



Global Faculty Initiative

**The Faculty Initiative
seeks to promote the integration
of Christian faith and academic disciplines
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars
across the spectrum of faculties
in research universities
worldwide.**

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Preview Response

CAN I TREAT A RIVER UNJUSTLY?

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On Prof Wolterstorff's Preview:

I'm interested in how one understands justice not on the level of individual relationships but at the level of whole societies, hence my interest in social contract theories.

Questions raised in the Preview relate directly to my research projects on freedom and emancipation. Respect for justice almost always includes, I think, curtailing my natural freedoms for the sake of a wider social good. The social contract is a great example of this.

I'm also interested in how such contracts are being extended today to include non-human parties: animals, particular features of the environment. The Preview states that "considerations of justice are relevant to any discipline or area of inquiry that deals, in whole or in part, either directly or indirectly, with the interactions of human beings", which I take to mean between two or more human beings. What about human interactions with non-human actors? Can I treat my dog unjustly, if no other human is concerned? Can I treat a river unjustly, if my interaction with it has no effect on other human beings? I think a Christian approach has unique things to say about this.

I wonder whether there is not a distinctively biblical concept of justice that triangulates the Aristotelian and Ulpian notions. Perhaps something like this: I treat you as worthy not atomistically (your worth inheres in your own existence divorced from any context), but relationally (you have worth only as a gift from God, by his decree). This fundamentally reorients rights discourse, and I think it's also a truer reflection of how rights discourse in fact functions, both theologically and in secular society (I could expand). I don't "have rights"; I am (if you like) "related right-ly" to God.

I'd love the paper to reflect upon the unique way in which Scripture and Christian theology bring together justice and mercy, or grace and truth (John 1), or love and faithfulness (Psalm 117; Exodus 34:6). It seems to me that this is one area where Christians have something genuinely radical and subversive to contribute to debates on justice, challenging the terms of the secular debate.

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