

## Jeremy Begbie, *Abundantly More: The Theological Promise of the Arts in a Reductionist World*

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In this highly readable, compelling book, Begbie argues for the arts' inherent capacity to resist the pressures of a reductionist age and, in so doing, reveals their resonances with the deepest Christian claims about God's nature and the experience of God's loving abundance towards the world.

These reductive tendencies are part of a larger cultural *episteme* of a reductionist age 'dominated by the logic of containment' and they 'apply both to what the world is envisaged to be and to our engagement with it' (p. 18). In the first two chapters, Begbie outlines four main reductive pressures or drives, which can be summarised as an effort to strip the world down to its 'base' or 'simplest' reality, to know it through limited or singular methods (usually understood as scientific), to 'bracket out, peel away, and if necessary dismiss phenomena and postulates that cannot be quickly accommodated in a premade ontological and epistemological frame' (p. 19) and to control and master the world once discovered. These pressures overlap and manifest in many different guises, including naturalist reductivism, evolutionary reductivism, sociocultural reductivism and economic reductivism.

Although almost every aspect of our shared cultural life has been distorted by these reductive pressures, Begbie is at pains to show that they express a historically contingent and highly selective way of interpreting the world and our place in it. In chapter 4, Begbie discusses the self-contradictory and self-defeating nature of reductivist modes of thought, especially their inability to account for reality that exceeds their explanatory models, ultimately undercutting their desire to explain all of reality. In chapters 3 and 5, he provides 'interludes' of biblical interpretation, taking the reader into the charged metaphorical, interpretatively expansive poesis of John's Gospel. This is not so much an argument against the historical forces of reductionism as it is an exegetical enactment of another way of conceiving reality, meaning and agency.

In the book's second part, we get Begbie's main constructive argument, which is comprised of two interconnected parts. The first (chapter 6) is the argument that both making and experiencing art is a uniquely counter-reductive activity by virtue of the arts' 'capacity to draw on and generate potentially inexhaustible dimensions of meaning' (p. 94). Enacted through our embodied experience of the world, art enlarges our perception, drawing us into ever-expanding realms of interpretation and experience that are nevertheless anchored in some sense of shared reality. His argument that art is not just another way of knowing the same thing we could learn elsewhere, but is another way of understanding that cannot be 'reduced down' to something else is particularly persuasive. The capacity of the arts to "make sense" not by closing down possible relations but by opening them up' (p. 123) is where Begbie finds theological resonance. He argues that this same capacity to resist containment is the life-giving source of Christian encounters with God in creation (chapter 7) and the way Christians understand the very nature of God's own 'uncontainable "ex-pressive" life' (p. 126, chapter 8). The point, as Begbie says clearly in chapter 9, is not to ask 'how art reveals God' but how making and participating in art 'might be

drawn...into the triune God's re-creative action in the world such that it serves to reveal something of the being and action of this God' (p. 187).

Here, then, is the real payoff of the book for Begbie: a deeper, richer appreciation 'for the ways in which the arts can be taken up in the life and witness of the church, as well as for the enterprise of Christian theology' (p. 185); and the final two chapters are eloquent arguments for the centrality of 'uncontainable' art as the bedrock of Christian collective life (worship) and talk about God (theology).

One could quibble with various moments of analysis throughout, but the bigger question left unanswered is why Begbie needed to write the book in the first place. If he is right about the inherent claims of Christianity about the revelation of God and God's engagement with the world, why does he have to make the case for the resonance between theology and the 'more than' powers of art-making and art experience? In other words, there is not, perhaps, enough discussion of the way Christian theology has historically contributed to these reductive tendencies and has absorbed these reductive aims, in its own cultural, social and intellectual life, such that Christians have to be persuaded otherwise. Nor is there a discussion of the way the same multivalence of interpretation can cut in different ways. The power of corporate singing, for example, may 'enable a bodily, emotionally energized awareness of and engagement with each other' (p. 206) and intimate an ecstatic jubilation and giving over to the spirit. Those same powers, however, can also be marshalled as ritualised coercion and disciplining containment.

There is a kind of shadow argument running throughout or behind the book, one that assumes that many Christians – ordinary faithful and academic theologian alike – may have to be persuaded to take seriously the counter-reductive powers of the arts to 'play a key role in the renewal of the church's life and worship' (p. 216). The fact that Begbie chooses not to stage this as an explicit argument may itself enact some of his larger hopes for the book. Arguing about the value of art, after all, plays into the hands of reductionist thinking, shutting down possibilities, hardening lines of interpretation, forcing art to prove its value as a proxy for something else. Instead, Begbie pulls his reader through the flow of the book into the open-ended, multi-valent interpretation he wants to model. Let those who have ears hear.

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

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\$40.00**

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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,