

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

A Comment by Dr. Gregory Stanton  
James Farmer Professor in Human Rights  
University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, Virginia  
President, Genocide Watch  
Elder, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA

Professor Wolterstorff presents a compelling reply to the academic army of atheists and post-modernists who now dominate debate on ethics and human rights in American universities and secular human rights groups.

Most Western Civilization courses today teach that the philosophical justifications for human rights are a cultural achievement of the European Enlightenment. Marxists, anarchists, followers of Nietzsche and other critics of Western values dismiss this dogma with a reversion to the position of Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic: justice is simply the will of the stronger. It's an old falsehood that Socrates demolished as self-contradictory, but it has amazing tenacity. Even the horror of twentieth century Nazism and Communism, in which the will of the stronger meant the deaths of over a hundred million people, has not penetrated the neo-Marxist babble of leftist professors on American college campuses today.

Post-modernists are even worse. They represent the new orthodoxy on campuses today. For the post-modernist, there can be no universal standard for human rights because every culture constructs the consciousness of its members. There are no natural rights. Therefore, each culture has a right to develop its own standards for human behavior. Post-modernists look to Heidegger as their prophet. The fact that he was, in fact, a Nazi does not seem to faze them. "He didn't really mean it," they say. The direct link between the inadequacy of Heidegger's relativism and his Nazi beliefs does not seem to occur to them.

It is refreshing to read Professor Wolterstorff's vigorous rebuttal of such views. The ethics of human rights did not start with the Enlightenment, he argues. They started with the Old and New Testaments. They are not culturally relative. They are culturally interpreted. Human rights are founded upon the inherent dignity of every human being. Wolterstorff's logic is powerful. If human beings are created in the image of God, then a violation of universal human rights is literally a violation of the First Commandment to have no other gods before God. The Ten Commandments, upon which universal human rights rest, begin with a reminder that God brought people out of slavery, and end with duties to not murder, steal or lie. These are duties that carry with them correlative rights by others not to be murdered, stolen from, or lied to.

There are a few other rights in there, too. The joke is that Moses came down the mountain and said, "I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I got God down to ten. The bad news is that adultery is still in there." The fundamental wisdom of even this commandment, which is probably the second most violated commandment after the prohibition on idol worship (as John Calvin noted,) is that it was one of the first protections for women in any world religion.

The question I have for Professor Woltersdorff is how we who are Christians can persuade non-believers that human rights are universal. Can't philosophers find a way to show, as Socrates did, that other positions are self-contradictory?

My teacher, Alan Gewirth, at the University of Chicago, attempted that in his "Epistemology of Human Rights." (1984) He agrees with you that human rights are relational claims that entail correlative duties, a position laid out elegantly by Wesley Hohfeld in his "Fundamental Legal Conceptions." (1964) Gewirth agrees with you that utilitarian, Marxist, and Rawlsian justifications for rights ultimately fail. He even finds Kant's attribution of human dignity as logically prior to rights impossible to prove by empirical reference. (Perhaps that is where you would disagree with him.) Gewirth's argument proceeds from self-assertion of a right to freedom and well-being, to a reciprocal right of others to such freedom and well-being, and ultimately rests on the individual's existence as a prospective purposive agent. (This is a position you find inadequate to protect the rights of Alzheimer's patients and the severely mentally disabled. No wonder the Nietzschean Nazis killed them first.) Gewirth concludes with something very close to the Golden Rule: "Act in accord with the generic rights of your recipients as well as of yourself." Gewirth does not find it necessary to ground his proof on human beings being created in the image of God, just as Kant attempted to ground his ethics on reason alone.

My own work against genocide has convinced me of the mortal danger modern man faces if we do not affirm our common humanity as members of the same human family in God's creation.

In a secular world, can we justify the universality of human rights without appealing to religious faith?