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# Pro Rege

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Volume 46 | Number 3

Article 3

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March 2018

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### Recommended Citation

Seerveld, Calvin (2018) "WANTED: Vegetarian Kuyperians with Artistic Underwear," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 46: No. 3, 24 - 28.

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# WANTED: Vegetarian Kuyperians with Artistic Underwear

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by Calvin Seerveld

Craig Bartholomew's IVP Academic publication, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition* (2017), is indeed a magisterial systematic introduction to the cloud of witnesses (and many fellow travelers) who have articulated a basically biblical, Jean Calvinian, committed world-and-life vision on how to live before God's face until Jesus Christ comes again to complete historically the Kingdom-Rule of God (Psalm 110, Acts 1:3, Hebrews 10:19-12:29) in this world, which belongs to the holy Triune Sovereign Creator God revealed in the Scriptures.

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A difficulty of passing on such a Reformational-perspective pair of glasses from one older generation to the next younger generation is that its visionary contour is less defined than a philosophical one, and it is also often subverted by the primal Way-of-life which always underlies us humans, who consciously have (or do not have) a "Weltanschauung."<sup>1</sup> To "retrieve and renew" a life-guiding (Kuyperian) tradition is not like excavating certain ideas as if they be stones and then rebuilding anew the old ruined house we once lived in, especially if Edward Shils is correct in saying, "A tradition once it has receded from regular usage cannot be deliberately restored."<sup>2</sup> The usual resulting "Neo-" character of such a maneuver tends, in my judgment, to be artificial, at best a beautiful bouquet of *cut* flowers.

What would it take, God willing, to foster a vital Kuyperian tradition in the consciousness of the coming generation that is not handicapped by being "Neo-Kuyperian"? I will offer two suggestions for our discussion: (1) A Kuyperian world-and-life vision has a supple, not analytically defined but imaginative, literarily composed character; and (2) our program should be to discover anew, reformingly embody, and freely share the Kuyperian-spirited constellation of insights with our neighbors, focused on their actual needs.

My own practice is to talk about a "committed world-*and-life vision*" instead of the truncated *Weltanschauung*, worldview.<sup>3</sup> Talk about

“worldview” omits the element of life praxis—which Kuyper’s original Dutch phrase “*levens-en-wereld beschouwing*” highlighted! The odd term of “life-system,” which Kuyper used in the 1898 Stone lectures, shows the importance of “life” to him; but “system,” I think, overstates the kind of cohering form belonging to a synoptic *vision*.<sup>4</sup> I use “vision” partly because of Ezra Pound’s wise dictum, “Don’t be viewy,”<sup>5</sup> vague, muddled, obscure, “worldviewish.”

However, I do believe it is proper for a committed world-and-life vision tradition not to be theoretically conceptually exact. The intelligible contour presented by S.G. de Graaf’s *Verbondsgeschiedenis* (1936)<sup>6</sup> has an unmistakable redemptive-historical visionary *Gestalt* that is richly biblical, but strict theological jargon I find absent. Thomas Cole’s painterly series of four large canvases narrating our human *Voyage of Life* (1842)<sup>7</sup> convincingly articulates the Horatio Alger American Dream world-and-life vision of greatness that is Neo-Idealistically attractive and hollow as hell. Bertolt Brecht’s oeuvre depicts and champions a pragmatistic survival ethic that promises an everlasting bitter-sweet meaning in a kind of inverted Nietzschean tradition.

That is, it helps me to understand the bulky nature and power of the Kuyperian tradition if I realize that the cosmic scope but non-philosophical rigor to its perspective has the nature of literate precision. *Literary* precision is not analytically tight, but the right word like “woebegone” or “bluster” can call up a florescent peacock tail of nuances that nevertheless can catch *precisely* a rich reality at hand. When Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth utters “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (*Macbeth*, V.1), she is not everyday swearing and is also not just carefully confessing “I committed intentional first degree murder.” But the theatrical saying has a bloody, down-to-earth, cry-to-heaven, *spirited specificity* that is not scientifically precise but is aesthetically lucid, engaging, overwhelming (as in Jesus’ parables, with the crooked tax collector praying, “God, be merciful to me, a

sinner” [Luke 18:9-14]).

Now, if a committed world-and-life visionary tradition—Nietzschean, American Dream, or Christian Kuyperian—“is the structured transaction of passing on *wonts* from practiced to inexperienced human hands,”<sup>8</sup> we have a sure guide to the enormous challenge we face, because “the wonts” of the Kuyperian tradition are as varied as creaturely life.

We will need the daily practice of attent, connecting Bible reading at family meals; a regular healthy diet of body-building grains and greens, without a constant gratuitous sugar caress; an expectant Sunday worship service with a church year of solid Scriptural preach-

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ing, earnest liturgical confession of sin to be forgiven, and joyful, communion-building celebration of the eucharist. We need to be learning a trade that fits our gifts and enjoy a week of work that somehow serves good to somebody and helps pay our bills; a habit of wide reading in cultural history and current affairs with wise mentors nearby; a circle of friends with the custom to play games together uncontaminated by a competitive mania, where there rises time for intimate conversation—it takes an encyclopedic range and ensemble of exercised human activities to show-and-tell, to engender and spread a committed world-and-life vision with a special (Nietzschean, American Dream or) Kuyperian cachet, beyond telling about it. To chant “square inch” and “sphere sovereignty” will not keep alive the blessing of a reforming Kuyperian tradition, since its concatenated wonts are not reducible to a few pregnant ideas.<sup>9</sup>

Would teaching and learning the Reformational Christian philosophical systematics—of Vollenhoven, Dooyeweerd, Zuidema, Mekkes, K.J. Popma, H. van Riesen, H. Evan Runner, Robert Knudsen, Peter Steen, Sander Griffioen, Edward Schuurman and others, which was and is a like-spirited conceptual deepening of this very Kuyperian committed world-and-life vision—help the living propagation of the Kuyperian

tradition? In my own judgment and experience, when a theoretical physicist (Harry van der Laan)<sup>10</sup> or a political science academic (Bernard Zylstra)<sup>11</sup> has digested the jargon-invested, basic intricacies of the Reformational Christian philosophy, which has embedded in its categorical framework and gut a cross-disciplinary avenue for communal reflection, then surprising alternative scholarship with wisdom can result, like economist Bob Goudzwaard's *Beyond the Modern Age*,<sup>12</sup> and oncologist James Rusthoven's *Covenantal Biomedical Ethics for Contemporary Medicine*.<sup>13</sup> Educated thinkers whose special field analysis and counsel has not been forged with and honed by Reformational philosophical hypotheses and who don't think with a committed Kuyperian world-and-life vision are too handicapped, I think, to be integrally Christian in their *professional theoretical* activity. But superficial knowledge of Reformational Christian philosophy is not an insurance policy one can cash in for being able to speak redemptive knowledge as a banker, CEO, pastor, governing official or teacher.

One last comment: since a committed world-and-life visionary tradition has, to my thinking, an imaginative literary consistency, not to say a supervening, suggestion-rich, artistic quality, I'd like to raise the ante on Kuyper's well-known phrase that "art is no fringe that is attached to the garment" of human life.<sup>14</sup> How about proposing that artistry should be *the underwear*, at least of the well-dressed Kuyperian readied for service in God's world.

Every mature Kuyperian child of God should have underneath his or her visible activity clothing, I suggest, a supportive fabric of images (like Ernst Barlach's *Singing Man*, Käthe Kollwitz's *Mother with dead child*, Rembrandt's late self-portraits), an invigorating psalm-song under the breath (Genevan 51, 89, 141), a poignant favorite poetic fragment or novel scene remembered (Shakespeare's "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds..."; Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Old Marrieds"; the severe act of crossing out Pieter's name from the Bible by his father Jakob van Vlaanderen, in Alan Paton's "Too Late the Phalarope"); a readiness for gracious, salty speech (see parable-speaking Jesus; Colossians 4:6)—all

of which are conducive to instilling and practicing a vital Kuyperian merciful and just Kingdom of God tradition among us.

Kuyperian Christian schooling would do well, it seems to me, to make wearing such underwear training a priority, since *the arts are among the best resilient, subtle, and invigorating carriers of world-and-life visions*.<sup>15</sup>

Could we perhaps tweak the "retrieve and renew" formula to discover and absorb, in order to give away the Kuyperian tradition as a task for promoting shalom? That is, a world-and-life vision is not so much a deposit you can pick up and refurbish, as it is an on-going, blood-coursing, world-wide, holding-patterned communal consciousness one inhabits or not.

As I understand it, a "Christian world-and-life vision is a thetical orientation and not a judgmental condemnation; [it is] a program for doing good for the commonweal and not a plan of attack on enemies."<sup>16</sup> So it is a joy to give-it-away to wandering people who may be at a loss, provided you do not come on as Proverbs 27:15 puts it, "like the dribbling drivel of a leaky roof on a day of pounding rain."

If you be a person whose inescapable Way-of-life has not yet sprung a self-conscious world-and-life vision, to be introduced to the all-encompassing Kuyperian tradition, as Craig Bartholomew's book does it, can be an exhilarating, eye-opening, and life-integrating experience. If you are holding onto an un-Christian world-and-life visionary tradition, it may take something more like a risky, complete blood transfusion to effect the change in life-orientation. If you meet Kuyperian progeny while breathing a different Christian world-and-life vision (Anabaptist Mennonite, or Roman Catholic), you may notice blind spots in the Kuyperians yet be willing to supplement your resident perspective with certain Reformational biblical strengths.

The most difficult encounter happens, I think, when someone who once had accepted the Reformed contours but because of some accidental affront or mistaken assumption willfully decided to reject its vision or let it atrophy. You cannot argue such disenchanting people into embracing the Kuyperian tradition again; even try-

ing to make them jealous of its healing grace for distracted people is a tough row to hoe.<sup>17</sup>

How is the elderly generation to transmit the Kuyperian tradition live to the up-and-coming generation and take pains to avoid the “Neo-” atavism which deforms a percolating visionary tradition into a cliché? I learned from colleague Bill Rowe that the handing on of wonts should take place face-to-face, seasoned person before novice and novice before mentor. The written record of the Kuyperian tradition should best become oral, spoken, with time for response. And I learned from colleague Peter Steen that a good teacher necessarily *simplifies* the matter at hand, but in such an encouraging way that the student can *complicate* what is shown-and-told, so as not to parrot back what is at stake, but own it one’s self.

You become an aide to a Kuyperian senator in the legislature; you apprentice yourself as an aspiring playwright in the Redeemer Roy Louter writing workshop. I learned the Kuyperian fish business from watching my Father (who had never read Kuyper) swiftly fillet flounders so close to the bone you wasted not a pinch of flesh, and then tried it hundreds of times over years of Saturdays and summers.

To transmit well the Kuyperian world-and-life vision takes time—for feedback, corrections, revised examples, and the random meaningful asides by the tradition-giver. I learned a major life-giving (Kuyperian) guideline on being “critical” from Vollenhoven. I was berating Kuyper for being too taken by Idealist Schelling and Neo-Classical Winckelmann’s thought on the practically salvific power of beautiful art.<sup>18</sup> “Ja, zeker,” said Vollenhoven, “maar hij had te veel te doen (“Yes, sure, but Kuyper had way too much to do.”), implying that a charismatic leader can’t be right about everything.

One should not, I believe, overvalue the Kuyperian Christian tradition because, like any world-and-life vision, its developed formatting of one’s consciousness that brings to the fore *structural* features of our life world (What is there? How? What’s wrong? Why?) is always meshed with the matter of *directional* choice, or where are we headed? What Spirit drives you on in your world-and-life vision?<sup>19</sup> Unless a win-

some and wise Holy Spirit suffuses and gentles the Kuyperian tradition, what does it really profit us and our neighbors? However, if we as a community *live* the Kuyperian world-and-life vision *reformanda*, constantly tapping into its wisdom-gospel biblical roots (although it is not mentioned in Ephesians 6:10-17), the lived, living Kuyperian Christian consciousness can be a protective hiding place to catch one’s breath in our mortal struggle as God’s people with the evil principalities and cultural powers that would destroy us all.

One last comment: let me emphasize that a committed world-and-life vision is not just simplified lay philosophy, as if the philosophical meat is just cut up in tiny bite-size bits so that untrained thinkers can swallow it. No! And as to the role that literary studies and critical art history do and could play in lively carrying on the Kuyperian tradition, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* novel is as complicated and intricate as Bakhtin’s philosophical aesthetics, but Dostoevsky’s all-encompassing vision and texture is of a nature different from philosophy. Dostoevsky with imaginative story is priming a mentality of compassion rather than expositing the fascinating intermeshing of life and reflection. Although using metaphors can be very dangerous, let me put it this way: philosophers sense and eat conceptual meat; **world-and-life visionaries are thoughtful perceptual vegetarians who formulate imaginative prose essays.**

So, while Reformational philosophers argue over their hamburger to gain wisdom for bearing their neighbors’ doubts and burdens, Kuyperians tell stories, doodle sketches, sing songs, formulate manifestoes, and start an Institute for Christian Studies, Redeemer College, Citizens for Public Justice, Christian Courier, Flagship Gallery...and remain Kuyperian vegetarians. According to the prophet Isaiah, as I read him, both Covenantal Jesus Christ-following diaconal meat-eaters *and* vegetarians will feast with “well-aged wines” together on the new earth (Isaiah 25:6-9). (I could mention, I have never met an over-weight Seventh-Day Adventist vegetarian....)

## Endnotes

1. C. Seerveld, "Philosophy as schooled memory" (1982) in *In the Fields of the Lord*, ed. Craig Bartholomew (Carlisle: Piquant, 2000), 84-89.
2. *Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 329. Cf. C. Seerveld, "Footprints in the snow" (1991), *Cultural Education & History Writing*, ed. John H. Kok (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2014), 253.
3. See "The Damages of a Christian Worldview," *Cultural Education & History Writing* (2004): 105-109.
4. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1961), 11 n.1. Cf. Seerveld, "Damages," 108; Bartholomew, *Contours*, 102-108.
5. "A Retrospect" (1918), *Literary Essays of Ezra Pond*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1954), 6.
6. Translated by H. Evan Runner as *Promise and Deliverance* (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1977-1981), 4 vols.
7. *Voyage of Life: Childhood, Youth, Manhood, Old Age* (Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art), each canvas more than 4x6 feet.
8. "Footprints in the snow," 239.
9. Craig Bartholomew touches on the hazard that "worldviewish thinking" may reduce the full-orbed lived character of the Kuyperian tradition to a mere view-finder pair of glasses (*Contours*, 118-124). Also, "Unformed persons do immense damage to the Kuyperian tradition, shouting about sovereignty and grace while failing to manifest grace and humility in their lives" (*Ibid.*, 318).
10. *A christian appreciation of physical science* (Hanmilton: The Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, 1966).
11. *From pluralism to collectivism. The development of Harold Laski's political thought* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1968).
12. *An Archaeology of Contemporary Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017).
13. *An Alternative to Principle-Based Ethics* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014).
14. *Lectures on Calvinism*, 151.
15. One might remember that Abraham Kuyper's conversion was triggered by Charlotte Yonge's novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (Bartholomew, *Contours*), 16.
16. "The Damages of a Christian Worldview," 121.
17. For biblical thoughts surrounding the problem of reinvigorating a Christian world-and-life visionary tradition lost, cf. Matthew 13:1-9, 24-30; Hebrews 6:1-12; Romans 10:18-11:12.
18. Abraham Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme en de Kunst*, rectoral speech at the Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam: J.A. Wormser, 1888), 70 n.53 and 76 n.76.
19. "The Damages of a Christian Worldview," 109.