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Donald Roth
Dordt University, donald.roth@dordt.edu

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Learning to Eat your Vegetables: A Review of Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition from a Teacher's Perspective

Abstract

"Bartholomew is taking on an exceptionally difficult challenge by trying to present these ideas both clearly and with sufficient context to situate them in a story that invites the reader in as a participant."

Posting about the book *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/learning-to-eat-your-vegetables-a-review-of-contours-of-the-kuyperian-tradition-from-a-teachers-perspective/>

Keywords

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Comments

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Learning to Eat your Vegetables: a review of *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition* from a teacher's perspective

Donald Roth

August 18, 2021

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

Author: Craig G. Bartholomew

Publisher: IVP Academic

Publishing Date: March 21, 2017

Pages: 379 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0830851584

This academic endeavor emerges in response to a student and professor summer book read and discussion about understanding more deeply the reformed perspective of the Christian faith.

This review is written by Dordt Professor, Donald Roth and follows a book review written by Dordt student, Emily Vander Ploeg.

I think children might be hardwired for skepticism when it comes to vegetables—at least mine are. No matter how many vegetables they've found that they like, no matter how deliciously they're prepared, every time they're presented with new (or sometimes old favorite!) veggies, I find myself having to exert some persuasive effort to convince my kids that it's worth it. As they've grown, my oldest is now starting to come around to the general idea of healthiness and the recognition of repetition that, yes, in fact she likes broccoli, but we're still far from out of the woods.

Sometimes students are the same way. I help direct an honors program named after Abraham Kuyper, a towering figure in the theological tradition that inspired my institution, and I find that an eye roll can be an almost reflexive response when I'm putting Kuyper's ideas in front of my students. It's not all bad that they're wary of being indoctrinated, but when that's not my purpose, when I just want my students to learn to articulate what they believe more clearly through conversation with a specific tradition, I will admit that it can be frustrating.

In *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*, Craig Bartholomew offers one of the best resources that I've found so far for inviting students into a reflective conversation with the insights that animate this tradition, and I recommend the book to anyone looking to cultivate their worldview in conversation with a deep and insightful strain of Christian thought.

Conceiving of the Contours

As a lawyer, I didn't know whether I should feel a certain pride or the sting of just desserts, but, when I first told my kids that they had to eat vegetables because veggies were good for them, they responded by looking for a loophole. What exactly counted as a vegetable? If potatoes were veggies, then eating french fries would be as good as brussels sprouts, right? What followed was a (still ongoing) back and forth about definitions and purposes: *what* counts as a vegetable and *why* is it good for me?

There is something similar at work when it comes to approaching a theological and intellectual tradition like Kuyperianism. At my institution, we often teach Kuyper in the very broadest of terms, throwing out terms like "sphere sovereignty" and "every square inch" as if they were a vocabulary you could pick up by osmosis; however, far less time is spent on a more thorough explanation of *what* the tradition means. Further, we often assume that the perspective matters without doing a terribly convincing job of showing *why*.

As a result, a potential problem is that, like my children, we can set up a shallow, even faux definition of what counts as Kuyperian (or "reformed") such that it conforms to our innate tastes or leaves us intellectually unchallenged.

This sort of assumed orthodoxy can grow to fear and resent more careful or pressing engagement, perhaps partly in fear that it might mean that we have to exchange our french fries for green beans.

This is one of the biggest strengths of Bartholomew's book. As "a systematic introduction," the work blends history and context over a range of topical foci that serve to flesh out *what* and *why* far more sharply. While the major themes, like worldview and sphere sovereignty, are covered, they are also situated in a broader intellectual tapestry that pays due regard to the fact that these more popular insights were, for Kuyper, inextricably linked with a view of God, Scripture, and the Church that I personally confess to underemphasizing in the past. I was worried that covering these issues might veer too far into denominational territory and turn students off, but stripping this context from the more popular concepts also always felt to me like I was presenting them in a false light. Bartholomew does not shy away from this richer context, and the result is that, by the time the reader gets to the chapter on education, near the end, a framework is in place that makes an even more compelling case for the crucial importance of Christian education for the ongoing vitality of the Christian community.

Testing Out the Tradition

My wife and I always require our kids to try at least a bite of anything they haven't tried before, and they have to revisit vegetables that they haven't tried in some time to see if they've developed a new taste for them, even if only in a certain preparation. While we've been working to convince our kids of the larger plausibility structure of vegetables being good, we keep offering up personal experience with various vegetables in various preparations, searching for a point of entry that can start to build this broader understanding at a more basic level.

The other major strength of Bartholomew's book is similar to this. Bartholomew came to Kuyperian thought with the hesitancy born of growing up in South Africa against the specter of apartheid, and he weaves this into the book in a way that changes the context of the ideas presented changes in important ways. Most notably, this creates a distance between author and subject that invites readers to test out the ideas presented for themselves. Further, the merit of these ideas is backed by the credible testimony of someone speaking from having overcome perhaps the most potent mark against the movement. Just like adding a little butter or a dipping sauce for veggies, this can disarm readers wary of rose-tinted glasses or indoctrination.

This is also the most important feature of the book to me as a teacher. Bartholomew typically begins and ends each chapter with fairly straightforward summaries of the major ideas that are developed within, and most chapters end with a forward-looking assessment that highlights areas where contributions and developments are needed. This structure adds to the approachable nature of the book, inviting readers to pick up the torch where they are inspired to possibly help blaze the trail forward for future generations.

Grinding it Out

I've never liked acorn squash. It doesn't matter how it's prepared; I've never really cared for it, but I've still eaten my fair share of it. From when someone else serves it to me at their house to when my wife wants to try out a new recipe that uses it, there are times when I have to just smile and shovel it down. In many ways, this is probably one of the hardest lessons to teach my children.

At some point, you eat what you're served, whether you like it or not.

There are points in this book that are, unfortunately, kind of like that. Bartholomew is taking on an exceptionally difficult challenge by trying to present these ideas both clearly and with sufficient context to situate them in a story that invites the reader in as a participant. Readers totally unfamiliar with the subject matter are essentially walking into an ongoing conversation, and Bartholomew is trying to catch them up on what's been going on.

As you can imagine, it is nearly impossible for someone both well-versed in and enthusiastic about the topic to provide only the precise amount of needed detail without branching off into some side debates or issues that fascinate them. This does happen from time to time in the book, probably most obviously in a section even titled “excursus” that follows the “conclusion” section of the chapter on Creation and Redemption, and it can, at times, drain some of the intellectual inertia of a chapter and turn sections into a little bit of a slog.

I don’t want to overemphasize this criticism, though, and I’m not sure exactly how I’ll treat it as I plan to use this book with students this semester. I could fairly easily trim reading assignments to work around some of these sections, but there’s also formative merit in just learning to eat your vegetables. I made a student researcher do just that this summer, and she seems to have benefitted from it admirably.

Overall, I recommend the book to anyone looking to grow in their ability to articulate what the Kuyperian tradition is and why it matters, or, frankly, to any Christian looking for a good conversation partner to help them cultivate their own worldview in dialog with the important ideas presented in this work.