
Pro Rege

Volume 35 | Number 4

Article 5

June 2007

Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices of Political Thought and Action (Book Review)

Keith C. Sewell
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Sewell, Keith C. (2007) "Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices of Political Thought and Action (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 35: No. 4, 40 - 41.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol35/iss4/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

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

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?

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

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

no interest in drawing to the attention of his interlocutors the truth that *after* Kuyper, from about 1926 onwards, thinkers “in Kuyper’s line” from the Netherlands, such as Herman Dooyeweerd, brought far greater theoretical precision to concepts such as “sphere sovereignty,” which Kuyper is famous for discussing rhetorically. It seems as if Bolt wants to draw a line after Kuyper and Bavinck, as their more philosophically astringent successors are far less amenable to his patriotic purposes.

In some respects Budziszewski’s discussion of Francis Schaeffer (73-87) is more satisfactory. He certainly seems to be much more at ease with Schaeffer than with the Dutchman. It was Schaeffer who gave American evangelicals some notion of a great cultural divide—an antithesis, no less, that is central to much contemporary American understanding of the “culture wars” (74, 80-81). The in-depth basis for Budziszewski’s commitment to “natural law” is perhaps most effectively captured in his statement: “When people are closed to special revelation, the only possible appeal is to general revelation, to the things we can’t *not* know” (85). The context is his discussion of Schaeffer’s presuppositionalism. This draws our attention to a serious problem for the champions of “natural law.” Presuppositions differ because of the deep-level religious starting points that give rise to each different perception of reality—a state of affairs that ensures that there is no “common sense” way of understanding “natural law” that is supposedly the same for everybody. Significantly, Budziszewski finds Schaeffer’s presuppositionalism interesting because it was not wholly consistent (85-86)—an assertion that I would not contest but the validity of which is attributable to the influence of “common sense realism” on the texture of Schaeffer’s thought.

William Edgar’s discussion of Budziszewski on Schaeffer provides one of the best passages in the book (167-185). Edgar discusses Schaeffer’s conservative Americanism, his environmental awareness, his indebtedness to Hans Rookmaaker, and the implications of his pre-millennial eschatology. Edgar situates Schaeffer within the context provided by the “theonomy” of Rousas

Rushdoony and Gary North (167-168, 179-180). For Edgar, believers and unbelievers may have some perceptions and understandings “in common” “[n]ot because of natural law but because of common grace” (183). It seems to me that at this point, through the influence of Cornelius Van Til, Edgar sounds a more authentically Calvinian and reformational note than those who look back to “natural law” as understood by medieval Christendom.

Almost a century ago, in 1909, August Lang published a famous article entitled “The Reformation and Natural Law,” which still repays a close reading. There is no doubt that from the outset, many of the Protestant Reformers also thought in terms of “natural law.” Melancthon is a prime example. Yet it is also true that in Calvin the topic of natural law is approached with caution and reserve. Subsequently, others touched by the deeper implications of the Calvinistic reformation have preferred to speak of a law for creation, or of an order of creation subject to law, rather than of “laws of nature.” Kuyper affirmed Calvin’s picture of the scriptures as the spectacles through which we need to view the order of creation (ourselves not excluded)—not infallibly but in the right light and from the right standpoint. And for all this, the Holy Spirit speaking in scripture, to our hearts, is indispensable.

This is not an easy book, but it is part of an important ongoing conversation among Christians concerning the status of “natural law” in the “public square.” We Christians have come to a point where we realize that in a post-Christendom environment, “democratic” institutions of governance can meet the requirements of public justice, understood from a Christian standpoint, even though Christians cannot subscribe to the “democratic way of life” as such. However, we are also in circumstances in which we cannot avoid confronting the corrosive effects of secularization *and* the challenge of militant Islamic *jihad* simultaneously. Some readers will need to be more familiar with the participants in this continuing conversation before they can see the issues from the inside, but the effort is worth making. Our era cries out for Christian political thinking of the highest order. Are we ready to meet this call?

Brooks, Arthur C. *Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth about Compassionate Conservatism*. New York: Basic Books, 2006. 250 pp. ISBN: 13:978-0-465-00821-6. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Emeritus Professor of Political Studies and Public Affairs, University of Illinois at Springfield.

Although the words do not appear in the title, charitable behavior is the central focus of Brooks’ book *Who Really Cares*. Certainly charitable behavior is a familiar concern to the readers of *Pro Rege*. Most of us have been enjoined from childhood to give offerings to worthy causes, not only to those of church and school but also to civic causes such as the United Way or tsunami relief. Indeed, we are aware that the Bible speaks much more about charitable behavior than it does about creation, hell, or the end times.

Despite that familiarity, we rarely cross paths with

analytical discussions of charitable behavior. Usually the concept comes up in matters of solicitation. Also, we understand charitable behavior as a particular expression of gratitude, a God-encouraged way to convey our thanks for the incredible gift of salvation that has come to us through Jesus Christ. Typically our empirical concerns are as simple as asking, “How is the ABC fund drive going? Has the goal been reached yet?” However, this book is based upon huge archival-data sets about contribution behavior and volunteer efforts that are cross-classified