

Review Essay

Reason Within The Bounds of Religion

By Nicholas Wolterstorff

William Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1976, 2nd edition 1984. 146 pps.

Few subjects have more theoretical or practical importance to a Christian scholar than to consider the relationship between their religious commitment and their academic scholarship. But I'm afraid that's about the easiest thing to say about the whole subject. Nicholas Wolterstorff took up that very challenging task more than thirty years ago in his 1976 book, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, and some seven years later added to it in his second edition where he laid out how he thought theory and praxis should come together. Written as a reflection, or as he says, a tract to Christians, he welcomes others (presumably non-Christians) to read over our shoulders. The reason I'm reviewing this important book *now* (more than three decades since its authorship) is that it seems to have had more influence on Christian scholars at Christian universities than on Christian scholars at secular ones and I think what Wolterstorff has said should not be missed by this latter group.

I will focus my review on the first part of his book, "Faith and Theory" since the second part of his book, "Theory and Praxis" has been developed more extensively in other of Wolterstorff's work—see *Teaching for Shalom*—and a review of that book would seem to be more fruitful for understanding his mature perspective on that. As Wolterstorff says in his preface to the first edition, his general topic for consideration "...is religion and science (Wissenschaft).", but from "within" the Christian religion.

A major thrust of his book is to explain what he defines as "control beliefs" and how they affect theory making and the scholarship of committed Christian scholars. In chapter nine of his book, "The Structure of Theory Weighing," he distinguishes between *data-background beliefs*, which typically have a relationship to "an enormously complicated web of theory" but at a specific time are taken as "unproblematic" and *control beliefs* which have to do more with the, "...requisite logical or aesthetic structure of a theory, beliefs about the entities to whose existences a theory may correctly commit us..."

In this review I want to sketch out different parts of how Wolterstorff develops this view and what I think he means to say. I will offer a few clarifications about what I think he's saying and do some evaluation. Because some of Wolterstorff's observations roughly reflect the level of development in epistemology when he wrote the book, there may also be some things to say about the direction he wants to take us given the last twenty to thirty years of work in this discipline which has moved that discussion forward. In the end I want to say that though Wolterstorff's essay isn't a complete last word on the subject, he does raise an important question for the Christian scholar and scientist who want to pledge their troth to a strictly empirical understanding of the methodology of science. And thereby gives us reason to pause and reconsider all of what is implied.

At the beginning Wolterstorff is concerned with exploring and justifying the position that while some particular religious doctrines which formed an important part of the background beliefs of medieval scholars set back the progress of science, it is also true that certain scientific doctrines have performed more or less the same sort of feat. It is implied in his work that since anyone who enters into scholarship is carrying in their background beliefs—which could eventually be proved false—why shouldn't Christian scholars (continue to) carry theirs into their work? He feels this would work if Christian scholars keep an open mind about the possibility that some of their religious doctrines are poorly formed or even false. (I would add that for this to “work” beyond the Christian community—in the public arena—it would require its acceptance by secular colleagues, which is no small challenge.)

To get to his latter conclusion Wolterstorff takes us on a journey to explore the nature of theory making, what he calls a theory of legitimate theories. His position is that the predominate view of this project since the Enlightenment is a foundationalist conception. Here, I think, the best way to understand what he means by a foundationalist picture of epistemology is to see it in fairly close terms to what Descartes proposed. That is, the proper way to think about legitimate claims of knowledge is to think that they must follow logically from foundational truths that no rational person can doubt. His next moves, which are deconstructive, are to show that such a project is untenable. His rejection of that sort of foundationalism as the basis for scholarly knowledge (other than perhaps the existence of merely “something” or the self) has wide and deep support in contemporary philosophy and I personally agree with this analysis. Contra Descartes I'm inclined to agree that you cannot even get observational science off the ground with that view. Space will not allow me to elaborate. Wolterstorff goes on to argue, even if this foundationalist strategy is supplemented with propositions that are probable with respect to those foundations, one still cannot be sure enough to form *indubitable* control beliefs—the problem of induction guarantees us that.

Of particular relevance to Christian scholars is that Wolterstorff also eschews any Christian attempt to justify her position by finding it within another sort of foundationalism—Biblical foundationalism—of the sort where one takes a Biblical *doctrine* as the indubitable starting truth and goes on theorizing from there. This is where his nuancing takes it up a notch and can cause some confusion. This is because what seems to emerge from his suggestions is both that one should include religious doctrines in one's theorizing but at the same time not consider them to be indubitable truth—the latter assertion being something that many conservative theologians might take for granted. But it seems to me that all one has to do is look at the history of theology to see that enough changes and theological “mistakes” have been made and that enough instances of theological ambiguity have been adduced to give one pause about claiming that the deliverances of theology *per se* constitutes a properly held *indubitable* control belief.

It seems to me that such a state of affairs, however, does not imply that there cannot be orthodoxy—what essential doctrines most Christians hold at a particular time—or that the Bible properly interpreted isn't telling us truth. The problem is that history has taught us that sometimes *our* understanding, *our* interpretation of what the Word and the Spirit have to say was a more challenging problem than some theologians would want to admit. Simply put, the varied literature of the Bible which involves diverse

genres, authors, places and times in history, to name a few, provides good reason to approach theology with some epistemic humility. Few of us—probably none of us—think that the world is flat or the sun and the planets revolve around the earth, but at least some earlier Christian thinkers have believed that and today those theological views seem to be ones that a Christian scholar would not want as a part of her control beliefs for theory making and theory weighing.

So where would this take us? I think Wolterstorff's answer would be something like this: the Christian scholar should form her control beliefs (some of which are religious doctrines) from what he calls her 'authentic commitment' (which are not to be thought of as an indubitable starting point) and "...devise theories that lead to promising, interesting, fruitful, challenging lines of research." (p. 102) Such a theory seems to me to resonate with the medieval expression "I believe in order to understand" and the C.S. Lewis aphorism, "I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it *but because by it I see everything else.*" (emphasis mine) But Wolterstorff seems to dismiss this in his discussion of the complementarists, the (foundational) preconditionalists, and the incorporationalist views of the relationship between faith and reason. So I think a key to understanding Wolterstorff is that he seems best understood as *non-classical* foundationalist preconditionalist.

This approach to theorizing is contradistinction to what he calls a radical conformism—something he eschews—where the Christian scholar completely separates her religious doctrines from her scholarly life. In this scenario science and religion are seen as two non-overlapping domains and therefore, in principle, they could not come into conflict with one another. Bringing your religious views into your control beliefs would be seen as an embarrassing confusion of domains. While the devotee of this view may reject secularism *tout court*, she does hold that it is perfectly proper to accept secularization with respect to science.

Parenthetically I want to say that in more current circles, two important paradigms about the proper way epistemology should be construed are the foundationalist picture and the coherency picture. It is tempting to think that when Wolterstorff rejects what he calls (epistemic) foundationalism he is accepting the (epistemic) coherency view. However, I think the proper way to understand Wolterstorff is not that he is necessarily accepting or subtly promoting a coherency theory when he speaks of the need for a non-foundationalist theory, but what he was really rejecting is what is now thought of as a *form* of foundationalism. That particular rejected form has been more recently classified as *classical* foundationalism.

It has turned out, mainly through the work of Alvin Plantinga and his interpreters, that foundationalism is better understood as a broader category that can properly include more than the classical view. For instance, a modest foundationalist might hold that there are foundations in a properly formed noetic structure which are not self-evident for everyone but which are subjectively justifiable. In these cases, the beliefs would need to be formed properly, that is a formed by properly functioning human brain functioning in an environment conducive for those faculties. In such cases the beliefs formed would be deemed epistemically warranted—and if those beliefs are true, then they amount to knowledge.

This may be weak tea indeed for those who suffer from Cartesian anxiety about this kind of “knowledge,” but I am inclined to think that this *is* the epistemic position we are in. What we know *indubitably* doesn’t give us a sufficient platform of propositions, to allow us build an irrefutable knowledge of the empirical world. This would still be the case even if we hold that there is a world beyond our so-called empirical appearances whose nature is independent of our cognition and theory making.

This implies that much of our knowledge is open to correction. And *mutatis mutandis*, why wouldn’t we think this isn’t the case in the domain of theology? And if this is the case, then could we not properly pursue our fallible and correctable knowledge of the empirical world with our fallible and correctable theological control beliefs? I think so and I think this is what Wolterstorff is suggesting.

But there are other issues waiting around the corner which he does not address (and admits so because of length concerns) that surely needs addressing. I cannot address them here; let me point out just two. One concern is that Wolterstorff hasn’t given sufficient justification for rejecting the two non-overlapping magisterial view of science and theology and I don’t think many Christian scholars who hold that view are liable to change their analysis given what he has written. If he has shown that Christian scholarship can be done the way he endorses, he certainly hasn’t shown it *must* be done this way. To do so Wolterstorff (or anyone else) would have to show, at least, that the deliverances of these two methodologies are mutually exclusive maps of the same terrain.

Second, even given the failure of the classical foundationalist picture of epistemology and the collapse of the explicitly reductionist move of the logical positivists in the second half of last century, there **remains more than a small residue** of methodological true believers in science (and scholarship) construed in empirical terms. Is it not its spectacular success in producing publicly verifiable results that gives it its cachet? And does not its methodology provide for widest of participation in its fruits among many communities? And does not, as a matter of practical fact, the so-called physical world impinge on us (as Hume declared) with more force than the spiritual world? It seems to me that there is much to say about these issues; Wolterstorff doesn’t speak to them and they need to be addressed.

Well the fact of the matter is that there are others “out there” who are following Wolterstorff’s lead and have been working on such problems. All this points to the fact that while *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* is not the last word worth saying on the subject, it does have something important to say at least as a well thought out first word. And because it is a well thought out and well written first word, I commend it to you as an important book to read or re-read.

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