



Lecture on religion in the public square *Denken om shalom*

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Dear audience, dear professor Wolterstorff,

As a student, I was introduced into professor Wolterstorff's philosophy for the first time. I attended lectures in the philosophy of Reformational Philosophy, a discipline which is now called Christian Philosophy. In the curriculum of these lectures was a book with the beautiful title *Van zekerheid naar trouw*. *Van zekerheid naar trouw* covers the complex relationship between faith and science. In a beautiful way, the book assures its readers of the necessity of christian philosophy. Amongst other things, it illustrates that, in our reasoning (or in our acting), there is no need to disengage our faith. On the contrary: faith will always affect our thinking. And not only our thinking, but our lives as well.

This is an important notion when speaking about religion in the public square, a subject matter on which professor Wolterstorff has published several works, among which are his book *Religion in the public square*, and more recently, *Understanding liberal democracy*. These primarily deal with democracy, but also cover philosophical matters of faith and science, albeit less prominently. How presuppositions influence the way we think, for instance, and how our deepest convictions affect our thinking, not only in our private lives, but in politics as well.

The beautiful thing about the ideas of professor Wolterstorff is that faith and reason do not exclude each other. On the contrary: if personal convictions affect much of our thinking, that is a good thing. That, however, does not mean that professor Wolterstorff is a theocrat. In fact, he is an ardent defender of democracy, and rightly so: in liberal democracy, people are free to have a large variety of opinions. At the same time, however, professor Wolterstorff is exceptionally critical of many of the liberal defenders of democracy. As remarkable as that may seem, it is with good reason, and the reason is this: these liberal defenders do not actually do much justice to societal variety, or to the great diversity in discourse and arguments. If were up to them, only arguments based on reason would be used in the public square, and, therefore, in politics. A universal language would be spoken, that appeals to everyone. 'The religious voice should be kept out of public political discourse', they argue. Thus, for religious people, fully participating in democracy becomes virtually impossible.

Wolterstorff passionately resists this liberal point of view. In his opinion, it is impossible to live and work with a set of neutral principles, as Rawls and Habermas propose. Besides, he warns us for the possibility of governments imposing their (liberal) ideas on their citizens. He takes the American philosopher Richard Rorty as an example, which I will briefly illustrate. Both Wolterstorff and Rorty feel the necessity of continuing conversation, of enduring debate. In this life time, there are many things on which people will never agree. There will always be difference of opinion. That, however, should not keep us from conversing with each other. On this point, both agree. Professor Wolterstorff's criticism, however, especially aims at the way Rorty deals with religion. He views religion, in its institutionalised form, as a threat to society. Besides that, he feels religion to be a conversation stopper, obstructing open public discourse. Therefore, in his opinion, religion should be privatised. It would prevent any danger of fundamentalistic groups that would forbid abortion, or take other measures to restrict the freedom of other citizens.

Professor Wolterstorff, on the other hand, completely disagrees with this idea of distinguishing between public and private. According to his own principles, Rorty's own views be privatised as well, according to his principles? Or are his views to be called neutral? In his book *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Rorty appears to be a Darwinian pragmatist. The arguments in this book are based on principles that are not commonly shared. Professor Wolterstorff did something similar – albeit from an explicitly christian point of view – in his book *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*. And there is nothing wrong with that. Why is it, that people should not be allowed contribute to the public discourse, from their own point of view? Is not exactly that the essence of democracy?

What is democracy? According to professor Wolterstorff, the democratic system is the utmost system which acknowledges the rights and points of view of *all* citizens. Rorty's view of democracy, on the other hand, has a variety of liberal values. He intended to privatise religion, in order to protect liberal standards. A horrifying thought, according to professor Wolterstorff. I quote:

This sounds to me like yet one more example of Big Brother trying to get us all to shape up, not this time around to get us all to shape up into becoming good compliant Nazis or good compliant communists or good compliant nationalists, rather, to get us all to shape up into becoming good compliant Darwinian pragmatists? (end quote)

Professor Wolterstorff is extremely anxious for governments that try to mold their citizens according to certain religions or philosophies – by means of an educational system, for instance. Whether that be a christian or an islamic system, or a darwinian pragmatic system.

Professor Wolterstorff writes from an American point of view, in an American context. Is our situation, in the Netherlands, just as miserable? Just as dark? Just as oppressive? Is there just as much pressure on the possibility christians have to be politically active, as there is in the United States of America?

Maybe, in the Netherlands, it is not that bad at all. That is partly due to the efforts of a man named Abraham Kuyper, a reformed man, and a fighter for freedom of religion and freedom of education. As he fought for freedom in the Netherlands, professor Wolterstorff may be a fighter for freedom in the United States. And freedom fighters remain necessary, as the state remains dangerous. More often than not, governments tend to control, order, survey and uniform society. And, as Kuyper once said: 'Uniformity is the curse of modern life.'

We need to dare to live in a world that is open to difference. Difference in the way we raise and educate our children, differences in religion and in personal convictions. Every citizen, each with their own identity, should be able to take their place in society, and in politics. Everyone – including religious people – should be unrestrained from being politically active. The aim of political debate is to reach agreement on government policy. In the end, the conclusions matter; not the arguments leading to these conclusions.

Furthermore: there is more to democracy than debate. Citizens who appeal against injustice are, besides debaters, often activists, who passionately fight malpractice. William Wilberforce zealously fought against slavery. Martin Luther King jr. not only appealed to reason, but also gave prophet-like speeches. In a word, apart from reasonable arguments, democracy is about righteous indignation, and a desire for change. We need that indignation, and this desire for change. Because the presence of injustice in our society shows that our society is fundamentally broken. Human trafficking, abortion and religious persecution, are striking examples of this injustice, all of which are fought against passionately. Righteous indignation is of a deeper level than merely discussing policy.

In our society, religion is often frowned upon, or even condemned, which the formation of a new Dutch government illustrates strikingly. People argue that religion only results in intolerance, because religion restricts our freedom. Should religion be forced back to people's personal lives? Professor Wolterstorff provides us with plenty of things to think about on this matter. His down-to-earth approach is a refreshment, in this debate. In the footsteps of Kuyper's neocalvinism, he goes by the principle of pluralism. Differences are welcome, within the limits of the democratic system. Along with each politician, come their personal and deepest convictions – in public debate as much as in people's personal lives. Also during public discourse, about what is beneficial for society, about justice, about shalom. During debates, in which we fully express our views. And nothing is wrong with that.