

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

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Rights thinking and the Suffering servant.

In his new book *Justice: rights and wrongs*. Princeton University Press, 2008, Nicholas Wolterstorff attempts to show how human rights are grounded by using the ontological argument that God exists independent of man or woman. This argument permits him to ground human rights in the Judeo-Christian scriptural position that mankind, male and female are made in God's image (*imago Dei*). Thus, where Kant has grounded his categorical imperative that all men are to be treated as ends and not as means on the rational agency of human beings, Wolterstorff has grounded the proposition on the concept of man is made *imago Dei*.

To explain how human rights are grounded however, while a valid starting point does not go far enough. The basic problems of rule deontology are not solved. The question still remains will those rights secure the non-violation of every other inherent natural right? I think not. Moral dilemmas will continue to be created when rights come into conflict and there is no mechanism for solving them.

To accept the ontological argument in the Judeo-Christian context, however, gives one far more tools with which to solve this issue of rights in collision than traditional categorical thinking in the vein of Immanuel Kant. The concept of *Imago Dei* has very large ramifications. One of those ramifications is that God is social. Not in the sense of Process Theology, that God needs man to be social, He does not. Rather, to think of God as social in the sense of the social family of God, as the Father relates to the Son, as the Son relates to the Spirit, and all the iterations, permutations, and combinations of the relationship of those three persons.. Therefore, if man is made in God's image and God is social can it not follow that man is a social creature in God's image as well? Thus, if as Wolterstorff holds that every human being must honor every other human because each is made in God's image I propose that one can argue that part of that image is a social nature and we as human kind should honor that social nature. But what is that social nature.

Royce Gordon Gruenler in *The Trinity in the Gospel of John*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Oregon (1986), states, that

"an essential characteristic of the divine community is revealed through the mind of Christ, which Paul describes in Philippians 2:1-11. It is the quality of being at on another's disposal. ... [e]ach of the persons of the trinity is at the service of the others, so united are they in essential love." p. 21. If this is the social image we should seek to replicate, then clearly the deontological test has been altered. Rather than arguing simply that all mankind must seek to be justly treated as equals we have altered the proposition by requiring that we should serve one another even to the point of being "disposable" for each other. As rational agents then rather than being part of the imperative in which we view ourselves and each other exclusively as equal ends, the imperative requiring us to honor the social economy of the divine family within our society requires us first to view others as ends, and second that we, must be willing to be the means for another's good end where self-sacrifice is not an end in itself.

Louis Janssen gives us insight into this proposition in his discussion of the Christian narrative⁽¹⁾ He writes

“the Christian narrative does not tell us to sacrifice ourselves aimlessly. It does not even tell us that self sacrificial love is the center of the Christian life. Instead it tells a profound story with the following point: in order to live an ethic of equal regard, one must be willing time and again to go the extra mile—to work hard, endure, even sacrifice – not as an end itself but as a means to restoring love as equal regard.”

I submit that if we truly adopt the ontological argument of *imago Dei* that we must focus on what it means to have a social nature in God’s image. I propose that the moral dilemmas created by conflicting rights and duties within the traditional deontological paradigm will in Wittgenstein’s words “dissolve” when we engage in a paradigm shift from each person viewing himself or herself exclusively as an end and acknowledging that to serve as a “means” for the good of another when equal regard and mutual respect, read the human rights of another, are challenged.

⁽¹⁾ Louis Janssen, “The Norms and Priorities of a Love ethic,” *Louvain Studies* 6 (spring 1977) p.228.