

Professor Nicholas Wolterstorff's "Can Human Rights Survive Secularization?"

A Comment by Ms. Kathryn E. Godfrey
Member, Reformed Institute Board of Directors
Sr. High Teacher, Old Presbyterian Meeting House, Alexandria, VA

In these convocation remarks, *Can Human Rights Survive Secularization?*, Dr. Wolterstorff asserts, quite eloquently and unabashedly, that the only unassailable justification for human rights rests on theism. The building blocks of that precious foundation are distinctly Judeo-Christian, with more than a little emphasis on the latter. The answer to the posited question, therefore, is no. Human rights cannot survive secularization, but we need not worry, because the knowledge and worship of God will never disappear from the face of the earth. This theological justification for human rights, crudely summarized holds that we have basic and fundamental rights that accrue to us simply by virtue of being human. Specifically, we each have value that places a corresponding claim for treatment befitting that value because we are God's and made in the image of God. Failure to honor the claims we have by virtue of being God's people is to wrong God—the ultimate wrong.

Some may question whether the enterprise of articulating a basis for human rights is a worthwhile endeavor. Do human rights really require a justification? Are not, as Thomas Jefferson asserted, "these truths self-evident"? One defense of this enterprise is simply to direct the critic to observe the state of human suffering and its causes in many regions of the world. That leads to another question all together. Is it appropriate to engage in abstract philosophical navel gazing while tangible human suffering screams for action not mere contemplation? To that line of questioning, moral philosophers and theologians must respond with a clear and commonly understood objective for their work, which cannot be an end in itself. The world has no need for an unassailable defense of human rights that does not engender corresponding action. Although that objective, for me, remains nebulously and imprecisely defined I gather that it is to establish some kind of objective criteria for claims that we may make upon each other—entailing both positive and negative action—that compels each and every individual and institution as a directive to avoid acting in a way that fails to uphold that claim. From a philosophical perspective, to fulfill the need for an objective base on which to evaluate such claims, these criteria, this foundation for human rights, would have to be temporally and culturally transcendent.

There can be no doubt that the narrative Dr. Wolterstorff offers fits this bill, in many respects. The evidence he offers that the concept of natural rights did not begin in seventeenth century nor even in the fourteenth century, but can be identified and inferred in the earliest Hebrew and Christian Scriptures attests to the power of the Judeo-Christian narrative to act as a foundation for human rights. It certainly seems to have some amount of temporal transcendence. Even as generations have changed the way they organize their thinking and make sense of the world, the strain remains. Although, it was necessary for Dr. Wolterstorff to rescue rights talk from possessive individualism, because of conventions that have led us there since the Enlightenment, it really is not much of a stretch to find the same narrative in John Locke. There are of course, differences in Lockean philosophy and the scripture Dr. Wolterstorff offers to support the claim that we find natural rights concepts there. John Chrysostom's idea that we not only have property in ourselves, as Locke would say, but also actually hold property belonging to our brothers and sisters with corresponding duties, is certainly more expansive, more communitarian, and more

supportive of claims that require positive action Locke. Nonetheless, I think the same theological basis for human rights is implicit in Locke's defense of the existence of natural rights.

The Christian narrative also has the advantage of offering a clear objective and call to action. If we are reflections of a good and benevolent God, the project is to bring us into right relationship with God and free us to act in accordance with God's will. That is, to affect change in human and institutional behavior, we need a normative codification of human rights that frees individuals and institutions from the hard habits of a fallen world. I am not sure, however, that the narrative alone it can fulfill the charge that it implies.

Using the pluralist lens that dominates thinking in the global age, I have to wonder if locating the origin of human rights in scripture begs the question of whether these texts fundamentally and universally establish human rights or whether they are one among many vehicles capable expressing a powerful meta-narrative that lies beneath the level of language. The Judeo-Christian narrative is indeed powerful—for those of us already fluent in it, but what power does it hold to persuade one who is not? If I reject God or do not believe that I am loved by God, then what does it mean to me to wrong God? What do we do about people—especially powerful leaders—that profess Christian principles while simultaneously sublimating them to abstract and essentially contestable concepts like national security and benevolent human patriarchy? How do we make sense of institutions imbued with people who profess Christian principles yet consistently act in violation of them? Perhaps, the world is not becoming more secular, but are even the people and institutions outwardly aligned with the Judeo-Christian religions regularly demonstrating fidelity to their principles?