

A Public Faith—but for Everyone and Every Public?

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Miroslav Volf packs a lot of ideas into this small book. He admirably then tries to unpack them for a general audience. I think most of his ideas are right, a few of his ideas might be other-than-right, and still other ideas make me wonder what might be right. So I am delighted to have this opportunity to engage *A Public Faith* from a congenial, but not identical, point of view—on behalf, one might say, of another public (Vancouver, Canada) than Volf's (New Haven, USA), which is a difference that matters at a few key points.

Volf's thesis is directly stated and, to me, unassailable: "Religious people ought to be free to bring their visions of the good life into the public sphere—into politics as well as other aspects of public life. What's more, I believe that it would be oppressive to prohibit them from doing so" (x). Throughout the world, regimes fear religion being brought into the public sphere, and for several good reasons. Religion tends to promote loyalty to causes higher or at least other than the nation, the corporations, the armed forces, and the state; religion tends to "clump" people together into groups thus rendering them less amenable to the suasions of advertising and the coercions of politics; and religion often provokes people into action, even violent action, on behalf of what adherents believe are nonnegotiable concerns.

Still, religious people are citizens, too, and the dark history of the twentieth century stands ready to refute anyone who claims that secularist ideologies are entirely more temperate and less violent than religious ones. We are who we are, and we ought to be able to enter public life as authentically whole people, true to our deepest convictions. For a minority or even a majority to insist that we think and talk and act like they do in order to participate in society is oppressive in a most obvious and basic sense—whether that oppression is wielded by religious police in Iran or thought police in the Ivy League.

Volf is no relativist, however, defending everyone's right to his or her own views because they are all equally good or all equally well (or badly) grounded. Ethics, Volf goes on to aver, is not arbitrary, but at its best provides an "owner's manual" for optimal functioning. He cites Rowan Williams in this regard: "What creation emphatically isn't is any kind of imposition or manipulation: it is not God imposing on us divinely willed roles rather than the ones we 'naturally' might have, or defining us out of our own system into God's." So, Volf says, "it is a mistake—a major mistake—not to worry about how well our notion of flourishing fits the nature of reality. If we live against the grain of reality, we will experience emotional highs, but we will not find lasting satisfaction, let alone be able to live fulfilled lives" (70). Thus Volf defends moral realism.

Volf therefore has a tension to resolve or, at least, to explain and defend. If he does in fact believe that there are better and worse ethics in the world—better and worse representations of moral reality—then why would he defend just any ethics being allowed into the public conversation? Indeed, since he is an avowed

Christian and therefore can be presumed to think that Christian ethics corresponds to the nature of things better than any other construal, why would he not defend the idea that only Christian ethics ought to be allowed into public conversation in which the contest of ideas then determine the best form of Christian thought?

Since I do not think there is a contradiction here, but instead an important paradox, I shall explore this question in further remarks below. A clue is found, however, in one more central contention of Volf's book: another form of realism, this time political. "Christian communities must learn how to work vigorously for the limited change that is possible, to mourn over persistent and seemingly ineradicable evils, and to celebrate the good wherever it happens and whoever its agents are" (83). This recognition of, and delight in, genuinely good work done by one's neighbors who are not Christian is a key element in Volf's campaign for a public faith that will join with neighbors of other, but overlapping, convictions to work for the common good. And as he does recognize goodness in what others believe and do, he obviously believes that their ethics conform in at least some key ways to moral reality. Christian ethics, then, are not alone right and all others wrong. Religions are such, in Volf's view, that at least some of them affirm at least some key aspects of moral reality, and so can be welcomed into public conversation.

What, however, about the possibility of religions that do not affirm at least a minimal moral consensus with Christianity? What about those that are directly opposed to, and competitive with, Christianity? Are there some religions or ideologies that Volf would exclude from public participation? Are there some he should exclude? We will return to these questions presently.

Affirmations

Volf's advocacy of pluralism extends to the defense of a variety of stances on the key question of "Christ and culture":

My contention in this book is that there is no single way in which Christian faith relates and ought to relate to culture as a whole.... Faith stands in opposition to some elements of culture and is detached from others. In some aspects faith is identical with elements of culture, and it seeks to transform in diverse ways yet many more. Moreover, faith's stance toward culture changes over time as culture changes. How, then, is the stance of faith toward culture defined? It is—or ought to be—defined by the Center of the faith itself, by its relation to Christ as the divine Word incarnate and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (xv)

But what does this mean for Volf? He means that Christian faith is "a prophetic faith that seeks to amend the world.... Faith should be enacted in all spheres of life: education and arts, business and politics, communication and entertainment, and more.

Volf implicitly takes issue with common depictions of the Christian life as a sojourn of a stranger in a strange land, a pilgrim passing watchfully through a dangerous country, an ambassador dealing stoically with a hostile and uncomprehending regime:

Cultures are not foreign countries for the followers of Christ but rather their own homelands, the creation of the one God. If Christians are

estranged from the world, it can only be because and insofar as the world is (and maybe they themselves as well are) estranged from God. Christian communities should not seek to leave their home cultures and established settlements outside or live as islands within them. Instead, they should remain in them and change them—subvert the power of the foreign force and seek to bring the culture into closer alignment with God and God’s purposes. With the possible exception of when the culture has gone seriously awry—as in Nazi Germany—Christian “difference” should always remain internal to a given cultural world. (89)

This true citizenship in and of the world yet is subversive: against the world on behalf of the world as God’s agents work with God in God’s mission of redemption, reconciliation, and renewal. Michel de Certeau is quoted as saying,

The Indians often used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them by force or by fascination to ends other than those of their conquerors; they made something else out of them; they subverted them from within—not by rejecting them or by transforming them (though that occurred as well), but by many different ways of using them in the service of rules, customs, or convictions foreign to the colonization which they could not escape. They metaphorized the dominant order: they made it function in another register. They remained other within the system which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally. They diverted without leaving. (90)

Volf reverses this nice phrase of Certeau’s and recommends “leaving without departing,” but that seems just contradictory to me. Certeau’s formulation is better: diverting, redirecting, improving the culture as we remain within it.

Volf echoes the insights of sociologists (such as David Martin) and missiological anthropologists (such as Paul Heidebrecht) as he asserts, contrary to the simplistic Hauerwasian dichotomy that plagues so much discourse in this zone these days, “The culture is not simply an intruding power that one has to resist. It is a space in which one lives, the air one breathes.... These are all ways of expressing the middle between abandoning and dominating the culture, of describing what it might mean to assert one’s difference while remaining within it” (90).¹

Volf’s point is key and worth quoting at length:

Christian identity in a culture is always a complex and flexible network of small and large refusals, divergences, subversions, and more or less radical and encompassing alternative proposals and enactments, surrounded by the acceptance of many cultural givens.... Christians never

¹ For Martin, see *Reflections on Sociology and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) and references below. For Heidebrecht, see *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). Stanley Hauerwas puts his point about the church being a culture most popularly in his collaboration with William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989). See also Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989); and Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

have their own proper and exclusive cultural territory—their own exclusive language, values, practices, or rationality. They speak a language they have learned from others, though they metaphorize its meaning. They inherit the value structure of the culture at large, yet they change more or less radically some of its elements and refuse to accept others. They take up the rules of a given culture, and yet they subvert them, change them partly, refuse to obey some of them, and introduce new ones....

Christians have no place from which to transform the whole culture they inhabit—no place from which to undertake that eminently modern project of restructuring the whole of social and intellectual life, no virgin soil on which to start building a new, radically different city. No total transformations are possible; all transformations are reconstructions of the structures that must be inhabited as the reconstruction is going on. (93)

This is like repairing the plane, or even redesigning it, while flying. It is at once conservative and transformative—and much more realistic than the radical suggestions of either the left or the right.

So, Volf avers, again in implicit contradiction to Hauerwas & Co., “Christianity is not a ‘culture’ or a ‘civilization’; it is a way of living centered on Christ in many diverse cultures and civilizations” (144).

What, then, of Christian encounter with fellow citizens of distinctly different outlooks? How are Christians to understand themselves, and their mission in the world, over against their fellow human beings? Volf recommends that we consider ourselves indeed as Christians and treat our fellow human beings as, indeed, fellow human beings:

Christian identity is established not primarily by denying and combating what is outside but by embracing and highlighting the center of what is inside—Jesus Christ as the Word who took on flesh and became the Lamb of God bearing the sin of the world. Difference matters not because uniqueness matters; when it comes to the Christian faith (unlike culture or personality), uniqueness is a non-value.... The Center defines the difference, not fear of others, either of their uncomfortable proximity or their dangerous aggressiveness. (95)

Indeed, we should expect a certain amount of overlap with the values of our human brothers and sisters, and we should rejoice in this overlap. Furthermore, some of our differences with other parts of our culture may in fact reflect something wrong with us: perhaps we are championing what is merely an ethnic peculiarity, or a virtue of our class or profession or sex, or something else in the name of Christianity when the culture would actually show us a better way that is more in tune with the virtues of the Gospel and the cultural mandate of God. Such things have happened, of course, when Christians have been confronted by others with how we have been treating slaves, women, children, people of other religions, and homosexuals. God’s light has not been shed only upon Christians, but has guided all human beings to at least some extent in their making shalom in the world.

Is Volf then seeing the world as Happy Valley, as a place of delightful give-and-take with our heretofore misunderstood neighbors whom we ought instead to embrace as just different but not in any way worse, let alone dangerous? Volf offers considerable wisdom on this matter.

First, a realistic warning: “There are situations . . . in which it may be unwise to share religious wisdom. [Volf recalls Jesus’ teaching regarding casting pearls before swine.] These severe words are a reminder that relations between religions are sometimes very tense, even violent. In such circumstances... sharing wisdom may elicit both angry and comprehension in further violence. Sometimes wisdom counsels not to be shared.” (105)

Not everyone, therefore, will thank us for offering them what is, to us, our most precious possession, because accepting what we are offering entails the most radical form of acceptance, a change of identity: “The most significant limits to what others are able to receive are set by their fear of losing their identity. For if they take too much from the ‘outside,’ their reception of wisdom may feel like an unwelcome undoing of their very selves. To receive Christ as wisdom or to receive faith as a way of life may seem profoundly alienating to the would-be taker” (110). Too few evangelistically zealous Christians appreciate what most non-Christians instinctively feel: We’re asking them not just to change metaphysics, but ethics, aesthetics, affections, and even—in both a spiritual and actual sense—families.

Such radical redefinition of the self cannot be accomplished by mere Christian persuasion: “It is not Christians themselves who do the most important part in sharing wisdom. Ultimately they cannot give it, for Christ must give wisdom. And ultimately they cannot make others receive wisdom; God’s Spirit must open people’s eyes to see it” (110).

We are not only inherently incapable of converting others because of our human limitations, but also because of our sinfulness:

The object of faith—God, who dwells in inapproachable light—is never fully present in the consciousness and practice of the faithful, even the most enlightened ones, not just because they are finite creatures and God is the infinite Creator, but because they are all driven by their own needs and proclivities and shaped by the particular situations in which they live. Second, along with others, Christians live in a stream of time that throws at human beings ever-new challenges. Often they find themselves disoriented and uncertain as to how to bring the wisdom of Christ to bear upon new situations, how to be wise in the ever-changing here and now. They may think of themselves as wise while they are in fact foolish” (112-13).

So Christians do well to walk and talk humbly, particularly in new cultural circumstances—such as ours clearly are today.

This humility, furthermore, extends to granting to others the treatment Christ commanded us to offer our neighbors, and this is the basis of Volf’s advocacy of pluralism:

In a pluralistic context, Christ’s command, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12) entails that Christians grant to other religious communities the same religious and political freedoms that they claim for themselves. Put differently, Christians, even those who in their own religious views are exclusivist, ought to embrace pluralism as a political project. (xvi-xvii)

Even as Christians gladly make room for others, finally, Volf asserts that they are, indeed, others. Pluralism does not mean pretending that everyone is in fact the same, but embraces genuine difference and insists on Christian

difference in particular—for the preservation of the integrity of the gospel and thus of the one great gift the church has to give to the world:

Whoever wants the Christian communities to exist must want their difference from the surrounding culture, not their blending into it. As a consequence, Christian communities must “manage” their identity by actively engaging in “boundary maintenance.” Without boundaries, communities dissolve. The question is not whether there should be boundaries; it is rather what their nature should be (i.e., how permeable should they be) and how they should be maintained (i.e., by shoring up that which is specific to Christian communities or by strengthening that which is central). (81).

This model of Christian being-in-the-world I find to be remarkably congenial to my own. So it is perhaps worth remarking on those few points on which Volf and I seem to differ, points that in some cases emerge from the different publics we inhabit and address.

Demurrals

From the start, I notice that Volf teaches at Yale, a prestigious mainline Christian divinity school on America’s east coast, while I teach at Regent College, a much less prestigious evangelical graduate school on Canada’s west coast. In this regard, then, it might simply be expected that Volf deals with the religious right but doesn’t mention, let alone equally castigate, the religious left (ix).

What is odd to me, however, is that an American such as Volf represents Islam as a fairly moderate religion nowadays. “The great majority of Muslims—including the most influential religious and secular scholars—disagree with [Islamism]” (xiii)—that is, disagree with the religious totalitarianism of Qutb. One can agree that most Muslims are not as extreme as Qutb without then calling them “fairly moderate”—a term that soothes without actually informing very clearly.

Meanwhile, Volf goes on, “these three great Abrahamic faiths, as they are sometimes called, differ slightly about the substance of the prophetic vision and about the appropriate modalities of prophets’ insertion into the world in order to realize that vision.” (7). Just a second, now. They differ only “slightly”? So all the consternation worldwide about Christians evangelizing Muslims and Muslims converting to Christianity—and vice versa—is just a gross exaggeration of what are in fact only small differences?

Likewise, Volf contends that “for centuries . . . it was uncontested that Muslims and Christians believe in the same God” (129). I wonder what centuries the author has in mind. I should think that it is only in recent *decades*, outside of a few special cases (such as episodes in Moorish Spain or certain Moghul regimes), that it was believed by any significant number of people that Muslims and Christians believe in the same God. And “uncontested” hardly seems the right way to put the status of this conviction even during those moments, for many contemporaries in each case doubted very much, even violently, that this teaching was true.

Still, Volf and I agree on what is to be done: “The only way to attend to the problem of violent clashes among different perspectives on life—whether religious or secular—is to concentrate on the internal resources of each for

fostering a culture of peace” (132). In particular, it is up to theologians—such as Volf and me, and our Islamic counterparts—to draw out of our holy books and traditions the grounds for pursuing genuine shalom, the religious legitimations of pursuing peace with all people, not just those of the same faith.² And that is what Volf commendably does here, as elsewhere.

When Volf turns his attention to the cultural influence of various forms of Christianity today, he seems a little myopic, as if his gaze doesn’t take in much beyond New England. “As to the Christian faith, its mystical malfunction is rare these days and is relatively inconsequential” (8). I reply that a lot of Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity is failing to transform business, politics, the arts, and so on precisely because of its mystical bent. And Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity—which Volf knows first-hand—is a very significant proportion of global Christianity.

Similarly, Volf contends that “in the majority of situations, functional reduction is not a case of bad faith; rarely are the representatives of prophetic religion cynically out to manipulate people by using religious symbols they believe to be vacuous.” Again, one wonders if the view of things from New Haven, Connecticut, is quite a bit different from the view of things in, say, Lagos, Nigeria, or Buenos Aires, Argentina, or Seoul, Korea. Volf is right to point to the many other instances in which “the language about God is hollowed out from within... and then that shell is put to what are deemed good uses” (10). But I think he is too sanguine about the numbers of outright hucksters there are that afflict and confuse many people where especially prosperity gospel forms of Christianity are flourishing.

He nowhere sounds more embedded in the dim embers of post-Christendom than when he predicts, “In the future, Christians will likely exert that influence less from the centers of power and more from social margins” (78). I’m sure that’s how it feels in New Haven, as it likely does also in Berkeley or Oxford or Berlin (or Vancouver), but I daresay that is not true of precisely where Christianity is flourishing today. What about Latin America? Nigeria? Korea? Even China? Already large social movements are deeply affected by Christian involvement, affecting national governments and economies.³

Volf seems curiously pessimistic in another key respect as well: It is not clear that even concern for our community’s well-being is substantial enough to give our work and our lives their proper meaning. If our own well-being and the well-being of the community are all there is to working, would not our working in some sense be like building sand castles on the seashore? It is meaningful as long as the activity and its results last, but it’s ultimately futile. A tide comes and washes away all the hard work, leaving no trace of it. If there were no more to our work than the benefit to ourselves and our communities, rapacious time would swallow us and the fruits of our labor, and our work would remain

² I argue this point myself in “Religious Diversity, Secularization, and Postmodernity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. Chad Meister (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 239–49.

³ David Martin alerts us to some of these connections in such books as *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005); and *The Future of Christianity* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2011).

ultimately meaningless. Our work can find its ultimate meaning when, in working for ourselves and for our community, we work for God. (34)

This assertion seems unduly gloomy. Surely if we are affecting people for at least some time, that is meaningful. I certainly am grateful when somebody improves my life for even an hour or two. Why is that not meaningful? Why does everything have to somehow be eternal in order to be meaningful? This assumption is a common problem in Christian construals of meaningfulness:

Finally, God makes sure that none of what is true, good, and beautiful in our work will be lost. In God, everything that we have done in cooperation with God will be preserved. In the world to come, our work will not disappear. We ourselves will be followed by our works, as it says in the book of Revelation (14:13). That makes sense if our identity partly resides in our work and its achievements. Even in the world to come, I could not meet Gutenberg and not think of the printing press, or meet Einstein and not think of his theory of relativity, or meet the apostle Paul and not think of the Epistle to the Romans. The results of our work—the cumulative results of generations of workers across the globe—will also be preserved in the world to come. They may be preserved just in God’s memory, or they may be preserved as actual building blocks of the New World. (35-36)

C. S. Lewis makes a similar, and vastly influential, point when he says that our work matters day by day because we affect other human beings who will last forever. If we are helping people move toward a good eternal destiny, then our work is meaningful.⁴ Yet think of medical work that is aimed entirely at helping and healing bodies that are definitely going to be done away and replaced in the world to come. Are medical people supposed to throw that over for work of some kind of eternal significance? Musicians create art that lasts in the air and on the ear for but a moment. Is their work in vain? Platonism continues to haunt Christian theology in unhelpful ways: God cares about the flower that is here today and gone tomorrow, and so ought we.

Occasionally, Volf seems to overdo his emphasis on difference at the cost of his conviction regarding an underlying moral reality that is variously perceived by various traditions:

The problem is that there are no generic human beings and there is no generic love. We know neither what love is nor what it means to be a human being outside of the traditions—mainly religious—in which we were raised and in which we live. There are Jewish ways of being human and of loving; there are Christian ways of being human and loving; there are Muslim ways of being human and of loving, and so on. The various ways of being human that of loving as presented by differing religions are not identical, though they may significantly overlap. (135).

But what about the Tao, as C. S. Lewis called it—that widely evidenced moral consensus in the world’s great traditions?⁵ Is there really nothing that the author would want to posit as fundamental to (virtually) all human beings’

⁴ C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 14-15.

⁵ See the appendix to C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: How Education Develops Man’s Sense of Morality* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

understanding of morality and particularly (virtually) everyone's understanding of love? How else can the Christian Gospel transcend every cultural boundary, connect with every person and every culture, be understood and be responded to in conversion? Don't we all know love when we see it, in at least some forms?

Indeed, wouldn't we now have to worry about "the closing of the pluralistic mind"?⁶ If there is no single and universal understanding of truth and love, then on what basis are we going to learn from each other ostensibly better ways of describing truth and practicing love? My guess is that Volf would agree and would perhaps rewrite these sections to correlate them better with this conviction I think we share. I hope so.

Questions

Miroslav Volf begins this book with the startling claim that "the main fear is that of imposition—one faith imposing aspects of its own way of life on others" (x). I wonder why the main fear isn't error or harm. Why is the question framed in terms of freedom rather than, say, truth or goodness or beauty?

He similarly writes in his conclusion, "I believe that... something like a violent 'Christian revolution' would be unjust, unloving, and counterproductive, and in any case profoundly unchristian." Indeed, "any form of imposition of a social system or of legislation allegedly based on God's revelation must be rejected. To affirm freedom of religion is to reject any form of religious totalitarianism and to embrace pluralism as a political project" (144).

The American Founding Fathers embraced liberty, pluralism, and so on because of a conviction about how truth would emerge, how liberty would be safeguarded, and how the common good would be best advanced. Volf doesn't defend democracy much here, so his theoretical grounding for this conviction remains unclear. This Canadian wonders if Volf's reflexive elevation of freedom is rather distinctively American over against, say, a greater concern for justice, order, and prosperity that would be foremost in Singapore or pre-democratic South Korea. Wouldn't it be better to have a regime of truth, goodness, and beauty imposed on us rather than having a thousand ideologies violently compete? Kong-zi certainly thought so.

One of the key semantic minefields in this conversation is marked by the word "secular" and its various offspring. Volf seems to get things wrong when he says that "the suppression of religious voices from the public square" is "the idea of a secular state, forged over the last few centuries in the West" (x). Yet this is not what everyone means, or meant, by "a secular state." It certainly isn't what everybody means by, say, a secular university. He is on firmer ground when he shifts from "secular" to "secularism" and makes this interesting point: "Today in the West . . . secularism is not, strictly speaking, an ideology [although I would suggest there is plenty of that still around] but rather a set of related values and truth claims partly inherited selectively from the tradition, partly generated by the marketplace, and partly drawn from the hard sciences. The marketplace enthrones personal preference as the paramount value, and the hard sciences

⁶ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

offer explanations using inter-worldly causalities as the only truth. With religions absent from the public square, secularism of this sort becomes the overarching perspective” (124-25).⁷

Volf then recovers himself, I think, as he agrees with Nicholas Wolterstorff that in a liberal democracy we require “neutrality” from the state, namely, “that the state be neutral with respect to the religious and other comprehensive perspectives present in society, as requiring impartiality rather than separation” (125). That is indeed what we normally mean by a secular state—and how a secular university ought to treat various religions and philosophies on campus.

It would have been good to hear Volf say more about “idolatric substitution” (11-12). He properly points to “positive thinking” and organized violence that appropriates the cross for its oppression, but in brief, general terms. I would like to have read him address American doctrines of Manifest Destiny, or the upwelling of a new machismo and sexism among conservative Christians, or the worldwide appeal of prosperity Gospel teachings.

Volf tantalizes us with this suggestion: “If faith only heals and energizes, then it is merely a crutch to use at will, not a way of life” (16). It would be interesting to have Volf think with us about how faith in this sense is a technology. And if it is in fact a technology, then it is no longer faith. Again, however, in many parts of the world today, faith is awfully close to magic, and thus a technology by which one obtains benefits from the cosmos by performing the right actions at the right times in the right ways in the right places—hardly the description of a prayerful, personal relationship with God.

Volf offers a series of provocative sentences on how faith ought to shape means as well as ends. In this he echoes both Barth and Niebuhr as they call Christians away from sloth (Barth) or sensuality (Niebuhr) to pursue the most shalom possible in any situation by acting as Christianly as possible in every moment of one’s life:

The adherents of prophetic religion will let faith dictate the ends to be achieved (in protecting unborn life or abolishing the death penalty), but fail to allow faith to determine the means to achieve those ends (opponents are not even respected, let alone treated with benevolence and beneficence). In all such cases—and many more—faith malfunctions by becoming an instrument of oppression. (18)

Maybe even more important is discernment within morally acceptable types of work. Recall an important distinction often made in just war theory between the just resort to war (*ius ad bellum*) and the just conduct of war (*ius in bello*). According to proponents of just war theory, a nation can have a just cause for war and yet conduct the war unjustly. The same applies to all our work, not just the work of waging war. Within a type of work that is morally acceptable, we still need to decide what is ethical and what is not, and act accordingly. (30-31)

The fact that something is legal doesn’t mean that it’s moral... it is legal to run companies that use child labor in impoverished countries just as it is in many places legal to seriously pollute the environment. But is it moral to do so? . . . A properly functioning faith nudges us to go beyond

⁷ See Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World, or Why It Is Tempting to Live as If God Doesn’t Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

what is morally permissible and do what is morally excellent. (31)⁸

That's true at least for the faith Volf and I share and certain other faiths as well. So is this: "The cure for religiously induced violence is not less faith but more faith—faith in its full scope, faith enacted with integrity and encouraged by its holy men and women, faith pondered responsibly by its great theologians" (20). This recommendation is helpful as long as you believe that religion, properly construed, is against religiously induced violence. But this affirmation marks two ambiguities in Volf's work.

First, does he not believe that some forms of faith do in fact promote violence, so that more faith will indeed mean more violence? If he does think that, then where are his recommendations for how such faiths are to be encountered and dealt with in the light of his hospitable pluralism?

Second, does he believe that even his own religion, properly construed, at least sometimes can and should prompt violence? Is there religiously legitimated violence authentic to Christianity?

It's fine for him to say, "I will contest the claim that the Christian faith predominately fosters violence" (39). Few Christians would disagree with him about that! And Volf properly takes to task certain poststructuralist thinkers for whom "any determinacy of the goal to be achieved by divine transformation of this world and any specificity about the agent of transformation already breeds violence. . . . Hence the only acceptable goal of desirable change is 'absolute hospitality,'" welcoming the stranger without any preconditions, just as the only acceptable engagement to achieve it is "radical and interminable, infinite... critique" (46-47).

In fact, Volf, doubtless drawing on his heritage as a Croatian, says, "absolute hospitality" seems generous and peaceful, until one remembers that unrepentant perpetrators and their unhealed victims would then have to sit around the same table and share a common home without adequate attention to the violation that has taken place. In one crucial regard, the idea ends up too close for comfort to the Nietzschean affirmation of life, in which a sacred "yes" is pronounced to all that is and in which "but thus I will do it" instead of all that was, with all the small and large horrors of history. Absolute hospitality would in no way amount to the absence of God's. To the contrary, it would enthrone violence precisely under the guise of nonviolence because it would leave the violators unchanged and the consequences of violence unremedied. Hospitality can be absolute only once the world has been made into a world of love in which each person would be hospitable to all. (47).

⁸ Indeed, Volf speaks of "the idleness of faith," which is virtually a definition of Karl Barth's "sloth." He uses these examples: "The market traps you, compelling you to act in accordance with its rules. . . . Large-scale bureaucratic arrangements function similarly. A soldier in the unit, for example, is often willing to do what he would never do as a private person. He is simply obeying orders, or he assumes a role ascribed to him by the system." (13-17) Obviously, we would expect to encounter Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* here, but strangely we don't. For a fine introduction to these themes of pride and sloth/sensuality, see Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995), 145-48.

Referring to the picture of Messiah in the book of Revelation, Volf refuses the pacifist avoidance of the language of violent judgment in chapter 19:

Yet, the Rider is not simply the Lamb; he is the Lamb in his function *as the final judge*. So why is the final judgment necessary? Without it, we would have to presume that all human beings, no matter how deeply steeped in evil they are, will either eventually succumb to the lure of God's love or, if they don't, willingly embrace not only the evil they do but the destructive impact of evil upon their own lives. This belief is not much more than a modern superstition, born out of the inability to look without flinching into the "heart of darkness." (49)

So Volf says he "therefore cannot exclude the possibility of divine coercion against persistent and unrepentant evildoers. Those who refuse to be redeemed from violence to love by the means of love will be excluded from the world of love" (50).

So Volf is open at least to the legitimacy of divine violence in the form of a righteous Last Judgment. But what he gives with one hand he seems to take away with the other:

How should we understand this possible divine coercion? In the context of the whole Christian faith, it is best described as a symbolic portrayal of the final exclusion of everything that refuses to be redeemed by God suffering love. Will God in fact exclude some human beings in the end? Not necessarily. I called the Divine coercion "possible," for it is predicated on human refusal to be made by God into a loving person and therefore to be admitted into the world of love. Will some people refuse? I hope not—and the Bible along with the best of the Christian tradition has never affirmed with certainty that some will refuse and therefore be excluded. (50)

This last sentence seems to me to be factually wrong, since the vast majority of the most notable of Christian theologians until modernity certainly did affirm with certainty (!) that people were going to hell. So unless Volf just means that "the best of the Christian tradition" simply means "people who agree with me," this affirmation is simply not true. More confusingly, however, is that this universalistic hope seems unjustified in Volf's straightforward (and in this particular context, courageous) affirmation of the language of judgment in the Apocalypse.

So now we return to the key issue:

The crucial question for our purposes is whether this possible divine coercion at the end of history sanctions actual human violence in the middle of it. The response that resounds throughout the New Testament, including the book of Revelation, is a loud and persistent no! Though imitating God is the height of human holiness, there are things that only God may do. One of them is to deploy violence. (50)

And Volf is adamant on this point: "The Christian faith is misused when it is employed to underwrite violence" (51). I will simply have to register not only my own disagreement with my friend on this question, but also (as he well knows) the disagreement of the mainstream of the Christian tradition with him as well. Sometimes the most Christian thing to do—the least bad thing and the thing most likely to maximize shalom—is to commit violence. I, for one, wish Canadian general Roméo Dallaire had gotten the few thousand NATO troops for

which he begged his superiors in order to quell the genocidal uprising in Rwanda. I do think small wars can prevent big ones, just as I think surgery is sometimes the best option in a badly compromised world.⁹

Moreover, I'm afraid that Volf's pacifism will keep many from heeding his call for more openness to neighbors of different views, and particularly his longstanding concern to improve Muslim-Christian cooperation. If he is not prepared to advocate the use of force to root out those whose convictions are hostile to the values and even the existence of the United States and similar countries, then he will easily be dismissed as a sentimentalist—and a dangerous one at that.

In a similar vein, he concludes his penultimate chapter “in praise of disagreement” (136). But this little section is too compressed. Why is disagreement, and fostering disagreement, a good thing? Presumably it is because disagreements that are conducted openly and fairly among people of intelligence and goodwill will result in eventually everyone arriving at a better version of the truth. Or, at least, “under the non-utopian conditions of this world” at least we would have the honoring of basic human rights and the appropriate challenging of illicit uses of power. That is what you would expect an American to say, and that's fine—but, again, that's not what every public is prepared to hear, and particularly not publics under considerable political and economic stress who might prefer a little more law and order and a little more meat in the pot before we throw open the doors to just any ideologies.

Conclusion

Miroslav Volf gives three pieces of good advice as to what the Christian church must do to help the world live with the grain of the universe. “First, we need to explicate God's relation to human flourishing with regard to many concrete issues we are facing today.” (73). “Second, we need to make plausible the claim that the love of God and of neighbor is the key to human flourishing” (73). And “third, maybe the most difficult challenge for Christians is to actually believe that God is fundamental to human flourishing.... We must believe it as a rock-bottom conviction that shapes the way we think, preach, right, and live” (74).

Volf's pithy book encourages *A Public Faith* that believes, proclaims, exemplifies, and effects the Kingdom of God. My concerns and questions themselves bear witness to the quality of its provocations, provocations to “love and good deeds.” As Volf says repeatedly, the way forward is not to thin out faith, let alone exclude it entirely, but to thicken it in authenticity.

To be sure, this thickening must be of what we must call “good faith,” faith that conforms to the moral reality at the heart of things, even as that good faith (in its varieties) must stand with God against all that believes wrongly and acts against the right. Perhaps a second book from Miroslav Volf will help us know better how to engage in that complementary task.

⁹ I set out my views at length in *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).