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Book Review by James V. Schall, S.J.

## DEEP DOWN THINGS

*A Deeper Vision: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Twentieth Century*, by Robert Royal.  
Ignatius Press, 619 pages, \$26.95



WHEN I WAS OVER HALFWAY through Robert Royal's *A Deeper Vision*, I received an e-mail from a friend who was also reading it. He found it a fine book, but too "irenic." Royal calmly spells out explosive issues with a cool hand, covering terrible things without yelling about them. Yet, while we may be justified to take horror at a Dachau or an abortion clinic, we still need to confront and understand them in an almost clinical manner. My own reaction was that this book is a remarkably even-handed presentation of issues fundamental to every mind, not just Catholic. More than just a survey of its subject matter, *A Deeper Vision* is a well-grounded judgment on the core of Catholic intelligence, on what it means. Indeed, through the lens of Catholic intelligence, it is a judgment about the overall thought of the century with which it deals.

The founder and president of the Faith & Reason Institute and editor-in-chief of *The Catholic Thing* website, Royal divides his book

into two general parts. The first, "faith and reason," deals with the revival of Thomism after Pope Leo XIII in the 1890s and its relation to various modern philosophies. In this light, through two world wars and eventually leading up to and beyond the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, Royal attends to the status of Catholic theology and Scripture studies.

THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT MERELY Christian but specifically *Catholic* thought, though that requires that it concern itself with Protestantism as well as with other religions and philosophies. Indeed, this "dealing" with all pertinent contenders to the name of truth and reason is the hallmark of Catholic intelligence's conception of itself as the inheritor of Aquinas and Augustine, of the Greeks and the Romans.

"Creed and culture," the second section of the book, was a most pleasant surprise. Royal's own higher studies at Brown and the

Catholic University of America were in literature, and we see the fruits of that study here. He takes us through primarily English and French novelists, poets, and writers of the 20th century—G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, J.R.R. Tolkien, François Mauriac, Charles Péguy, Georges Bernanos, Paul Claudel—with some attention to the Germans, and ends, interestingly, with a discussion of the Polish poet and philosopher Czeslaw Milosz.

That Royal would include the literary under the heading of "intellectual tradition" is more than significant. Catholicism has to justify itself in the light of other intellectual traditions, but it also must make sense to the most simple and humble of its adherents:

Unlike other intellectual traditions, the Catholic intellectual tradition has to withstand scrutiny by two different sets of criteria. It must, of course, be true to itself as an *intellectual* enterprise,

which is to say, it must be able to hold its own in terms of self-consistency, rigor, and human scope, and at the same time—impossible though it might seem—answer to the demand that in its ultimate results it correspond to the simplicity of the Gospel itself.

Not all Catholics need to be philosophers, but they all, including philosophers, need to save their souls.

This book represents a massive amount of erudition. Royal has read widely, and well. He is able to explain complex theological and philosophical issues in clear but not simplistic terms.

**T**HE TITLE COMES FROM THE ENGLISH poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, from “the dearest freshness deep down things” that constantly illuminate *what is*. At first sight, one might think that the core of this book was found in a philosopher like Jacques Maritain, or a theologian like Hans Urs von Balthasar, or a historian like Christopher Dawson, each of whom is treated with great insight.

But it is Hopkins and Péguy who begin and end the book, almost as if to say that human thought can only end in human concrete reality, in its encounters with *all that is*, seen best by the poet and novelist. The last words of the book are from a poem of Péguy to Our Lady of Chartres: “Let us, O Queen, preserve at least our honor, / And along with it our simple tenderness.” This is neither Hobbes nor Heidegger. When we recall that Péguy was killed at the front in the first year of the Great War, we get some sense of what Royal is driving at in this book, something that shows us what is at stake when minds cease to conform to reality.

Even when poets and philosophers end in honor—even in the grave—the final questions remain: How did they live? What did they think themselves to be? Or, as Royal puts it, speaking of the hero of Waugh’s *Men at Arms*, “The various personal and military fiascoes he encounters lead Guy to realize that the Christian life is really about personal acts of charity and kindness in a world that, in peace as war, is wildly out of our control.”

The same point is made about Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Rings* is often considered “the best book of the millennium.” “[T]emptations to evil,” writes Royal, “not always resisted, appear among the ‘good’ characters in Tolkien

as well. The battle between good and evil is, as always, fought out in every human heart.” Though Royal does not mention him, this was also the final view of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn from the worst Gulag of the 20th century.

Royal sees the more visible ethical questions in the light of metaphysics. Though Aristotle had already argued the same thing, this is a hard saying for those who will not admit any relation between how we think and how we ought to live. The intellectual import of this book, seen in discussions of the works of Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Lonergan, Karol Wojtyła, Joseph Ratzinger, and others, is precisely its spelling out the way that the Catholic mind draws on its own long tradition to deal with ideas and systems that, in effect, broke the link between what men think and how they are to act in the light of *what they are*.

**F**EW WRITERS HAVE EXPRESSED THIS AS forcefully as Chesterton. Royal finds Chesterton’s most profound book to be *The Everlasting Man*, which addresses the aberrations of the scientific mind on its own terms as mind. I have always considered *Orthodoxy* to be the greatest book of the 20th century, but I was pleased to see that Royal cited the prophetic last words of Chesterton’s 1905 book, *Heretics*:

We [believers] shall be left defending, not only the incredible virtues and sanities of human life, but something more incredible still, the huge impossible universe which stares us in the face. We shall fight for visible prodigies as if they were invisible. We shall look on the impossible grass and the skies with a strange courage. *We shall be of those who have seen and yet have believed* [emphasis added].

The word “courage” is right. The most courageous thing that the Catholic intellect has to tell us is what Thomas Aquinas taught—truth is the conformity of mind with reality.

The largely successful modern effort to eliminate nature and given being from our lives is contained in these lines. The few who see that babies are babies, that what we see is what is there, are those who believe. That the function of revelation is to inform us not merely of what we need to know for our salvation, but of what we need to know to see *what is*, is the supreme irony of intelligence.

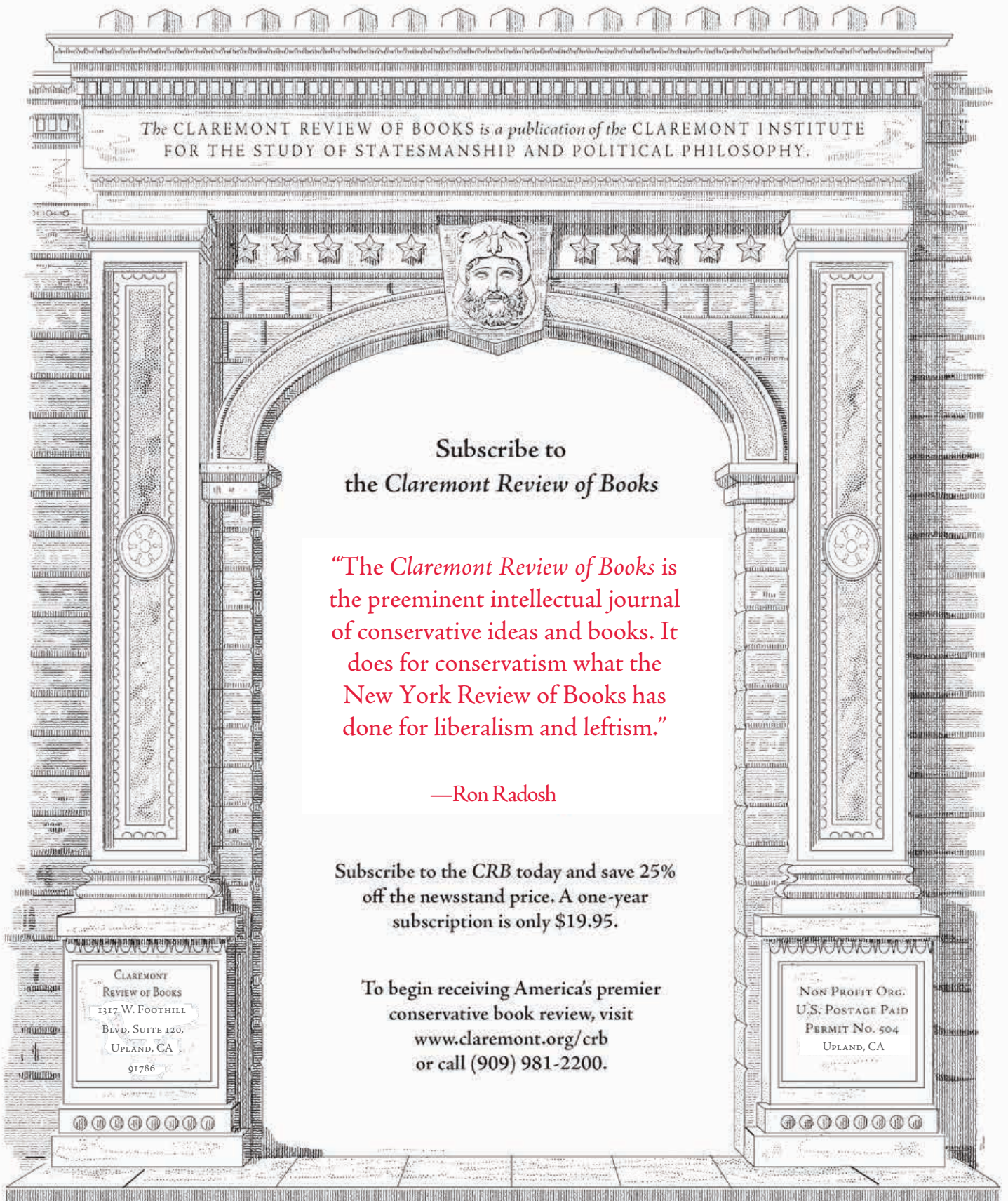
**T**HOUGH THE BOOK IS LONG ENOUGH, there are three things I would like to have seen more discussed. First, some attention to music in the 20th century, especially sacred music, along the lines of Robert Reilly’s *Surprised by Beauty* (2003), would be welcome.

Second, something more needs to be said on the relation of the hard sciences to Catholicism. It is the one issue that seems to justify the most ambiguous or hostile views of religion in general, despite the fact that science and Catholicism in many ways are growing closer. Books like Stanley Jaki’s *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (1978), and Robert Spitzer’s *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (2010), spell some of this out, as does Michael Chaberek’s *Catholicism and Evolution* (2015), with attention to intrinsic design and the anthropic principle that seems to be present in the structure of the universe.

Finally, although this book is primarily about the 20th century, the recent turn away from Catholic intellectualism needs more attention. This is, no doubt, a topic for another book. Royal is aware that efforts to bring the Church “up to date” have often resulted in confusion. That confusion too is part of the story he tells here, though there seems to be more confusion now than anytime in the past century. Royal was present at the recent synods and knows Roman trends well. But the rather stark difference on intellectual matters and their place within the Catholic tradition between John Paul II and Benedict XVI, on the one hand, and Pope Francis, on the other, has more than a few puzzled as to how a line of coherence remains.

Robert Royal’s *A Deeper Vision* is worth attentive study and reflection. No other book presents such a wide and carefully articulated understanding of 20th-century thought seen through the eyes of a Catholic tradition that is ordained to comprehend it. The book is a major intellectual achievement; an occasion of deep meditation and wide-ranging analysis of the modern mind, Catholic and otherwise.

*James V. Schall, S.J., served as professor of political philosophy at Georgetown University for 35 years, and is the author of several books, including The Modern Age (St. Augustine’s Press) and The Mind That Is Catholic (The Catholic University of America Press).*



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