Miroslav Volf Replies

I'm very thankful that my respondents have taken the time and trouble to read so carefully and respond so graciously to what Maurice Lee and I have written. The challenges that have been thrown up here touch central issues and I will be able to respond to them only briefly.

I should say that I'm fully in agreement with Professor Fast Dueck's main points. In particular, I think that it is important to underscore the experience of grace in conjunction with liturgical celebration, as she rightly does. We need to find modes of liturgical celebration that not only portray the self-giving of Christ for our sins but underscore celebratively that the *imitatio Christi* is a deeply hopeful way of life, and help us live out our calling as a church. Although I've sometimes put things in rather technical language, a vision of spiritual life that needs to be liturgically celebrated and also prayed, fasted, and lived out communally is at the heart of what I am after. At the center of the Christian faith are, not our efforts to engage in Christian practices, but the gift of a new life that we have received through the Spirit of God.

Similarly, the best response I give in relation to Professor Pinnock's remarks is to utter a resounding "Amen" to the prayer at the very end of his response: "Come Creator Spirit." I take his whole response to be summarized in that prayer.

More extended comments are in order in relation to Professor Demson's and Professor Erb's responses. First, Professor Demson. I'm in basic agreement with the "critique" of the search for the historical Jesus that is associated with the "Yale School" (which my colleagues at Yale are not sure ever existed). I do not think that we should read the New Testament "as a theological reflection upon … a 'reconstructed historical Jesus'"; even less am I interested in using the "reconstructed historical Jesus" as a criterion of what we are allowed to think and believe about Jesus Christ. But I'm not persuaded that an interest in the historical Jesus is theologically misplaced. If we are not going to have a disembodied, ahistorical form of Christian faith, then we have to be interested in historical research at least to the extent that if it could be shown that the picture that the gospel writers present is incompatible with what can be plausibly construed as an account of the historical Jesus, then we'd have to scratch our head and think twice about whether we can really affirm that. There has to be

a certain kind of fit between the two. In the paper we have read the historical research from the perspective of the narrative of the gospel and suggested that this too is how one can construe it in historically plausible ways. The controlling thing for us is not the historical research but the Gospel narratives. I think if one inverts the primacy, as the historical Jesus research has always tended to do, one will inevitably mirror the reigning cultural plausibilities and, when all is said and done, end up with a rather boring and humanly uninteresting picture of Jesus. Although I tend not to be as negative about historical Jesus research as is Luke Timothy Johnson in *The Real Jesus*, when I read his second volume, *Living Jesus*, it struck me how much more *interesting* the Christ of the New Testament is than the so-called "historical Jesus."

"Enacting?" Maybe saying that the church "enacts" the Reign of God is too strong. "Anticipating" or "portraying" or "provisionally embodying," in a more than simply verbal or symbolic sense, might be better. I think a sense of anticipation, in a broken way instantiating that which is being spoken about, is what I would want to claim for the church. Anything less would not give sufficient weight to the presence of Christ by the Spirit in the church.

I don't think it is adequate to construe the relations of the economic Trinity simply in terms of the Spirit being sent by Christ. The Spirit has to be seen on the economic level as also constituting Christ. The gospel narratives bear witness to that. Now, the difficult question is what one concludes, from this observation concerning the life of the economic Trinity, about the way in which we understand the immanent Trinity. That brings me to a second issue. I think I would argue for a stronger distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity than I see in the greatest theologians of the 20th century, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner. As Yves Congar, among others, has pointed out, Rahner's dictum that the economic Trinity is the immanent and vice versa is too strong. One needs to distinguish between the two, while not separating them. If that is the case, one could suggest that to speak of the Father "commanding" and the Son "obeying" is quite appropriate for the life of the economic Trinity but, strictly speaking, not fully adequate for the life of the immanent Trinity. Not fully adequate because I don't know what "commanding" means applied to persons who are equally divine and who would therefore always already know what the command would be and would always already be willing to do precisely that. I don't know how to imagine the possibility of

such a relationship within the immanent Trinity. The language of equality *can* be idolatrous; *anything* can. We would be ill-advised to insist only on formal equality in social terms. An exclusive stress on formal equality ends up emptying relationships of their proper content. Rather, formal equality must be affirmed together with, for instance, the notions of grace, service, humility, and mutual deference, and alongside with perfect love, which implies equality in relation to persons standing on the same ontological footing. In contemporary Western culture, formal equality is immediately associated with the claim to particular rights, and so the basic mode in which people operate in relationship to one another is as claimants to rights. For very important reasons which would be too involved to go into here, the Christian tradition must both affirm the importance of and transcend rights talk. The Christian tradition goes much deeper when it emphasizes love. If this deeper side of things is rediscovered, the notions of self-giving and obedience can be retrieved. Love implies both self-giving and equality, both submission and the absence of a unidirectional, stable hierarchy.

Though I have to continue to disagree with him, I am very thankful that Professor Demson has raised the issues of submission and equality, both with respect to the Trinity and with respect to human relations. For these are extraordinarily important issues and neither flat talk about equality nor quick appeals to hierarchy will do.

Responding to Professor Erb's more extensive comments will be more difficult because he engages not only the text Maurice Lee and I wrote but also my books *After Our Likeness* and, to a lesser extent, *Exclusion and Embrace*. I'll respond on my own behalf only; and before I make a few brief substantive comments, let me note one misunderstanding. My claim is not that reconciliation in Christian vision has no social meaning. To the contrary; my claim is that certain understandings of reconciliation rob it of its proper social character.

I do engage ecclesiological questions from a particular tradition, the free church tradition in which I was raised. So my reflection is not undertaken "from outside historically-given institutions." I realize that that is not good enough for some of my friends, especially those from the Orthodox and Catholic traditions. But I would resist the suggestion that I am operating with some "a-historical transcendent norm," unless, of course, Scripture itself as read by these communities is seen as such.

My argument in *After Our Likeness* is not that free church ecclesiology is the best ecclesiology for all times and places; my argument is (1) that it is a legitimate ecclesiology such that a refusal to affirm the ecclesiality of the free churches (a persistent attitude of both the Orthodox and the Catholic hierarchies!) is unwarranted, and (2) that free church ecclesiology can be construed to be resonant with the very core of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity. This said, I can well imagine situations in which a hierarchical constitution of the church would be not only legitimate but preferable. As Professor Erb rightly suggests, however, when hierarchy is preferable, it is not on account of the virtues of hierarchy itself but on account of the "fallen creation" – more precisely, a particular form of the "fallen creation" – of which the church is also a part. And as I indicated above in my response to Professor Demson, "equality" does need to be redeemed, and I would fully agree that it must be "fully enclosed and reborn within the Sacred Heart (of Jesus)" were it not for all the historical baggage that that term carries with it. At the heart of the church's life is the Eucharist and at the heart of Eucharist is the self-giving of Christ.

Finally, a few words on the relationship between the Spirit and ecclesial institutions. I make a forceful argument in *After Our Likeness* that I consider the church to be an institution. Hence I connect very much the work of the Spirit with institutions. The central question is not whether the church is an institution but what *kind* of institution it is, and not whether the Spirit is related to the church as institution but *how* the Spirit is related. This is a complicated issue, and I'll have to leave it here at that.

Once again, let me thank the respondents for their hard work and generous comments.

Part II

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

Gerald Shenk

There are seasons in our shared history when together we sense that a corner is being turned, that we've reached a hinge-point beyond which everything must surely be different. We feel this with an uncanny certainty, even though we have not yet suspicioned just what the new direction will be.

At the close of the Cold War, that most extensive and prolonged of clashes in the century just behind us, many seers and would-be prophets leaned forward to peer into the future. They tried to suggest the things to come after the collapse of that strangely stable contest between superpowers relying on mutual assured destruction (MAD). With the great strategic struggle no longer matching chess pieces bit by bit around the globe, to what use might the abandoned figures put their newly undirected energy?

Communities advocating non-violence began to hope for a "peace dividend," in which the high costs of permanent hostilities could be converted into resources for more constructive purposes. But among political theorists and geo-policy planners, much more dire predictions took center stage. Francis Fukuyama proclaimed "the end of history," in a Hegelian footnote of culmination with the triumph of liberal democracies and global economic free market efficiencies (1992). Along with the economics of growing desires for consumption, he also warned of an accompanying "struggle for recognition." Less rational forces of culture, religion, and nationalism would lead people into demands that their self-worth be recognized by others. Samuel Huntington took the discussion of post-Cold War new realities a somber step further with his treatise on "the clash of civilizations" (1996). He portrayed a shift from "East versus West" to "the West and the rest," warned of a world "anarchical,

Gerald Shenk is professor of Church and Society at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

rife with tribal and national conflicts," with the greatest dangers for stability arising "between states or groups from different civilizations." The 1990s saw an "eruption of a global identity crisis," with the politics of identity more and more entangled along the boundary lines of religions. Religion and culture map the battle lines of resurgent large-scale conflicts.

Within this complex scene of rapidly shifting paradigm proposals, Miroslav Volf emerges with a theological agenda for reflecting on the same dramas of identity and recognition. His account is both personal and cultural; at once intensely individual yet global. Responding to the "new tribalism" breaking out around the world, Volf cannot be content with either the vagaries of a free-floating universalism or a mushy sentimentalism that downplays the significance of real differences. Rather, the answer must be a deep, anguished acknowledgement of how alien the "other" truly is yet deserving of something far more vigorous than toothless tolerance.

Volf's opus is passionately engaged in the struggle toward understanding these terrifying forces from within the maelstrom of contemporary life. His observations are rooted in a homeland familiarity, born in the midst of the complex ambiguities known as Yugoslavia. Volf is intimately acquainted with the scenes and actors clashing across Serb, Croat, and Bosnian lines, which is also to say Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Muslim cultures. Product of a Pentecostal religious minority within an ethnic Croat (plus Czech and German) minority, his vision evokes all the detail of particularity that knows its own place and view point.

Volf is also a protégé of theologian Jürgen Moltmann, and a graduate of Tübingen and of Fuller Theological Seminary. Moving confidently in ecumenical circles, he engages in dialogue with Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites. His theology may be seen in the broadest Reformation tradition while also influenced by Marxist philosophical thought, which he studied in Belgrade. Now the Henry B.Wright Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale Divinity School, Volf has also taught at Fuller Theological Seminary. A few years ago *Christianity Today* rated him one of the "40 leading evangelicals under 40."

Two aspects of Volf's work make him a dialogue partner of special interest to readers of *The Conrad Grebel Review*. First, Volf is uniquely qualified to address themes that are close to the heart of a sectarian heritage. Anyone who is prone to think in terms of "us" and "them" will readily recognize the cultural

patterns of ethnicity, tensions over identity, and pressures toward assimilation. My own acquaintance with Balkan life over more than two decades has persuaded me that North American religious communities have far more in common with those persistent Balkan patterns than most of us could comfortably acknowledge. And if even a small part of Huntington's thesis comes to fruition in the decades ahead, we face a major task in learning how to deal more constructively with otherness — with the humanity of the skeptic, the alien, the blasphemer, or any other who appears to revile what we hold sacred. Indeed, our very identity is formed within a specific relationship to that "other."

At a deeper level, readers should be alert to the thread that ties Volf's work to Anabaptist concerns. Volf cites John Howard Yoder at the outset for his insistence on the centrality of Jesus as example for Christians today. A key claim: "All *sufferers* can find comfort in the solidarity of the Crucified; but only those who struggle against evil by following the example of the Crucified will discover him at their side" (24). Self-giving love, in radical obedience to God, is the way of Christ. It is also a scandal, certain pain, an agony of abandonment and frequent failure.

One of the chief costs of such discipleship, according to Volf, is the Christian's obligation to forgive an enemy. Despite the ambiguities of "non-innocence," when perpetrator, victim, and bystanding third party alike are not free from complicity and measures of responsibility for monstrous evil, I must forgive. Even when I have no strength to do it, I must forgive. Even though the true release from such a burden of sin comes only from God's forgiveness, I must forgive. Forgiveness marks the sacred ground between exclusion and embrace.

For most contemporary heirs of an Anabaptist vision, however, Volf's concluding observations will be troubling. There he argues that a proper biblical understanding of our ethical obligation not to retaliate against evildoers must be set in the larger framework of God's justice. Chaotic powers that refuse to accept God's redemption in the cross of Christ will come to the end of God's patience. The God who saves Christ's faithful suffering followers will make an end to violence, deception, and injustice. Volf asserts that this confidence underlies the bold witness of the Anabaptist traditions for peace. Citing the Anabaptists' use of passages in I Peter 2 and Romans 12, he claims to be more in line with our own heritage than many of us who might shy away from the implications of God's wrath and judgment. It is a disturbing note, directed

against the quiet and comfort of suburbia. Amid the clamor of our current disputes over denominational bureaucratic arrangements, we should not ignore his prophetic warning.