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## Reciprocal Critique: A Dialectical Engagement of Theology and Human Rights Discourse (abstract)

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## **The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy**

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**Research Panel:** Religion and Human Rights

**Presenter:** Diane Yeager, Georgetown University

**Title:** Reciprocal Critique: A Dialectical Engagement of Theology and Human Rights Discourse

**Abstract:** Nicholas Wolterstorff puts the problem baldly: “The relation of Christians to human rights is a troubled relationship. It was not always so; it became so in the twentieth century.” A reviewer has accurately (if perhaps overdramatically) pointed out that “the assumption that rights talk is anathema to theology” functions as the “chief impetus” propelling Ethna Regan’s ambitious and provocative *Theology and the Boundary Discourse of Human Rights* (2010).

While much of the discussion generated by Regan’s argument has centered on her efforts to show the constructive convergence of moral theology and the human rights movement (which she manages dialectically by situating rights talk as a “boundary discourse”), I will explore and extend her contention that the two are also dialectically related in an abrasive but ultimately fruitful “reciprocity of critique” (218). From the one side, theology exposes the pretension of human rights discourse by first correcting the individualistic bias of much rights talk and then situating the construct of human rights within a more complex moral landscape.

From the other side, analysis of Christian individual and institutional practices in light of the human rights norms has two effects: (1) when human rights advocates engage theologians, their uncompromising insistence on the realities of brutal dehumanization challenges the “moral and theological imagination” (219) by “interrupting” both doctrinal abstraction and platitudinal treatments of suffering. And (2) human rights norms provide a platform from which to conduct a biting moral analysis of the practices of Christians and Christian institutions. Since this last element—the critique of religious practice—is the least developed by Regan herself, it is the one on which I will concentrate. Any such critique must, in all honesty, take up the question of possible or probable conflicts between religious human rights and other human rights.

**Keywords:** Boundary discourse, religious human rights, Regan, moral theology,

**Biography:** Diane Yeager is the Healey Family Distinguished Professor of Ethics in the Theology Department of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.