

# Wolterstorff and the philosophy of religion. About being and creation

By Henk G. Geertsema

## Introduction

In the context of the symposium in honour of Nicholas Wolterstorff I am asked to say something about his philosophy of religion. I am happy to do so. I will try to characterize it in general terms with the history of Western philosophy as a background. My leading question will be: should Wolterstorff's philosophy of religion, or his ontology, be characterised as onto-theology?

I am aware that because of this approach I will not do justice to the important contribution Wolterstorff has rendered to the philosophy of religion. My discussion will be about his method and general approach, not about specific topics. Yet, I will relate to an issue which is almost unique for Wolterstorff, the question whether God is able to speak, which is central to his book *Divine discourse. Philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* (1995). The way Wolterstorff deals with this question reminds me of a discussion between him and Henk Hart years ago in *Philosophia Reformata* (1979, 1981). It relates to the final section of his book *On Universals. An Essay in Ontology* (1970) and concerns the scope of the relation Creator – creature. Is this relation all-encompassing and the most fundamental or is it possible that structures exist which are even more encompassing and more fundamental? I will pick up on this discussion. How this relates to onto-theology will, I hope, become clear in the course of what follows.

## Thinking and being

To give a first impression of what I mean by onto-theology I start with a characterisation of ontology. I guess Wolterstorff will agree with the following description: ontology is the philosophical analysis of the basic characteristics of reality, or, rather, of all there is. Onto-theology implies that this analysis includes the being of God. In this sense onto-theology goes at least back to Parmenides who connects thinking and being in an all-encompassing way. Plato, Aristotle, but also Thomas Aquinas, Kant and Hegel follow in his steps. Sometimes thinking and being are closely related to language. In this respect the method of contemporary analytic philosophy, which, taken in a broad sense, is also practiced by Wolterstorff, seems rather similar to that of Aristotle. Be it as it may, in onto-theology questions about God are discussed within the framework of a general theoretical analysis of being in terms of concepts which are well defined and relations that are analysed by means of the general rules of logic.

It seems clear that Wolterstorff as far as his ontology is concerned is part of this tradition. I only have to refer to the Epilogue of *On Universals*. I quote:

The predicable / case / exemplification structure holds for all reality whatsoever – necessarily so. Everything whatsoever is either a predicable, a case of a predicable, or an exemplification of a predicable. ... Nothing is unique in that it falls outside this fundamental structure of reality. God too has properties; he too acts. So, he too exemplifies predicables. The predicable / case / exemplification structure is not just the structure of created things. ... It is a structure of reality, of what there is. (299)

Wolterstorff is saying here that the most general and fundamental structure of reality, of what is there, also applies to God. Philosophical thought in its theoretical analysis of what is does not face a boundary when it is directed to God. It is able to discover structures to which God Himself is subjected. The discussion between Wolterstorff and Hart was about the question whether this claim takes account of the fact that God is the Creator of all there is. Does God's

being the Creator of all there is not imply that every structure that can be discovered is dependent upon Him instead of God being dependent on such a structure Himself? If this dependence of all things on the creator is denied, as Wolterstorff's claim seems to do, are the boundaries of our thinking not being transgressed? In other words, does he take into account that our thinking itself is always creational? If our thinking is indeed creational, then, it seems, we cannot take a stand outside of the relationship of creature – Creator. Does not Wolterstorff ignore this state of affairs when he claims that God is dependent on certain structures that we discover by way of theoretical analysis? Does this contention not pretend that in our thought we can take a stand outside of that relationship and thus ignore the boundaries of our own creatureliness?

When I studied *Divine Discourse*, preparing my contribution for this symposium, I was reminded of this discussion. The central question of *Divine Discourse* is “whether God could speak”(95). Reading the book this question more and more puzzled me. What exactly does Wolterstorff mean by it? Does he want to elucidate what it means that God speaks? There are several indications that point in this direction. Let me give just one example. At the end of the first chapter Wolterstorff refers to the practice in many branches of the Christian church “to respond to the public reading of Scripture with some such words as, ‘This is the Word of the Lord’”. He then adds: “There, in this response, is my topic. What is one saying in saying that? How would one go about interpreting the words read to discover what God said?” (18). So, one could think: the question Wolterstorff wants to answer is how can we understand that God speaks, especially (but not only) in the Bible understood as the Word of God. How can we understand what this means by way of philosophical analysis?

I do not doubt that this is an important element of what Wolterstorff aims to do. Yet it does not explain to me the central place of the question whether God could speak. The very possibility of God speaking seems to be at stake. A second answer could be that Wolterstorff wants to give a philosophical account of the conviction that God speaks. It is clear that for him this is an essential element of Christian faith (cf. e.g. p. 8). Actually it is this very assumption that makes the philosophical endeavour of the book meaningful. And, again, I do not doubt that this is an important element. The book clearly has implications for a Christian apologetics. Yet, the question Wolterstorff asks seems to go beyond this. The structure of the book itself points in that direction. After a discussion concerning the difference between God speaking and God revealing, between discourse and revelation (chapter 2), he lays a foundation for answering the main question by giving an analysis of discourse and speech by means of the philosophical idea of speech-act, elaborating in his own way on the theories of J.L. Austin and John Searle. Having thus pointed out the conditions for attributing discourse and speech to someone, he asks the questions: “Could God have and acquire the rights and duties of a speaker?” (ch. 6) and: “Can God cause the events generative of discourse?” (ch. 7). Wolterstorff wants to answer the question: is God able to fulfil the conditions that are necessary for performing a speech-act. So the question really is about the possibility of God speaking.

How serious a question is this for Wolterstorff, one could ask. Imagine that his analysis by means of speech-act theory would have led him to a negative conclusion. Should his Christian conviction that God has spoken not have been that strong that it would have functioned as a control belief? Should this conviction not have been a reason to reconsider the theory of speech-acts in order to maintain this basic conviction of faith? The question I want to ask is a different one, though. Is it possible at all to decide by means of a philosophical analysis what is possible for God? Is that what Wolterstorff is trying to do?<sup>1</sup> Can it be

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<sup>1</sup> If Wolterstorff is only asking whether the expression about God's speaking should be taken literally or metaphorically (cf. p. 10), the question becomes whether it is by philosophical analysis that the issue should be

meaningful to ask such a question? It seems to me that this is the point at stake in the discussion between Wolterstorff and Hart. Is it possible that we, human creatures, define by way of theoretical analysis the boundaries of what is possible for God? If that is what we pretend, is not the implication, then, that human reason sets the boundaries for what we believe? Religion within the bounds of reason instead of ‘reason within the bounds of religion’? If the Bible as the source and norm for what Christians believe explicitly contends that God speaks, addresses humankind by way of words, how meaningful, then, is it for a Christian to ask by way of a philosophical analysis whether this is possible at all? Parmenides claims that thought can define the boundaries of being by way of logical analysis. It seems to me that this contention already transcends the limits of thought, even for philosophy. What is there is a given, to be discovered, analysed and understood, to be respected, but not to be judged by way of our theories whether it is possible: is it really there or just appearance? Should not this attitude of respecting reality as given characterize our relation to God the Creator even in a much deeper sense?

Anyway, not only the ontology of *On Universals*, but also the philosophy of religion in *Divine Discourse* strongly indicates that Wolterstorff is part of the tradition of Western philosophy in which theoretical analysis is applied to the being of God by way of concepts and theories which are developed in relation to created reality. Does this mean that his ontology and philosophy of religion are in fact onto-theology? Not necessarily so. What I have shown so far is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition. To answer the question whether Wolterstorff’s approach can be characterised as onto-theology in the full sense another element must be considered. This will be the topic of the next part.

### **Being and meaning**

Although the term onto-theology comes from Kant, as far as I know it is especially Heidegger who made the notion as a critical idea popular within philosophy. If I understand Heidegger correctly his problem with the onto-theological tradition is that being (Sein) is understood in terms of a being (Seiendes). Perfect, highest or being in the absolute sense (Sein) is God. And God is a being (Seiendes). Therefore onto-theology. In his philosophy Heidegger wants to ask the question of the meaning of being (Sein). But according to him a truthful asking of this question is prevented when being (Sein) is understood as if it were an entity (Seiendes). Therefore he wants to go back behind the tradition of onto-theology. In this way Heidegger also attempts to get rid of the influence of the Christian tradition as far as the meaning of being is made dependent on God as Creator – connecting with the creation story of Genesis 1: “And God saw that it was good.”

My point of discussion here is this relation between being and meaning. An essential element of onto-theology seems to be that ‘being’ is not a neutral term. It is loaded with meaning. That starts even as early as Parmenides, who places (true) being over against the illusionary world of appearances. The tradition is continued by Plato with his world of forms in which the Idea of the Good has a central place. But also in Aristotle the essence or substance of things, which is known by the intellect or reason, is deeply connected with their inner destination, their entelechy or telos. For him theology is the highest science (scientia) because it is directed to the highest being. Medieval philosophy carries on with this tradition. God is the highest being or being itself. Everything else is because in one way or another it participates in the divine being. Being is therefore understood as intrinsically good. The medieval transcendental ideas of being, truth, goodness and beauty are deeply interrelated. That is why ontology as onto-theology can cause a feeling of excitement and joy. It relates to the inner meaning and destination of humankind and the world.

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solved or by a careful interpretation of the text to understand how God’s speaking is meant in the Bible itself. So the question asked in the main text remains.

When I read Wolterstorff's *On Universals. An Essay in Ontology* this inner joy and excitement because of the nature of being is totally lacking. Ontology has become an abstract conceptual analysis without any immediate connection with the inner meaning of things. The final part of the book, entitled 'Predicables in Divine and Human Life', makes this abundantly clear. In his discussion with Plato, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas Wolterstorff shows no sympathy for, not even understanding of the normative meaning of forms or ideas in Plato, of the close relation in Augustine and Thomas of universals with God. For Wolterstorff being has become a neutral term, without any connection with meaning and being good (Genesis 1). That is why universals cannot be taken as normative models (cf. 264ff). This understanding of being is also manifest in the distinction Wolterstorff makes between 'existence' as actual existence, 'subsistence' as possible existence and 'being' which might apply to what is impossible to exist. The property of 'being a square circle' 'is', even though it does not exist concretely because it cannot be exemplified in actual reality. Still as a property it 'is' (cf. 211). I presume that for Plato and Aristotle this property rather would have been an illustration of non-being. Parmenides would have said: it cannot be thought because it involves an inner contradiction. So it cannot be, even as a property.

In modern times it has become a characteristic of science that the theoretical understanding of reality by means of concepts and theories is separated from questions of meaning and value. Max Weber emphatically pronounced this approach, even for the social sciences. Husserl saw it as an expression of a deep cultural crisis. Heidegger wants to ask the question of meaning in relation to being to overcome this very crisis. He looks for the source of meaning in being itself, not anymore in a human subjectivity, that since Descartes has been placed over against objective reality, neither in a highest being (Seiendes) which Christianity identified with God as Creator. That is why he is so critical of western philosophy (metaphysics) as onto-theology. At the same time he wants to keep close to that tradition as far as it is concerned with meaning and its inner relation to being.

In *On Universals. An Essay in Ontology* Wolterstorff seems to take 'being' very much in the way exemplified by modern science. Being and meaning have no intrinsic connection. It seems to me that the ontology presupposed in *Divine Discourse. Philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* is not much different.<sup>2</sup> Because the intrinsic connection between being and meaning is a crucial characteristic of onto-theology Wolterstorff's ontology and philosophy of religion cannot be characterised as such. They lack this inner relationship. In other parts of his philosophy the biblical idea of shalom with all its connotations is of crucial importance. *Until Justice and peace embrace* (1983) is a beautiful illustration. In his ontology it appears to be totally missing.

### **Conclusion and epilogue**

My aim in this short contribution has been to give a general characterisation of Wolterstorff's philosophy of religion with the history of Western philosophy as a background. As a leading question I have asked whether Wolterstorff's philosophy of religion, or his ontology, should be characterised as onto-theology. The answer now should be clear. In one sense Wolterstorff is close to the onto-theological tradition, because for him the being of God can be analysed by means of concepts and theories developed in relation to created reality. In another respect, though, Wolterstorff differs from onto-theology because for him being is not intrinsically connected with meaning and the Good. In his view about the relationship between thinking and being Wolterstorff is more traditional than modern, because the critical question concerning the boundaries of human knowledge and especially of theoretical reason does not

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<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that Wolterstorff's analysis of language in terms of two acts (the lingual utterance of sounds as the basic fact and the attribution of meaning to them based on conventions, p. 80f) is an expression of this modern kind of ontology.

receive a central place. At the same time his ontology appears to be typically modern, because being has become a neutral idea, referring to an objective reality over against the seemingly subjectivity of meaning and value.

Personally I consider this second element as a loss, as much as I have problems with the first. In both cases I miss a serious reflection on the significance of the Creator – creature relationship as foundational for all there is, including our knowledge. This applies as much to the philosophy of religion as to ontology understood as an analysis of the structures of (created) being. To avoid misunderstanding I like to add that my emphasis on the fundamental nature of the Creator – creature relationship does not imply that we cannot have reliable knowledge concerning God. We certainly can. Because God has revealed himself. And He has spoken. I believe this as strongly, I hope, as Wolterstorff does.<sup>3</sup> The boundaries implied for us in the Creator – creature relationship do not exclude our knowledge of Him neither the possibility of us speaking about Him. They only mean that in our theoretical analysis we cannot draw conclusions about the being of God in the same way as we can draw conclusions in relation to created reality. The validity of our theories concerning creational structures and phenomena depends on God given continuity and lawfulness. Not the other way around.

Such a view implies a critique as much of the modern contention concerning the ultimate authority of reason, exemplified in Kant, as of the ancient claim of the all-embracing scope of reason in relation to being, put forward by Parmenides. In both cases it seems to me God is not truly honoured as our Creator. And this is what we as Christians should do with our philosophy, being servants in the kingdom of God. In spite of the differences I have pointed out I am sure this is as much Wolterstorff's intention as it is mine. Moreover, my critical questions and comments hardly affect the high appreciation I have for the many contributions he has made as a Christian philosopher.

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<sup>3</sup> In a paper given in 1992 I have given an analysis of the way God speaks to us through the Bible that has some similarities to Wolterstorff's idea of deputized discourse (*Divine discourse* 42ff). I emphasise the structure Speaker – sent messenger – addressee for understanding the connection of Divine and human authority within the Bible as the Word of God. This paper was published as 'Faith and science in biblical perspective: human responsibility before God' in Jitse M. van der Meer ed. *Facets of Faith & Science. Volume 4: Interpreting God's Action in the World*. University Press of America 1996, 285-312. See esp. p. 288 ff.