# 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,

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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.