

Exclusion and Embrace: Reconciliation in the Works of Miroslav Volf

Corneliu Constantineanu

Institutul Teologic Pentecostal, București

corneliu_c@yahoo.com

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Introduction

Among contemporary theologians, Miroslav Volf has written extensively on, and probably made the most significant contribution to, the topic of reconciliation.¹ The reason why Volf deserves special consideration is twofold. First, he has developed his theology of reconciliation in a context fraught with disturbing wars, and out of a deep concern for the social and political realities of the day; as such his writings are marked by a profound preoccupation with concrete questions and implications of the Christian faith for the contemporary world. Second, Volf has paid close attention to the biblical text and interacted with it throughout his work; thus, he addresses not only the question of the social meaning of reconciliation from various angles, but he also offers strong, biblical grounds for his theology.

Dr. Miroslav Volf is the Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School, and Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. He is an influential Christian theologian, widely known for his works in systematic theology, moral ethics, reconciliation and peacemaking, and for his very active role in promoting a theology of forgiveness, non-violence and unity. Dr. Miroslav Volf was born in Osijek, Croatia and was educated at *Evandeoski Teoloski Fakultet*, Osijek (BA, *summa cum laude*); Fuller Theological Seminary (MA, *summa cum laude*); and University of Tübingen (Dr. theol., *summa cum laude*, and Dr. theol. habil., both under the supervision of Prof. Jürgen Moltmann).

In addition to dozens of scholarly articles, Dr. Volf is the author of ten books, including *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Oxford UP); *After Our*

1 For a detailed list of Volf's works on reconciliation see the bibliography at the end of the article.

Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity (Eerdmans) – winner of the *Christianity Today* book award; *A Passion For God's Reign: Theology, Christian Learning And The Christian Self* (Eerdmans); *Exclusion And Embrace: A Theological Exploration Of Identity, Otherness And Reconciliation* (Abingdon) – winner of the 2002 Grawemeyer Award in Religion; *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Zondervan) – a book which has been commissioned as the Archbishop's Official 2006 Lent Book; *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Eerdmans). His book *Exclusion and Embrace* was selected as among the 100 best religious books of the 20th century by *Christianity Today*. He has frequently taught and lectured in Central and Eastern Europe.

On a personal note, I am very grateful to Dr. Miroslav Volf whom I had the great privilege to have as a professor, mentor and friend for nearly 20 years now. No one has challenged me more profoundly in my theology and Christian praxis than him, and I will never forget his most serious admonition for a student of theology: "If you do not do theology out of devotion to Jesus, pack your things and go home!" Indeed, he has significantly shaped my thinking, in general, and on the subject of reconciliation in particular.

The present paper is an extended review of Volf's works on reconciliation, especially highlighting those aspects in his writings that are particularly relevant for a discussion of the social dimension of reconciliation. Therefore, this is not an exhaustive treatment and critical interaction with Volf's entire thought on reconciliation. I will concentrate mainly on his most significant book on reconciliation, *Exclusion and Embrace*, and briefly on two of his major studies, "The Social Meaning of Reconciliation" and "Trinity is Our Social Program."

Exclusion and Embrace: Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation²

The Thesis

The drama of the modern world, with its widespread cultural, ethnic, and racial conflicts on the one hand, and the powerful tension between "the God who delivers the needy and the God who abandons the crucified" on the other hand, represents the starting point for Volf's theological exploration of "identity", "otherness" and "reconciliation" in his *Exclusion and Embrace*. Written from an unambiguous Christian perspective, the book reveals both Volf's deep intellectual struggle –

2 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

trying to find a way through the tension between the message of the cross and a world of violence – and also his spiritual journey in which he, as a Christian living in a world of injustice, oppression, and violence, tries to remain faithful to the gospel story and the demands of Christ while continuing the struggle for justice, truth and peace. “How does one remain loyal both to the demand of the oppressed for justice and to the gift of forgiveness that the Crucified offered to the perpetrators?” (9). Indeed, how does one engage in solving this tension, betraying neither the suffering, exploited, and marginalized nor the double demand of Christian faith to bring justice for the victims and embrace the perpetrator? Is there any distinctly Christian stance towards the other, a form in which to work out the tension between “the blood of the innocent crying out to God and ... the blood of God’s Lamb offered for the guilty”? (9).

The above questions are extremely complex and difficult to answer. Yet reading Volf’s book, one senses his almost nonnegotiable response: *willingness to embrace the other*. The whole argument is built around the metaphor of “embrace” which brings together three central, interrelated, theological themes fundamental for his thesis: the mutuality of self-giving love in the Trinity; the outstretched arm of Christ on the cross for the “godless”; and the open arms of the “father” receiving the “prodigal” (29). Here is how Volf states the essence of his thesis:

[T]he will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity. The will to embrace precedes any ‘truth’ about others and any construction of their ‘justice’ (29, italics his).

The way he formulated the thesis highlights the basic categories he will employ in order to develop his argument (“identity”, “embrace” vs. “exclusion”, “truth”, “justice”) and determines the shape of his argumentation. Indeed, before he properly addresses the central thesis, he develops the concept of “identity” and discusses the phenomenon of “exclusion” against which he subsequently constructs his main argument on “embrace”. The emphasis on the primacy of grace and on the priority of the “will to embrace” is only maintained against the assumption that the struggle for truth and justice remains indispensable. Truth and justice, however, can only be pursued adequately within the horizon of the will to embrace even though, Volf will immediately add, the embrace itself is conditioned by the recognition of truth and the realization of justice.

Identity and Otherness

The increasing conflicts between cultures around the world are “part of a larger problem of *identity and otherness*” (16), argues Volf, and therefore, any reflection

on social realities should place at its center the issue of identity. Volf notes a shift in interest in political philosophy from “the politics of equal dignity” to “politics of difference” (following Charles Taylor) – which forcefully illustrates that the issue of identity and difference is urgent. In the light of the powerful assertions of local and tribal identities, “It may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference” (20).

The three general lines of approach to the issue of identity and otherness that Volf identifies (universalist, communitarian, and postmodern), have all concentrated on social arrangements – all societies experience a dynamic between social arrangements and social agents where social arrangements tend to condition the social agents which, in turn, shape the arrangements. By contrast, while emphasizing that the issue of social arrangements is not at all unimportant, Volf leaves that task to be appropriately done by cooperation between Christian economists, political scientists, social philosophers, and theologians. As a theologian, he concentrates on social agents:

Instead of reflecting on the kind of society we ought to create in order to accommodate individual and communal heterogeneity, I will explore *what kind of selves we need to be* in order to live in harmony with others. [Theologians themselves] should concentrate less on social arrangements and more on *fostering the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, and on shaping a cultural climate in which such agents will thrive* (20f.).

So, the kind of questions Volf is pursuing relate to the identity of “selves” as they are *situated* in particular social and cultural contexts: How should they think of their identity and how should they relate to those who are different? How should they go about making peace with the other? Moreover, “What should shape social agents so that they in turn can fashion healthy social arrangements instead of simply being molded by them? From what vantage point should we reflect on the character of the self in the engagement with the other?” (22).

The notion of “self” can never be an abstract notion because “selves” are always “situated selves”, situated in their own culture. Therefore, the question of identity is always a complex one referring to both the dynamic relationship between culture and selves and the relationship of the self to “the other.” The general tendency of people (including Christians) to give ultimate allegiance to their cultures leads inevitably to a kind of “sacralization of cultural identity”, captivity to one’s culture, and so to an inappropriate dynamic between culture and self. To avoid that, it requires “cultivating a proper relation between distance from the culture and belonging to it” (37). Building on the story of Abraham’s call and its appropriation by early Christians, particularly Paul, Volf argues that for Christians, there should be a complete change of loyalty, a required move to “de-

part” from their particular culture and give ultimate allegiance to the God of all cultures, “...a move away ... from the particularity of ‘peoplehood’ to the universality of multiculturalism, from the locality of a land to the globality of the world” (43). But how does one avoid the danger that a local culture may lose its specificity for the sake of “universality”? The framework to answer this question is provided by Paul: the cross of Christ, as the foundation of a new community, creates unity as Christ gives his own self “for many” and not “against many”. In this community thus formed, the “body of Christ”, the differences among many members are not erased but brought together in “a complex interplay of differentiated bodies – Jewish and Gentile, female and male, slave and free” (48). The implications of such a Pauline argument for the relation between Christian faith and other group identities are important. Cultural specificity can be affirmed, but at the same time each culture has to renounce its own “tribal deities”:

Religion must be de-ethnicized so that ethnicity can be de-sacralized. Paul deprived each culture of ultimacy in order to give them all legitimacy in the wider family of cultures. ...Both distance and belonging are essential. Belonging without distance destroys... but distance without belonging isolates (49f.)

This “distancing” from one’s own culture does two important things: it creates space to receive the other and it entails a judgment against evil in every culture (51ff.). Christians will distance themselves from their own culture because, following the Crucified, they understand that there is an ultimate reality more important than their culture, and so they are ready to give ultimate loyalty to God and his promised new world:

...with one foot planted in their own cultures and the other in God’s future... they have a vantage point from which to perceive and judge the self and the other not simply on their own terms but in the light of God’s new world – a world in which a great multitude ‘from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages’ is gathered ‘before the throne and before the Lamb’ (Rev. 7:9; 5:9) (53).

Sin as Exclusion

The widespread practice of exclusion is due, at least in part, to a prevailing deficiency in the understanding and construction of one’s identity as “pure” without “the other”. A close examination of the creation account in Genesis, however, may offer a much better model for constructing our identities, argues Volf. He uses the term “differentiation” to illustrate the interdependence between “separating-and-binding” in the creation activity which suggest that the notion of identity is not simply a self-enclosed, isolated, and self-identical being, but rather it includes

connection, difference and heterogeneity (55f.):

The human self is formed not through a simple rejection of the other ... but through a complex process of 'taking in' *and* 'keeping out'. We are who we are not because we separate from the others who are next to us, but because we are *both* separate *and* connected, *both* distinct *and* related; ... Identity is a result of the distinction from the other *and* the internalization of the relationships to the other; it arises out of the complex history of 'differentiation' in which both the self and the other take part by negotiating their identities in interaction with the other (66).

If this is the accepted definition of identity, then whatever deviates from, or contradicts these two elements ("binding" and "separating") is *exclusion* – which entails both cutting off the bonds that connect, and the erasure of separation. Whatever does not take into consideration the pattern of interdependence between the self and the other is exclusion, is sin. Whatever way it manifests itself (as elimination, assimilation, dominion, abandonment, etc.), the practice of exclusion is always a search for purity, a distortion of the other, and a will to push "others" out of our world.

The difficulty with this approach consists, of course, in settling who is capable of making a "non-exclusionary judgment" between legitimate differentiation and illegitimate exclusion. Indeed, which agents are able to behave in this way and, more specifically, what *kind* of center must such a self have? (68ff.). Volf responds by examining Paul's statement about the character of the Christian life in Gal. 2:19-20. Paul de-centers his self (the old self being "crucified with Christ"), but also re-centers his self around Christ ("it is Christ who lives in me"). The story of Christ, in his self-giving love, is at the center of Paul's self – Jesus Christ being an integral part of Paul's new identity. For Christians, this "de-centered center' of self-giving love" would be able to make non-exclusionary judgments and decide "about the fate of otherness at the doorstep of the self" (71). However, such judgments need not (in fact, they cannot) be made between "innocent" and "non-innocent" parties. In a world of violence, even the victims cannot sustain their innocence, argues Volf, because "in addition to inflicting harm, the practice of evil keeps re-creating a world without innocence. Evil generates new evils as evildoers fashion victims in their own ugly image. . . the victim and violator are bound in the tragic and self-perpetuating solidarity of sin" (81f.). Volf is quick to affirm that the solidarity of sin does not mean *equality of sins* (which "dissolves all concrete sins in an ocean of undifferentiated sinfulness" (82).

There is an interdependence between the "universality (solidarity) of sin" and the "primacy of grace", and Volf suggests that for an adequate reflection of social issues grounded in the cross, one needs to explore the nature of that relationship:

Solidarity in sin underscores that no salvation can be expected from an appro-

ach that rests fundamentally on the moral assignment of blame and innocence. ... The question cannot be how to locate 'innocence' either on the intellectual or social map and work our way toward it. Rather, the question is how to live with integrity and bring healing to a world of inescapable noninnocence that often parades as its opposite. The answer: in the name of the only innocent victim and what he stood for, the crucified Messiah of God, we should demask as inescapably sinful the world constructed around exclusive moral polarities – here, on our side, 'the just,' 'the pure,' 'the innocent,' 'the true,' 'the good,' and there, on the other side, 'the unjust,' 'the corrupt,' 'the guilty,' 'the liars,' 'the evil' – and then seek to transform the world in which justice and injustice, goodness and evil, innocence and guilt, purity and corruption, truth and deception crisscross and intersect, guided by the recognition that the *economy of undeserved grace has primacy over the economy of moral deserts*" (84f.).

In a world where the powerful reality of evil manifests itself so pervasively and presents itself as if "there is no choice," where everyone falls captive to the inescapable system of evil and exclusion, Volf convincingly asserts that "there *is* choice." Indeed, if no one is innocent, the effort towards reconciliation should have as its fundamental presupposition that "*no one should ever be excluded from the will to embrace*" (85, italics his). This is the logic of the New Testament mandate to "love your enemies," persists Volf, showing that "at the core of the Christian faith lies the persuasion that the 'others' need not be perceived as innocent in order to be loved, but ought to be embraced *even when they are perceived as wrongdoers*" (85). But what exactly will empower one to make the choice of a "will to embrace"? Again, Volf is in no doubt: it is the Spirit of the crucified Messiah. He concludes,

The Spirit enters the citadel of the self, de-centers the self by fashioning it in the image of the self-giving Christ, and frees its will so it can resist the power of exclusion in the power of the Spirit of embrace. It is in the citadel of the fragile self that the new world of embrace is first created (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is by this seemingly powerless power of the Spirit ... that selves are freed from powerlessness in order to fight the system of exclusion everywhere – in the structures, in the culture, and in the self (92).

Embrace

In the central chapter of the book called simply, "Embrace," Volf proposes a way to overcome the stark polarity of "either us or them", maintaining that it is possible to break the cycle of violence and to live as a community that embraces rather than excludes. In trying to articulate a way of life under the conditions of enmity, Volf presents the thesis "that God's reception of hostile humanity into

divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other” (100). The whole argument is written from the perspective of the “victims” and their will to imitate Christ’s self-giving love in a world of hostility. The crucial question Volf asks refers to the “*resources we need to live in peace in the absence of the final reconciliation*” (109). However, it is only the vision of the final reconciliation (brought finally by God) that can represent the basis of the struggle for a non-final reconciliation. The only way in which reconciliation with the other can succeed is “if the self, guided by the narrative of the triune God, is ready to receive the other into itself and undertake a re-adjustment of its identity in light of the other’s alterity” (110).

There are four essential steps in this progressive move from exclusion to reconciliation that Volf analyzes: “repentance”, “forgiveness”, “making space in oneself for the other,” and “healing of memory”. What is unique in his argument is the fact that Volf highlights all these elements from the perspective of “the victim”, of “the oppressed”. Victims need to repent because they let their own lives and practices be transformed by the ideologies and practices of the oppressors, neglecting the radical demand of Jesus’ message for a pure heart. And definitely, 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 behavior*” (114, italics his). By allowing the violent practices to shape their own character and lives, the victims reinforce the dominant practices of the oppressors and perpetuate the evil. There can be no social change, affirms Volf, without a change of heart and without repentance – which means “to resist the seductiveness of the sinful values and practices and to let the new order of God’s reign be established in one’s heart” (116). If we continue to talk about the need of the victims to repent, we may contribute to the “*creation of the kind of social agents that are shaped by the values of God’s kingdom and therefore capable of participating in the project of authentic social transformation*” (118, italics his).

Forgiveness, the second step towards reconciliation, is as difficult as the first. The unrepentant perpetrators inspire the “automatism of mutual exclusion” and an instinctive desire for revenge. Such being the case, an irreversible cycle of vengeance is set into motion: “a ‘just’ revenge leads to a ‘just’ counter-revenge;” moreover, the fact that in most of the cases the evil deeds one does and their consequences cannot be undone make revenge look like the only option left. Yet, there is a way out through forgiveness. Not only in his teaching, but also through his own life, Jesus taught this truth: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” – and it stands as a supreme example embodying the truth and power of forgiveness. What about justice? Is forgiveness a substitute for justice? No, is Volf’s immediate answer. But “because strict restorative justice can never be satisfied ...no reconciliation will be possible” outside the framework of

forgiveness (122f.). However, “every act of forgiveness enthrones justice; it draws attention to its violation precisely by offering to forego its claims... [and] provides a framework in which the quest for properly understood justice can be fruitfully pursued” (123). The strength for such a painful forgiveness can only be found “in the presence of God” where one becomes aware that God is both love and justice, that the oppressors will be judged for the wrong committed to their victims, and one discovers his/her own sinfulness there.

The passion of Christ on the cross and the “mutual indwelling of the others” in the life of the Trinity provide the basis for Volf’s third step towards embrace: making space in oneself for the other. Beyond offering forgiveness for enemies, the cross aims ultimately at restoring the communion between estranged parties:

At the heart of the cross is Christ’s stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in. ... The cross is the consequence of God’s desire to break the power of human enmity without violence and receive human beings into divine communion. ... The arms of the crucified are open – a sign of a space in God’s self and an invitation for the enemy to come in (126).

The same two dimensions of self-giving love and creating space to receive the other are characteristics of the Trinity – none of the three persons can be defined without the other two; each person includes the other two in itself in a “mutual interiority”. This receiving the other “in God” is manifested most profoundly towards humanity at the cross, and is celebrated and consciously apprehended in the life of the church during the Eucharist. The Eucharist represents not only a celebration of who God is and what he has accomplished for an estranged humanity, but is at the same time a call and an empowerment for Christians to imitate:

Inscribed on the very heart of God’s grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in – even our enemies (129).

One final act needs to happen in order to have a complete reconciliation, states Volf, and this is “*a certain kind*” of forgetting the evil suffered. One’s memory of the wrongs done by the other will tie both of them in a rapport of non-reconciliation and therefore the need for non-remembering. The argument is:

Since no final redemption is possible without the redemption of the past, and since every attempt to redeem the past through reflection must fail because no theodicy can succeed, the final redemption is unthinkable without a certain kind of forgetting (135).

Such a forgetting will have a bearing on our lives in this world as long as we assume that the issues of truth and justice will be dealt with, that the oppressors will be named and judged, and that the victims will be protected and healed of their wounds. Obviously, this can only be an eschatological forgetting, ultimately realized in God's new world.

Identity and the "Phenomenology of Embrace"

Volf describes "the drama of embrace" in four structural elements ("opening the arms", "waiting", "closing of arms", "opening the arms again"), and offers a way to understand identity as a constant interaction between the self and the other (140-145). Discontent with one's "self-closed identity", one *opens* the arms as a sign of desire for the other, of the fact that one has created space in oneself for the other, and as an invitation for the other to come in. But because the self respects the integrity of the other, it will *wait* for the other to come. When the reciprocity of "giving" and "receiving" is achieved, the *closing* of arms takes place in a proper embrace. It is important that the embrace itself is a "soft touch" so that an *opening* of the arms after embrace may occur since in the event "the identity of the self is both preserved and transformed, and the alterity of the other is both affirmed as alterity and partly received into the ever changing identity of the self" (143).

Volf concludes his central chapter with a close reading of the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, highlighting the two most important features of the story which, in a sense, underline the whole chapter: "the father's giving himself to his estranged son and his receiving that son back into his household" (156). How should identities be conceived in order for broken relationships to be restored and embrace to take place? The definite answer that Volf gives is that relationships have priority over rules. The way the father acts illustrates that his identity includes the sons, and that his will to embrace is not grounded in the morality of the sons, even though an account of one's actions have their place in the redefined identities:

For the father, the priority of the relationships means not only a refusal to let moral rules be the final authority regulating 'exclusion' and 'embrace' but also a refusal to construct his own identity in isolation from the sons and thereby reconstructs their broken identities and relationships. He suffers being 'un-fathered' by both, so that through this suffering he may regain both as his sons ... and help them rediscover each other as brothers (165).

Having argued persuasively for the logic and priority of embrace, Volf turns in the second part of the book to deal with the crucial issues of "justice," "truth," and "peace," without which there can be no significant talk about reconciliation.

Oppression and Justice

Despite competing accounts of justice, there can be no peace without an agreement on justice, and without justice there can be no social order. But how can such an agreement on justice be pursued in a world of pluralism and enmity? Here is Volf's proposal: "Agreement on justice depends on the will to embrace the other and that justice itself will be unjust as long as it does not become a mutual embrace" (197). He begins his argument from the premise that all people stand within a particular tradition, even in more than one place, and that one's social location shapes one's identity profoundly. Christians are shaped on the one hand by the beliefs and practices of the community they belong to, by the biblical traditions it meditates on, and, on the other hand, by the surrounding larger culture they inhabit. The reality of living in "*overlapping and rapidly changing social spaces*" compels us to affirm "*basic Christian commitments in culturally situated ways*" (210f.). But we will only be able to make these commitments bear on social realities, especially on issues related to justice, if we develop an "enlarged thinking" or a "double vision", asserts Volf forcefully. The practice of such a "double vision" entails:

... letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, and ... allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from *their* perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspective as we take into account their perspectives (213).

The theological ground enforcing a double vision is to be found in the example offered by the life of Jesus Christ, as well as in the "inner logic of the theology of the cross" (as God gave himself for others and invited the godless others into himself). Volf emphasizes that "if we believe rightly in Jesus Christ who unconditionally embraced us, the godless perpetrators, our hearts will open to receive others, even enemies, and our eyes will be open to see from their perspective" (215). So, the search for justice must be ultimately a search for embrace, but it will be successful only as we practice this double vision. Volf gives two reasons why we should talk about embrace in a world of injustice. First, "the grace of embrace must help justice deal adequately with ever-changing differences among human beings," and second, "since 'justice' is impotent in the face of past injustice, reconciliation is ultimately possible only through injustice being forgiven and, finally, forgotten" (224). This shift in the understanding of justice is suggested by the shift in the understanding of identity. It will be possible only as long as we relate to our fellow humans as to God's children, created to live together in a community of love:

If our identities are shaped in interaction with others, and if we are called ultimately to belong together, then we need to shift the concept of justice away from an exclusive stress on making detached judgments and toward susta-

ining relationships, away from blind impartiality and toward sensibility for difference. ... *true justice will always be on the way to embrace* (225).

Deception and Truth

Volf refutes both the modernist and postmodernist explanations of the character and significance of truth – the objectivity of the “truth of fact” as well as the suspicion of truth as “manifestations of power.” Instead, he proposes the practice of “double vision,” in the search for truth that is seeing things both “from here” and “from there” – which will enable one to treat “the other” as other and not try to delineate their differences. Through this process of seeing things from the perspective of others, we do three important things, asserts Volf: 1) “we step outside ourselves,” 2) “we cross a social boundary and move into the world of the other to inhabit it temporarily,” and 3) “we take the other into our own world” (251f.). By repeating this process we can bring about a common human understanding and a common language, and so eventually steer an interest in finding the truth without which there can be no search for truth. But truth can never be simply an abstract issue to be known. Rather it is also a matter of a truthful character, of a truthful life that one lives in a particular community; before one can investigate about truth, one must live the truth in love – of course, in relation to the other (2 Cor. 11:10; Eph. 4:14f): “It takes a *truthful life* to want to seek after the truth, to see the truth when confronted by it, and to say the truth out loud without fear” (256). The will to truth can never be separated from the will to embrace the other - without which there can be no truth between people, and without truth there can be no peace.

One of the most important things that Volf conveys in this section is the fact that truth is indispensable and it is always related to community; it sustains community (Jer. 9:4-6; 2 Cor. 4:2): “we speak truth because community matters to us and we sustain community that matters to us by speaking truth” (262). Christians should always wrestle for telling and living the truth just as, by virtue of his character, the God of the prophets and apostles was constantly engaged in the struggle for truth because if community depends on truth, truth depends “on the struggle of the truthful warriors on behalf of the truth” (264). But they will be able to do that only as they become truthful because “the truthfulness of being is a pre-condition of adequate knowing” (270). Volf concludes with two important implications for the search for truth which he draws from the confrontation of Jesus with Caiaphas and Pilate: 1) “truth matters more than my own self,” and 2) “the self of the other matters more than my truth” (272). These will enable us to place truth above the self and to renounce violence as a means of persuading

others of our own truth. Indeed, only such a double commitment to truth and to nonviolence will bring about an authentic freedom:

... free to make journeys from the self to the other and back and to see our common history from their perspective as well as ours, rather than closing ourselves off and insisting on the absolute truth of our own perspective; free to live a truthful life and hence be a self-effacing witness to truth rather than fabricating our own “truths” and imposing them on others; free to embrace others in truth rather than engage in open or clandestine acts of deceitful violence against them (272f.).

Violence and Peace

There are two important aspects of the place of religion in the society of today’s world that cannot be denied: first, religion represents a significant feature in public life and has a continuous relevance; and second, religion has had an increasing role in many conflicts around the world. It may thus transpire that in order for reconciliation between people to happen, their religions must be reconciled first, as Hans Küng suggests. Yet, Volf rightly points out that this may not necessarily be the case since there are so many conflicts among people having the same religion. Rather, what is most urgent in our search for peace, believes Volf, is a commitment to nonviolence and a “critique of the religious legitimation of violence” without which “religious images and religious leaders will continue to be exploited by politicians and generals engaged in violence” (285f.).

The story of Christ, especially his cross, provides the best place to help us construct a Christian perspective on violence. Volf discerns four ways in which the cross challenges violence: 1) it “breaks the cycle of violence;” 2) it “lays bare the mechanism of scapegoating;” 3) it represents “part of Jesus’ struggle for God’s truth and justice;” and 4) “the cross is a divine embrace of the deceitful and the unjust” (291- 94). The lesson that the cross of Christ teaches is obvious: “the only alternative to violence is self-giving love, willingness to absorb violence in order to embrace the other in the knowledge that truth and justice have been, and will be, upheld by God” (295). It is only the hope and certainty of God’s final just judgment (and vengeance) that may enable one to renounce violence and practice forgiveness and embrace. It is only as Christians follow the crucified that a biblical vision of peace may be put into service:

Assured of God’s justice and undergirded by God’s presence, they are to break the cycle of violence by refusing to be caught in the automatism of revenge. ... the costly acts of nonretaliation become a seed from which the fragile fruit of Pentecostal peace grows – a peace between people from different cultural

spaces gathered in one place who understand each other's language and share in each others' goods (306).

“The Social Meaning of Reconciliation”³

In this article, Volf more directly addresses the specific questions related to the inability of churches to act as agents of reconciliation and their complicity in social conflicts around the world, and proposes the theme of reconciliation as a key category for Christian social engagement. In his estimation, it is a “confusion of loyalty” – a prevailing allegiance to their respective cultures and ethnicity – and ultimately misconceptions about the ministry of reconciliation, that provide an appropriate explanation for the church's failure in situations of conflict. Indeed, Volf remarks that there is “a deeply disturbing *absence* of sustained attempts to relate the core theological beliefs about reconciliation to the shape of the church's social responsibilities” (8). A narrowly understood doctrine of reconciliation as “*reconciliation of the soul with God*,” on the one hand, and “*the pursuit of freedom and the struggle for justice*” as the center of the social agenda of the church on the other hand, have deprived the message of reconciliation of its social dimension and “have left churches with no resources in situations of conflict” (9). In trying to correct these deficiencies, Volf challenges us to give priority to reconciliation and “to understand the struggle for justice as a dimension of the pursuit of reconciliation whose ultimate goal is a community of love” (9).

Volf argues for the primacy of reconciliation in the NT by focusing on one of the main Pauline texts on reconciliation, 2 Cor. 5:17-21, and exploring its social dimension. He follows Seyoon Kim's argument⁴ according to which the origin of Paul's unique understanding and usage of the term “reconciliation” is to be found in Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus – an experience in which Paul, an enemy of God, found himself forgiven and reconciled to God. Based on this argument, Volf draws out two important features of a Pauline theology of reconciliation with their subsequent social implications. He puts them as follows:

1.) “...*though grace is unthinkable without justice, justice is subordinate to grace*” (10). In his Damascus experience, Paul (the enemy) encounters God (the vic-

3 Volf, “The Social Meaning of Reconciliation,” in *Transformation* 16:1 (1999), 7-12.

4 Seyoon Kim, “God reconciled his enemy to himself: the origin of Paul's concept of reconciliation,” in Richard N. Longenecker (ed), *The Road from Damascus. The Impact of Paul's Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 102-104.

tim) who is not wrathful, but loving and reconciling. The search for justice is not abandoned, however, because in the same act of receiving grace, Paul is asked to give account for the injustices committed through his persecutions. Remarkably, the victim did not pursue justice first and then offer reconciliation. Rather, he reconciled the “ungodly” and the “enemies” (Romans 4:5; 5:10). Volf explains:

At the core of the doctrine of reconciliation lies the belief that the *offer of reconciliation* is not based on justice done and the cause of enmity removed. Rather, the offer of reconciliation is a way of justifying the unjust and overcoming the opponents’ enmity – not so as to condone their injustice and affirm their enmity, but to open up the possibility of doing justice and living in peace whose ultimate shape is a community of love (10).

2.) “...*though reconciliation of human beings with God has priority, reconciliation between human beings is intrinsic to their reconciliation with God* (10). To think first of the reconciliation with God and only *then*, as a consequence, to the reconciliation between human beings is a wrong alternative. The same is true about enmity towards God and towards fellow human beings. As in Paul’s case, they are intrinsically related and cannot be separated, argues Volf:

So from the start and at its heart, the enmity toward God is enmity toward human beings, and the enmity toward human beings is enmity toward God. Consequently, from the start, reconciliation does not simply have a vertical but also horizontal dimension. It contains a turn away from the enmity toward people, not just from enmity to God, and it contains a movement toward a community, precisely that community which was the target of enmity” (10).

According to Paul, then, if grace lies at the heart of reconciliation with God, it is also grace that lies at the heart of reconciliation between human beings. Moreover, as God moved towards estranged humanity, so Christians must relate to their enemies (Romans 15:7). The scope of reconciliation should go beyond the limit of the church and should embrace the whole of reality. This is the Pauline vision of reconciliation. The ultimate goal is the final reconciliation of all things (Col. 1:20). Our social engagement will be Christian only if it will be governed by such a vision, concludes Volf.

The Trinity Shaping a Social Vision

In another article dealing with social issues, Volf proposes the doctrine of the

Trinity as the shaping model for Christians' social engagement.⁵ Being created in God's image and for communion with the Triune God, human beings should seek to imitate God in their relationships. But in exactly which way can the doctrine of the Trinity provide a model for human relations? It will definitely not consist of a particular system, plan, or a specific program for action in the social realm, affirms Volf. Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity should shape a particular "social vision" because it contains "the contours of the ultimate normative end toward which all social programs should strive" (6). As in his book, Volf concentrates on social agents, on their character and their relations,⁶ and tries to examine the ways in which the doctrine of the Trinity can shape social agents.

There are two features within the doctrine of the Trinity that Volf considers significant for his project: identity and self-donation. The mutual indwelling of the divine persons within the Trinity – in which each person's identity is being shaped by its relationship with the others and yet each person remains distinct – suggests two important things about the construction of identity. First, "identity is non-reducible," that is, there is always the need to maintain the boundaries, "a certain kind of assertion of the self in the presence of the other and a certain kind of deference of the other before the self" (11). Second, "identity is not self-enclosed," the self always contains "the other" within itself:

The self is shaped by making space for the other and by giving space to the other, by being enriched when it inhabits the other and by sharing of its plentitude when it is inhabited by the other, by re-examining itself when the other closes his or her doors and challenging the other by knocking at the doors (12).

But in order for such reflections on identity to be helpful and not merely abstract proposals, they need to be situated within the narrative of divine self-donation, argues Volf. He is aware, however, that human beings cannot copy God fully, especially not in the perfect "circular movement of love" expressed in the internal life of the Trinity, and so they are not called to emulate God in that respect. Yet, as Jesus pointed out to his followers, they will be children of God not necessarily when they love those who love them, but when they love their enemies and thus imitate God's one-sided love directed towards a rebellious and estranged

5 Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity is Our Social Program: the Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," paper presented at the conference "The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics" at King's College, London, April 28-30, 1997, and subsequently published in *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 403-423.

6 The term "social" in Volf's article is used to refer "to the way in which the self, by its very nature, is inserted into small and large networks of relations, both as their unique sediment and as their creative shaper" (6).

humanity. It is this downward movement of God, continues Volf, his self-giving love for sinful humanity, and his passion to save the world that represents the model for our social practice and the basis for our social vision. The Spirit of God will empower the followers of the crucified to participate in this self-giving love for the other and to embrace the other.

Concluding Reflections

Having presented the main themes and lines of argument in Volf's understanding and presentation of reconciliation, several concluding remarks are in order. I begin with the observation that even though Volf has written out of a situation of conflict in his own country, and makes references to many other tense situations worldwide, his book is not trying to offer solutions to a post-conflict situation. Rather, it is a "forward looking" kind of argument. His preoccupation is to offer a way of thinking about life together despite deep differences among the members of society. Volf's approach is helpful in providing a model for articulating the significance of the doctrine of reconciliation for the shape of social agents and of their relations. He takes a "preventive" line of approach – in the sense that he wants to offer resources for Christians to think through and articulate a view of identity, otherness, and justice that will foster a culture of peace and reconciliation.

Volf made it clear that for an adequate discussion on social realities and practices, one cannot escape dealing with the important issue of identity. As we have seen, much of the Christians' complicity in situations of conflict, as well as a persistent practice of exclusion, is due, to an important degree, to an inadequate understanding and construction of identity – with its complex network of relationships between culture and selves and between selves and "the other." To address the social significance of reconciliation means necessarily to address the issue of identity.

Volf's works point out clearly that an exploration into the social meaning of reconciliation would imply two conditions. First, before one hastens to draw social implications from the theological concept of reconciliation, one has to show that *reconciliation has an inherent social dimension*. Second, the relationship between justice, as an indispensable dimension in the pursuit of reconciliation (the primary category for Christian social engagement), and love (the ultimate goal of reconciliation), needs to be explained in social terms.

The two important points of the theology of reconciliation that Volf extracted from 2 Corinthians 5 are well taken – *the primacy of grace in the search of justice* and *the intrinsic relationship between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of reconciliation*. While maintaining the priority of reconciliation between human be-

ings and God, he makes it clear that we cannot think of *this* reconciliation outside of the context of reconciliation between human beings. One cannot separate the two: being reconciled with God *means* being reconciled with “the other,” whoever it may be. However, these statements have to be substantiated by a detailed study of Paul’s main features of reconciliation throughout his letters. It will be only after such a study that Volf’s thesis may or may not be sustained.

It is significant to observe the overall framework in which Volf places the discussion of reconciliation: not as a search for accomplishing a final reconciliation, but as a search for resources needed, and an articulation of a way to live in peace under the conditions of enmity. No less significant is his insistence that “victims” also need to practice repentance, forgiveness and acceptance of the enemy, thus opening up the possibility for justice.

In trying to offer a Christian social view of reconciliation from a biblical and theological perspective, Volf wonders whether one can go in any significant way beyond “social agents.” In fact, he deliberately limits himself to addressing social agents. But is this sharp distinction correct? Can we talk about social agents at all without considering the question of social arrangements? In order for an effective impact of Volf’s proposal at the social and political levels, we have to also ask: what kind of social arrangements do his social agents require if they can do their job well, if they are not to be permanently frustrated? And again, given that Volf requires these specific characteristics for the social agents, what sort of social arrangements must these agents want to work for? If we think how social agents are constituted through a network of relationships with the social arrangements, it becomes clear that we cannot discuss one without the other since the social agent is embedded in social arrangements and social arrangements are internalized in social agents.

The force and creativity of Volf’s overall argument is indeed persuasive at the level of general theological-ethical reflection about genuine Christian attitudes and stances. At a practical level, however, it leaves many questions open. It is not clear how to effect this “will to embrace” into concrete actions, or how to persuade people/institutions (including churches) to accept and love “the other.” Indeed, can this “will to embrace” be initiated, maintained, and developed outside of a “community of embrace”? Even though, ultimately, the will to embrace is a choice, a decision that one has to make, there are no hints of a process that eventually may lead one to that place where he or she will be able to make that choice.

I would like to make one more comment on the issue of justice in Volf’s argument. While it is clear that God’s penultimate act will be to establish his perfect justice – followed by his ultimate act of “embrace” – it is not so clear as to how we should pursue justice in the meantime, nor how the “oppressed”, given their “will to embrace”, would see their oppressors judged. What exactly happens to the

perpetrators? In which way are they called to justice within the framework of the will to embrace? No, I will not let my identity be shaped by envy or enmity; yes, I wish to embrace, but how will the oppressors give an account for their misdeeds? What does forgiveness imply? How do I name the injustices committed in the act of “opening arms” for the enemy to come? Indeed, one gets the feeling that Volf’s preoccupation with “local” or “immediate” justice induces him to postpone the serious issue of the way in which one should be responsible for one’s wrongdoings.

Finally, I would like to say that these questions aside, we are all in debt to Miroslav Volf for his enormous contribution to the subject of reconciliation. His book *Exclusion and Embrace* is profound and exciting, challenging and humbling, marvelous and life-changing all at the same time. It explicates the meaning of the cross for the multicultural, multi-ethnic and complex society we live in today, and asks questions that evangelical theologians rarely ask. It explores what it means to live an authentic Christian life in a divided community. No one has made it clearer than Volf that in order for an appropriate reflection on Christian social engagement in society, one cannot avoid addressing such vital notions as social agents, identity, otherness, exclusion, enmity, sin, forgiveness, memory, reconciliation, truth and justice. Volf has persuaded us to respond to the great need for deep reflection on, and concrete explication of, the social and political dimensions of our biblical/theological concepts that will enable the churches to be agents of peace and reconciliation in a broken and conflicted world such as ours. Volf’s work on reconciliation is a rare combination of academic excellence and a real commitment to the biblical redemptive narrative of the cross of Christ. Whoever reads his books will be not only enriched and challenged, but also encouraged to follow the example of the crucified.

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