

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

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There is much to commend in Nicholas Wolterstorff's defense of the inherent dignity of humanity in a moral universe prohibiting the violation of that dignity. Having worked with Amnesty International against the use of torture, capital punishment and unjust imprisonment, I can appreciate his assertion that such practices are universally wrong because they violate what is universally true: human beings have worth that befits their status as made in the image of God. In fact, that assertion is so embedded in my own conscientiousness that to question it is like tearing down the moral house. This conscientiousness was once true for nearly everyone in western civilization but I am certain it is rapidly fading out of view.

While there is much to commend, what I found missing in Professor Wolterstorff's essay is any mention of gift, rather than right, as the basis for human worth and moral practice. He comes close by acknowledging Christians who claim the use of rights language often leads to possessive individualism, but then dismisses this criticism as a problem between theory and practice. Bad practice doesn't mean bad theory. I wonder if a theory of human rights that nowhere accounts for gift (and Giver) as the basis for life can ever lead away from a sense of entitlement? To assert my right is to claim my entitlement. That is not a problem with an abuse of theory, that is the natural outcome of the theory. Wolterstorff defends against the criticism that rights language leads to possessive individualism by claiming the practice is an abuse of the theory. *But if a theory has no consistent connection with the practices that flow naturally from it then what is the point?*

The language of rights produces a sense of entitlement. The language of gifts/Giver creates a sense of gratitude for what is given, to the One who gives it. For Christians, the basis of all life is found in the generosity of God who gives all good gifts, including the gift of life itself. This life is supremely revealed in the gift of Jesus Christ given for the salvation of the world. Acknowledging our dependence upon these gifts and the gift giver, we offer lives of praise and gratitude to the Giver. A language of rights alone cannot account for the gratitude that arises from a human being in response to the generosity of God. Nor can rights language alone account for lives of generosity, mercy and compassion without regard to entitlement.

What I also found worrisome about his essay is precisely this naked assertion of a moral universe that sounds strikingly similar to that of the enlightenment, although he strenuously argues against this criticism drawing upon philosophers of earlier centuries. Once that has been asserted and firmly in place, he then turns to the scriptures – principally, though not exclusively, the Old Testament – and the early Church fathers to buttress what has been posited. But, what if the premise itself is faulty? What if arguments, based upon western philosophy, buttressed by scriptures and asserted as universally true are no longer possible?

We live in a time in which moral narratives are in conflict with one another; some would argue it is no longer possible to presume what Wolterstorff asserts as universally true. The large story which

encompasses all people of all cultures of all time has given way to the local narrative that takes account of the nuances of cultural practices. These stories contest with one another and their worth is proven by the practices that flow from them. He alludes to this predicament at the end of his essay by asking whether human rights can survive the onslaught of secularization. Curiously, he says probably not but then asserts a hopeful comment, as if trying not to end on a down note, that all shall be well because God will make it well. For some unbelievers looking upon the demise of human rights around the world and listening to debates about torture, that hope may seem a bit romantic like the canary in a coal mine.

Finally, I would like for his defense of the inherent worth of humanity to take account of the possibility of competing moral arguments that are not so assured of human dignity nor sanguine about God embedded in the hearts of all. What of those human beings who publicly delight in death, claiming a religious moral argument as their warrant?