

## BOOK REVIEW

of

J. Budziszewski,

*The Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man*,  
Spence Publishing Company, 1999.

This book is in the Evangel Library,  
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

This book is, in my opinion, particularly relevant at this time for two reasons. First, it has much to say about Natural Law, the topic of the recent Reformed Conference at Evangel featuring the teaching of Tom Johnson. I started reading this book only shortly before the Reformed Conference took place not knowing it dealt with the same general topic that Tom Johnson would be addressing. It was a pleasant surprise. Now that I am more familiar with Natural Law, I want to learn more. Second, this book has to do with politics, and this being an election year perhaps it might have some influence on how you or I might vote, or at least help us understand better the issues.

Professor J. Budziszewski holds a joint appointment in government and philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, where he has taught since 1981. When he joined the faculty there he was an atheist. He was also a nihilist. That is, he was significantly under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher, and did not believe there was any basis for knowledge, truth or morality. He started his academic career at the University of Texas, fresh out of graduate school, holding two basic principles: (1) human beings decide what is good and evil, and (2) individuals are not responsible for what they do. His long-term plans were to build ethical and political theory on these two principles. He now considers such thinking as indefensible and foolish. It is clear to him, now, that he had *started* with atheism and nihilism, and “cooked up arguments only to rationalize” his position; it was not cogent arguments that led him to it. Budziszewski confesses “It was ... agony. You cannot imagine ... what a person has to do to himself to go on believing such nonsense. ... I came, over time, to feel a greater and greater horror about myself. Not exactly a feeling of guilt, not exactly a feeling of shame, just horror: an overpowering *true intuition* that my condition was terribly wrong.” This brought him back to the Faith he had abandoned in his youth. “The next few years after my conversion were like being in a dark attic where I had been for a long time, but in which shutter after shutter was being thrown back so that great shafts of light began to stream in and illuminate the dusty corners.” He repudiated his own Ph.D. dissertation and his earlier two basic principles above, and reoriented his thinking on ethical and political matters along Christian teachings.

The book has nine chapters: 1. The Fallen City (apologion), 2. The Revenge of Conscience, 3. The Illusion of Moral Neutrality, 4. Politics of Virtues, Government of Knaves, 5. The Problem with Communitarianism, 6. The Problem with Liberalism, 7. The Problem with Conservatism, 8. Why We Kill the Weak, and 9. The Fallen City (reprise and charge). These chapters are preceded by a preface and followed by a detailed index.

The concern of this book is the investigation of the significance of the Christian doctrine of the “Fall” to the common life of our society. And the common life of our society, by definition, involves politics. Budziszewski claims that the “Fall” implies that we are neither simply good nor simply bad, but rather created good and broken. Therefore, proper politics cannot be separated from religion nor belief in God. This, says Budziszewski, flies in the face of modern approaches to political theory. Again, says Budziszewski, to deny the “Fall” is to embark on a path that cannot lead to proper political theory. Keep in mind that Budziszewski teaches these ideas at a secular university of high repute, and publishes these ideas in secular journals as well. He claims that in the larger society of the United States a political scientist must either be an atheist or at least impersonate one in order to be taken seriously or even survive. He claims the same is true of those who work in the hard sciences. His observations lead him to the conclusion that it is intellectual leaders in the humanities and the sciences that are the “fundamentalists” and that today it is the theists who want to follow the evidence and the materialists who want to ignore it. Budziszewski writes that it is not novel to claim the reality of the “Fall,” and the concept of original sin to be at the foundation of proper political theory, but it has a long history in the West and explains, in part, the high level of civilization in the West. “Aristotle begins every ethical discussion with what almost all men in almost all times and places have believed. St. Paul, who quotes poets to pagans, says that God has not left Himself without a witness even among the nations: He has written His law on the heart. Thomas Aquinas holds that there are certain moral principles we can’t not know ... any culture in deep moral denial must come to its senses or collapse, for the consequences of denying first principles are cumulative and inescapable ... Depraved conscience turns out to be as different from genuine ignorance as it is from honest recognition – a point which tends to be overlooked by both advocates and the critics of the notion of natural law. It is not a midpoint, but a third thing altogether.” Once again it is worth noting that Christianity is relevant to all areas of life and it is delightful to see more and more Christians coming out of their self-imposed ghetto and engaging society at all levels.

The above paragraph comes from chapter one. It hopefully gives a sample of the feast that this book provides. The second half of the book applies the concepts developed earlier to specific political problems facing society.