THICK RELIGION: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM MIROSLAV VOLF

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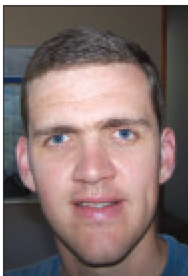
Miroslav Volf's exploration of otherness is without peer in contemporary theology. Linden Fooks asks what we can learn from him on the meaning of reconciliation in a world of violence.



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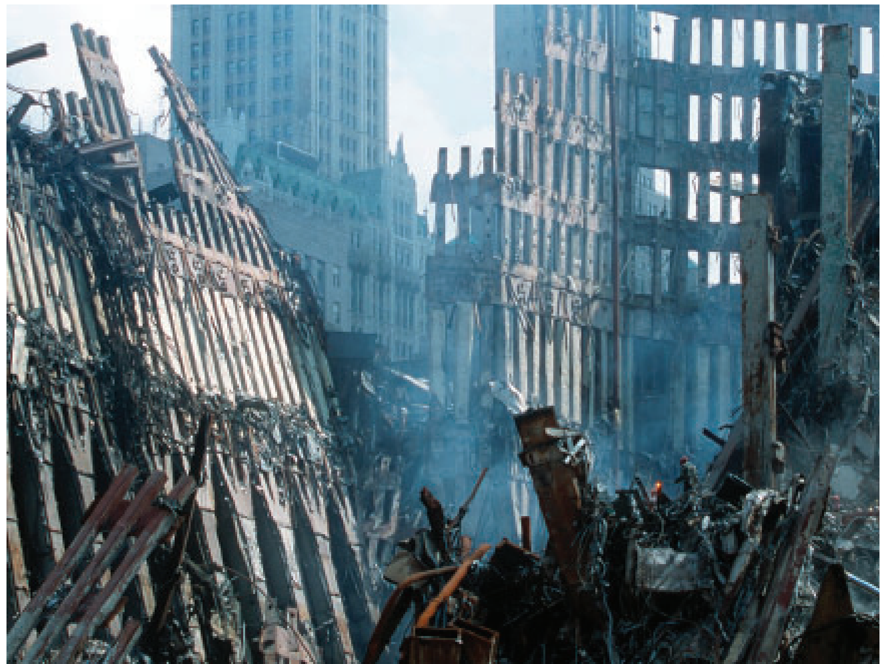

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As the two hijacked aircraft flew toward the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, Miroslav Volf, Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School addressed the 16th Annual United Nations International Prayer Breakfast. The title of his address was 'From Exclusion to Embrace: Reflections on Reconciliation'. In this address, he wanted to consider the 'many conflicts that rage around our world'.[1] The conflicts had left gaping wounds in many societies. Yet even though the atrocities of Rwanda or Bosnia had cut many societies apart, Professor Volf argued that there was the possibility of reconciliation. For Christians, this possibility was entirely founded in the Christian message. The Christian gospel speaks of 'the God of unconditional love … the God who died for the ungodly'.[2] The speech was, of course, cut short. The dark irony was that, as Volf spoke of religious reconciliation, less than two miles away the Twin Towers were crashing to the ground.

Interviewed in the days after September 11, Volf claimed that the answer was not 'less religion' but 'more religion'. The problem was, in fact 'thin' religion—religion that grasps its foundations only flimsily. What we needed was 'thick' religion, a grappling with the heart of the Christian message.[3]

Born and raised in Croatia, educated in Zagreb, the United States and Germany, Volf has thrown much of his life's energies into the all-too-real problems of reconciliation and violence. His major work, *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*, was born out of his own experience of seeing his homeland devastated in the 1990s.[4] Having witnessed the violence that exploded between Croats and Serbs, Volf is well-placed to comment on the importance of reconciling with the other.[5] In *Exclusion and embrace*, and in other works, Volf has arguably made an unparalleled contribution to a theological understanding of the problems of otherness. His engagement with philosophy, with concrete political life and with the best and deepest in the Christian tradition—not least with the scriptures themselves—means that his work will warrant attention for decades to come. This article will offer a glimpse

into what we might learn from Volf on Christianity and otherness.

We might well begin by asking the question, 'who is the other?' For Volf this is really a question of 'who is my neighbour?' He explains the nearness of the other:

> I think the more important other is not the distant, but the proximate other, almost a domestic other. Others are always also our neighbours. There are those who live at the boundaries of our lives, the boundaries of our community, the boundaries of our nations. Samaritans, after all, were the Jews' neighbours.[6]

So what is it to be a good neighbour to the 'proximate other'? Volf's work, as we shall see here, points us not towards the envisioning of better social arrangements, but to the altogether deeper level of identity-formation itself. This article will trace out four main themes in his work. First, it will begin by looking at the nature of 'exclusion', which is essentially the practice of 'creating a world without the other'. Second, it will consider Volf's discussion of the need for 'distance' between a Christian and their surrounding culture in the process of identity-formation. Third, it will consider Volf's discussion of what it is to 'embrace' the other: a move requiring both repentance and forgiveness. Finally, we will zoom in on Volf's treatment of the nature of the self as such. What does the Christian doctrine of the Trinity mean for the way in which we understand ourselves in relation to others?

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Exclusion

One of the starting points for *Exclusion and embrace* was an observation of the cultural sources of conflict in the Balkans. Volf argued: 'The political power side of the war and the economic side of the war were there partly because of the cultural difference'.[7] Fuelled by religious differences, cultural differences created an environment ready for conflict. Reflecting on a visit he later made to Croatia, Volf remarked:

> '[T]he longer I was in the country, the more hemmed in I felt. At the time, I sensed an unexpressed expectation to explain why as a Croat I still had friends in Serbia and did not talk with disgust about the backwardness of their Byzantine-Orthodox culture ... the new Croatia, like some jealous goddess, wanted all my love and loyalty.[8]

Volf felt the jealous demands of a cultural identity that was formed on the basis of exclusion. The tragedy of the Balkan conflict had sprung in part from this evil. This could be seen in the way the ethnic other became something to be 'cleansed' from the land. Ethnic cleansing, says Volf, is the 'most powerful current metaphor' of the practice of exclusion.

> Ethnic otherness is filth that must be washed away from the ethnic body, pollution that threatens the ecology of the ethnic space. The others will be rounded up in concentration camps, killed and shoved into mass graves, or driven out; monuments of their cultural and religious identity will be destroyed, inscriptions of their collective memories erased; the places of their habitation will be plundered and then burned and bulldozed.[9]

Such is the practice of creating a world without the other.

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Yet moving away from the Balkan experience, what can we learn about 'exclusion' more generally? Volf suggests exclusion is not found merely in the dark evil of ethnic cleansing. It exhibits itself in a number of other ways—assimilation, domination or elimination—and even practices of abandonment and indifference. He suggests the latter form of exclusion is particularly seen in the North and West—say in the flight to the suburbs, or the retreat from 'rabble'. 'If others neither have goods we want nor can perform services we need, we make sure that they are at a safe distance and close ourselves off from them so that their emaciated and tortured bodies can make no inordinate claims on us'.[10]

Volf is not afraid to call exclusion sin. It is not the root of all sin; yet it is a deceptive sin, construing itself as innocence. Exclusion contains in it the refusal to tolerate the sin in the other. In the face of this, says Volf, we need to remember our share in the 'solidarity of sin'.[11] Exclusion, like other sins, is the kind of sin that begets sin; in the long history of violence, today's perpetrators become tomorrow's victims.

Volf suggests that the exclusionary impulse arises from our need to find our identity. Such a basic need is essentially healthy, of course. Yet, within it lies the 'germ of its own illness'.[12] Exclusion is the making of an identity without space for the other. It is not that Volf wants a self without boundaries. Boundaries are very necessary. It is when these boundaries are not porous and do not allow a dialogical relation with the other that they are problematic. As Volf says, 'instead of reconfiguring myself to make space for the other, I seek to reshape them into who I want her to be in order that in relation to her I may be who I want to be.'[13]

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Distance

The formation of an exclusionary identity has much to do with how we relate to our culture. Our culture gives us the material from which we build our identity. Volf argues that in order to develop a non-exclusionary identity, we need a certain 'distance' from our culture. Without such a distance, culture can dominate. Religion will sacralise and abolutise that which is cultural:

> Blind to the betrayal of the Christian faith that both such sacralization of cultural identity and the atrocities it legitimises represent, the "holy" murderers can even see themselves as the Christian faith's valiant defenders … as Serbian fighters have in their recent war against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia …[14]

So what is the alternative? Instead of the sacralisation of cultural identity, how can we cultivate appropriate 'distance'? Here Volf points us to the scriptures—to two archetypal figures, Abraham and Paul.

Volf offers the biblical account of Abraham as a kind of archetype for the Christian believer's relation to cultural identity. Abraham was called to leave his society and step out his enmeshment in his 'network of inherited cultural relations'.[15] To become a child of Abraham, then, means to depart, to begin an exodus of faith, to become a stranger. At the very core of Christian identity lies 'an all-encompassing change of loyalty, from a given culture with its gods to the God of all cultures'.[16] Faith in the transcendent God creates for the believer a critical distance from the culture that surrounds them—a distance that enables them to stand over and against the culture if need be.

However, Volf does not stop with Abraham. He points us to a second archetypical, though specifically Christian figure, the Apostle Paul. Paul saw himself as the one sent to proclaim the message of Christ, who was the 'blessing to all the nations'. Yet Paul's ministry faced the problem of how the one God could be related to the many nations. Belief in God had, until that point, entailed membership in the one tribe. Was this the way it had to remain? Or was the way forward to regard different religions as manifestations of worship of the same deity? Paul's solution was different to both. It centred on the creation of what Volf terms a multiethnic community:

> It begins with the fact there is one God and this requires a certain universality. This universality entails a human equality. Human equality implies equal access by all to the blessings of the one God. Equal access is incompatible with ascription of significance to genealogy. Christ is the fulfilment of the genealogical promise to Abraham and the end of genealogy as a privileged locus of access to God. Thus, faith in Christ replaces birth into a people. Thus, faith creates a new multiethnic community around Christ.[17]

Critics such as Daniel Boyarin have seen in Paul's solution a 'dualism of the flesh and the spirit, such that while the body is particular … the spirit is universal'.[18] Difference is resolved by bashing everything into the 'same'. But Volf sees in Paul quite the reverse. Rather than dualism, Paul clings to the scandalous particularity of the suffering body of Christ. Christ unites the bodies into one body, not by his oneness, but by his suffering in the flesh. Indeed, far from being the coercion of the many into the

one, the cross is the self-giving of the one for the many.[19] We are united with Christ by his body; and of his body we are now different members.[20] Thus, Paul doesn't move from the particularity of the body to the universality of the Spirit. He moves from separated bodies to a community of interrelated bodies—the one body with its many members.

Importantly for our purposes, we need to recognise that in making us members of the one body, the Spirit doesn't erase bodily differences, but instead allows us access into the one body of Christ. Each culture can retain its own cultural specificity in Christ. Yet far be it from any one culture to rise up and claim absolute status:

> Paul deprived each culture of ultimacy in order to give them all legitimacy in the wider family of cultures. Because of the ultimate allegiance to God of all cultures and to Christ who offers his body as a home for all people, Christian children can depart from their culture without having to leave it.[21]

So as well as 'departing' (like Abraham) from the source of cultural identity, the Christian will retain their bodily and cultural particularity. Departure is no longer a spatial category. We do not leave to form a new Christian nation.[22]

The opening of 'distance' between the believer and their surrounding culture achieves two important things. First, it creates 'space' for us to receive the other.[23] The Spirit breaks into our little worlds creating a fissure, a space for the other to come in. This 'catholic personality', as Volf calls it, requires a 'catholic' community. As the Gospel is preached, many different cultures are brought into the one church. Though there are many diverse churches, they are one, just as the Triune God is one. No church in a given culture may isolate itself from other churches in other cultures. Both catholic personality and catholic community suggest a catholic cultural identity. Thus, there is a distance from our own culture that is born of the Spirit. Our culture loosens its grip on us. Other cultures are no longer a threat to our cultural purity, but a source of potential enrichment.

Second, the distance forged by the Spirit contains within it a judgment against evil in our culture.[24] Any catholic cultural identity that would be capable of integrating but not discriminating would be grotesque. The practice of judgment cannot be given up. There can be no new creation without the judgment. If I cut myself off from everything and become a wanderer, I become an indeterminate self, open to arbitrary content. As a consequence, I simply float, unable to resist evil. Yet those who seek to overcome evil—those who seek to live in the light of this judgement—must first fight against evil in their own selves. In this sense a truly catholic personality must, therefore, be an 'evangelical' personality: a person bought to repentance and shaped by the Gospel.

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Embrace

Volf's picture of 'embrace', our third theme, is inspired first and foremost by the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The father of the prodigal son recklessly runs down the road to embrace his child (v20). His arms are wide open to the very one who turned his back on him. If the Father is the archetype of free embrace, the older brother is the counter-type. He cannot comprehend his father's unwillingness to disinherit his son.[25] He cannot understand why the Father's will to embrace has exceeded his desire to see a strict justice carried out. The Father's embrace, however, moves beyond the logic of strict retributive justice. This is what any true embrace requires. It is shown to us in our heavenly Father's grace to us, in the openness of his arms toward us.

According to Volf, to be truly gracious requires two things. The first is repentance. Surprisingly, if not shockingly, Volf speaks here of the need for repentance not only for the perpetrator, but also for the victim. Volf notes that it is Jesus who calls the oppressed—the victims of exclusion—to repentance.[26] Jesus said that he came to call not the righteous but sinners. But, as he calls them, does he not have anything more comforting to say? Volf insists we see 'the revolutionary nature of what Jesus said'. The victims need to repent because the social change that corresponds to the vision of God's reign, God's new world, cannot take place without a change of their heart and behaviour. The values of this world can only be transformed if the hearts of believers are changed. To repent means to resist the seductiveness

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of the sinful values and practices and to let the new order of God's reign be established in one's heart. Repentance thus empowers victims and disempowers the oppressors. It humanises them by protecting them from mimicking the oppressors.

Yet Volf is realistic that genuine repentance may be a difficult act for a community.

He notes that the Christian traditions think of genuine repentance not as a human possibility, but as a gift of God.[27] It is not only when we are the victims, but also when we are clearly the aggressors that we point to the non-innocence of the others. We find it hard to repent. Indeed, the liberation from our own inability to confess our sin might be the hardest and greatest form of liberation.

But the second ingredient required for gracious embrace is forgiveness. Like repentance, forgiveness is difficult. Yet forgiveness is the only way out of the endless cycle of violence and the pay-back of violence. Revenge, Volf reminds us, is annulled at the cross, wherein we see the greatest example of forgiveness. Forgiveness, however, does not override justice. Forgiveness, by its very nature, implies an obligation, a debt owed to God and to others. It tacitly recognises the presence of a just claim. Forgiveness is not the absence of justice; forgiveness enthrones justice. The cross, suggests Volf, is the ultimate example of what forgiveness will cost. Like Christ, when I forgive, I suffer. When I forgive, I am forgoing the claims of retributive justice. Yet without the *active* suffering of forgiveness, redemption from the *passive* suffering of victimization cannot happen.

Forgiveness is the 'boundary between exclusion and embrace'.[28] It heals wounds. Yet it leaves a distance between people—an empty space. It allows them to go their separate ways in what is sometimes called 'peace'. Such peace is the most that many can hope for. Yet the cross is about more than this kind of forgiveness. In the cross God *makes space within himself* for the enemy.[29] He opens himself up and lets the other in. He gives of himself in order to not give up on humanity. 'Much more than just the absence of hostility sustained by the absence of contact, *peace is communion between former enemies*.'[30]

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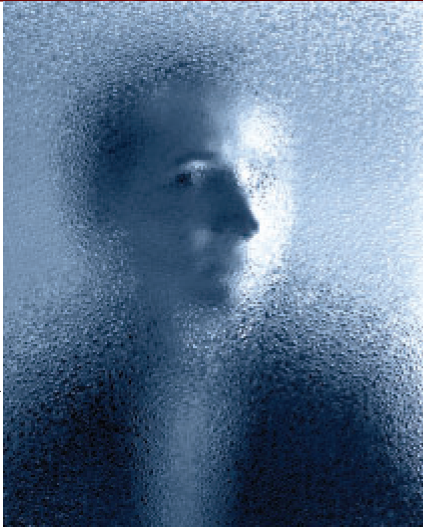
The self

Beneath the discussions of exclusion, distance and embrace lies the question of the self. For Volf such a question needs to be related to the question of the personhood of God. How we understand God as Trinity, as person, will affect how we understand ourselves.

It is important to see that Volf does not draw a direct parallel between human relationships and those of the Trinity. Indeed, Volf strongly urges that Trinitarian concepts such as 'person', 'relation' or 'perichoresis' can only be applied analogously to humans.[31] The Trinity is not some 'ideal' that humanity strives to achieve—not merely a good model for society to follow. Rather, human relationships reflect the Trinity only as the Spirit works in the church to transform her into Christ-likeness. (See, for example, Romans 8:29). This is an eschatological transformation. For Volf, 'the Trinity names the reality which the church ought to be'.[32]

In the Trinity, suggests Volf, we see 'the kind of unity in which plurality is preserved rather than erased'.[33] We see that 'the divine persons are not simply interdependent and influence one another from outside, but are *personally interior* to one another'.[34] This is why Jesus speaks repeatedly of being in the Father.[35] The Son, however, does not disappear into the Father, he remains a distinct person who interpenetrates and indwells the Father. Indeed, 'every divine person is and acts as itself and yet the two other persons are present and act in that person'.[36] In the Trinity, identity is shaped by relationships with the other persons.

There are two important conclusions that Volf draws from this, both of which are crucial to our present discussion. First, identity is non-reducible. We cannot claim that persons are absorbed into their relations. They exist as themselves outside



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their relations. Therefore, there is a need for boundary maintenance. The self must be asserted in the presence of the other. Without this, there is a danger of the self being 'dissolved into the other or being smothered by the other'.[37]

But secondly and conversely, identity is not self-enclosed. The boundaries of the self are porous and shifting. The self is 'in a state of flux' because of the interplay of the self and the other.[38] Just as the persons of the Trinity relate in giving space to the other, identity must be thought of in ways such that the self can give space to the other.

Volf thus urges us to love in imitation of the Trinity. This means loving in reciprocal relations. The love and self-giving of the Father is perfectly returned by the Son in his own love and self-giving. But Volf notes, the love of God had to be 'translated' for a world where there are not the eternal bonds of love, but rather 'non-love'.[39] This 'translation' is seen in the cross. The cross is the expression of God's inner being—eternal love. God gives of himself to a world where there is no hope of reciprocation. Thus, humans are called on not just to love in reciprocal relations, but to mirror the love of God with a love that will give without hope of return.

Conclusion

It has become commonplace to blame religion for much of the world's violence. Sadly, though often overstated, there are grounds for such claims. In his September 11, 2001 speech, Volf acknowledged, 'religion, Christianity included, can and does cause conflicts'.[40] It becomes, at times, enmeshed in the struggles of a culture to assert its identity over and against the other. As we have seen, Volf's answer is not to look away from Christianity, but to look deeper at the resources that lie at its centre. Perhaps the core of Volf's message, the most central resource to which he points us, is the notion of reconciliation. We saw this exemplified in the open embrace of the Father toward his prodigal son. We saw it reflected in the call to costly forgiveness and repentance. It is perhaps fitting to allow Volf to conclude with this point. Shortly before the UN prayer breakfast was closed due to the nearby attacks, Volf urged, 'since the God of Christian belief is the God of unconditional love and the God who died for the ungodly, the will to embrace the other, even the evil other, is a fundamental Christian obligation'. We find at the heart of the Christian faith, then, the call and the means to 'make space' for the other.[41] ©

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ENDNOTES

1 Volf is Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology Yale Divinity School and Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. For the September 11 speech, see Volf, Miroslav (2001) 'From exclusion to embrace: Reflections on reconciliation'. n.p. Accessed at: http://www.christianembassyun.org/speeches/folder.2006-03-17.1175308140/file.2006-03-17.0276350443.
2 Ibid.
3 Volf, Miroslav (2002). 'More religion, less. violence'. *Christian Century,* April 10-17, p32.
4 Volf, Miroslav (1996). *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*, Nashville: Abingdon.
5 Oppenheimer, Mark (2003) 'Embracing theology: Miroslav Volf spans conflicting worlds', *Christian Century*, January 11, pp18-23.
6 Volf, Miroslav (2001). 'The role of the "Other"'. n.p. Cited 14 August, 2005 Online: http://www.globalengagement.org/issues/2001/09/mvolf-bwf-other-p.htm.
7 Ibid.
8 Volf, *Exclusions and embrace*, p16.
9 Ibid. p57.
10 Ibid. p75.
11 Ibid. p80.
12 Ibid. pp90-2.
13 Ibid. p91.
14 Ibid. p37.
15 Ibid. p40.
16 Ibid. p39.
17 Ibid. p46.
18 Boyarin, 1994, cited in Volf, p46.
19 Ibid. p47.
20 Ibid. p48.
21 Ibid. p49.
22 Ibid. p48.
23 Ibid. pp51-2.
24 Ibid. pp52-4.
25 Ibid. p161. For the expectation of retributive justice see Deuteronomy 21:18-21.
26 Ibid. p114-5.
27 Ibid. p119.
28 Ibid. p125.
29 Ibid. p126.
30 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
31 Volf, Miroslav (1998). '"The Trinity is our social program": The doctrine of the Trinity and the shape of Social Engagement' In *Modern Theology*, 14:3, p406. See also Volf, Miroslav (1998). *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, p199.
32 Volf, '"The Trinity is our social program", pp405-406.
33 Ibid. p409.
34 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
35 John 10:38; John 14:10ff; 17:21.
36 Volf, '"The Trinity is our social program"', p409.
37 Ibid. p410.
38 Ibid. p410.
39 Ibid. p414.
40 Volf, 'From exclusion to embrace', n.p.
41 Ibid.