Book Reviews

Robert van Putten, Bart Cusveller and Rob Nijhoff, eds.


Readers of Dutch are being served with a new access to the practical philosophy of Nicholas Wolterstorff. Two of the book’s fifteen chapters are translations of Wolterstorff’s works, to wit, a short autobiography, and a newly written exposé in which he explains why he is a Kuyperian, but not a Dooyeweerdian. The other thirteen chapters are generally introductory and appreciative in kind, with limited critical engagement. Although his epistemological work receives hardly any attention, the book provides a good introduction to a large part of Wolterstorff’s oeuvre.

Denken om shalom is divided into five parts. In the first part, Herman Veenhof reflects on Wolterstorff’s autobiographical essay and his writings on grief after the loss of his son. He concurs with Wolterstorff on the need for lament and the appropriation of one’s grief and notes that, even though Wolterstorff thinks the image of an empathetic but helpless God is theologically unsatisfying, his ideas on the suffering love of God in fact approach it closely.

The second part is on justice and politics, and opens with an essay by Geert Jan Spijker on Wolterstorff’s defense of an “equal political voice” in the public sphere. Against widely shared liberal views that the public domain should only allow for views acceptable to all reasonable people, Wolterstorff maintains that citizens should have an equal opportunity to participate in lawful democratic debate with contributions that suit their particularities, including religious ones.

Govert Buijs is more critical in raising the question of what exactly Wolterstorff was aiming for with his book-length argument that the only sound justification of human rights is a theistic one that sees human rights as inherent to human beings. Would it not have been better, especially as a Christian philosopher, to search for traces of God’s human dignity bestowing presence in other traditions as well, rather than joining the choir of the contemporary
debunking discourse on human rights? If Wolterstorff’s aim was apologetic, Buijs is concerned about the risk of lacking common ground with people who do not share his Christian presuppositions. Buijs is more sympathetic to two other possible aims. First, Wolterstorff seems to try to convince his fellow Christians that the idea of human rights is in line with the earlier Christian tradition and deserves their support. Second, in a secular world where human rights are a threatened species, Wolterstorff rightly articulates a deep concern regarding our understanding of them.

Robert van Putten explains how for Wolterstorff the authority of the state is limited by rights. Wolterstorff argues that the government is appointed by God—contra Yoder and Hauerwas—but does not have its authority in virtue of being the state (“positional authority”)—a mistaken view he ascribes to Calvin, among others. Rather, the state has “performance authority”; that is, an authority limited to its tasks and function. The government’s authority can also be derived from the right not to be harmed. Its tasks are not limited to punishment of wrongdoers but also concern—to some extent—the support of human flourishing, contributing to the realization of social goods. In doing so, the state should acknowledge the rights of all religions and religious institutions. Wolterstorff therefore objects to the two-rules doctrine of Aquinas and Calvin, according to which the state has a supportive function in relation to the church.

Part 3 is concerned with social practices: education, science, and art. Roel Kuiper explains Wolterstorff’s view on Christian education and poses a number of critical questions regarding his Responsibility Theory of Education, according to which education serves to form students in such a way that they tend to act responsibly. Education may serve to attain a more humane world; but should that be its prime aim?

René van Woudenberg introduces Wolterstorff’s view on science and contrasts it to the views of Kuiper and Dooyeweerd, as well as to the view that science and religion are non-overlapping magisteria. Various developments in the philosophy of science have shown the inadequacy of the once dominant view that science is an objective, neutral, general, rational, value-free, and presuppositionless endeavor. In response to the demise of this view, rather than embrace relativism, Wolterstorff concluded that science works differently from the way it often was supposed to work. We all are “cloaked in beliefs,” and traditions, culture, education, faith, etc., inevitably and positively contribute to our theorizing. Christians, therefore, need not ignore their faith when doing science—rather, they should participate in it as Christians. According to Wolterstorff, scientific theories are built from various kinds of beliefs: data