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# Review of Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education

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Nicholas Wolterstorff— *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*

Edited by C.W. Joldersma & G.G. Stronks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

**Tom Christenson**

I first began reading Nick Wolterstorff in the late 1970s when I was introduced to his *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* by a colleague at Concordia College. I have to admit that my first reaction to his work was rather negative. Wolterstorff was making an argument and coming at questions of epistemology and scholarship in ways that I had never encountered before. I couldn't imagine that Christian scholarship, as he described it, could possibly produce anything much of interest. A few years later, therefore, I was reluctant to travel down to St. Olaf College to hear him lecture on a Christian view of the arts. Though I had been interested in the ways Christians incorporate the arts in the life of faith, I couldn't imagine there being anything like a Christian aesthetic nor a Christian view of the arts. What came to mind was a kind of theoretical justification for the kind of art one finds in "Christian bookstores," and I was quite sure I didn't want anything to do with it.

I had established a prejudice, reinforced by a caricature. Had it not been for the prodding of another Concordia colleague I might still be living with both. I am extremely thankful for that colleague and all others along the way who have rescued me from such sink-holes of self-constructed and self-reinforced ignorance. I heard Wolterstorff's lectures, ended up buying the two books that he subsequently published on these topics and reviewed both of them. One of them, his *Art in Action*, I have used many times since in courses I have offered on the philosophy of art.

When I saw this new book of essays by Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom*, I knew immediately that I wanted to review it. Some of the essays included here I had read when they were published elsewhere. But many were new to me.

Two of the essays that I wish to recommend to your reading have a very particular focus: one on the issue of academic freedom at religiously based colleges and universities; a second on the question, "Should the work of our hands have standing in a Christian college?" The

first is one of the most sensible approaches to academic freedom I have ever read, the second poses the question about the relation of the life of the mind to the work of our hands. It initiates reflection toward a philosophy of work.

But most of the essays collected here cluster around the nature of Christian higher education. They seek to answer questions such as: Christian education is education for what? Meant to serve the world how? That relates faith and scholarship how? Shaping the character of students how? I cannot in a review explain completely Wolterstorff's answers to all these questions. So I will focus on two things. The first is the meaning and importance of the conception that appears in the title, *Shalom*. The second is the influence of Abraham Kuyper in shaping the reformed approach to higher education that has influenced Wolterstorff so much.

**Shalom**

Wolterstorff poses the question, "What should be the overall goal of Christian collegiate education?" He goes on to answer:

There is in the Bible a vision of what it is that God want's for God's human creatures—a vision of what constitutes human flourishing.... The vision is not that of disembodied individual contemplation of God; thus it is not the vision of heaven, if that is what one takes heaven to be. It is the vision of *shalom*— a vision first articulated in the poetic and prophetic literature of the Old Testament, but prominent in the New Testament as well under the rubric of *eirene*, peace. (p. 22-23)

I think Wolterstorff raises an interesting question here. What is the overall biblical picture of the life to which humans are called? We do not usually read the scriptures with such an encompassing question in mind. Some might wonder whether the Bible, being the odd anthology it is, presents such a vision. Wolterstorff believes that it does and that vision is *shalom*.

it is, presents such a vision. Wolterstorff believes that it does and that vision is shalom.

Wolterstorff is not satisfied to translate *shalom* as “peace” as is usually done. He argues that the idea also contains the idea of justice, community, communal responsibility and delight. He argues that the Bible shows us God calling humans to a life manifesting all of these dimensions. This is a rich, multi-dimensional concept that should inform not only the *what* of a college curriculum but its *how* as well. He argues that a Christian college should be a place where students not only learn about such things but where they learn to practice them. Obviously one of the focal ideas here is justice and responsible action. Wolterstorff has addressed how we should educate in and toward both of them. One of the chapters in this volume is titled, “Teaching for Justice: On Shaping How Students Are Disposed to Act,” and the title of one of his earlier books is *Educating for Responsible Action*. One of the sections of Wolterstorff’s *Art in Action* is on the role of the arts in taking delight.

A later chapter of the present book returns to the concept of shalom. Wolterstorff writes:

To be human is to be that place in creation where God’s goodness finds its answer in gratitude. I see Christian learning as fundamentally an act of gratitude to God.... Shalom is human flourishing in all its dimensions. My suggestion is that Christian learning contributes to our human flourishing, and that it is, in that way an eirenic act on the part of the community at the same time that it is a eucharistic act. (p. 258)

### **Abraham Kuyper and His Influence**

I have to admit that, though I had often enough heard my Calvinist friends quote Kuyper and refer reverently to him, I did not have a very complete understanding of his thought nor of the contribution he had made to Dutch Reformed Calvinism and to Wolterstorff’s scholarly output. Having some understanding of Kuyper, I now see why Wolterstorff has approached many questions in the way he has, particularly his understanding of Christian scholarship and epistemology.

I will try to briefly paraphrase Wolterstorff’s presentation of Kuyper’s argument in order that we might go on to examine it further. Please remember that what you have here are Kuyper’s thoughts at third remove. I bother to do this only because I hope that others will read both Wolterstorff and Kuyper because of what they find here.

1. Wolterstorff sees Kuyper who published his most influential work in the 1890s as a “post-modern thinker born out of season.” Kuyper maintained that inquiry cannot take place without being informed by some operative belief system. There is no such thing as inquiry generically considered but always inquiry shaped by some assumptions, some agenda, some basic beliefs.

2. It is an unrealistic expectation, therefore, that all rational inquirers will eventually reach a consensus. Pluralism and disagreement are, therefore, a natural outcome. Yet we are inclined to see truth in our own views and to see falsehood in the views of others. This, Kuyper believes, is a manifestation of sin which runs through all our projects of knowing.

3. Just as sin can effect the enterprise of knowing, so can God’s work of salvation. Those in whom God works rebirth (palingenesis) He also creates, as it were, a new mind. Kuyper writes: “And the fact that there are two kinds of people occasions of necessity the fact of two kinds of life and consciousness of life, and of two kinds of science...” (p. 218).

4. Consequently we should *expect* that Christian inquirers in the disciplines will have different views than are typically held by non-Christians.

5. Rather than viewing religious beliefs as prejudices that any inquirer ought to shed or at least bracket in the process of pursuing a discipline, Kuyper invites us to see Christian belief as a particular gift which may inform our awareness of the world in positive ways. This leads him to assert, in Wolterstorff’s phrase, “a privileged cognitive access” for inquirers gifted by the Spirit with Christian faith.

6. This does not imply, Wolterstorff maintains, that every Christian scientist will do better work than every non-Christian one. It only means that the Christian has an advantage, a way of looking at the world informed by Christian belief.

I think that these provocative thoughts are worth pursuing. We very often see things because of the particularity of experience and belief that others lacking those gifts cannot see. Thus we have had to learn to see injustice through the experience of black people and women, we’ve been led to see environmental destruction

by indigenous tribal people, we've been led to see dimensions of slavery by Marxists, and dimensions of brutality by feminists, etc. There is no reason to think that Christians might not be able to see dimensions and aspects of reality that others miss. But at the same time I don't find any reason to think that the Christians in these examples are exclusively nor peculiarly gifted. Can we conclude any more than that they, too, bring their gifts to the table? Should we conclude, perhaps, that the richest picture of reality is one that finds room for the largest variety of voices? Should this lead us to an intentionally pluralistic approach to education rather than a peculiarly Christian one or peculiarly Calvinist one?

Wolterstorff seems to find himself suspended somewhere

between the "privileged access" view that Kuyper articulates and the pluralistic one suggested above. I believe many of Wolterstorff's books are attempts to show (rather than explicitly argue for) what insights the "privileged access" of the Christian inquirer might reveal. Thus while Wolterstorff makes no claims to privileged access to the truth about justice, peace, education, the arts, he does want to demonstrate that an inquirer operating from a viewpoint informed by Christian beliefs will have surprising, wise and eye-opening truths to share. This is what I believe Wolterstorff, through his scholarly efforts in all these areas, has been doing all along. He has not declared the peculiar value of the Christian scholar so much as he has shown it. He is the best example of a fruitful Christian scholar that I know.

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