Thomas R. Rourke

The Roots of Pope Francis's Social and Political Thought: From Argentina to the Vatican. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. Pp. viii + 221. Hb, \$80.

Thomas Rourke, the author of a volume on the intellectual background of Pope Benedict XVI (*Social and Political Thought of Benedict XVI* [Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010]), here turns his attention to Pope Francis, to the ways in which he was influenced by medieval theology, Jesuit history, Argentinian culture, the writings of Romano Guardini, and many other sources, to bring him to the set of ideas and principles with which even after a few short years the Catholic community has become quite familiar. Francis, however, is not Benedict. It is one thing to explore the intellectual roots of a distinguished theologian who has authored many books. It is something else altogether to go looking for where a profoundly pastoral man who is not an academic can be said to have discovered the set of ideas that have influenced if not guided his teaching as pope. It could be a temptation to go more deeply into the ideas that supposedly influenced him than the evidence actually warrants. Like explaining a joke, it might even take all the fun out of this papacy. Rourke has not fallen headlong into this trap, but nor has he entirely escaped it.

Rourke is at his best in the chapter on culture, where he rightly emphasizes the degree to which Bergoglio and now Francis favors a grassroots approach, eschewing attention to abstract theories and putting his faith in the common people and popular religion. There is also a good account in two chapters on the historical-theological roots of the rise of liberation theology and the emergence of a peculiarly Argentinian form of this phenomenon which is often known as “the theology of the people.” In fact, there seems to be little difference between the two forms, except that in the Argentinian variety there is an allergic reaction to the name Karl Marx, perhaps stemming in part from the authoritarian if not fascist governments of Argentina in the sixties and seventies, and perhaps from an overestimate of the amount of Marxist theory upon which liberation theology actually depended. Nevertheless, these are competent summaries, though they do not contain much information that is not already available in previous books on Pope Francis, particular Austin Ivereigh’s *The Great Reformer* (New York: Picador, 2015), Paul Vallely’s *Pope Francis: The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), and Elizabeth Piqué’s *Pope Francis: Life and Revolution* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014).

While Rourke correctly recognizes that Francis is suspicious of abstract theories or ideologies, he surprisingly spends a good deal of time exploring and explaining what he takes to be the influence of Suárezian political economy on

the pope—a fairly arcane consideration—and the negative impact of Calvinism before concluding that “evangelization through inculturation” is Francis’s fundamental orientation. This leads Rourke into quite a one-sided consideration of the importance of the the famous Jesuit reductions of Latin America, and their impact on Francis. They respected the actual life of the people, says Rourke, only to be swept away by the abstract ideologies of the Bourbon colonizers. Well, maybe, but there are some postcolonial critics of the missions who might offer a more nuanced picture. They do not get a look in here. And a considerable number of scholars, among them Catholics, would not share Rourke’s shockingly ungenerous reading of Calvinism. Calvinism, he states, “separated the heart from head,” it “imposed a religious discipline hostile to all that was rooted in human sentiments” and the church fades to abstraction. The Ignatian perspective, says Rourke, was “needed to ward off the destructive impacts of enlightened rationalism and Calvinism, which fragmented the religious and social unity of the people in order to impose a hegemonic and absolutist vision” (101–2). Such strong claims, and yet the index curiously makes no mention of Calvinism, the Reformation or even Protestantism. While the controversial tenor of the times in which Ignatius wrote might have accommodated this kind of rhetoric, any implication that Francis himself would subscribe to such openly anti-ecumenical sentiments in our day and age is simply laughable. There is also some editorial carelessness in the irritatingly frequent repetition of the information that the then Cardinal Bergoglio was the principle redactor of the final document produced by the Latin American Bishops’ Conference after their 2007 meeting in Aparecida, Brazil (4, 71, 81, 87, 102, 105). While we might ascribe this to sloppy copy-editing of a text written in haste, the same cannot be said of Rourke’s occasional lapse of quoting Aparecida as if the document is a product of Bergoglio alone rather than the bishops’ conference, an implication that one would imagine would horrify Francis.

If the title of Rourke’s book is accurate, we should expect to find the chapters on culture, politics, and economics to be the most fulfilling. However, while they are worthy summaries of Bergoglio’s probable inspiration in these areas, they may be too detailed and they are certainly too dry to hold the attention of anyone other than a specialist. And here is perhaps the heart of my unease with this book. For all the information it contains, even if we ignore the fact that much of it is already available in other frankly more readable books, it seems unsure of its audience. The early chapters appeal to a more popular readership than would be satisfied by the later discussions of politics and economics. The audience for the second half of the book already knows the general picture laid out in the first part, while those who might be engaged by the

earlier chapters will be frustrated, if not bored, by the extent of the detail at one remove from the attractive subject of the book. While there are undoubtedly some people who will be aided by Rourke in exploring where Francis's ideas came from, the vast majority will not and maybe do not need to pass beyond the strength of the pope's personality and the vitality of the ideas that, wherever they originated, are clearly marked as his own. All this "intellectual background" is in danger of overwhelming the real originality of the present papacy.

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