Rights and wrongs: An interview with Nicholas Wolterstorff

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The Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has pursued a broad range of interests, including political philosophy, aesthetics, metaphysics and the philosophy of religion. He was recently professor of philosophical theology at Yale University and before that taught for many years at his alma mater, Calvin College. He has been president of the American Philosophical Association (Central Division) and of the Society of Christian Philosophers.

Wolterstorff's many books include John Locke and the Ethics of Belief, Until Justice and Peace Embrace, Religion in the Public Square (*with Robert Audi*) *and* Faith and Rationality (*with Alvin Plantinga*). *His 1995 Gifford Lectures were published as* Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology. *He is currently a visiting professor at the University of Virginia.*

You have argued that Christians (along with other believers) have every right to make religious arguments in the public sphere—that they don't need to turn to some neutral, universally rational language before they engage in political debate. Can you explain?

I think it is appropriate in our liberal democracy for Christians, along with adherents of other religions, to make decisions about political issues on the basis of whatever considerations they find true and relevant. I also think it appropriate for them to cite those reasons in public discussions and debates about those political issues. Sometimes, though not always, these reasons will be distinctly religious reasons—Christian, Jewish, whatever. Of course, if you want to persuade your fellow citizens who don't accept your religious reasons to adopt some policy that you favor, you will have to try to find some reasons that they find compelling.

I don't agree, then, with the view of many political theorists that when making up our minds about political issues or debating them in public, we have to appeal to some body of principles that we all accept, or would all accept if we did things right.

I don’t believe that there is any such body of principles. It’s not that we Americans disagree about everything. But we don’t agree about enough things to settle our basic political issues by reference to a body of agreed-on principles.

In light of that stance, how would you evaluate the way that religious views and identities have entered into electoral politics in the United States in recent years?

There are better and worse ways of employing religious reasons in deciding and debating political issues. The way that religion has been bandied about in American politics over the past decade or two has often been lamentable. For one thing, the religion that politicians profess often seems to have little if anything to do with their political positions. Here’s an example: it seems to me obvious that deep within Christianity and Judaism is the injunction to welcome the stranger; yet a good many of the recent crop of presidential candidates seem to have no difficulty at all fervently affirming their Christian piety while at the same time launching attacks on immigrants. They make no attempt—at least none that I have heard—to show how these two fit together. I find myself led to conclude that it was not for Christian reasons that they adopted the immigration policy that they espouse. Their professed Christian piety is a mere add-on to a deeply entrenched nativism.

I think the fundamental considerations that we ought to employ in debating political issues are justice and the common good: what do justice and the common good require? But I find, to my dismay, that when politicians do seem genuinely motivated by their religion, often their goal is not to secure justice and promote the common good but to secure power for their party. They try to use the levers of power for their own advantage. And in the process of doing so, they often heap abuse on those whose positions they disagree with, treating them with profound disrespect. That’s wrong.

So I defend the right of Christians and other believers to use religious reasons in deciding and debating political issues. But there are right ways and wrong ways, good ways and bad ways, of employing those reasons. And we have seen a lot of wrong and bad ways in recent years.

For most of the 20th century Protestant theologians in the U.S. assumed that that there is a natural affinity between Christianity and democracy. That view has come under attack of late by neotraditionalists who are

highly critical of the ethos of liberal democracy, which is—as they see it—focused on individual autonomy, individual rights and a thin, procedural view of justice. We take it that you aren't persuaded by that critique.

Very often in human history, the people living under a particular political jurisdiction have shared a common vision of God and the good, and they have seen their polity as the highest institutional expression of that shared vision. One effect of the Protestant Reformation was that within a century, in northwest Europe, this sort of unity was gone; political jurisdictions contained within their citizenry not one community united by a shared vision of God and the good but a number of distinct such communities. Religious strife raged across northwest Europe. It was in this situation that political thinkers and activists began to suggest that a new form of political organization had to be devised. Northwest Europe and its colonies began the risky experiment of granting to all citizens the right to free exercise of their religion. In the U.S. this risky experiment was taken even farther: there was not even to be any establishment of religion.

What this meant, obviously, was that the polity could no longer be seen as the highest institutional expression of a community united by a shared vision of God and the good, for there was no such community; the citizens were deeply divided in their vision of God and the good. The polity was instead an *association* of such communities.

Does this imply that such a polity has no moral basis? Does it imply that it is nothing more than an amoral arrangement of convenience? That's what many of our present-day communitarians and Christian traditionalists claim. And if one is looking for the sort of moral basis possessed by a polity whose citizens are united by a shared vision of God and the good, one will indeed conclude that our political structure has no moral basis.

I think the conclusion that liberal democracy has no moral basis is seriously mistaken. At the heart of liberal democracy is limited government. Historically those limits have been specified by an appeal to natural rights. Citizens have a natural right against the state to free exercise of religion; that's why they should have the civil right to such exercise. Similarly, they have a natural right against the state to freedom of assembly, to freedom of association and so forth. Liberal democracy is a justice-based political structure. More specifically, it's a natural-rights-based political structure.

There are two additional principles essential to liberal democracy. First, governmental officials are accountable to the people. The government of a liberal democracy is like every other government in that it coerces its citizens in all kinds of ways for the common good—the dominant form of this coercion being taxation. What is unique to liberal democracy is that the officials who institute laws and policies for the common good are all to be accountable to the people. Second, liberal democracy is based on the principle that every adult is the political equal of every other adult.

I hold, in short, that liberal democracy has a very thick moral basis.

Now to speak directly to some of the points of criticism. Some critics don't like liberal democracy because they discern, correctly, that it is a natural-rights-based policy, and they don't like the idea of natural rights; they think there aren't any. The idea of natural rights, they say, originated in the (supposedly) secular Enlightenment; possessive individualism is built into its DNA. Well, we now know, as the result of the work of such students of medieval canon law as Brian Tierney and Charles Reid, that the canon lawyers of the 12th century were already employing, in a highly articulate way, the idea of natural rights. And no one would accuse the canon lawyers of being possessive individualists. The common narrative about the idea of natural rights originating in the Enlightenment is indisputably false. (I discuss this in some detail in my forthcoming book, *Justice*: *Rights and Wrongs* [Princeton University Press]).

Another charge against liberal democracy, coming from Christians, is that it undermines Christian virtues. But remember that our citizenry is religiously pluralistic and that our polity is an association of religio-moral communities rather than the highest institutional expression of one such community. So it's up to the Christian community to teach Christian virtues to its members; it cannot depend on the state doing that. I think we are dealing here with a matter of justice, not of convenience. It would be unjust to force those who are not Christian to undergo training in Christian virtue—just as it would be unjust to force those who are Christian to undergo training in non-Christian virtue.

Much of the current theological critique of liberal society focuses not so much on democracy as a system of political representation as on liberalism as a form of society that operates, or seeks to operate, without a substantive conception of the good. Presumably, a liberal society is one

that does not affirm any vision of the good life, but only affirms each individual's right to seek his or her vision of the good life. Is such a society sustainable?

By virtue of the fact that liberal democracy is an association of communities, each of which has its own vision of God and the good, rather than itself being the highest institutional expression of one such community, it does indeed operate without a common substantive conception of the good. Nonetheless, as I indicated, it has a thick moral basis of its own.

We suffer from a great many social ills nowadays. I think those are mainly to be laid at the door of capitalism and nationalism, not at the door of our liberal democratic political structure, and at the door of the church for failing to teach its members how to be discerning critics of capitalism and nationalism.

Is liberal democracy sustainable? Can it endure? Don't we *need* a common conception of God and the good? I find it interesting that such liberal theorists as John Rawls and Robert Audi agree on this point with communitarians and Christian traditionalists.

Suppose it were true that we need a common conception of God and the good. How do the critics propose getting that commonality—by force? Also, liberal democracy is undoubtedly a fragile arrangement. Its endurance presupposes a distinct set of political virtues in its citizens. Those virtues may decline, and to that extent, such a form of government is no longer possible. Sad to say, a good many Christians are contributing to the decline of those virtues by how they act in the political arena.

I regard liberal democracy as a pearl of great price. I think that the recognition of human beings as having natural rights, by virtue of the worth they all possess on account of bearing the image of God and being loved by God, goes back into the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. So also then, the conviction that we are all equal in that fundamental way goes back into the scriptures.

How did a Reformed philosopher become passionate about justice?

I became passionate about justice because of two episodes in my life. First, in September 1976 I attended a conference in South Africa at which not only were white Afrikaners present but also black and "colored" (mixed-race) scholars from South Africa. The latter two groups spoke in moving language about the indignities

daily heaped upon them and pleaded for justice. I felt that I had been called by God—in the classic Protestant sense of “call”— to speak up in my own way for these wronged people.

Second, in May 1978 I attended a conference on Palestinian rights on the west side of Chicago. About 150 Palestinians were present, most of them Christian. They too poured out their hearts about the indignities heaped upon them and pleaded for justice. Again, I felt that I had been called by God to speak up for these wronged people.

In short, it was hearing the voices and seeing the faces of the wronged that evoked in me a passion for justice. A good deal of my writing since these two episodes has been about justice. I see all of it as my attempt to speak up for the wronged of the world.

The effect of these two episodes has gone beyond my writing, however. I became friends with a rather large number of “coloreds” and blacks from South Africa and of whites in the resistance movement. I have often spoken about South Africa and have returned there a number of times. One of those times was as a character witness in a trial of Allan Boesak. Boesak, along with Bishop Desmond Tutu, was one of the two most important religious leaders of the resistance. He has been a dear friend for 25 years.

I also did a great deal of speaking on the plight of the Palestinians, and I became head of an organization called the Palestine Human Rights Campaign. When the Oslo Agreement was signed, I thought that the day of outsiders making a contribution to peace with justice in the Middle East was over, that it was now in the hands of the Palestinians and the Israelis. That proved to have been a naive conclusion!

Justice is a word we hear invoked in countless situations. Yet deciding what it means to act justly in particular situations (whether it’s a case of affirmative action or the huge global inequalities in living standards) is highly controversial. How can we begin to get clear about what justice is?

As I see it, justice is grounded in rights. A society is just insofar as its members are enjoying those goods to which they have a right—or to put it from the other side, insofar as no one is being wronged. In turn, I understand rights as grounded in worth. You have a right to my treating you a certain way if my failure to do so would be to treat you as having less worth than you do have.

A good number of moral systems do not take the worth of persons into account; they take into account only how well or poorly people's lives are going. Utilitarianism is an example. The utilitarian says that we should aim at bringing about as much well-being as possible—that is, as much good as possible in people's lives. Nothing is said about the worth of the persons whose lives those are. The reason I think that the recognition of rights is to be found in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is that there one finds the worth of human beings affirmed.

So how does one decide what justice requires? How do I decide whether justice requires that I treat a student of mine in a certain way? I ask whether my not treating her that way would amount to treating her as if she had less worth than she does have. If she has written a top-notch paper but I nonetheless give her a mediocre grade, I have wronged her. Of course, it's not always easy to discern what respect for worth requires. But it's also not always easy to discern what obligation requires. And so on for all other moral concepts.

Justice is not everything, however. Love never falls short of justice, but often it goes beyond justice. Likewise, to return to politics, the common good often goes beyond what justice requires.

I think that the overarching category that Christians should use for thinking about social and political relations is that of *shalom*. There is no shalom without justice, but shalom goes beyond justice.

You've long been interested in the unique capacity of the arts for showing the depths of reality. Would you comment on what is most encouraging or discouraging to you in the current scene regarding liturgy and the arts?

That scene seems to me nothing short of dismal and chaotic. I want to keep perspective on the matter. Surely at most times and most places, the music and art of the church have been, from an aesthetic point of view, pretty bad. The reason it's easy to think otherwise is that we keep alive the great liturgical art from the past while allowing the bad stuff to fall out of memory and to decay. We visit Chartres Cathedral and listen to a Bach cantata and think, Oh, how wonderful it once was. But most Christians of that era never set foot in Chartres or in anything like it, and most never heard a Bach cantata or anything like it.

However, I don't think aesthetic considerations are the first considerations to use when it comes to liturgical art. They are by no means irrelevant, but the first

consideration to use, in my judgment, is whether this music or this art fits what we are doing and saying in the liturgy. And does what we are doing and saying in the liturgy fit the God whom we worship? It is this lack of fittingness that most distresses me. Four electric guitars, an electronic keyboard, three young women holding mikes, leading us in a praise song that begins, “Oh how I appreciate you, Jesus”: do these words and this music fit Jesus, divine Son of God who dwelt among us, was crucified and rose from the dead? The music and the words are aesthetically bad. But worse, they don’t fit.

American Christians, in their passion for relevance, have all too often mindlessly borrowed secular culture while at the same time railing against the inroads of “secular humanism.”

What pitch might you make for pastors and theologians to be educated in philosophy, at least to some degree?

No pastor should be ignorant of theology, for theology is the church’s systematic and critical expression of what it has to say about God. And no theologian should be ignorant of philosophy. For from the time of the church fathers onward, the reflections of theologians have been shaped by philosophical concepts and ways of thought—sometimes for good, sometimes for ill. A little philosophy is a bad thing, however. To my students who want to become theologians I say, be a theologian, honor the tradition of theology, don’t try to be an ersatz philosopher. But study enough philosophy to become sure-footed in it. Otherwise you will be jumping on bandwagons that you ought to turn your back on and missing those that are going your direction.

You are perhaps most widely known for your moving book Lament for a Son, about the death of your son Eric. That book ends with a vision of God bearing the suffering of the world in tears. Perhaps that vision is the end of theodicy, or the dissolving of theodicy. In any case we wonder how you might respond to a classic theodicy question: Why did God create a world that God must endure in tears?

My little book *Lament for a Son* is not a book about grief. It is a cry of grief. After the death of our son, I dipped into a number of books *about* grief. I could not read them. It was impossible for me to reflect on grief in the abstract. I was *in* grief. My book is a grieving cry.

In the course of my cry I hold out the vision of God as with me in my grief, of God as grieving with me; God is with me on the mourning bench. I know that one of the attributes traditionally ascribed to God is impassibility—the inability to suffer. I think the traditional theologians were mistaken on this point. I find the scriptures saying that God is disturbed by what transpires in this world and is working to redeem us from evil and suffering. I do not see how a redeeming God can be impassible.

The traditional question of theodicy is, Why does God permit moral evil and permit suffering that serves no discernible good? If we hold that God is not impassible, then in addition to that question we have another: Why does God permit what disturbs God? Why does God allow what God endures in tears?

I do not know the answer. In faith I live the question.