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**Book Review: Craig G. Bartholomew, Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction, Bob Goudzwaard and Craig G. Bartholomew, Beyond the Modern Age: An Archaeology of Contemporary Culture. Reviewed by Travis Pickell**

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**Craig G. Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction***  
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017). xiv + 363 pp. US\$40.00. ISBN 978-0-8308-5158-4 (hbk)

**Bob Goudzwaard and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Beyond the Modern Age: An Archaeology of Contemporary Culture***  
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017). xii + 313 pp. US\$30.00. ISBN 978-0-8308-5151-5 (pbk)

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Abraham Kuyper stands as a giant of politics, theology, and social philosophy in the Dutch Reformed context. Serving as a pastor, journalist, educator and university founder, political activist, theologian, author, and prime minister in his time, his legacy continues through the neo-Calvinist tradition (sometimes called ‘Kuyperianism’), which has gained considerable influence in the American evangelical Protestant context. If ever one has heard of ‘sphere sovereignty’, ‘principled pluralism’, ‘reformed epistemology’, ‘anti-thesis’ and the impossibility of ‘neutrality’, or ‘Christian worldview’, then one is likely already within the Kuyperian ambit. Anyone who is interested in considering the social and public relevance of Christianity does well to acquaint herself with this school of thought.

In doing so, she could do worse than starting with Craig Bartholomew’s *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*. A useful introduction to Abraham Kuyper and his legacy, this book also extends neo-Calvinist thought in novel and interesting directions. Bartholomew begins by framing Kuyper’s life and work within the context of the widespread embrace of Enlightenment ideals across Europe in the nineteenth century. He positions Kuyper as a firm critic of secular Enlightenment humanism (what Kuyper referred to as Modernism), but one who displayed a forward-looking mentality that affirmed the importance of genuine pluralism. Kuyper ‘was no theocrat’ (p. xi). Chapter 1 offers a biographical and historical sketch of Kuyper’s early intellectual and spiritual path from Modernism to something resembling ‘evangelical’ Christianity. (One slightly confusing aspect of the book is the author’s seeming equation of ‘Modernism’ with higher criticism in biblical studies; it is unclear whether this is because the two are equated in the author’s mind or whether they were for Kuyper.) Bartholomew praises Kuyper’s conversion away from

Modernism, which ‘gave him a place to stand and from which to engage the fast-changing world of his day’ (p. 25). Henceforth, Kuyper’s primary strategy would involve a strategic separation: ‘a *life-sphere* of our own on the foundation of *palingenesis*, and a *life-view* of our own thanks to the light that the Holy Spirit kindles on the candelabra of Scripture’ (p. 26, original emphasis). The author emphasizes Kuyper’s notion of ‘antithesis’ in a manner similar to Rod Dreher’s notion of a ‘Benedict Option’ (‘withdrawal *for mission*’, p. 27, original emphasis). But the treatment lacks a nuanced account of practices and formation that one finds, for example, in the work of Stanley Hauerwas. Instead, Bartholomew points toward the need for conversion and renewal (*palingenesis* as the center of Kuyper’s thought), leading to a re-orientation that situates the believer within a ‘worldview . . . utterly comprehensive in its outlook, just like the kingdom of God’ (p. 31).

The remaining chapters take up distinct loci within Kuyper’s oeuvre. The chapters vary somewhat in approach or emphasis, but the general format is as follows: an introduction to the topic (e.g., Scripture, ecclesiology, education, etc.) is followed by an exposition of one or more of Kuyper’s texts on that topic. Bartholomew then presents a range of views from within the Dutch Reformed tradition (typically Herman Bavinck), offers a critical or appreciative evaluation of how the topic has been developed within that tradition, and suggests avenues for further development.

To my mind, a few of the chapters stand out as particularly strong. Chapter 2 explores the distinctively Dutch Reformed construal of the relationship between nature and grace, according to which ‘grace restores nature’. Implicit in this formulation is a rejection of various ‘dualistic’ accounts, including those that would see grace as an obliteration of nature and others that would see grace as an elevation of nature. Redemption, it is argued, is a consummation of God’s original creative purposes. Bartholomew presents the range of positions on this issue in an understandable fashion, and argues for promising ecumenical intersections around his favored account. Chapter 5 explicates Kuyperian social philosophy with special attention to his doctrine of ‘sphere sovereignty’, a central, and often misunderstood, concept within Dutch Reformed political theology. Chapter 7 extends the discussion of social philosophy to the role of the state in addressing issues of poverty and pluralism. Here, Bartholomew misses an opportunity to engage Catholic Social Teaching at length (though he does mention it), as the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity (and their complex relationship to one another) would have been very fruitful. Nevertheless, the chapter is valuable in its discussion of the important Kuyperian notions of ‘principled pluralism’ and ‘public justice’. Finally, chapter 11 presents Kuyper’s approach to education in a clear manner. While I find myself departing from Kuyper at this point, it is very helpful to understand how sphere sovereignty and antithesis have contributed to contemporary (evangelical) Reformed adherence to Christian schooling.

For those with a working knowledge of Kuyper’s main ideals, this volume will provide an opportunity for a deep-dive into those ideals as they have been developed by others. Others may use it as a resource for exploring a single topic of interest. It may strike the casual reader, at times, as unnecessarily esoteric yet also parochial. (In commenting on the work of Gordon Spykman, for example, Bartholomew muses, ‘While . . . I disagree with his definition of theology, his work is rich and deeply Kuyperian, albeit in Dooyeweerdian mode’ [p. 283]. This is what we in the United States call ‘inside-baseball’.)

The basic neo-Calvinist framework laid out in *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition* is the same adopted by Bartholomew and Bob Goudzwaard in *Beyond the Modern Age*. The latter is a fairly ambitious book. Arranged in three parts, with an introduction and epilogue, the authors seek to provide ‘cultural analysis that can illuminate how we have arrived at where we are today, what precisely is the nature of the crisis in which we find ourselves, and where we can find resources for healing our present condition and moving beyond it toward a world that promotes the flourishing of all, not just a small percentage of the elite’ (p. x).

After an Introduction, which frames the inquiry around a series of paradoxes endemic to modernity, Part I offers an ‘archaeology’ of modernity, in order to ‘find the roots of [its] strange ambivalence’ (p. 11) and of the dizzying array of views it has bequeathed. The substance of these chapters is an examination of a series of contending, more-or-less coherent modern worldviews: the ‘classical modern worldview’, the ‘structural-critical modern worldview’, the ‘cultural-critical modern worldview’, and the ‘postmodern worldview’. For each, they outline key values, beliefs, and orientations in broad strokes, before also tracing the worldview’s origin and emergence through key figures and historical events, remarking on its relation to other worldviews, and, finally, offering some points of evaluation. For Goudzwaard and Bartholomew, the classical modern worldview (chapter 1) is the central driving force of modernity, departing from premodern medieval European society. It is marked by optimism about economic and technological progress, faith in humankind’s critical reasoning, a strong preference for market-oriented economies, principled adherence to political democracy and free competition, and a desire to impose control over the contingencies of nature.

According to the authors, various tensions within modernity have given rise to alternative worldviews in response (discussed in chapter 2). The structural-critical modern worldview (developed through G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, the Frankfurt school, and Jürgen Habermas) holds to the basic tenet ‘that the structures and systems of society are themselves the root cause of the social and economic problems’ (p. 37). Alternatively, the cultural-critical modern worldview (with sources in German romanticism and humanism, but developed through Paul Ricoeur, Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, and Emmanuel Levinas) holds that ‘most if not all of the problems of our time have deep cultural roots and thus originate in a lack of will or in distorted human attitudes’ (p. 48). Taken together, these two approaches ‘are powerful voices that show impulses within modernity toward moving beyond modernity. At the same time, [each] is itself a full participant in fostering the inner contradictions of modernity’ (p. 55).

Chapter 3 notes how, in the wake of the cultural contradictions of modernity, people may find themselves vulnerable to the temptations of various ideologies marked by ‘values defined by the ultimate goal [of each ideology], increasing dependence on and loss of control over the means needed to achieve the end, and a redefined image of the “enemy”’ (p. 66). The postmodern worldview (developed through Jean-François Lyotard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida) exists in an ambiguous relation to such ideologies: on the one hand, postmodernism offers strong resistance to ‘seductive dreams of a better world for all that are based only on modern utopias’ (p. 88); on the other hand, postmodernism’s deep ambivalence to metanarratives risks sliding into novel, nihilistic, and cynical ideologies.

In the estimation of Goudzwaard and Bartholomew, each of these worldviews approaches something true and good, but each also carries a shadow-side. Importantly, none seems adequate to the deep social-structural challenges that mark our time. So what are we left with, according to the authors? We face a series of cultural and social paradoxes, exacerbated by an ideology of material progress that is rooted in the classical modern worldview. This worldview has been challenged (partly, but incompletely) by structural-critical, cultural-critical, and postmodern worldviews, which (to make matters more confusing!) are themselves rooted in the classical modern worldview. But, as the authors recognize, if we are all swimming in the modern worldview(s), what hope is there for escaping the paradoxes? Their solution: we must mine our current cultural resources for ‘sources of wisdom that may originate before the birth of modernity but still have lasting significance’ (p. 95). This is the task of Part II.

Space precludes an in-depth treatment of the remainder of the book. Part II includes chapters on the following: secularization, ‘the post-secular’, and the nature and importance of religion in modernity; the relationship between authority and ‘the sacred’ according to Philip Rieff (which, puzzlingly, neglects one of Rieff’s most famous ideas: the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’); anthropology and desire, approached through René Girard’s theory of mimetic violence; the nature and importance of genuine pluralism under the conditions of political liberalism; and the need to see global poverty as a pressing moral concern. Part III concludes with two chapters of application. Chapter 10 argues that ‘the impulses toward nonmodern worldviews described in Part II open up avenues of resolution that contemporary modern worldviews have closed off’ (p. 217), demonstrating this through an extended apology for a radical re-thinking of economic life around an ‘economy of care’. Chapter 11 offers concrete examples at the personal or community level of alternative economic models at play, and argues that such models are critically necessary in light of impending ecological disaster: ‘Climate change problems should lead us to reflect on the course of modern society as a whole from the perspective of restraint and well-being’ (p. 263).

Goudzwaard and Bartholomew are adamant that ‘the battle of our time is a spiritual battle, that is, a battle for meaning, values, and worldviews’ (p. 270). ‘There is profound need to openly, even forcefully challenge the powerful illusion that technological progress can save us. A spiritual battle must be fought against worldviews that do not start with respect for what has been given us to take care of and preserve’ (p. 264). While I do not disagree, it is here that I would press the authors for greater clarity.

In repeatedly emphasizing the centrality of worldview-analysis (a common neo-Reformed bailiwick) I found myself deeply puzzled about two matters. The first has to do with their language of ‘transcending’ the ‘modern worldview’. Part II, we are told, will help us ‘to see *outside* the tunnel of the classical modern worldview and discover that once we take healthy religion or *the call from the outside* seriously there are indeed ways to heal modernity and move *beyond* it’ (p. 217, emphasis added). The reader is encouraged to remain ‘open to a call from the outside’ because there is a ‘distinction between meaning that comes to us from beyond modern human intellect and meaning generated from inside the modern human intellect’ (p. 218). But this way of putting the matter raises important questions. How does one, as a modern person, access such wisdom from beyond? Can one access it in a pure form, unaltered by one’s own situatedness

within modernity? How exactly are we to understand the intellectual contributions of figures like Rieff, Girard, and Kuyper? In what way is appealing to them moving beyond the ‘modern human intellect’? Furthermore, even if we grant that modernity has given rise to coherent worldviews, shouldn’t we also acknowledge the continuity and through-lines that exist between such worldviews and what preceded them and out of which they developed? The authors plead, ‘God willing and they themselves willing, [Christians] can lay bare the deeply secular roots of the present illusions of our age’ (p. 264). Much work in recent intellectual history, however, has drawn attention to the distinctively *religious* and *theological* roots of modern secular humanism. At some point the dichotomies are no longer helpful.

The second area in which I would invite clarification involves the language of ‘choosing’ one’s worldview. Early in the book, commenting on the experience of their students, Goudzwaard and Bartholomew observe that they have ‘no real clue about what worldview might serve as a basis from which to overcome these problems . . . [Moreover] many people today lack a coherent worldview that could enable them to better understand today’s turbulent, wounded world and work toward healing solutions’ (p. 5). After making the case that most of us will have uncritically accepted elements of the classical modern worldview, they claim that the stage has been set ‘for a decision: ought we to embrace the classical modern worldview, perhaps with modifications, or reject it?’ (p. 36). In many ways, the authors note, ‘the challenge we have laid before our students and readers [is] to choose a worldview that helps them make better sense of today’s world and of their—and our—responsibilities within it’ (p. 231). In their final sentence, they cheerfully conclude: ‘As you choose—we hope, more explicitly now—a basic worldview, orientation, or perspective, we wish you all, from the bottom of our hearts, peace, shalom, salaam on all your ways!’ (p. 273).

But is this really how intellectual and moral formation occurs? To be sure, the authors’ basic gist seems right: uncritical acceptance of the dominant cultural logics may result in a feedback loop that is difficult to escape. There are, however, much better accounts of how cultural critique might occur. (One thinks, for example, of Charles Taylor on ‘social imaginaries’, James K.A. Smith on ‘cultural liturgies’, Stanley Hauerwas on ‘story-formed communities’, and Graham Ward on ‘cultural transformation and religious practice’.) This way of speaking comes close, in my judgment, to treating worldviews as free-floating realities which we might neutrally evaluate and, at some point, select, reject, or exchange for another worldview. Among the many issues with this locution, it strikes me that it is a distinctively *modern* way of thinking. Beyond the faulty anthropology on which it seems to rely, it also fails to give adequate recognition to the inherently destabilizing nature of ‘choosing’ in a context of cultural pluralism (as Peter Berger argued in *The Heretical Imperative*, Doubleday, 1980). Moreover, it seems to involve an oddly instrumentalist view toward intellectual formation. Consider the following quotation: ‘For such a worldview to be viable in relation to the crises of our time, we shall need to discover whether its vision of economic and social life is robust enough to offer genuine solutions’ (p. 231). But is this the only, or best, manner to determine whether it is *true*?

In many ways, it is precisely the ambitious nature of *Beyond the Modern Age* that left me feeling flat—though a more modest book may have been much less interesting to read. *Beyond the Modern Age* does have some very clear strengths: it is grounded in the

authors' experience teaching undergraduates and participating in public policy and governance. It lends attention to lived reality and experience as well as to generational cultural shifts. The authors' framework for understanding modernity (Part I) may be quite useful as a primer on the history of social philosophy for an undergraduate course in modern theology and politics. Specialists may find the chapters in Part II of interest, though they may be difficult for the general reader. While each is interesting in its own way, collectively, they do not hold together very well.

Taken together, these two volumes are a valuable (if limited) contribution to contemporary theology of public life, for those within the Kuyperian tradition and for those outside. That the authors have, in various ways, been participants and practitioners in public service, only adds to the profundity of their insight. In any case, we all have something valuable to learn from engaging the thought of Kuyper and the tradition he inspired from articulate and sensitive interpreters such as these.