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Praying at Burger King (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Mouw, Richard J. *Praying at Burger King*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007. 134 pp. 978-0-8028-4046-2. Reviewed by Jason Lief, Instructor of Theology and Youth Ministry at Dordt College.

The 1999 Academy Award-winning film *American Beauty* invites us to “look closer” beneath the surface of our culture’s obsession with image, warped sexuality, and power in order to discover the beauty and grace of the ordinary. In his new book *Praying at Burger King*, Dr. Richard Mouw, professor of Christian philosophy and president of Fuller Seminary, presents us with a similar invitation.

Praying at Burger King is a collection of short writings published in such journals as *Christianity Today* and *Perspectives*, as well as posts from Mouw’s internet blog site (www.netbloghost.com/mouw). The essays represent a variety of selections grouped thematically under the categories “Living,” “Believing,” and “Church and World.” The essays are short and written for a popular audience, but true to form, Mouw has packed theological and philosophical reflections in accessible wrapping. In the spirit of his previous books, such as *When the Kings Come Marching In* and *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, Mouw explores significant issues by relating them to everyday experiences.

Here, Mouw embeds theological discourse in narrative as he engages the experiences of real people and the occasional animal. From the teenager behind the counter at McDonald’s, to his own struggles with Lent and Sister Helen’s tears, to the dignity of chickens, to the good news proclaimed to sheep on the first Christmas morning, these writings speak to faithful living, firmly rooted in the messiness of life.

The thread binding these stories together is the reformational perspective that operates as Mouw’s interpretive lens. In the essay “Christian stuff,” Mouw reflects on the influence of his spiritual hero, Abraham Kuyper, and uses Psalm 24 to warn against placing limits on how we define Christian “stuff.” In “Oversize religion,” he criticizes the concept of personal faith that limits “God talk” to the private sphere, while in “Letting Chicken’s Strut their Stuff,” he shares a wonderful story about a Canadian chicken farmer who believes “Chickens are chickens and they deserve to be treated like chickens! This means that we have to give each chicken the space to strut its stuff in front of other chickens” (52). The context for these beliefs is Mouw’s declaration that there is only one evangel: “Through [Jesus’] death and resurrection he has decisively overcome sin and death, sealing the doom of all that stands against God’s creating and redeeming purposes in the world” (112).

But Mouw also leaves room for the paradox of certainty and uncertainty that is the essence of Christian faith. Although certain truths are black and white, day-to-day living often produces many more shades of grey. Mouw, by entering into the experiences of others, acknowledges the struggle of putting faith into practice. He recognizes our human longing for ritual and the innate desire to “do something religious” (57). Mouw verbalizes the experience of so many Christian youths, who struggle with “spiritual awkwardness” and need space to ask tough questions without someone giving them the easy answers. His prayer to the Virgin Mary, as well as the compassion from which it is spoken, is both controversial and moving. In reading these short stories, we discover the grace and humility that provide the basis for Mouw’s leadership in ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue and his willingness to publicly wrestle with controversial issues.

Although I deeply appreciate Mouw’s perspective, does an over-emphasis upon creational structures and common grace lead to the possibility of accepting, and even baptizing, sinful structures of the status quo? As Christians we believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has ushered in the new creation of the age to come. There is a new reality at work in the world in opposition to the powers of this age. How do we differentiate between the goodness of the created order and the grace that God bestows to us through this goodness, on the one hand, and the brokenness that permeates every part of creation, on the other? In the opening story “Praying at Burger King,” Mouw makes this statement: “There is no place in all creation that is outside the scope of God’s mercies – not even a Burger King. Cheeseburgers and French fries are, properly understood, gifts from the Lord” (5). But what about the economic, social, and justice issues with regard to fast-food establishments like Burger King? In many of these establishments, the disparity between the compensation offered to workers and corporate profits is enormous. The food distribution and preparation practices of such establishments contradict the prophetic words of the Canadian chicken farmer concerning the treatment of animals “produced” for consumption. They also add to the North American obsession with consuming more for less that in many ways contributes to starvation in “the larger world” (5). When weighed in the balance, does Burger King represent the goodness of creation, the mercies of God? Or does it reflect the effects of sin and brokenness?

Another example is found in the essay “Reading Machiavelli.” Although I commend Mouw’s intention of calling Christians in leadership to follow the example of Christ, and not the realism of Machiavelli, this does not go far enough. The “servant leadership” Mouw advocates assumes that the economic and social structures within which this leadership happens are appropriate. Do we pray, seek God’s will, and read scripture in the context of the existing structures? Or do we recognize the prophetic calling of the Christian community to imagine a new reality made possible by Christ’s resurrection and the hope of the new creation? Christian “servant leadership” in oppressive economic and social structures does not seem to be the best solution, nor is it the Biblical solution advocated by such characters as Moses, Elijah, or Jesus.

Praying at Burger King is a thoughtful book in which we

Budziszewski, J., et al. *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. 218 pp. ISBN: 10: 0-8010-3156-7. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History at Dordt College.

This composite volume mostly contains material initially presented at a conference sponsored by the Ethics and Public Policy Center and held at Prouts Neck, Maine. Editor J. Budziszewski is Professor of Philosophy and Government at the University of Texas in Austin. The “Introduction” is written by Michael Cromartie, and the “Afterword” is written by Jean Bethke Elshtain, both political scientists. The work’s central portion, which is written by Budziszewski, consists of his reflections on the “four formative voices” mentioned in the sub-title: Carl Henry, Abraham Kuyper, Francis Schaeffer, and John Howard Yoder (39-121). Thereafter, Budziszewski’s reflections on these four thinkers receive responses from David L. Weeks (Professor of Political Science at Azusa Pacific University), John Bolt (Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary), William Edgar (Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary), and Ashley Woodiwiss (Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations at Wheaton College) respectively (123-194). Without disrespect to either Henry or Yoder, readers of *Pro Rege* will probably be most interested in what Budziszewski makes of the reformed thinkers Kuyper and Schaeffer.

For Budziszewski, Kuyper is an “evangelical Calvinist” (55), a characterization that runs the risk of being misleading. As might be expected, the discussion focuses on the concept of “sphere-sovereignty” (55-62). In Kuyper this concept, says Budziszewski, is derived not so much from scripture as from “general revelation.” Kuyper draws inferences “not from what the bible tells us about the order of creation but from what we can observe about it” (63). Ultimately, Budziszewski finds Kuyper’s discussions of “sphere-sovereignty” to be “cloudy”—lacking in precision and unworkable (62, 64, and 69). As to those

are invited to enter into the experiences of the author and those whom he has encountered. These experiences are inspiring as they give a human face to the lofty beliefs of the Reformed tradition. Mouw gives us a few snapshots of what faithful living looks like: pictures that embrace humanity, the original goodness of creation, and the hope and restoration that come only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are left to ponder, however, what it means to be the Christian community in what Mouw refers to as the “post Christian” age (125). What does it mean to be the prophetic community, and, to borrow from Walter Brueggemann’s *The Prophetic Imagination*, how do we imagine new possibilities for the world in the midst of brokenness, violence, and despair? What *does* the resurrection of Jesus Christ mean for Burger King?

who came after Kuyper and who inherited and valued his insights, such as Herman Dooyeweerd, they are regarded as engaging in a hopeless endeavor to find ways around “natural law” (72, n. 119).

This reviewer regrets that Budziszewski, for his part, is not clearer as to *precisely* what *he* means by “natural law.” The concept itself has an extensive history and is certainly not free of problems. Exactly what is it? Is it truly the same for everyone? What is nature? How may “the law of nature” (*ius naturale*) instruct moral conduct? How is “natural law” to be rightly discerned by sinners? Is it not entangled in natural / supernatural, general / special dichotomies? In truth, how “natural law” has been understood has reflected the deeper motives arising in the human heart and at work in history. The closest Budziszewski gets in this volume to articulating his view is at pages 33-37, where he makes some pertinent comparisons between evangelicalism and historic Protestantism. But this is hardly a positive exposition of the basis of his standpoint. Perhaps he too readily assumes that readers are already familiar with his earlier works, *Written in the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (1997) and *The Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man* (2004).

John Bolt, in his response to Budziszewski on Kuyper, does not come to our aid here. He responds to arguments presented by James Skillen elsewhere – in the *Calvin Theological Journal* (147-149) – and generally endorses Budziszewski’s critique of Kuyper’s articulation of sphere sovereignty, agreeing that in his *Lectures on Calvinism*, Kuyper was expressing a vision rather than aspiring to theoretical precision (145). Bolt’s appropriation of Kuyper is congruent with his own patriotic affirmation of American civil-religion and exceptionalism. Bolt mobilizes Kuyper for such contestable latter-day purposes. He seems to have