a conflict between my vision of secularity and any notion of transcendence. And, if there is, how can that allow for a continuing value for symbols, or for the kinds of traditional devotions that she rightly says I am at pains to preserve. And Bradford Hinze makes his most challenging point with reference to just the same issue. Hinze thinks that my theology of secularity may be an over-correction that strengthens the unconditionality of the world and the call for human freedom at the price of any space for the working of divine grace. Then, he wonders, what happens to the strength that comes from this grace to fund worship, service and "even work for justice in the world."

My theology of secularity is not intended to reduce Christian life to ethics, nor to substitute a stiff-necked or stoical Pelagianism for an

openness to the mystery and the grace of God. My concern is not to reduce or eliminate transcendence, but to elevate the theological status of the world. In the language of the nascent twentieth-century theology of the laity, even in the early work of Congar, the theological emphasis on the secularity of the laity cannot have any other effect than to put the world down. The clergy, by contrast, are distinguished by their attention to the life beyond. Thus, we are left to draw no other conclusion than that this life is less important than the life to come, this life is in the end merely instrumental to transcendence. It is as if we have left behind the pre-modern living within the mystery of God, only to fall into the hands of the Enlightenment bifurcation of the secular and the religious. In my opinion, a dualism of transcendence and immanence is the moment of demythologization, perhaps a necessary antithesis to the pre-modern world's lack of space for genuine human freedom. My thoughts about secularity are most emphatically not a celebration of the uncoupling of human life from reference to God, but an attempt—however haltingly and poorly expressed—to find a second naïveté for our postmodern context and the church that must proclaim the gospel within it. Traditionally, theological thinking interprets the world as an instrument in the divine plan, whether as the place in which human beings must work out their salvation, or as that which must be redeemed. I am simply trying to explore what would happen if we reverse the process, and make worldly reality the lens through which we discern the plan of God.

Perhaps our theological problem begins with the error of thinking that Scripture tells us more about God than it does. Obviously, the Bible is not about God but about God's activity in the world. God creates a world. God creates human beings to be in the world. The sin of Adam and Eve does not lead to their expulsion from Heaven into the world, but from the Garden of Eden, a place already in the world. Nothing in Genesis, it seems to me, says the world is changed because of Adam and Eve. But they are changed, in the sense that the presence of God, while continuing to be real, is occluded, and the human race must find its way back to God. The fact of sin means that we cannot find our own way back. We need the help of God, given above all, perhaps, in the capacity even of fallen humanity to recognize mystery. Is it not the case that this is a matter of being open to the occluded presence of God, and is such a notion not in fact as good a definition of faith as we might come upon? Faith in the Resurrection, for example, is faith in a powerful act of God that occurs within the world. Jesus is not raised beyond the world, but raised in the world. The resurrected Jesus is a symbol, if I may respond directly to Ross here, but not of the subordination of earthly reality to supernatural reality. He is a symbol of the

power of God to transform earthly existence. Christian faith in the Resurrection is faith in the living presence of the resurrected Christ in the world, testimony to the power of God to transform human life.

Much of the debate that my discussion of secularity seems to have occasioned stems from the phrase, “the unconditionality of the human.” It certainly sounds, out of context, like a denial of transcendence, and there may be better ways to say the same thing. But the idea grows out of a discussion of the work of William Lynch, and depends on a clear distinction between the figure of Prometheus and the ideology of Prometheanism. The latter is an assertion that the worldly is all there is. The former, in the thought of Lynch at least, is a recognition that the worldly is what God has given us to work with. There is a real convergence between God’s gift of the world, Nietzsche’s advice to “be faithful to the earth,” and Ignatius of Loyola’s insistence that we should act as if everything depends upon us, but pray as if everything depends upon God. Nietzsche would not like it, but a Christian rephrasing of Zarathustra’s words might be, “be faithful to the gift, and you will be faithful to the giver.”

Ross also challenges me on the excessively anthropocentric focus of “the unconditionality of the human.” She is absolutely right. Though, I plead at once, this is an unintentional error. What I should have made clear is that “the truly human” can only be understood by the kind of meditation on what it means to be at home in the world that leads quickly to the recognition of the interdependence of all living things—indeed, to the far greater dependence of the “higher” upon the “lower” life forms. But even if I had been clearer on this point, there is a deeper insight in Ross’s challenge. Stress the interdependence all you like, be as ecologically sensitive as you like, if one understands the world fundamentally as God’s gift, does this not, however subtly, make the rest of creation the instrument of human enjoyment of the gift? Pursuing this would rapidly get us into deep waters. I think this question of anthropocentricity is a serious one. In the end it seems to me, if we can get beyond God in Genesis clearly providing the world as a place for human beings, we should focus on the gratuity of the gift. The world is God’s gift to itself. Existence is purely gratuitous—why is there something rather than nothing? Just because the giver gave! But the gift is appreciated in different ways, according to the nature of the recipient. The world gives glory to God, though most of the world does not know that it does so, simply by being itself. Human consciousness means openness to the awareness that the world is gift, and of course the capacity to problematize the gift. Moreover, the human tendency to think anthropocentrically is certainly at the heart of the ecological crisis. The theological challenge for human beings is to reject the notion

that God gives us the world, and to replace it with the idea that God gives us life as part of the entire living organism of creation. Surely the stars in the sky should tell us that much. But then, maybe we have to recognize that redemption is for us alone. We are the only part of the world that is fallen. The heavens continue to proclaim the glory of God. And will still be doing so, even if humanity's own self-destructive behavior removes us entirely from the scene.

Mary Jo Weaver offers me a different kind of challenge. Like Ross's final point, it comes down to a question about my "optimism." Weaver does not see that the laity, not even the young, have the will to make the necessary changes in the church. Even if all my proposals for renewal in church life were implemented, it would not matter because so many of the laity would remain passive and the institutional church would outfox us anyway. Ross, in similar vein, thinks that imagination, energy and focus may be missing in the church, and that consumerism may overwhelm the necessary counter-cultural and prophetic edge.

Well, this is a pretty kettle of fish! On the one hand I am perhaps justifiably criticized for at least seeming to put too much in the hands of human beings and not leaving enough for God to do, and then I am told that it is not going to work! Of course it will not work, if we just look at the long sorry story of human effort. Is it disingenuous of me to respond simply that I am not optimistic but I am hopeful? To argue that meditation on the unconditionality of the human brings new meaning to the divine assertion that "my grace is enough for you"? To suggest that the atheistic critics were right when they pointed out that dualistic thought leads to the subordination and alienation of the human? To propose that apathy and despair come from not taking up the human task, not from finding it too much to ask? To insist that the Spirit of God is within us, and that faith in human possibility is part of taking the gift of God seriously? I hope not, if only because loss of confidence in the human capacity to deal with the problems of the world is not the prelude to trusting in God, but the prelude to despair.

Fairfield University

PAUL LAKELAND