



BOOK REVIEW

Nimi Wariboko, *Transcripts of the Sacred in Nigeria: Beautiful, Monstrous, Ridiculous*

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Few thinkers are more indispensable than Nimi Wariboko for the scholarly task of understanding the Pentecostal movement's global social implications. His new volume, *Transcripts of the Sacred in Nigeria: Beautiful, Monstrous, Ridiculous*, builds on the theological and ethical foundations of his previous work while situating them in the concrete context of contemporary Nigeria. By weaving his often dense and complex concepts into an exploration of his home country, Wariboko renders his thought freshly comprehensible and its implications clearly valuable.

The easiest way to summarise *Transcripts of the Sacred* is by exegeting its title. Principally, all of the essays in the book are concerned with 'the sacred', which in Wariboko's parlance is the network of possibilities available to a community and its members. The sacred can be beautiful, monstrous or ridiculous depending on how its possibilities comport with human flourishing (conducively, repressively or disruptively). The sacred is calcified into transcripts, which are the concrete forms that the sacred takes in social life (practices, institutions, ideas, etc.), which allow scholars to observe the possibilities available to a community. Armed with this terminology, Wariboko charges into the volume's six chapters.

The first chapter is primarily a contextual exposition of Wariboko's definition of the sacred as sets of possibilities in relation to Kalabari and African Pentecostal theology. One of the chapter's chief conceptual insights is that the sacred as possibilities is facilitated by a backdrop of impossibilities (a point made through ample dialogue with Catherine Keller). The second chapter uses the sacred as a lens for understanding the aesthetics of Nigerian Pentecostal 'hot prayers'. Wariboko demonstrates that these exorcistic prayers can be coherently understood aesthetically, as the worshipers utilise tropes found in African traditional religions to manifest the real presence of God in ways that affect their possibilities for flourishing. The third chapter surveys what Wariboko calls 'the Pentecostal incredible'. This is his term for the deformed side of Pentecostalism that responds to the incoherence of postcolonial Nigeria with an incoherent spirituality. This incoherence is often counterproductive for political development, though it could be the grounds for revolutionary movement. In order to actualise this revolutionary potential, however, the destructive impulse of the incredible must be paired with the Christic security of promise. The fourth chapter reads the problem of violence within

postcolonial Nigeria in terms of the sacred. The fifth chapter is a fascinating exploration of the belief of some Nigerian Pentecostals that they are destined to evangelize the world and facilitate the uplifting of the Black race globally. Wariboko criticises this notion, because it fails to fulfil the potential of Pentecostalism to disrupt nationalism. The final chapter returns to concepts introduced in his earlier chapter on 'the Pentecostal incredible'. He turns to some instances of resistance to authority within Nigerian Pentecostalism and presents five possible ways of reconceiving Pentecostalism's relationship to cultural development.

One important result of Wariboko's framing of the sacred as social possibilities is to highlight the ambiguous relationship between religion and sacredness. In this framework, religion is merely one of many ways that the sacred manifests within society. Indeed, religion can and does work against the beauty of the sacred when it becomes a means of stifling broader human flourishing. Religion can both create and destroy social possibilities. This reverses the stereotypical view that majority world scholars have of impoverished countries' piety: 'What poor countries have more of is religion, not the sacred' (p. 193).

For readers familiar with Wariboko's other work on Pentecostalism, such as *The Pentecostal Principle* or *The Pentecostal Hypothesis, Transcripts of the Sacred* has much to offer in the way of practical clarity. Here, application to the definite global and temporal space of contemporary Nigeria gives flesh to the principles and paradigms presented in his other work. This may help readers who have found his previous work inscrutable. Furthermore, the second chapter, 'The Demons as Guests', which surveys the aesthetics of Nigerian Pentecostal hot prayers, is one of the best places for new readers to start with Wariboko's work as it applies some of his more abstract ideas to a single practice.

Readers interested in the relationship between religion and politics in twenty-first century Nigeria will find here a stimulating companion to Ebenzer Obadare's *Pastoral Power, Clerical State*. Wariboko provides an affirmation of Obadare's diagnosis of Nigeria's clerical/political gridlock while also articulating the manner in which religion might play a liberatory role in opening new possibilities for social flourishing. *Transcripts of the Sacred* is demanding reading. It requires the reader to follow Wariboko's thought across widely different essays and often into the furrows of complex economic and political theory. But when one looks over the terrain as a whole, one finds that the journey has rendered the map legible.

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