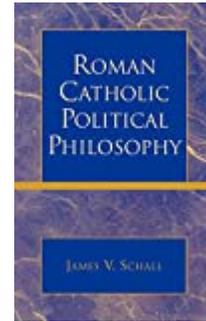




**James V. Schall.** *Roman Catholic Political Philosophy.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. xx + 209 pp. \$68.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0745-4.



**Reviewed by** William Byrne (Department of Government and Politics, St. John's University, New York)

**Published on** H-Catholic (July, 2007)

### Political Philosophy, Revelation, and Modernity

There is a real need for a book on Roman Catholic political philosophy. The Catholic tradition has generally placed a great premium on philosophical study, including political philosophy. There are many Catholic political philosophers, some of whom are quite explicit in their efforts to integrate their understanding of Christian revelation into their work. However, it remains difficult to say just what "Roman Catholic political philosophy" is, or to identify the precise characteristics (other than perhaps authorship) which distinguish any particular political-philosophical thought as Roman Catholic.

One of the most fitting authors for a book entitled *Roman Catholic Political Philosophy* would certainly be James Schall. A fixture of Georgetown's Department of Government, and a prolific writer for decades on matters of both political philosophy and religion, Fr. Schall is without question one of the most well-known and respected Catholic political philosophers in America. His more recent books often take the form of long reflective essays, or a series of linked reflective essays; this one is no exception. The present book makes for an illuminating and inspiring read. However, despite its title, it is

not *the* book on Catholic political philosophy; that book remains to be written, if indeed it can be.

Fr. Schall makes clear what this book is not. It is not a book "on what is called 'the social doctrines of the Church'" (p. xiii). Nor is it an effort to reconcile Catholicism with any particular strain of modern political thought, or to explain which regime types are most compatible with Catholic thought. Notably, it is also not "a history or summary of the views of classic or modern Catholic thinkers on politics"; nor is it a book "on comparative religion or philosophy" in a political context (pp. xii-xiii). While each of these topics would, at a minimum, require a sizable book of its own, greater incorporation of at least some of this material would help to justify this book's title. Nevertheless, it should be appreciated for what it is.

The book's actual subject is a very important one. It is political philosophy itself, in relation to the Roman Catholic account of revelation. This work is "a relaxed, literate 'attempt' to present from various angles a rarely heard argument about how the highest things of philosophy, politics, and revelation relate to each other" (p.

xiii). Schall's explorations are indeed literate, and go beyond political philosophy narrowly construed to take in broadly the relationship between reason and revelation. To Schall, political philosophy provides a context in which to illuminate and develop some of the themes of *Fides et Ratio*. It is a sort of nexus at which the relationships of reason and revelation, and of philosophy and faith, play out.

The distinction between political and religious concerns, though important to recognize, is not as great as is supposed by many—especially by modern secularists, who tend to compartmentalize religion when they think of it at all. For one thing, every person, no matter how oriented toward revelation, must live in the world, and cannot wholly escape political matters or the concerns of the social sciences. Moreover, because politics does not represent humankind's ultimate end, good political philosophy must point beyond itself, and the good state must point beyond itself. A point central to Schall, and in his view a key mark of Roman Catholic political philosophy, is this recognition that “the ultimate destiny of each human being, the political animal, is not located in politics” (p. 158). Following Eric Voegelin, Schall recognizes the rise of ideology, and then the exhaustion of ideology, as symptoms of modern society's failure to recognize this basic reality. In closing itself to revelation and rejecting metaphysics, politics becomes its own monstrous metaphysics. Paralleling the phenomenon of political modernity is modern philosophy's hubristic tendency to identify the wholeness of reality with what is knowable through philosophy's methods. We neglect the vital role of revelation at our peril.

Negotiating the relationship between revelation and reason, or between the things of God and things of Caesar, is not easy. Openness to revelation does not, of course, imply some sort of biblically driven public policy in the crude sense; indeed, care must be taken not to put religion in service to a political ideology. Schall explains, “revelation â} does not directly teach us about tax policy.... But it does indicate the immense importance of each human being” and gives us some sense of the meaning of the world (p. 76). This does not make political philosophy unimportant; it has its own extremely

important (but not completely independent) sphere, and is in need of greater attention. In particular, those with a religious orientation must pay more attention to political philosophy—and, ideally, those already engaged in political philosophy must become more open to revelation—since, “indirectly, revelation has the effect of confirming or strengthening philosophy and political philosophy by providing answers that, when sorted out, make philosophy to be more philosophic and politics to be more 'politic'” (p. 179).

In his reflections Schall draws not only upon key Catholic Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Aquinas, and John Paul II, but on a great variety of other classic and modern sources including Plato and Aristotle and, a Schall trademark, the *Peanuts* comic strip. Indeed, the book's bibliography could be adopted as a wonderful life reading list. However, Schall identifies his most important sources as Voegelin and Leo Strauss, and it is Strauss's presence which is most heavily felt. This is somewhat problematic in a book on “Roman Catholic political philosophy,” not simply because Strauss does not speak from a Catholic or Christian tradition, but because some of Strauss's writings suggest belief in a sharp divide between reason and revelation as well as incompatibility between philosophy and religion. One could argue that Strauss would deny that there could *be* such a thing as Roman Catholic political philosophy—either it would not really be Roman Catholic, or (more likely) would not really be philosophy.

This is not to say that Schall should not draw upon Strauss. Schall makes excellent use of Strauss; in fact, one of this book's greatest strengths is its effective synthesis of elements of Strauss with elements of Catholic and related thought. It would be helpful, however, if Fr. Schall acknowledged (beyond a passing reference) the tensions which appear to exist among his sources, and engaged those tensions more directly.

Nonetheless, Schall's message is an important one. Once upon a time, much of what he says would have been taken for granted—although it may not have been expressed so precisely or eloquently. Today, he is a much-needed corrective to a de-sanctified world and its fragmented pursuit of knowledge.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

**Citation:** William Byrne. Review of Schall, James V., *Roman Catholic Political Philosophy*. H-Catholic, H-Net Re-

views. July, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13459>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).