

Observant Notes on a Stroll with “Justice” and “Salvation”

Joe R. Jones

It sometimes happens in our earnest speaking and thinking that we unwittingly get fixed on what a particular word *must mean*. And in our fixation on that particular picture of what that word must mean, we find ourselves falling into serious confusion and bewilderment. Hence, some big, heavy duty words that bear much intellectual traffic, such as ‘justice,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘truth’, get up and walk around on us. Sometimes, but not always, it helps to relieve our bewilderment to examine carefully just where our speaking and thinking shifts and becomes the source of our confusion.

Much of the work in my *A Grammar of Christian Faith* is aimed at unraveling some of what seem to me to be the confusions and conflicts within the church’s discourses and practices. Certainly the word ‘freedom’ in its multiple uses is one source of consternation and disagreement among Christians that I attempt to sort through and unravel in my *Grammar* [pp. 312-317, 530-536]. ‘Salvation’ is another word of some instability in Christian usage that takes some patient examination and exploration in order to avoid falling into desperate confusion in our speaking and thinking and living. [See *Grammar*, pp. 503-509, 709-724 and some essays on this web site.]

But the language of *justice*, both within and outside the church, is particularly perplexing, confusing, and vexatious. The notes I am herein presenting were begun in 2006 at which time I had just read Miroslav Volf’s intellectually engaging book *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996) in which a serious argument is advanced concerning the relation between Christian discourses and practices of human justice and forgiveness and the ultimate justice of God. These notes are occasioned by my sense that Volf is wrong about God’s ultimate justice, but his errors are exceedingly common among Christian thinkers through the ages.

[In fairness to my friend Miroslav, it should be clearly noted that in 2005 he published *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Zondervan), which severely challenges his own conclusions about God’s ultimate justice in *Exclusion and Embrace*. And in a conversation in 2009 Miroslav affirmed to me that he no longer holds the position he developed in *Exclusion and Embrace* concerning God’s ultimate justice. So why do I mention Volf and refer to his earlier work? Because in that earlier work, in its excellence in talking about human forgiveness and peacemaking, nevertheless simply cannot relinquish the idea that God’s ultimate justice, in order to be and uphold *real justice*, must be what I will below call *just deserts justice*.]

Accordingly, I will be exploring some issues long rooted in how we—Christians and many non-Christians—talk about and invoke judgments about what *justice* must require. I want to show that at an abstract level we can see how language about justice arises and functions and how in its particularities of social application and judgments huge disagreements arise.

It should be shocking to us all that in the last two centuries much human bloodshed has been occasioned by someone's—some nations, some revolutionaries, some political leaders—invocation of the requirements of justice. It is so often for the sake of some conviction about justice that we humans go to war and slaughter many.

A. A Common Way of Talking about Justice: *suum cuique*

1. Let us note at an abstract level, **justice language is closely related to language about order**: justice involves *right order* and injustice involves *disorder*.

But then the question is '*right order relative to what?*' which is a request for how we determine when some apparent state of affairs is '*rightly ordered*'.

Hence, we cannot decide about justice until we have some serviceable criterion [or criteria] in terms of which we can judge some state of affairs as *rightly ordered*.

Put another way, we need some *norm* by virtue of which we can recognize that some state of affairs is just or unjust, rightly ordered or disordered.

2. In a host of ancient discourses, a basic conceptual epigram emerges: justice, and therefore right order, involves ***suum cuique*: rendering to each what is due**.

Abstractly considered, we can see how this concept slides easily into some form of **just deserts**: *persons should receive what is their due*.

This, of course, raises the **question of how we determine what is due**.

3. Precisely here we must recognize that the answer to that question of what is due is the great rub in human disagreements about what justice requires.

The word *justice*—and its rough equivalents in other languages—is subject to many different meanings and uses; or, put another way, the word gets up and walks around on us.

Differing socio/political orders speak of justice differently and only at the most abstract level should we assume they are talking about the **same subject matter**.

There may be some formal and abstract agreements about justice involving right order or *suum cuique*, but the determination of content of such *right order* cannot escape coming to grips with a given socio/political context of discourses and practices relative to social order.

Augustine accuses Roman law and society of not being a *just* social order, but he does so by virtue of an appeal to a concept of justice that is different from what was roughly common among Romans when they talked of law and justice. What was apparent to Augustine, but not to the Romans, was how deeply corrupted their understanding was of right order, human good, and the criteria for determining right order and human good.

4. **Different Types of Dues**: Abstractly considered, I propose analytically that there are at least two distinct but interrelated ways in which what is due can be addressed and answered:

- a. **what is due relative to a person's standing or identity or location in some presupposed socio/political order**.

b. **what is due relative to a person's actions.**

These are obviously interrelated considerations but they are not simply the same.

5. **What is due** also bears on:

a. what is due **from** a person or what a person **owes**.

b. what is due **to** a person, either:

1) in terms of standing/identity/location or

2) in terms of the person's actions.

6. Relative to a **person's standing/identity/location**, much depends on how that standing/identity is determined.

Notice these differences, among many other possible differences:

a. a person's standing/identity/location **within a political community**.

Here in political communities we encounter issues of how standing is determined by such contrasts as free/slave, citizen/noncitizen, male/female, property owner/nonproperty, patriot/enemy, as well as by socio/economic class, by ethnicity, by office, etc.

b. a person's standing/identity/location within some assumed **transcendent order of being**.

Christian traditions often affirmed 'simply as a person created by God, every person is *due* x,y,z and *owes* a,b,c.'

Hence, it is by appeal to some theological or metaphysical judgment that *dues and obligations* are determined in some basic and nonforfeitable way.

It should be clear that when a given socio/political order appeals to some transcendent/metaphysical order as the basis for its determination of societal dues and obligations, controversy often emerges as to the content and appropriateness of that appeal.

Notice as well, that it is in regard to persons' fundamental identity, whether by socio/political order or transcendent order, that we find the language of **rights** emerging. Standing/identity/location can be understood as conferring different and distinct rights on different persons in that order.

Relative to rights, justice language historically does much hopping around!

7. Relative to a **person's actions**, we encounter the deep conviction that many actions of a person, but not all, are subject to judgments of 'right and wrong' and/or 'good and bad'.

And again we run into the question of how we arrive at criteria for determining right/wrong or good/bad.

But at least this is clear: talk of *right order*—and therefore *justice*—are unavoidably rooted in some discriminating system of **making judgments** about some actions of persons and derivatively about or on the basis of some society and social relations.

[Another note: in stressing persons actions, I do not intend to negate that tradition of moral discourse that emphasizes *virtues* as human dispositional characters that are the primary object of moral appraisals.

But it seems to me that virtue language about justice is parasitic on justice questions relative to human actions: how could we decide what the good virtues are if we had no idea of what right and wrong, good and bad actions are?]

8. It would seem, then, that when we judge that a person's action is *wrong* we are applying some criteria embedded in other judgments about what is *due to* or *owed by* that person. These other judgments, then, are those that are rooted in some regard for the person's standing/identity, whether within some transcendent order of being or as a member of a socio/political community.
9. It appears, then, that **right and wrong judgments about actions** cannot avoid what can be called **retributive justice**: some actions *deserve commendation* and some *deserve condemnation*—or, simply, deserve reward or punishment. In this way we have a **just deserts** understanding of *justice*: persons should receive what is their *due* relative to the *rightness or wrongness* of their actions. Historically, the language of retributive justice has often been reduced simply to the negative/punitive side, but such would make no sense if there was not also those commendable actions important for right order.
10. Related to—but different from retributive justice—is that justice that considers issues of the distribution of goods in a social order: issues of **distributive justice**. A just order, therefore, must also consider how the goods of life are to be distributed among the persons in that social order. These sorts of considerations, however, are bound up with questions concerning what constitutes **human good** or what is a **good life** and related questions as to the conditions under which certain goods might be justly claimed by persons—e.g. are all goods justifiably relative to what a person has earned/deserved from his labor/resources/investments? Hence, distributive justice issues only arise when there is some given and firm socio/political agreement about what the goods of life are and how they are due a person who has definite **standing** within that socio/political order. Of course, the differentiated ways in which standing/identity/location can be determined is itself often a controversial political matter. Issues about the goods of life that ought to be a matter of justice considerations, become more complicated when there is an appeal to a transcendent order of being to identify just what those goods are that are due to all persons with standing or just to some persons under restricted conditions.
11. Where does the concept of **law** fit in these considerations of these concepts of justice? In all of the above analyses, whether talking about divine justice or human justice, the basic concept of **law** is simply that **laws intend to identify those criteria and rules that are necessary for the understanding of when an order is right and/or good and for the maintenance of that order among humans in a society**. Hence, law will pertain to both retributive justice and distributive justice. In the social process of applying law for the sake of just order, it becomes common to invoke the concept of **fairness: like cases or instances must be treated in the same or similar manner**.
12. But here is the great dispute in human history: **how is it determined who has the authority to determine the laws of right order and who has the authority to enforce that order?**

Every socio/political arrangement must *de facto* have some determination of that authority and the methods of enforcing that right order. Evildoers—violators of the just order—must be *punished* lest justice be abandoned and disorder prevail.

Such *de facto* arrangements, of course, are inevitably embedded in the discourses and practices of that social order—that by virtue of which it is a *social order* as distinct from *social chaos*.

Hence, while various socio/political arrangements in human history may inevitably share some formal language about justice and just deserts, the actual and practical judgments about that justice can appear wild, capricious, and—paradoxically—*unjust*.

It is precisely this formal socio/political function of the word *justice*, and its kin in other languages, that we can see it more nearly as *slot-marker* awaiting the particular contents a social order might pour into it in theory and practice.

13. Granting that the points thus far identified are *abstract* and beg for greater definiteness as to what criteria are to be used for determining justice, the controversies in Christian traditions pivot around **how to relate God's justice as that right order determined by God—and how we know that determination—and issues of forgiveness/grace and destiny/salvation.**

B. A Default Position in Christian Traditions concerning Justice, Salvation, and Destiny

1. Let us now investigate what can be called the **default** position in mainline Christian traditions about justice and human destiny.
That *God is just* means that God, the Creator of all things, has created human beings to live within *God's right order* and that humans have the capacity to recognize what that right order requires of them and their actions. This is **God understood as the lawgiver**. [We will prescind here from the Socratic question as to whether the order is just because God wills it or does God will it because it is just.]
Obedience to the right order deserves/merits blessings and reward and disobedience deserves/merits condemnation and punishment. This belief, however, would be meaningless if we did not also understand God as the **final administrator of reward and punishment**. God decides what is just and administers justice.
2. The question of *destiny* involves at least two questions:
 - a) what will happen to humans relative to their lives in time—should what happens to them in time be understood as evidencing either divine blessing or divine punishment, both of which are acts of *divine judgment* [Job is lurking in here somewhere!]? and
 - b) what will happen to humans *ultimately* either in some concluding *consummation* of time and creation or in some *transhistorical* life before God?
3. The *default* position is troubled by these issues, for it is aware that many are the devout who live lives in time under terrible conditions; hence, it cannot—though Israel

sometimes thought it could—simply read off right and wrong and correlative blessings and punishment from *what happens to persons in time*.

Yet this unnerving fact inevitably moves toward some *future* condition, whether in time or beyond time in which persons will receive from God *what their lives deserve/merit, whether condemnation or salvific blessing*.

This is what I call a **just deserts understanding of God's justice and human destiny/salvation**.

4. The situation of human beings becomes dramatically problematic when we adduce another common judgment in the default position: **all human beings are sinners—violators in one way or another of God's just order—and therefore deserve punishment**. But what sort of punishment fits the depth of human sin?

5. It should be clearer that when we track these issues in an abstract way in order to see some deep interconnections in our discourses and understanding, we see how important the **criteria** actually are in terms of which right and wrong are determined—and therefore just deserts—and which goods are identified as basic to human life.

If God ultimately renders justice in dealing with human destiny, then how is that justice measured?

The temptation is that Christians have been exceedingly strict in identifying the social conditions of justice due and owed, but, when confronted with sin and questions of destiny/salvation, they collide dramatically **with any remnant of God's love, grace, and mercy**.

6. **How, then, does it come about that any person is saved/rewarded if it is true that all persons are sinners who do not deserve a reward?**

Consider the position of **Anselm**, who is usually invoked by those who want to keep God's justice intact: Jesus, the God-man, meets all of God's just demands and thereby pays the costs—satisfies God's right order. This means that this one God/human does something that overcomes the deserts that were *due* human beings as their rightful/just destiny.

Lurking herein is the issue of how to understand an **imputed righteousness** that one does not deserve? Jesus apparently does something for humans that they cannot do for themselves?

Issue: does something else have to happen—be performed by individuals—in order for that imputed righteousness of Christ's to actually convert a sinner-deserving-of-punishment to a sinner-deserving-of-reward/salvation?

What is seldom noticed is this question: **what now is the status of all the sinners who have violated God's justice and who still sin?** If we say they are now **forgiven** because of Jesus' righteous/sacrificial work, then why is it not warranted by the default position that their forgiveness by God stays in place and is the decisive factor in the determination of their identity/destiny/salvation?

Poor Anselm, he could not leave well enough alone and still had to reckon with an *ultimate dual destiny*: some folk *had to* fall outside the atoning work of Jesus ultimately. **But why?**

7. This question now arises: **how does this default position handle the conceptual status of the grace and forgiveness that was manifested in Jesus Christ?**

It seems unavoidable that the default position would have to, for the sake of consistency and coherence, understand **God's forgiveness as itself conditional upon the individual repenting and asking for forgiveness.**

So, within the structure of justice, there is a *reward* available still for those who sincerely repent and *ask for forgiveness*—and live from thereon continuously righteous.

Put sharply, in order not to impugn God's justice, the default position can say that it is part of the *right order of God's justice that God will forgive those who truly repent and turn from any further sinning.*

It still is the case that by meeting this special condition of forgiveness and grace, a person can be said to **earn** her salvation by righteous living.

8. What the default position does not seem to allow—or is at least confused about—that God's forgiveness could be given *before* a person has repented.

The default condition does not mind that God can forgive repentant sinners, but it falls into confusion when we consider a strand in the Bible in which it seems that **God's forgiveness precedes the repentance**, just as God's gracious work in Jesus precedes the work of the individual person.

What is the status before God of the person who has not repented but is nevertheless forgiven? Has God impugned God's own justice?

The default position inevitably defaults into admitting that the **life of faith is in some sense meritorious toward ultimate salvation and, therefore, the damned remain damned as deserving their damnation because of their lack of faith and the faithful saved ultimately by virtue of their righteous faithfulness.**

When justice is understood in terms of just deserts, then issues of ultimate destiny and salvation must fall within the logic of those considerations.

C. Consider now Miroslav Volf as we find him in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996).

1. Volf is insistent that something deep has happened in Jesus Christ that shapes how we are to understand justice and destiny/salvation.

Clearly Christ has suffered death and been raised from the dead and those who follow him are to live a life of love, meaning at least *embracing the other and seeking the other's good*, wherein the *other* includes the stranger and the enemy—those most often appearing as threatening to good order and safety.

But you cannot seek the other's good if you kill or use violence against the other. So, Christians are called to live nonviolent, non-retaliating lives, returning no evil for evil done to them.

Further, followers of Jesus are to be forgiving of others even as they know they have been forgiven by God. Of course, being forgiving does not mean that Christians will ignore injustice in society, but they will be hesitant to use violence against the unjust.

Yet, how did it come about that Christians are forgiven—well that is not so clear, surprisingly! Is it because of something they have done or is it some gift given

freely to them. If freely given, is it also given to others who are not Christians?

2. But when it comes to matters of ultimate destiny/salvation, for Volf it is impossible to suppose or conclude that God might forgive the utterly unrepentant sinner—the worst of the bestial people of the world! [see pp. 295-304, invoking the “Rider on the White Horse” from Revelation 19:15]
3. Volf is here trying to hold together several sets of concepts:
 - a) that God’s ultimate justice is a *just deserts justice* that cannot be infringed;
 - b) that while humans are to forgive and live nonviolently, God is not held to the same moral summons;
 - c) that God must **judge** all humans ultimately and that means that God must apply the standards of God’s justice, resulting in the fact or possibility that some will ultimately be punished;
 - d) God’s condemnation and punishment of unrepentant evildoers is required lest we ignore the injustices that persons have done—which is especially important to those persons who have been grievously harmed and violated by others, for the harmed will feel there is no justice in the world now or ultimately if the violators do not receive their just deserts, their just punishment.

It is this *ultimate, just judgment of God* that Volf thinks Christians have to acknowledge: that, for some persons, God will punish in such a way that it amounts to *violence*.

4. Volf seems to understand himself herein as arguing against what he calls “universalists”, whom he interprets as supposing that the unrepentant evildoers will simply enter into beatific bliss in their utter unbelief.
[I do not know any so-called *universalists*—Christians who believe that God will ultimately save all humans—who would put it that way.]
For Volf, these universalists forget that there is an ultimate judgment of God, and therefore Volf thinks folk who emphasize the ultimacy of God’s love and grace have completely neglected the ultimate justice and judgment of God.
5. What is curious is that Volf, in holding out for a punitive, violent ultimate justice of God, leaves completely unresolved how anyone could *stand* before God and *deserve salvation*.

The horns of his dilemma are staggering: if anyone is ultimately saved, either that person is saved by the forgiving grace of God **or** she is saved by her own just deserts as the just reward of God’s justice, yet due the person because of what meritorious action or disposition or what?

6. In short, Volf correctly discerns the perils of concepts of human justice that depend on and perpetuate violent punishment and human conflict, and he does warn against them.
But when it comes to God, he cannot let go of a divine justice that must be able in some way to administer ultimately violent punishment for some egregious evil-doers.
Why? Because if all are forgiven ultimately, then there is no justice ultimately. It would seem necessarily to follow, however, if anyone is ultimately saved by divine forgiveness and grace, then there is no justice, in that sense, ultimately.

D. Brief Concluding Suggestions

1. My own attempt is to say that Christians must posit an **ultimate transition** in which the individual encounters the **sheer irresistible grace and forgiveness of God**, whereby she will be totally exposed to the **truth** about her life with all of its lies, betrayals, sins, **and** be empowered to say ‘yes’ to God’s grace. It is not a ‘yes’ that earns the grace; it is a ‘yes’ that acknowledges the grace already given. Hence, there is **judgment** by God that a person is a **sinner** and therefore **not deserving** of blessing and salvation but nevertheless **graciously forgiven**. But for Volf, *blessing and salvation without just deserts undermines a strong sense of God’s justice and judgment*.
2. Put it this way: Volf seems to think that the **judgment** of God is always and only the judgment of just deserts and that the universalist denies this. So, Volf gives no credence to the following: **God judges the sinner as a sinner and yet forgives the sinner her just deserts as a sinner and thereby refuses to administer to persons what their lives might deserve/merit.**

My thesis is that the ‘justice’ and ‘judgments’ of God’s retributive justice—*just deserts justice*—because of God’s own self-revelation in Jesus Christ, must finally be understood as subordinate to *God’s ultimate right ordering of forgiving grace and transformation*.

Nothing I have written or said herein should be interpreted to mean that the repentant life of growing in sanctification is unimportant because it does not finally determine one’s ultimate destiny. It is a conceptual and self-involving knot to understand how important it is to live faithfully before the One who’s justice is ultimately gracious and transformative.

[complex stuff: see *A Grammar of Christian Faith*, 709-748 for an extended discussion of some of these issues.]

3. Consider then the implications of my way of construing God’s justice as ultimately aiming at transformation: what might that imply about how Christians could reconstrue the ways in which human socio/political discourses and practices of justice might aim at *transformation*—at reclaiming and redeeming humans caught in the snares and ambiguities of societal practices of just deserts justice.
4. I hope as well, given the huge political disagreements within the church and within Western democracies and some self-identified theocracies, that the thread of distinctions identified in the first section [A] of these notes pertaining to how justice is determined and justified relative to what is due by virtue of social location/identity and what is due by virtue of right and wrong actions might prove useful in identifying and unraveling, if not solving, discursive and political disputes about justice.