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BOOK REVIEW

Justice, Rights, Order and Disorder: Theology in Dialogue with the University

Chapters Reviewed:
1. Justice and Rights – Nicholas Wolterstorff in Dialogue with the University. Cross-Disciplinary Encounters with Theology. Edited by Terence C. Halliday and K. K. Yeo. Langham Global Library, 2024. £16.99.
2. Order and Disorder – Nigel Biggar in Dialogue with the University. Cross-Disciplinary Encounters with Theology. Edited by Terence C. Halliday and K. K. Yeo. Langham Global Library, 2026. £16.99.

Reviewed by Canon Dr Chris Sugden [1]

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1. *Justice and Rights – Nicholas Wolterstorff in Dialogue with the University. Edited by Terence Halliday and K. K. Yeo, Langham, Global Library 2024 £16.99*

In the first volume of the Global Faculty Initiative of Langham Publishing, a ground-breaking series that develops a new approach to theological education by bringing it into touch with other disciplines and fields of study and action, Nicholas Wolterstorff discusses Justice and Rights with comments and engagement from a wide range of scholars.

His thesis is that justice has two possible meanings. First order justice is in just human relationships characterised by giving people the dignity and honour that is their right. Second order justice is to carry out judgement due when people do not act in accord with what acting justly requires. They then face justice.

He argues that justice and love are not antithetical, but that love incorporates acting justly. Other scholars argue that such a view of first order justice is subjective, that

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rights are not grounded in the subjective will and desire of the isolated individual and that human relationships are not defined by people's rights but by love.

Wolterstorff's discussion is very useful when he engages with the contemporary view that people should be able to do what they want, in accord with whatever identity they choose and that no one should stop them. This is rooted, as Joan Lockwood O'Donvoan writes in 'the socially atomistic and disintegrative philosophy of possessive individualism'.

Wolterstorff responds his interlocutors by noting that the claiming rights without regard to the rights of others is an abuse of rights talk. Rights are not only to be claimed, they are to be acknowledged in others.

The applications developed from Wolterstorff's thesis are mainly by academics to their university environment. While this is fair enough in encouraging Christian voices on topics of concern to the academy, should such a volume not also include engagement from those who are engaged in administering and reflecting on second order justice in the legal system, in politics, in addressing injustice by their involvement in relief and development or working with poor people and oppressed minorities?

Some responders use Wolterstorff's first order/ second order distinction to illuminate and engage with issues of justice and rights in their fields of experience and expertise. The most useful and interesting developments of the initial thesis are on Economic Justice and the Politics of Redistribution, the Quest to reduce the Risk of Disasters, Justice for Colombia's displaced persons, Restorative Justice, Family Law and Climate Change Justice.

Less helpful are the responses, some less than half a page, that just raise questions and practical implications which they do not explore further. This raises the possibility that the issue of the precise definition or vocabulary used is not as significant as the process of taking a definition, which may be disputed, but nevertheless testing it by its usefulness in illuminating a field of study and action.

Perhaps further volumes in the series might focus more on the responses that apply and test the thesis offered.

2. *Order and Disorder Nigel Biggar in Dialogue with the University. Cross-Disciplinary Encounters with Theology Edited by Terence C Halliday and K. K. Yeo. Langham Global Library 2026 £16.99*

This volume in the Global Faculty Initiative of Langham Publishing, consists of 16 pages from Lord Biggar, former Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford in which he argues that the doctrine of God and creation includes the existence of an objective and universal moral order of principles that are necessary to secure what is needed for human flourishing, namely the goods of truth, friendship with God, personal integrity, beauty and creativity which themselves need no further justification.

A series of responses and comments follow, some no longer than half a page in length, from scholars around the world in a variety of disciplines. The point is to demonstrate what theology can offer to a wide range of academic disciplines, and in turn what those disciplines can offer to enable theology to make a relevant contribution.

The volume ends with an 11 page response from Dr Biggar to issues raised in the responses.

Some parts of the book are hard going as some responses, many under a page in length, are very esoteric and expressed in the language and terms of the discipline from which they are written. These make it difficult for a general reader to relate them to the main argument of the book. It would therefore help, in a second edition or further collections in this series, if every response, as some do, could include a 'so what' implication of their contribution illustrated with a practical example of what their response adds to the understanding of the central theme of the book.

To give one example. A half-page response critiques Lord Biggar's presentation as 'androcentricc' and concludes "What might need to be said about the role of the non-human (majority) of the created order, including animals and the eco-system, in a theology of the created order?"

A 'so what' would be a further exposition of what such a role in a theology of the created order would contribute to the case being made about the objective nature of a moral order of accountability. The responder may want to elaborate on the theme of stewardship in which man and woman, as images of God, in other words the representatives of God on earth in the same way that ancient eastern kings placed their images in regions over which they had control, have responsibility for the care of the created order which is not just formless clay, but itself has a role in God's plan.

What does this mean that role is to be, and how are human beings to relate to it? Lord Biggar engages with the non-human world in addressing 'radical ontological egalitarianism' on page 11 and how 'the created world reflects the coherence, the rationality, the beauty, the order of the Creator". Lord Biggar is only androcentric to the degree that the biblical narrative is androcentric and clearly has a place for the createdness of the non-human world in his theology. What more would the responder like to be said, and could it please be said rather than left hanging?

Another responder cites music that 'connects us freely and creatively with the Logos of the universe'. An interesting 'so what' would be to expand on the fact that we use music significantly in our worship of God through hymns and songs, most clearly in the Bible in the Psalms. Readers could be encouraged to reflect when they sing "Psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs' that they (we) are joining in with the harmony and songs of creation.

There are such responses that build on Dr Biggar's opening essay and develop the theme of a given moral order as it applies, for example, to public health, market economics, and to its relation to positive law.

A lot of work has gone into the collection. Dr Biggar's article was sent, probably in 2022 to 150 Christian academics for their comments and responses and the volume has been published in 2026. His response both addresses some of the issues his respondents raise but also builds points they raise into his understanding.

For example, he exposes the self- contradiction of much post-modern thought which insists both on a particular view of the world and at the same time insists that there are no incontrovertible truths. He also, based on actual experience, concedes that a Christian concern for forgiveness and reconciliation as an expression of God's moral order can only, in some circumstances go so far, as when a Lutheran deacon who had been twice imprisoned by the communist authorities in Eastern Germany for her dissident activity found herself living in the same street as the person who had informed on her. 'Co-existence' and 'accommodation' were thought to be more appropriate terms in those circumstances.

Neither volume, regrettably has a contribution from those who are living and teaching in Africa or South Asia. This is sad when the prime claim of Dr Biggar is that the moral order of creation is universal and that Professor Wolterstorff is seeking a universal understanding of justice and rights.

They both read as transcribed and helpful extended seminars with a scholar following their opening presentation. It is therefore easier to digest them by drawing on individual responses and referring back to the main essay rather than straight through.

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