JOURNEY TOWARD JUSTICE

PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

NICHOLAS P. WOLTERSTORFF

Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, Journey Toward Justice
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
Contents

Series Preface vii
Series Editor’s Foreword ix
Preface xii

Part 1 Awakening
1. Two Awakening Experiences 3
2. An Evening in Amman 11
3. Questions about Starting from the Wronged 15
4. One Difference That Starting from the Wronged Made 22
5. Another Difference That Starting from the Wronged Made 29

Part 2 Justice and Rights
6. Opposition to Rights-Talk 37
7. What Are Rights? 42
8. Rights Grounded in Worth 45
9. Why Rights-Talk Is Important 50
10. Is Rights-Talk for Expressing Possessive Individualism? 57
### Part 3 Justice in Scripture

11. Natural Rights in Three Church Fathers 65  
12. Justice in the Old Testament 69  
15. On English Translations of the New Testament 91  
17. Justice and Love 105  
18. Justice, Love, and Shalom 113  
19. Does Scripture Imply a Right Order Conception of Justice? 119

### Part 4 Righting Injustice

20. Human Rights 129  
21. Six Days in South Africa 140  
22. Art in the Struggle to Right Injustice 151  
23. On the Blocking of Empathy and the Hardening of Hearts 156  
24. The Structure of Social Justice Movements 166

### Part 5 Just Punishment

25. A Visit to Honduras 183  
27. What Paul Said about the Task and Authority of the State 200  
28. Justice, Forgiveness, and Punishment 208

### Part 6 Beauty, Hope, and Justice

29. Justice and Beauty 221  
30. Hope 227  
31. Recap 244

Index 251

---

Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, Journey Toward Justice  
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
early forty years ago, the Scottish church historian Andrew F. Walls predicted that Africa would become the new Christian heartland and that other regions to the global South and East would become the new main places in the world for Christian practice and thought. Few of Walls’s colleagues paid him any attention then, but today we see how prophetic he was. The “coming of global Christianity,” as historian Philip Jenkins put it, is gaining broad interest and attention, and its signs are quite evident. Africans have recently led the World Council of Churches and several of the Protestant world communions. The South African Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu is arguably the world’s most prominent public theologian. China and Brazil are now closing in on the United States as having the world’s largest national populations of Protestant Christians. And not only has the balance of Christianity’s place in the world tipped markedly toward the global South and East, so has public and scholarly consciousness of it.

This global shift in Christianity’s demography, vitality, and influence has caught most Christian scholars in the North Atlantic region by surprise. Their orientation and sense of mandate has been toward the problems of the increasingly post-Christian West, and their preparation for dealing with these issues has been framed within

Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, Journey Toward Justice

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
the European “Christian humanist” tradition. C. S. Lewis, Abraham Kuyper, and Dorothy Sayers are their patron saints, and one of their prime mandates has been to try to take back intellectual territory from the “cultured despisers of religion.” Christian scholarly guilds, colleges, and universities are deeply oriented in this direction. Their strategies and preoccupations were forged on the anvils of European Christendom. As a result, says Walls, there is a major mismatch between Christian vigor and engagement in frontline mission and Christian resources for producing scholarly work. Christian scholarship needs a major reorientation.

Walls took that idea to heart, and he set to work rewriting the church history syllabus. It needed to reflect the implications of the gospel’s traveling south and east from Jerusalem as well as to the north and west. There are others too who have been reorienting their personal and scholarly callings, and the purpose of this series is to give several Christian thought leaders the opportunity to share what they have been learning. May these reflections be powerfully instructive, so that many of you who read and ponder them will turn your hearts, minds, and vocations in this new direction.
When Bob Hosack of Baker Academic started thinking with me about a “Turning South” series, we decided that we would look for Christian thinkers from North America (and perhaps from Europe too) who had experienced a change of heart, mind, and professional direction because of their encounters with people from Africa, Asia, or Latin America and their ideas and concerns. If Christian intellectuals are supposed to be helping the church do its most demanding thinking about its mission to the world, then they should be ready and willing to engage the problems and issues that arise at the front lines of the church’s work. Given the seismic shift of Christian vigor and activity toward the global South and East, shouldn’t Christian thinkers be devoting the greater share of their time and talent to those regions too? Needless to say, the trends of Christian thought lag far behind the dramatic shift of the church’s main arenas. So we have been looking for some exemplary Christian scholars who have experienced a reorientation of their calling and who are willing to tell the story of their turnabout.
The very first person who came to mind was Nicholas Wolterstorff, one of the most eminent philosophers of our time. Nick has earned great respect for his work in epistemology and the philosophy of religion, but he has a remarkable range of interests and achievements across the various “applied” fields of philosophizing—in aesthetics, ethics, politics, and education—as well as in the more purely theoretical fields of inquiry. Anyone who is acquainted with his speaking and publishing, however, sees a persistent strain in his thinking over the past thirty years: Nick cares deeply about justice. In recent years his writing has trended even more pointedly in that direction. In *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, 2008), Nick argues that justice comes from the recognition of basic human rights, and that these rights derive from the dignity of persons who are made in God’s image. *Justice in Love* (Eerdmans, 2011) insists that justice and love are not in tension but are perfectly compatible. So where does Nick’s passion for justice come from? And why has he taken it upon himself as a philosopher to make these arguments about the nature of justice?

The answer, he says, is that he encountered people who were being wronged, and he felt a deep empathy for their plight. Empathy is what gives the struggle for justice its most powerful motivation—not duty, or obligation, or any virtue one might possess, but personal knowledge or understanding of how it feels to be treated unjustly. Some people might experience empathy from their armchair reading, he says, but it comes to us most powerfully when we are confronted by the faces and the voices of those who are vulnerable and who suffer injustice.¹

So here we have Nick’s story—how he met and was confronted, head-on, by the injustices experienced by black South Africans, by Palestinian refugees, and by plain and poor folk in Honduras. He recounts that at first, these experiences affected his life “after hours,” but it wasn’t long before they began to affect his thinking as a philosopher too. While many, if not most, in his profession who look at justice want to ground it in a rightly ordered society, Nick said that

his experiences taught him to ground it in the worth and dignity of persons. And while many modern Christian thinkers want to distinguish between Old Testament justice and New Testament love, Nick says that this is a false dichotomy. Christians cannot be the people of love in any consistent way without the great passion for justice that the Bible shows as coming from the living God. These matters too have been certified to him by the teaching and witness of global South Christians. If we turn in their direction, he says, we will hear the voices and see the faces of those who have been wronged. Nick’s turning South changed him, fundamentally. Who knows what God might have in store for you?
Had it not been for prodding by others, I would not have written this book. This is a story. I am a philosopher. Philosophers seldom tell stories; we deal in abstractions.

Not only is it a story; it’s a personal story, the story of how I came to think about justice and to think about it as I do. What I wrote at the beginning of an essay that I was invited to submit to *The Christian Century* for its series “How My Mind Has Changed” remains true:

Autobiography does not come easy to me. I grew up in a community of Dutch Reformed immigrants in a tiny farming village in southwest Minnesota. The ethos of the Dutch Reformed was never to call attention to yourself, to be modest in all things, never to brag or boast, never to toot your own horn. If you have done something well, let others say so; don’t say it yourself. The Minnesota ethos was always to understate. If someone compliments you for some fine job you have done, either say “Thanks” and let it go at that or say “Yeah, not bad I suppose.”

Autobiography grows poorly in such soil.

The person who prodded me the most insistently was Joel Carpenter, head of the Nagle Institute for the Study of World Christianity.

at Calvin College. Joel had the idea of a series of books to be called “Turning South.” He was aware of the fact that it was certain experiences I had in the global South that prompted me to think and write about justice as I do. So he encouraged me to write a book for his series in which I told the story of how that had gone. I use the term “global South” a bit loosely, to include the Middle East.

So that’s what this book is—an autobiographical tour through my thoughts about justice rather than a systematic tour, which is the form that almost all of my previous writings on justice have taken. What I say here concerning the righting of injustice goes beyond what I have previously published; but for the rest, it’s an autobiographical tour through much of the same material that I have presented systematically elsewhere. Some passages have even been lifted out of what I wrote previously, usually with some tweaking.

The fact that the material is organized in an overall narrative rather than systematic form puts things in a distinctly different light; I hope that even those readers who have read my systematic discussions of justice will find it both interesting and illuminating to have the material presented in this light. I myself found it interesting and illuminating. I saw some things more clearly than I did before; I saw connections that I had not seen before.

Judging that some readers would also find it valuable to have the “essence” of my thoughts on these matters without all the details, I decided to eschew the philosophical intricacies of my systematic treatment of the issues. I daresay that there will be other readers who are disappointed on this account—readers who find the discussion too superficial, too lacking in philosophical depth and finesse for their taste. I refer those readers to my earlier systematic treatments of the topics.

I was first awakened from my oblivion to justice—my “slumber,” one might call it—by my encounter in South Africa in 1975 with Afrikaners and people of color; I was further awakened by my encounter with Palestinians in 1978. Those encounters have looming importance in the narrative that follows. So here, before the narrative begins, I
want to do what I can to forestall two false impressions that readers might get. One false impression is that, in 1975, all Afrikaners were defenders of apartheid. They were not. Among them were also vocal and heroic opponents. I got to know a few of them on that first trip; I got to know a good many others later. Another false impression is that all Israelis were and are defenders of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. They were not and they are not; a good many Israelis were and are vocal and heroic opponents of Israel’s policies. I got to know a fair number of them after my initial encounter with the Palestinians.

Most of the chapters are brief: just one topic per chapter. I have grouped them into six sections. In part 1, “Awakening,” I describe how I came to think about justice and how I came to think about it as I do. In part 2, “Justice and Rights,” I briefly rehearse the theory of justice that I have developed more elaborately in my earlier writings on justice. Since I hold that justice is grounded in rights, I explain what I take rights to be. In part 3, “Justice in Scripture,” I show how deeply embedded justice is in Christian Scripture, New Testament as well as Old Testament. In part 4, “Righting Injustice,” I reflect on various dimensions of the struggle to right injustice and why it is that that struggle is typically so difficult and contentious. It was not until a visit to Honduras, just a few years ago, that I saw, with a clarity that had previously eluded me, that fundamental or “primary” justice, as I call it, is impossible in the absence of just punishment. So that is the topic of part 5, “Just Punishment.” Finally, in part 6, “Beauty, Hope, and Justice,” I reflect on the relation between justice and beauty and on the relation between justice and hope. I conclude with a brief recap.

Unless I indicate otherwise, my quotations from Scripture are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).
PART 1

AWAKENING
Two Awakening Experiences

In September 1975, I was sent by the college at which I was teaching, Calvin College, to an international conference on Christian higher education organized by the University of Potchefstroom in Potchefstroom, South Africa, a small city located about an hour’s drive from Johannesburg. At that time the university deliberately and explicitly located itself within the Afrikaner tradition. Whites who were not Afrikaners were admitted as students; but so-called blacks and coloreds were not.¹ This was the first time I had set foot in the global South.

Most of the South African scholars present at the conference were Afrikaners; but there were some so-called blacks and coloreds as well. In addition, there were scholars from other parts of Africa, a sizable contingent from the Netherlands, a number of us from North America, and some from Asian countries.

Though the conference was not about the South African system of apartheid—1975 was well before the revolution in South Africa—apartheid was the dominant topic of conversation during coffee breaks.

¹ The Afrikaners gave the name “coloreds” to those who had both African and white ancestors.
and meals, and constantly threatened to intrude into the conference itself. Eventually it did, first into a scheduled session of the conference, and then into a hastily called unscheduled session. The discussion in that unscheduled session was more intense than anything I had ever experienced. The Dutch were very well informed about South Africa and very angry about apartheid; they vented their anger at the Afrikaners. The Afrikaner defenders of apartheid in turn vented their anger at the Dutch. Later I would learn that Afrikaners fended off most critics of apartheid by telling them that they were misinformed. They could not charge the Dutch with being misinformed. So instead they charged them with being self-righteously judgmental. Eventually the so-called black and colored scholars from South Africa began to speak up, more in tones of hurt than of anger—or so it seemed to me at the time. They described the daily indignities heaped upon them and the many ways in which they were demeaned; they spoke of being expelled from their homes and herded off into Bantustans. With great passion they cried out for justice.

Not only was I profoundly moved by this cry for justice, I felt convinced that I had been issued a call from God. I did not hear words in the air; it was by way of the speech of the so-called blacks and coloreds that God spoke to me. Fidelity to God required that I speak up for these victims of injustice in whatever way might prove appropriate.

While in South Africa, I learned of the existence of its antiterrorism laws. These allowed the police to detain a person for ninety days without filing a public charge, without notifying anyone where the person was held, without giving the person access to an attorney, and with the right to renew the ninety-day period repeatedly if they so wished.

Before going to South Africa I had known of the heroic resistance to apartheid by C. F. Beyers Naudé, a member of one of the prominent old Afrikaner families. For me it was a matter of conscience to have an interview with Naudé while in South Africa; so it was arranged that, after the conference was over, I, along with Gerald Vandé Zande from Canada, would have an interview with Naudé...
in our hotel in Pretoria. The interview was never held. Two days before, one of Naudé’s principal assistants had been arrested under the antiterrorism detention laws; Naudé was so preoccupied with reorganizing his staff and trying to find out where his assistant was being held that he had to break the appointment.

Deeply disturbed over the existence of a society in which such an arrest could take place, I walked the streets of Pretoria that night with a professor from Malawi who had attended the conference, venting my anger. After some thirty minutes, I noticed that my companion was absorbing all this with little noticeable reaction. I asked him how it could be that if I was so angry, he could be so calm. I shall never forget his answer: “I live with this sort of thing every day of my life. If ever I would criticize my government outside a tiny circle of trusted friends, I would be arrested, my family would lose its means of livelihood, and my seminary would be closed down.” I saw more vividly than ever before what a privilege it is to live in a country where I can vigorously criticize my government in public without fearing reprisal.

Upon returning home I bought yards of books about the situation in South Africa and its historical origins, and read avidly. I began to think, speak, and write about justice in general and about injustice in South Africa in particular. I returned to South Africa a number of times and became friends with many opponents of the old regime—black, colored, and white. Of these, it was Allan Boesak who became one of my dearest friends and who, over the years, has remained that through thick and thin.

In May 1978, I attended a conference on Palestinian rights on the west side of Chicago. I do not know why I was invited, nor have I ever understood what it was in myself that impelled me to attend. The conference was sponsored by an organization called the Palestine Human Rights Campaign. There were about 150 Palestinians present, mostly Christian; they poured out their guts in flaming rhetoric, rhetoric too hot, I later learned, for most Americans to handle. They described the indignities daily heaped upon them. They told of how

Two Awakening Experiences

Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, Journey Toward Justice

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
their ancestral lands and orchards were being confiscated and of how they were evicted from their homes and their homes bulldozed to make room for Jewish settlers. They told of collective punishment and of the multiple ways in which they were daily demeaned. They cried out with great passion for justice. I was deeply moved by the cry. And again I felt convinced that I had been issued a call from God to speak up for these wronged people in whatever way might prove appropriate.

The US State Department had allowed Ambassador Terzi, who at the time was the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) representative to the United Nations, to attend the conference on the condition that he see to it that whenever he spoke, there be no more than five people within earshot. This infuriated me. If my country’s policy in the Middle East was so fragile that it would be endangered by more than five people simultaneously hearing what Terzi was saying, then there must be something profoundly wrong with the policy.

Upon returning home I bought yards of books about the situation in the Middle East and its historical origins, and read avidly. I spoke and wrote about injustice in the Middle East. I became chair of the board of the Palestine Human Rights Campaign, and organized and spoke at conferences that the Campaign sponsored. I traveled to the Middle East several times, and became friends with a number of those who were protesting the situation, both Israeli and Palestinian. When the Oslo Accord was signed on September 13, 1993, I concluded that the situation was now in the hands of the Israelis and the Palestinians and that there was little that foreigners like myself could now contribute. How naive!

Why were these two experiences so moving for me? I had been a vocal supporter of the American civil rights movement, though I had not traveled to the US South to participate in protest marches. I had been a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War; I had spoken out publicly in opposition. Rereading some of the things I wrote at the time, I notice that the basic moral categories that I employed for thinking and speaking about these situations were those of justice and injustice.
But I had not felt called, not in the way I did when confronted by the situations in South Africa and Palestine. I had not been motivated to think, speak, and write about justice.

John Rawls’s now-classic text *A Theory of Justice* was published in 1971. The acclaim and attention it immediately received led me to read it soon after it appeared, more out of intellectual curiosity than anything else, since political philosophy and ethics were not among my specialties in philosophy (I never taught a course or seminar in either until after I retired). I found Rawls’s book intellectually intriguing and some of the discussions surrounding it fascinating. But I was not moved to think for myself about justice, nor was I motivated to read further in the literature on justice.

So why was my response so different when I heard the so-called blacks and coloreds in Potchefstroom cry out for justice, and why was it so different when I heard the Palestinians gathered on the west side of Chicago cry out for justice?

I think it was because in Potchefstroom, and on the west side of Chicago, I was face-to-face with the wronged. I was not reading what someone had written about some abstract thing called justice, but neither was I reading newspaper reports about the victims of injustice somewhere. I was listening to live human beings telling their own stories of how they and their families and friends were systematically demeaned and humiliated. As they told their stories, I fastened on their faces, looked into their eyes, absorbed their words. Nothing of this sort had happened to me before. The injustices with which I had been personally acquainted were mainly episodes. These people were not speaking about episodes in their lives; they were describing the daily condition of their existence.

They, the wronged, came to me; I had not gone out looking for them. When I went to Potchefstroom, I expected a leisurely discussion on Christian higher education. I do not know what I was expecting when I went to the conference on Palestinian rights, but certainly not...
that I would be confronted by 150 Palestinians crying out for justice. In both cases, I was overtaken.

Not only was my thinking, writing, and speaking about justice motivated by seeing the faces and hearing the voices of people who were systemically wronged; their contours have been shaped by that starting point.

In *A Theory of Justice* John Rawls did not start from the wronged; he started from various problems in political and ethical theory. The same is true for that enormous body of writing that was spurred by Rawls’s publication; it is by professors and for professors, about issues that professors find intellectually intriguing. I too am a professor, a professor of philosophy. But my experience in Potchefstroom in 1975 and on the west side of Chicago in 1978 made it impossible for me not to start from the wronged in my reflections on justice.

The response to the “blacks” and “coloreds” by the Afrikaners at the conference who spoke up in defense of apartheid took me completely aback. They did not contest the charge of injustice; but neither did they concede the charge and resolve to join the oppressed in the struggle to right injustice. They insisted that justice was not a relevant category. Order and disorder were the relevant categories; South Africa was threatened with disorder. And as to the whole project of apartheid, they insisted that this was an act of goodwill on the part of the ruling Afrikaners. In South Africa, they explained, there were some ten or eleven different nationalities. The system of apartheid was inspired by the ideal of each of these nationalities finding its own cultural identity. If that was to happen, they could not live mingled among one another; they would have to live separately, apart—hence, *apartheid*.

To this, some added stories about their own individual acts of charity: clothes they gave to the “black” family living in the backyard that their own children had outgrown, trinkets that they gave to the family at Christmas, and so forth. Some of my fellow North Americans were skeptical of these stories; I was not.

In short, they, the Afrikaners, presented themselves as a benevolent people. They complained that so often their benevolence went...
unacknowledged; no gratitude was forthcoming. Why can’t we just love each other, one of them asked plaintively of the “blacks” and the “coloreds”; why do you only criticize us? And they complained that critics of apartheid ignored the visionary beneficent ideal that motivated the project; the critics only took note of the difficulties encountered in achieving the ideal.

What I saw before my eyes, as I had never seen before, was benevolence being used as an instrument of oppression—self-perceived benevolence, of course.

Why was it so important to the Afrikaners who spoke up in defense of apartheid at the conference that they resist thinking of the situation in terms of justice and injustice, and think of it only in terms of order and goodwill? Because for them to concede that the “blacks” and “coloreds” were being treated unjustly would require putting brakes on their own passion for order and on their self-perceived paternalistic benevolence; it would require advocating the rejection of the whole project of apartheid. And that was something they could not bring themselves to do. Not only were they inspired by the great good that apartheid would supposedly yield, they were satisfied with their own position in the situation; they were calling the shots and living comfortably. Of course, they did not themselves make this last point, that they were calling the shots and living comfortably.

What is it about justice that puts brakes on paternalistic benevolence? And why, more generally, does justice matter? Why are goodwill and benevolence not enough? At the time I had no answers to these questions. Now I think I do. We’ll be getting to them later.

And why did the Afrikaners who spoke up at the conference in defense of apartheid not respond to the cry for justice as I did? Not only was I emotionally moved, I felt that I had been issued a call from God to speak up for these wronged people. The Afrikaners responded instead by arguing that justice was not a relevant category. Yet at the conference they were face-to-face with the same “blacks” and “coloreds” that I was face-to-face with; in their daily lives they were face-to-face with many more. They heard the same human beings...
telling the same stories of humiliation and demeaning that I heard. They looked into those same eyes—or maybe not, maybe they didn’t look into their eyes. But they saw the same faces. Why did they respond with cool argumentation, and with the aggrieved claim that they felt hurt because their benevolence was so seldom recognized and acknowledged with gratitude? At the time I also had no answers to these questions; some hunches, but no more than that. Now I think I do have some answers. We’ll also be getting to those later.