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Gospel and Culture(s)
Extra Book – Commentary
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Exclusion: The Story of Cain
Embrace: The Story of the Prodigal Son
Remembering Rightly: Joseph accepting his brothers
Justice: From Babel to Acts

Miroslav Volf makes a complicated, yet persuasive, argument for God's justice rooted in the Cross and Trinity. He interprets God's story, namely Cain and Abel and the Story of the Prodigal Son; he critiques cultural assumptions of modernity and post-modernity (both seek self-derived freedom), and he wrestles with the practical realities of violence, sin, and oppression. He ends up with a theology and social practice centered on the cross and Covenant that expects a willingness to embrace even the vilest offenders. This is not some cheap hug, but an honest desire to embrace a perpetrator – in this way, the violated is this instigator of God's justice. Again, this is not a passive proposal that refuses consequences (at times even purporting violence and restraint on the offender), but the call from God to the social practice of forgiveness as "*true justice will always be on the way to embrace*" (225).

In the end, Volf does not construct an isolated Christian tradition, but contrary to McIntyre, he calls for Christianity to change culture through its social practices.

Volf, a Croatian theologian, began this work in response to a question by Jurgen Moltmann at a lecture attempting to argue "we should embrace our enemies as God has embraced us on the cross." At the end of the presentation, Moltmann asked, "Can you embrace a cetnik, a Serbian soldier?" A similar question would be if George W. Bush could embrace the man who tried to kill his father, Sadaam Hussein; or if Elie Wiesel could embrace Dr. Josef Mengele (Nazi Angel of Death). This book is not simply about the clash of cultures, but the deeper issue for Volf, "the problem of identity and otherness" (16).

This task was not easy for Volf to undertake, but his goal is clear: he desires to understand complicated social questions "in the self-giving love of the divine Trinity as manifested on the cross of Christ." His fruitful prejudice is that the gospel views reconciliation through "the self-giving love of God." (25).¹

The core of Volf's argument regarding embrace is found in Chapter III, but before he can explain this, he authentically expounds on the inescapable nature of humanity, *Exclusion*. Volf begins with a hermeneutics of suspicion, largely utilizing Nietzsche, as a way for truth-telling to take place.

The interaction with cultures and the manifestation of identity are the loci of his argument. He has an extensive footnote on page 19, n3 explaining the cultural relationship to identity. Until we know where we come from, we are unable to "distance ourselves" in order to make room within ourselves for the other.

His argument begins (Chapter I) with naming the current situation of cultural captivity. Here, *cultures* is plural, and Church is singular; and for Volf church and cultures are often competing yet interconnected locations (36). Volf proposes a turning away from the captivity to our own culture in order to turn to "a proper relation between distance from the culture and

belonging to it.” I think another way to state Volf’s proposal is in Andrew Wall’s understanding of *indigenous and pilgrim*.ⁱⁱ

Distancing self from culture for life in the new creation has two benefits – first, *it creates space in us to receive the other*, known as a *Catholic personality* (51).ⁱⁱⁱ Second, it *entails a judgment against evil in every culture*, and the judgment begins with the “household of God” (52).^{iv} We begin by naming our own sinful reality.^v

Chapter II, *Exclusion* argues that one must examine the self before examining the other. Exclusion is “barbarity within civilization, evil among the good, crime against the other *right within the walls of the self*” (60). The opposite of exclusion is not inclusion for this falsely eliminates boundaries; inclusion was modernity’s utopian yet failed desire. Instead, boundaries are necessary, for “without boundaries we will be able to know only what we are fighting against but not what we are fighting for (63). This image of fighting is interesting considering his position in his last chapter regarding the patient waiting to pursue violence. However, how does one prevent the violence of exclusion within the presence of boundaries? Volf proposes that differentiation is not exclusion, nor is exclusion judgment (65-69).^{vi}

Volf’s construction of a self emerges initially out of exclusion, not embrace. Self is identified as one who is willing to be de-centered through laying one’s self on the cross. Cross-centered selves allow solidarity with sin, which allows the self to make judgments without making exclusions, for a de-centered self is aware of one’s propensity for sin. Everyone lives under “pervasive noninnocence” (85). This noninnocence recognizes a pervasive need for reconciliation; even under the most deplorable conditions, “no one should ever be excluded from the will to embrace” because moral performance is not definitive for relationship. (85). If the cross defines the decentered-self, then the identity can be tested in the world where many of us wage wars against each other (85).^{vii}

Exclusion

Exclusion is best illustrated through Volf’s use of Cain and Abel, whereby Cain is both us and them, as is Abel (92-98). Sin in this story has both geography and ideology. Place and persons are corrupted through exclusion.

“Exclusion is often a distortion of the other, not simply ignorance about the other; it is a willful misconstruction, not mere failure of knowledge. We demonize and bestialize not because we do not know better, but because we refuse to know what is manifest and choose to know what serves our interests” (77).

Exclusion is often the inability to deal with the exclusion we have within ourselves. We also excluded “because we are uncomfortable with anything that blurs boundaries, disturbs our identities, and disarranges our symbolic cultural maps” (78).

Who is too guilty for the evil that pervades our worlds? Volf argues that it is the perpetrators, the victims, and the self – the third party, “the chimerical goodness of the self that is but the flip side of the evil it projects onto others” (79). Volf makes a sophisticated argument about violence robbing the innocence from a victim, and we feel uncomfortable adding guilt to the suffering. The world is not so neatly divided between the guilty and innocent, for Volf, who says, “the line between the guilty and the innocent blurs and we see an intractable maze of small and large hatreds, dishonesties, manipulations, and brutalities, each reinforcing the other, and Romans 3:9, 20 capture us all (81).

Remembering and Forgetting Rightly

In the beginning of Volf's chapter on Embrace, he argues that Memory is both a paradise and affliction (130-152). Therefore, in relationship to memory as affliction is forgetting. Forgetting is itself not our enemy; rather, it is those who would rob us of the right to decide for ourselves what to forget and what to remember, as well as when to do so" (132). And so forgetting is required for reconciliation; "forgetting the suffering is better than remembering it, because wholeness is better than brokenness, the communion of love better than the distance of suspicion, harmony better than disharmony" (139). Forgetting rightly, or nonremembering, is necessary for our own redemption. Later in the book Volf says, "The dead must finally let the living rest from the exhausting quest for revenge." But what about memory? What about the burning cities, the molested children, and the violated friend, how do we forget these images? (138). Does forgetting rightly not simply put the bloody hands of the offender in a white robe? No, there is a sense where forgetting rightly relieves the oppression of the oppressed, but without requiring complete amnesia. In forgetting rightly, one is called to remember rightly as well.

The interplay between forgetting and remembering is illustrated by the story of Joseph. It was his "strange forgetting" interspersed with indispensable remembering that made Joseph, the victim, able to remember and embrace his brothers, the perpetrators – and become theirs and his own savior" (139).^{viii} In the later pages of the book, Volf outlines memory as paradise, namely its importance for Reconciliation.^{ix} Remembering rightly allows memory to be spoken, proclaimed as Volf says, so that others may live rightly from the redeemed memory.

Embrace

Embrace seeks "to combine the thought of reconciliation with the thought of dynamic and mutually conditioning identities. The new Covenant is God's embrace of the humanity that keeps breaking the Covenant; the social side of that new Covenant is our way of embracing one another under the conditions of enmity" (156).

Embrace emerges through a discussion of Contract and Covenant. Volf deconstructs contract in order to propose the model of Covenant. Then Volf connects the Covenant to the Cross as the full development of embrace. The Covenant has three distinct marks – making space, self-giving, and eternal (154-155). The Crucified God is the image, which guides the social practice of embrace.

Act of Embrace

Act One: Opening the Arms – "Open Arms are a sign that I have created space in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other."

Act Two: Waiting – The opening cannot violate another's space, but waits for the other to move into the openness offered.

Act Three: Closing the Arms – "In an embrace, the host is a guest and a guest is a host."

Act Four: Opening – Embrace is not a dissolvable action of two people into one, but following the reconciled action of embrace, one offers the other an invitation to "return." (140-145).

Structural Elements of embrace: fluidity of identities, nonsymmetry, undetermination of the outcome, and the risk of embrace "grace is always a gamble" (150).

The path to embrace: Double-vision (enlarged thinking)

"We enlarge our thinking by letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us

see them, as well as ourselves, from their perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives” (213). Double-vision is the ability to both “stand within a given tradition and learn from other traditions” (213).^x This is the activating of Ricoeur’s second naiveté. This is the activation of catholic personality.^{xi}

Critique of Modernity: Because God practices unjust justice.

Volf critiques modernity’s approach to neutrality. He argues that no neutrality is possible; this is the fallacy of *Justitia*. God’s justice according to neutrality is injustice, for God practices grace, partiality (for the sojourner), (220).

“In a world shot through with injustice, the struggle for justice must be carried on by people inescapably tainted by injustice. Hence the importance of double-vision. We need to see our judgments about justice and our struggle against injustice through the eyes of the other – even the manifestly ‘unjust other’ – and be willing to readjust our understanding of justice and repent of acts of injustice.” (218) This is possible when we realize that as victims we are not on the cross of Christ, though we may be bearing a cross, but on this cross, “we are the perpetrators who crucified Christ, we are the godless whose godlessness God exposed.”

Objections to this proposal (and Volf’s response)

1. Is this an exercise in wishful thinking? (Response: the will to embrace the unjust precedes agreement on justice).
2. Should we be so willing to speak of double vision in the thick of the battle with injustice? (Response: reflection on justice clouds our call to do justice – Acting is justice)
3. How can we struggle against injustice while engaged in reversing perspectives? (This points to the modern problem of neutrality; Response: the powerful are those who need to be shaken by the cries of the oppressed, and also those who need to practice ‘double vision’).

ⁱThe dialogue partners for Volf are, “The Crucified against Dionysus” (modernity) and the ‘Crucified against Prometheus’ (post-modernity) (25). His connection with these social realities is in part to move theologians to “foster 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.” (21) This lends itself to the Christian Formation (Education) questions.

ⁱⁱ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 6-9.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Catholic personality is a personal microcosm of the eschatological new creation. A catholic personality is a personality enriched by otherness, a personality that is what it is only because multiple others have been reflected in it in a particular way. The distance from my own culture that results from being born by the Spirit creates a fissure in me through which others can come in. The Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying, ‘you are not only you; others belong to you, too [and obviously you belong to others, too].’” (51)

^{iv} For an example from American culture and Church, see p53, last paragraph.

^v Objections to this include the need for boundary maintenance and the problem of rigid moral responsibility (eliminating whatever I do not like).

^{vi} From Ricoeur, the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other.” (66) Identity is a set of relations.

^{vii} This is difficult as the “background cacophony of evil” plagues our systems and institutions (88). All participate in telling the partial stories of reality, and media resonates with one side of the story, and the “stage for eruption and ethnic cleansing is set” for the community to march in violent protest (88).

^{viii} Remembering rightly is then practiced in proclaiming (Joseph ironically named his son Manasseh in order that this story not be forgotten).

^{ix} I wonder if the amount of pages between the two sections is intentional as not to let one who is trying to forget lapse back into remembering not-rightly?

^x Volf borrows from Wolterstorff here, See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981 Delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1983).

^{xi} William T. Cavanaugh, professor at St. Thomas and writer of the foreword to *The Hauerwas Reader*, argues that throughout the book and especially in Volf’s concept of double-vision, there is no ecclesiology. In some ways this is understandable, as Volf, like Moltmann, wants to write in such a way that those outside the church are able to participate in the conversation. But is something lost in Volf’s universality? Is Pneumatology exempt? Does the resurrection have the necessary power without the witness of God’s church? Possibly, since Volf was invited to speak to the United Nations on this very topic of reconciliation, and ironically it was on September 11, 2001 in New York City.