

Wolterstorff's Problem of Almighty Toleration

Kevin Vallier
Bowling Green State University

The Mighty and the Almighty is the first work of analytic political theology. After fifty years of original contributions to philosophy, Nicholas Wolterstorff (2012) has managed to invent an entirely new subfield. For this, Wolterstorff deserves our admiration and respect.

One of the more remarkable features of the text is that it purports to show that Christian doctrine and liberal democratic institutions are compatible, in contrast to much 20th century Christian political theology. Wolterstorff also resists a "perfectionist" understanding of state authority, where government has the right and duty to promote the temporal and spiritual good. Instead, Wolterstorff (2012, 102) argues that St. Paul, in contrast to Aquinas and Calvin, rightly promoted a "protectionist" conception of the state, where the state's duty is to protect natural rights, among these a right to religious freedom (much expanded upon in *Understanding Liberal Democracy*).

I am sympathetic. I believe that a perfectionist conception of the state cannot make sense of the justification of the governing idea of liberal democracy. It requires, as Wolterstorff rightly notes, that the state acknowledge no in-principle limits on its authority to promote the good.

But here's a worry: some Christian theologians have insisted on a perfectionist doctrine of political order and authority. As Wolterstorff acknowledges, both Aquinas and Calvin were perfectionists (129). This leads me to wonder how it could be that they were so fundamentally confused about the nature of the state. Could it be that both men's minds were formed within a religio-political body (medieval and early modern Christendom) that legally enforced religious orthodoxy and so found it natural to think that the state's job was to promote true religion? Or did they have some insight that perhaps we moderns, in our rush to defend liberal democracy, might have missed?

Perhaps their main insight was taking the spiritual good *very* seriously, so seriously that they were not prepared to place any limits on our social and political power to promote the spiritual good. Perhaps this is what let them to place few restrictions on providing the state with the social and political power to promote Christian doctrine and punish apostasy and heresy as capital crimes. Perhaps we have grown soft and weak and lack their strong faith. Perhaps we've lost our stomach for an unapologetically universalist and exclusivist Christianity. Perhaps that is why we like liberal democracy.

I want Aquinas and Calvin to be wrong. And I would like to be convinced that Wolterstorff has shown as much, but I fear that he has not.

In his recent book, *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, Wolterstorff (2012b, 197-8) claims the protectionist view flows from Christians' increasing recognition of the worth of individuals, worth that they receive from being the objects of God's love and honor. And this may be, but what Wolterstorff does not do, in *Understanding Liberal Democracy* or *The Mighty and the Almighty*, is to adequately explain why the turn from Christian perfectionism to Christian protectionism was justified.

To see why, let's consider some axiological points. Suppose that, objectively speaking, the God-given worth of individuals provides weighty reasons to respect individual rights, including the right to freedom of religion. But suppose further that Christianity is true. If so, there are *very* strong reasons to promote Christianity, as Christian belief is a (if not *the*) clear, reliable path to eternal friendship with God. If so, it appears that we have conflicting reasons: (i) reasons to respect the worth of persons by respecting their religious choices and (ii) reasons to do whatever we can to ensure that non-Christians convert. In this way, we're sensitive to *both* the moral reasons of worth celebrated by modern Christian protectionists like Wolterstorff and the moral reasons of goodness celebrated by medieval Christian perfectionists like Aquinas.

Acknowledging both moral reasons raises two critical questions: Which reasons are weightier? And why? I think most modern Christians will accept that there *are* protectionist reasons based in the worth of persons. But why should we think these reasons are sufficiently weighty to *outweigh* moral reasons of Christian goodness? After all, *salvation might be on the line*.

This might be one non-practical, philosophical reason why Christians have taken so long to recognize a fundamental right to religious freedom: they were concerned with the eternal destiny of humanity, and thought themselves entitled to do what they could to bring it about. I believe they would find incredible the idea that reasons of worth give us reason to respect *mistaken religious choices*. Wolterstorff rightly points out that states really can affect beliefs over time, in contrast to Locke's well-known view (319). So why shouldn't a Christian state do what it can to ensure that children learn true doctrine, even if this includes supporting governmental restrictions on freedom of other religions (or, for that matter, denominations)?

One answer, suggested by Wolterstorff in conversation, is that reasons of worth generate obligations, whereas reasons of Christian goodness do not. And given the nature of obligation, we likely lack reason to ignore that obligation in order to promote Christian goodness. This is because violating the right of religious freedom is *wrong* and we should not do what is wrong. However, it makes sense to ask whether we have sufficient reason to do the wrong thing in some cases. Sometimes, perhaps, weighty reasons of beneficence give us sufficient reason to do the wrong thing.

Another answer, which we can draw from *The Mighty and the Almighty*, is that God has not *authorized* the state to engage in perfectionist coercion. As Wolterstorff (2012a, 151) claims, "Paul does not say that God authorizes the state to pressure citizens into what it regards as pious and virtuous behavior; he says that God authorizes the state to curb and punish wrongdoing." But if God has given Christian rulers all authority on heaven and earth to preach the gospel, why not give Christian rulers the authority to impose the gospel on whomever they are able? Or, at least, why not think that God has authorized rulers to promote the common good generally?

There is no *prohibition* in the Bible to suggest otherwise, certainly not in Paul's case.¹ We know that God wills the good, and wills that we do good, so why not do good through political means by coercively pressuring people to accept the gospel if they're otherwise unwilling?

Now, of course, the state is not competent to enforce true religion. The state will more likely enforce false religion or discredit true religion by associating it with state violence and greasy democratic political processes. But this provides only an *instrumental* reason to respect religious freedom, and so cannot justify a natural right to religious freedom.²

If I am right that these replies fail, the only way to justify a right of religious freedom from a Christian perspective is to show that reasons of worth outweigh moral reasons of Christian goodness. But that is a tall order given that the moral reasons of Christian goodness are reasons to promote *infinite goods*, the goods of knowing God eternally. How could *any* reasons of worth outweigh reasons to promote goods of infinite weight? Wolterstorff has not provided an adequate answer. Consequently, he has not shown that Christians have good reason to support religious freedom. Given that religious freedom is part of the governing idea of liberal democracy, Wolterstorff has not shown that Christians have good reason to endorse liberal democracy.

Bibliography

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 2012a. *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology*. Oxford University Press.

_____. 2012b. *Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.

¹ In Jesus' case, we have Matthew 13:29-30, the part of the parable of the wheat and the tares, which can be interpreted as requiring religious toleration. I take no stand on this passage, but would caution against drawing political principles from it in any direct manner.

² Or, perhaps, it cannot straightforwardly do so.