



Book Review for *Religion in the University*

by Nicholas Wolterstorff

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failure to court a Northern Muslim elite hoping to take back Yar'Adua's lost years and a Pentecostal elite losing faith in his capacity to govern results in his eventual loss (122).


Obadare's concern with Pentecostal influence in the Nigerian Fourth Republic is not limited to the formation of a self-authorizing Pentecostal elite. In chapter 6, "Kill Them Before They Kill You," Obadare begins to trace the violent risks of such an outsized Pentecostal influence in Nigerian society. On the first front, Obadare convincingly argues that the quotidian violence that Pentecostals experience in Nigeria shapes violent practices such as aggressive prayer and spiritual warfare. At this point, Obadare suggests a potential expansion of Pentecostal violence as a result of this violent spirituality. Obadare is convincing on the violent formation of Pentecostal practice, but less so on the resulting Pentecostal material violence. Even so, this offers a stark warning that readers would do well to take seriously.

Throughout the book, Obadare is anything but a disinterested observer of Nigerian political life. This is much to his credit, as it brings life to the text. While never compromising his capacity as a scholar, there is a sort of disgust with particular forms of corruption or self-aggrandizement found in Nigerian religious and political life. One might expect this, however, given Obadare's methodological approach to Nigerian Pentecostalism, which puts off the task of articulating Pentecostal theology or philosophically accounting for Pentecostalism in Nigerian politics and opts for a narrow scope of identifying Pentecostalism's relationship to Nigerian state power (5). Such a methodology is able to uniquely illuminate "what happens to weak political institutions when they fall under the sway of powerful religious sources" (35).

While laying bare the power plays of the theocratic elite, Obadare's methodology simultaneously risks certain forms of reductionism or assuming his conclusion. In his treatment of Pentecostal pastor and political activist Tunde Bakare's condemnation of Obasanjo as demonic, Obadare asserts that "being politically ambitious himself (which I discuss presently), Bakare probably sees Obasanjo as a legitimate political obstacle to be removed at all costs" (91). Obadare's Obasanjo is a corrupt figure worthy of Bakare's critique, but it is not clear that Obadare has any way to imagine Pentecostal speech as rendering any type of legitimate critique.

Pentecostal Republic offers an in-depth analysis of Nigerian electoral politics, from which both beginners and those more familiar with Nigerian society will benefit. Obadare has done a service in illuminating the ways religious and electoral power interact. All those interested in similar interactions between religion and politics will find the text informative and insightful.

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Book Review for *Religion in the University*, by Nicholas Wolterstorff

In *Religion in the University*, Yale Emeritus professor and prolific author Nicholas Wolterstorff reflects on how religious voices fit into today's secular universities within liberal democracies. Wolterstorff engages with Max Weber's lamentation of the seemingly inevitable irrelevance of the distinctly non-conformist religious voice in scholarship. Wolterstorff gracefully shows that Weber's prediction has, fortunately, not come to fruition, as reflected in the democratic changes toward plurality in the academy over the past fifty years. What is more, he shows

that the contemporary critic of the rationality of religious beliefs is also misguided. Using a Christian voice of his own, Wolterstorff is ultimately led to redeem religious voices, placing their acceptance alongside the acceptance of other comprehensive orientations, like feminist theory, that have rightly found a home in the university.

In the first chapter, Wolterstorff surveys Weber's prediction that modernity would give rise to distinctive spheres of education, differentiated according to norms internal to themselves. Such norms would aim at objective understanding, absent our values or prejudgements (9). In order to achieve this objectivity, it was thought that the ethic of the scholar then necessarily involved excluding one's own perspective in order to prevent bias from obstructing our direct cognitive access to reality, to overcome contradictory beliefs, and to eliminate disagreement (20). In the second chapter, Wolterstorff argues that this ethic has changed. It is now thought that our *choice* in which theories to adopt, and the cultural traditions through which we view them, as Gadamer and Kuhn argued, as well as our specific character-identities, as Wolterstorff himself adds, have far from obstructed our understanding of reality (37-49). Such lenses have, rather, *enabled* it. The difference is that now secular universities in liberal democracies are beginning to explicitly teach and share in these particular perspectives.

However, there is work to be done. The main obstacle that Wolterstorff commits himself to addressing in the third chapter is the contemporary critic's argument that religious beliefs are distinctive in their being non-rational. It is thought that they are the product of the misuse or malfunctioning of our rational capacities, and the academy is not in the business of engaging with non-rational beliefs (63). In this sense, religious perspectives are fundamentally different in kind from other scholarly lenses, such as the feminist lens. This is partly because religious beliefs are part of a comprehensive doctrine that relies on a nest of beliefs internal to the doctrine itself, making religious beliefs, in addition to being non-rational, inaccessible (67). If they are inaccessible, they are immunized from critique, and that is why the critic argues they cannot be employed at the university level.

In addressing the critic, Wolterstorff states that we can either meet the charge or challenge it. By meeting the charge, we can point to great strides that have been made in, for instance, natural theology. Here, proof for the existence of God does *not* rely on circularly held commitments, internal to Christianity, but on premises that lie outside of the belief system (77). However, the issue remains that religious folks, scholars included, often do not base their religious beliefs on arguments, but on experience or the testimony of others. Even if this is true, however, Wolterstorff argues that the mere existence of these arguments, even those with which we are unfamiliar, indeed contribute to the rationality of religious beliefs. We rely on "chains of testimony" of those who *are* knowledgeable of and in agreement about these convincing theological arguments (104). If this is insufficient evidence, however, we can challenge the charge that religious beliefs are non-rational. The main idea here is that we hold all kinds of beliefs immediately, like perceptual beliefs, without argumentation, yet nobody claims beliefs like these are the product of a malfunctioning capacity for reasoning. Religious beliefs are like perceptual beliefs in this way (105).

In light of these arguments against the non-rationality of religious belief, in the fourth chapter, Wolterstorff expands on what this means for religious voices in the university. Since "our capacity for reasoning is always functioning in the service of some particular faith or love, or in the service of some intuition or interpretation of how things are", then academic learning should be based on interpretation as social practice, rather than objectivity (118). This means recognizing that scholars already do (and should) bring to their work their particular identities and comprehensive doctrines, but also recognize that in doing so, we are not encouraging a breakdown of scholarly ethic. Rather, we are witnessing an extraordinary openness of the university (126). This openness, what Wolterstorff called a "dialogic

pluralism”, requires that we actively work *with* those with whom we disagree, never immunizing ourselves from critique, and not tolerating intolerant views (128). In short, Weber was wrong. The ethic of the scholar *does* include bringing questions of value to our academic disciplines (9). There may be hope, then, that religious voices in particular can keep alive questions of “the meaning of the mystery, magnificence, and horror of our existence” (154).

Overall, Wolterstorff’s contribution to discussions on the ethic of the scholar is a heartfelt and accessibly written defence for religious voices in secular universities. What is perhaps most surprising, and bold, is Wolterstorff’s ability to liken religious voices to other diverse perspectives as all-encompassing orientations to the world that we are now engaging with in the academy. In doing so, he rightly highlights courses offered in, for instance, feminist epistemology, black sociology, or liberation theology (48). These areas of study reflect how different character identities can offer privileged access to aspects of our social reality from which we all can learn. It would rightly seem unjust to leave religious orientations out of this mix.

At the same time, there is a large dissimilarity here. The largest difference is that not all religious groups have a history of oppression. In fact, Wolterstorff seems to overlook how those who adhere to a dominant religious group, and especially those who also occupy other positions of privilege, like heterosexuality or whiteness, have had an *asymmetrical* experience to marginalized folks, such as women or people of colour. It is precisely these axes of *oppression* that gives marginalized voices their unique “cognitive access to certain dimensions of reality”, and, I would suggest, why the university has begun recognizing them on that accord (53). One might be keen to point out that Christian voices have become much less prominent in secular universities in the past fifty years, and may even be a minority in most academic circles. However, subtle assumptions of christonormativity can linger on (Case). This is evident in the way religious minorities may smother their use of religious concepts that their colleagues are unfamiliar with, and may struggle to be seen as credible speakers (Dotson; Medina). Conversely, Christians may communicate ideas and concepts even from within their comprehensive doctrine with comparative ease.

Perhaps the hopeful vision of dialogic pluralism that Wolterstorff advocates may come to fruition only if we are actively attentive to how we use our religious voice in light of these other aspects of our character identities. Dialogic pluralism can emerge when we are self-conscience of how our adherence to a religion that has largely *lacked* a history of oppression means that we possess a responsibility to acknowledge that privilege, and to seek ways to encourage the voices of the religious minorities around us.

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