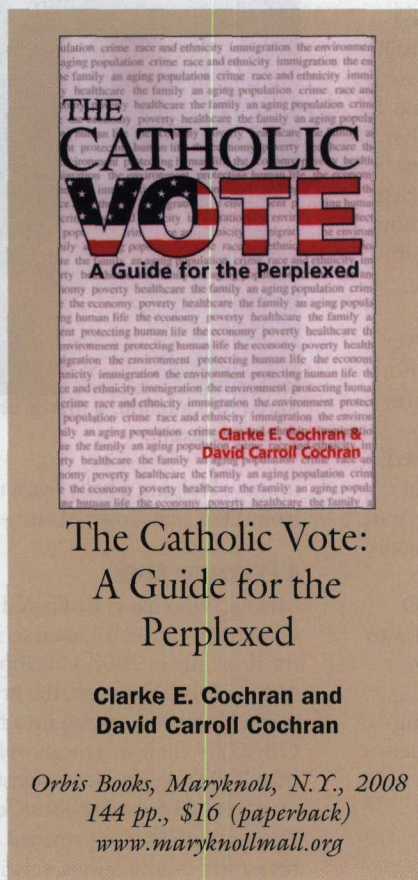


BOOK Review

As the authors acknowledge in explaining their subtitle, borrowed from Moses Maimonides, relieving people's perplexity is never a simple task. The difficulty is compounded when you are dealing with religion and politics, two topics that defy simple answers but never lack for attention. Clarke and David Cochran are smart, informed and well-intentioned. Yet, they have produced a book that illustrates just how hard it is to come to some sense of how we should apply our faith to current politics. Their convictions about Catholic social teaching motivate them, rightly, to offer a book that is descriptive, even-handed and educational on one hand, but normative, prophetic and aspirational on the other. The result is a book with many valuable pieces that do not always fit comfortably together under one cover.

The book attempts to offer a handy guide to Catholic voters, who will be evaluating candidates in the coming elections in terms of Catholic social teaching. The authors reprise their 2003 arguments in *Catholics, Politics, and Public Policy: Beyond Left and Right* that the Catholic position on many contemporary social issues cuts across right-left distinctions. While the Republicans have been better on abortion, stem cell research and same-sex marriage, Democrats have held positions closer to Catholic social teaching on capital punishment, immigration and charity to the poor. The authors argue that no single issue should be dispositive, given the integrated nature of Catholic teaching with its respect for life and concern for the poor and oppressed.

Following the work of scholars of the influence of religion on voting patterns such as Corwin Smidt, David Legee and Andrew Kohut, the Cochrans argue that no easily defined "Catholic vote" exists. Looking at the history of Catholic voting trends shows some movement in the 1980s from Democratic presidential candidates to Republicans among frequent churchgoers, but



The Catholic Vote: A Guide for the Perplexed

Clarke E. Cochran and
David Carroll Cochran

Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y., 2008
144 pp., \$16 (paperback)
www.maryknollmall.org

does not represent a major realignment.

Then, the authors offer a summary of current Catholic teaching on specific social issues such as health care, education, the elderly, immigration, race and the environment. These topics and many others are each briefly discussed, relying on church documents from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops or papal statements. A useful bibliography of church documents and other secondary sources is provided.

The final two chapters of the book move toward the aspirational. They urge Catholics to look at all the issues, not simply one or two, and to see those issues in the broader political and theological context. They present the notions of prudential judgment, choosing the lesser of two evils, and compromising to achieve incremental improve-

ments as necessary elements of our democratic polity. They conclude with the hope that Catholics might play more of a prophetic role in American society. Rightly, they urge Catholics to be aware of how they may be co-opted by political operatives of either party: "As one of the few sophisticated and comprehensive traditions of social reflection not hostage to either the left or the right . . . [the Catholic tradition] can speak to issues and their connections to each other in different ways, opening up new and promising political possibilities."

With increasing dissatisfaction — especially among the young — with politics as usual, this is a hopeful and rousing call to action. Catholics of conservative or liberal persuasions could not but hope that this could be so. But there remain several problems with this approach.

First, in both their discussions of specific issues and in their overall appeal for a more prophetic Catholic presence, one cannot but see the authors' preferences. Clearly, they are arguing with conservative groups that stress abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and same sex marriage and who urge Catholics to vote against Democratic candidates on the basis of their positions on those issues. When presenting abortion, for example, the authors lump it unfailingly with the death penalty. It is a tendentious move — although with theological justification — that ignores the very many differences between those issues. Another example would be the authors' position against withholding Communion to politicians supporting abortion, not without reason, but certainly intended to counter the right. Likewise, their dismissal of President George W. Bush's faith-based initiative as a mere "campaign tactic" is baseless, and their castigation of the war in Iraq reads like a quotation from Moveon.org. Quickly one detects many of the attitudes that since the days of *A Call to Action* have alienated some Catholics who reject the

left's critique of American policy and values. They have fought the left — in Europe, Latin America, and the United States — on issues like the moral character of capitalism, and the role of America in the world.

Nevertheless, what the Cochrans aspire to in this book should not be dismissed as partisan or abandoned because of its difficulty. Perhaps what the authors describe as the unrealized capacity of Catholicism to transform our culture is a function of the complexity of the political and social reality. Ideas in a democracy always must attain popular status to become policy. The values of modern democratic states cannot be expected to comport neatly with those of the church. We are locked in a battle not simply with members of the opposing political party but with institutional evil and with the failings of our nature.

Perhaps we must resist the urge for the total vindication of our values and hopes. Maybe pluralism condemns us to partial answers. Some will always disagree, sometimes for reasons we cannot appreciate. Then, we are left with the tension between justice and charity and with the perplexity it evokes.

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