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More Than Just “Every Square Inch”: A Review of *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*

Emily Vander Ploeg

August 17, 2021

Title: *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction*

Author: Craig G. Bartholomew

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This book review from a student perspective highlights summer academic scholarship. Emily Vander Ploeg, a Dordt student, has been researching and developing an informative display highlighting significant figures in the reformed tradition for the Kuypers Honors Program. Her work develops a big picture view of what the Kuyperian tradition entails, both in content and context, and reading this book supported these objectives.

I have been very blessed to grow up in a Christian environment; I was born into and raised by a wonderful Christian family. I went to a Christian elementary, middle, and high school, and now attend Dordt University. Growing up, my family and I attended church twice on Sunday without fail, and I faithfully attended Sunday school, catechism classes, youth groups, GEMS meetings (a weekly girls club put on by the church), Bible studies, and eventually gave my public profession of faith in the summer before my senior year of high school. Although I grew up in an environment that allowed me to grow in my faith, I never gave much thought to the views of Christianity presented by the Christian Reformed Church, which I was a part of. Although I had heard of Abraham Kuyper and his “every square inch” quote before entering college, it wasn’t until an introductory course within the Kuyper Honors Program at Dordt University that I began to gain a deeper understanding of who Abraham Kuyper was and how impactful his ideas are. After being recommended Craig G. Bartholomew’s *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction*, I found that it proved to be a fantastic resource in the development of my understanding of Kuyper’s ideas and how they relate to my own Christian faith.

In *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*, Bartholomew looks to show readers some of the distinctive themes of the Kuyperian tradition, devoting entire chapters to topics such as the role of Scripture (Chapter 3), the idea of sphere sovereignty (Chapter 5), and how Christian education should work (Chapter 11). Each chapter closely examines Kuyper’s own thoughts on the topics, followed by an examination of the thoughts of other scholars within the Kuyperian tradition, especially those of Herman Bavinck and his nephew, J.H. Bavinck. At times,

Bartholomew also points readers to more recent theologians who are a part of the Kuyperian tradition, such as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (regarding philosophy in Chapter 9). This allows readers to gain an understanding of the position and historical development of the Kuyperian tradition on a given topic.

One of the strengths of *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition* is Bartholomew's inclusion of theologians beyond Kuyper in his discussion of the Kuyperian tradition. Throughout the book, Bartholomew points to multiple theologians when examining different topics. By including theologians and scholars such as Herman Bavinck and his nephew J.H. Bavinck, Bartholomew allows readers to see multiple examples of ideas within the Kuyperian tradition relating to topics such as worldview, missions, and philosophy. While some readers may be familiar with some of the ideas from certain scholars or theologians (for example, I had encountered some of the writings of Herman Bavinck before reading *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*), Bartholomew lays out his observations in a way that allows readers to not only make direct connections between the ideas of Abraham Kuyper and those of other scholars, but also to expand their own understandings of the Kuyperian tradition and how it can be applied to their everyday lives. For example, in the discussion about theology in Chapter 10, Bartholomew explains that "Both Kuyper and Bavinck are wary of a theologized faith that becomes purely intellectual, but both see an important, albeit limited, role for theology as an academic analysis of the content of faith given to us in Scripture for today."¹ However, immediately following that statement, Bartholomew notes that "For Dooyeweerd theology can never reflect directly on the Word-revelation but only on the faith modality or aspect of human experience."²

By including multiple views on certain topics, such as those from Kuyper, Bavinck, and Dooyeweerd, and putting them in conversation with each other, Bartholomew shows how differing ideas and perspectives can fit into the Kuyperianism, which widens the scope and elaborates on some of the basic beliefs of the Kuyperian tradition.

While this inclusion of scholars and theologians other than Kuyper can be seen as a strength of *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*, it can also make the connections that Bartholomew is trying to make less clear. For example, in Chapter 9, which focuses on philosophy, Bartholomew begins by examining Kuyper's view of philosophy, followed by Herman Bavinck's observations of the same. Bartholomew then gives an overview of philosophy, noting that "In contemporary philosophy there are two major traditions: the continental and the analytic."³ The following pages discuss topics such as Reformed epistemology, Reformational philosophy,

Foundationalism, and Classical Foundationalism. As a student reading this over the summer to gain a better understanding of the Kuyperian tradition, I found myself struggling to get through some of these discussions about the specifics of philosophy. While I see the value in Bartholomew's attempts to define philosophy within the Kuyperian tradition, for the most part, these sorts of informational sidetracks seem to make Bartholomew's ideas harder to follow—especially for readers who are simply searching for “A Systematic Introduction” to the Kuyperian tradition—and may feel like a distraction from the main topics of the chapter and book altogether.

As I was reading the book, I was looking at ways to connect what I was reading to my own life. As a student, one of the clearest connections that I found came in Chapter 11, which focuses on education. Specifically, I found the clearest connection in Bartholomew's discussion of Christian scholarship. Bartholomew explains that “For Kuyper, God made us logical beings, so we should trace his reason in the creation, his Logos, study it, publish it, wonder at it, and spread that wonder to others. Scholarship also proclaims the glory of God's name.”⁴ As a Christian student, my learning should not be only for my own glory, but “to bring to light the hidden things of God, to give us joy in digging up the gold hidden in the creation, and to contribute to the well-being of human life.”⁵

Throughout my time at Dordt University, and as a history major, I have found much enjoyment in learning about people who lived in the past under very different conditions than I do, hearing stories of a wide range of people, and learning how, as both a Christian and a student studying history, I can call for justice, peace, and love for those who are underrepresented.

While this time of my life is filled with hours of reading and writing and may seem insignificant compared to those of mission-field missionaries, my life and my work, whether that be writing final papers or someday in my career, play an important role in the kingdom of God and should be done in a way that brings glory to God.

After reading this book, I was struck by how little I actually knew about the Kuyperian tradition that I grew up in. While I knew of Kuyper's adherence to the ideas of John Calvin and his proclamation that Christ claims “every square inch,” I had no idea that the Kuyperian tradition provided, as Bartholomew aims to show, “rich resources that can help Christians in their calling

to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world today.”⁶ Craig G. Bartholomew structures the book in a way that allows readers to focus on individual topics within the Kuyperian tradition in order to see how Abraham Kuyper himself, along with other major figures, viewed certain topics in light of their Christian faith. While at times Bartholomew’s detailed explanations may deter readers, it also provides them with a valuable and comprehensive introduction to the Kuyperian tradition. Reading *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition* has allowed me to gain a better understanding of what the Kuyperian tradition is, how it applies to my life, and how it allows me to grow in my faith and trust in my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

1. p. 285
2. p. 285-286
3. p. 253
4. p. 298
5. p. 298
6. p. 10