Conversations with Miroslav Volf

On his book
Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation (1996)

Part 1

Miroslav Volf

Exclusion and Embrace grew out of a predicament, out of an attempt at making sense of the war that was raging in the former Yugoslavia. But to me it soon became a larger issue of trying to address the question concerning various sorts of conflicts around the problem of identity. We take note of conflicts mainly when they emerge on the front pages of the newspapers. But I am also interested in addressing the kind of low-grade conflicts that are the stuff of which life is made and that do not make it into the headlines. The more I think about the book, the more I think about it in terms of these low-grade, everyday, non-flared-up conflicts than in terms of the emergency situations, with outbursts of incredible violence, in which we occasionally find ourselves.

As I was writing the book I tried to work through my theological upbringing. This was partly in the evangelical tradition, but also a tradition shaped by liberation theology. When I was studying at Fuller Theological Seminary, I took a course in liberation with an evangelical liberation theologian, Orlando Costas, and continued to study it afterwards. That is also why I went to do doctoral work with Jürgen Moltmann, who in a sense was a granddaddy of liberation theologians. I tease him sometimes about that. And though he is not sure that the title is appropriate, I think Moltmann is key together with Johann Baptist Metz in being a major impetus to what has become, in a particular context, liberation theology.

As you know, liberation theology operates with a basic polarity between liberation and oppression. Liberation is conceived of as the goal, and oppression

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This conversation was held in a public gathering at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario, on March 17, 2000. The two Conversations with Miroslav Volf in this issue were recorded and transcribed by Jeremy Bergen, administrative assistant and graduate student in theology at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre in Toronto, Ontario. The final versions were edited by Miroslav Volf.

is the major impediment. I tried to apply that schema to the world of conflicts in the hope that participants could apply it in order to better engage in the struggle for justice. Soon I realized that this would not work, because each side saw itself as oppressed and as involved in the struggle for liberation; and each side had at least internally plausible reasons for perceiving itself in this way. In a sense, this approach was simply playing into one common criticism of the Christian faith: that far from being a help for resolving conflicts, Christianity is in fact one of the major causes of violence around the world. In the more general cultural milieu, people think that religion, especially the Christian faith, is not a solution to the problem of violence but among its causes. I was startled by that realization about how the basic categories of liberation theology functioned, and so sought to explore alternative ways of thinking about the relationship of the Christian faith to the world of conflict. That's how the idea of embrace came to my mind.

I wanted to make sure that something like exclusion and oppression is still part and parcel of my concern, because that is obviously what's happening. The naming of that evil seemed extraordinarily significant to me and any lessening of the evil being perpetrated struck me as a denial of the experiences of many people. But it was also clear that liberation could not be conceived of as the ultimate goal of the struggle against oppression and exclusion; that goal must be something that binds conflicting parties together rather than pulling them apart from each other. So I embarked on the journey of reflecting on reconciliation and did so by trying to relate it to the question of identity. These are two themes that unify the book – how identity is constructed and how reconciliation ought to be pursued.

Let me briefly address these two issues. The issue of identity is very significant. Many conflicts revolve around the issue of identity. Economic issues are always significant, as well as issues of political power, but certainly identity issues are very important. That applies not only to ethnic conflicts but also very much to our personal conflicts. Identity is significant on our battlefields, where cultural and national identities are often at stake, and it is significant in our living rooms, where gender and personal identities are often being negotiated. So it seemed essential to address the question of identity and connect it with the topic of reconciliation. My first question was: How does one conceive of identity? Here one has to make two kinds of claims. One was

that identities must be distinct – if you don't have distinct identities, you don't have identities at all. And if you don't have boundaries, you don't have identities. It's a very good thing that boundaries exist. Level all the boundaries and what you get is really not a world we can inhabit, but a dense pond of sheer indistinguishables. But boundaries also create a problem. So we must try to find ways in which to think about boundaries that are not the simple negation of otherness. My identity is not simply what the other is not; rather, it encompasses both what is distinct from me and what binds me to another person. A more dynamic way to make the same point is to say that boundaries should be porous, allowing traffic to go back and forth between the self and multiple others, also including the institutions in which one finds oneself. The result is a discrete but nonetheless fluid sense of identity. Only such a fluid sense of identity could account for who human beings are in their interchanges.

Two years ago I become a father, and I am clearly not the same person that I was before this wonderful little creature named Nathanael thrust himself into my life. I've changed in profound ways. He has come to inhabit who I am. I see the world in different ways through his eyes and so forth. All the significant relationships that we as persons and cultures have are such that the other person is not simply external to us but has in profound ways become intrinsic to who we are.

During the war in the former Yugoslavia I would occasionally tease my fellow Croatians: "You can complain about it, but part and parcel of what it means to be a Croatian is to have Serbs as neighbors. That is what has shaped you as who you are." You cannot pretend that the other is not included within your own identity; and hence your own sense of identity cannot be whole unless your relationship with the other is wholesome. That emphasis on the presence of the other in the self, and therefore, within the conflict, an inability to be at home in my own house without resolving my relationship with the other, led me to the second theme – that of reconciliation in a particular light.

One of the central claims of my book concerns the will to embrace. I argue that the will to embrace the other, even the evil other, must be indiscriminate. It applies to every possible human being and no deed is imaginable that would take a person outside of my will to embrace that person. That claim is predicated on a particular reading of the work of Christ on the cross: God in God's infinite love decided to be God for us who are God's enemies;

nobody is outside the sphere of the divine love, and therefore nobody ought to be outside the sphere of our human will to embrace.

Just after my book came out, I was lecturing to an audience of rather conservative Presbyterians on this universal and indiscriminate will to embrace. I saw looks on the faces of my audience, looks that questioned and resisted me, and I knew something was wrong. I was so deeply immersed in my own thinking on this question that it never occurred to me that there were Calvinist Christians for whom the divine will of salvation is *not* universal. For them, there is such a thing as election and there is such a thing as reprobation, so there are also reprobate people – you don't know who they are, but you can *suspect*. Christ's death does not apply to all people, but only to those who God has elected to be saved. Why would God do any more work than is necessary? I don't believe any of this, and so I was startled when the first person to stand up after my lecture said: "But the divine will to embrace is *not* universal. Why then should our will to embrace be indiscriminate?" The great majority of Christian traditions believe that the divine love *is* absolutely universal and indiscriminate, and that nothing can possibly undermine it. So our own will to embrace the other must be the same. That's the first part of reconciliation.

The second part of reconciliation is the distinction between the will to embrace and the embrace itself. Though the will to embrace is, in my account, indiscriminate and applies to absolutely everyone, the embrace itself must discriminate. That is, full reconciliation is predicated on truth being told and justice being attended to. As a consequence, properly speaking, the will to embrace the other entails also the will to pursue justice. Justice is not extraneous to the will to embrace but rather is part and parcel of the will to embrace itself. And I try to argue also in my book that, especially in situations of conflict, agreement on what transpired between the people and groups involved and agreement on questions of justice are unlikely unless there is something like the will to embrace the other – the will to live together.

I was in Zagreb while the Croatian translation of my book was being launched and was asked to say a few words. And there, too, I was talking about the will to embrace. A person in the audience was looking at me restlessly and I knew there was going to be a question from him. During the question and answer period, he didn't speak, but immediately afterward, when the crowd had dispersed, he came charging toward me. He was a journalist and

wanted to know one thing, but he was so impatient that he couldn't even formulate his sentence completely: "Where does it come from?" "Where does what come from?" I said. "Where does the will to embrace come from?" Then he went down the list of possibilities very quickly. Is it inborn in us? A genetic predisposition? Or, he asked, are you writing only for Christians who have been informed and formed by Christian faith, whose wills have therefore been shaped by the divine will? The journalist was not alone in asking such questions, and my response is always: "It's strange how often Christians don't do what they know they ought to be doing, and how often non-Christians are so much better at it." Which is to say that the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of the crucified Christ and therefore the Spirit of embrace, also works outside the sphere of the Christian faith. The same Spirit of God which rested on Christ, which led Christ to do the deed which he did for us, also is at work outside the walls of the church.

Response

Tom Yoder Neufeld, *associate professor of Religious Studies*
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I'm very honored to have been asked to respond, and grateful that you have been able to be with us. *Exclusion and Embrace* is one of the most important books I have read in many years. If I were to identify two books that have most resonated with my study of the Scriptures and my own thinking about what the call to peacemaking means to the followers of Jesus, it would be John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* and your *Exclusion and Embrace*. Many times I found it very challenging; at other times I cheered; yet at other times I pondered long and hard, and will no doubt continue to do so. I therefore want my comments to be heard as coming from a deep well of gratitude.

Jim Reimer introduced your book as dealing with ethnic conflict, and you spoke to that briefly. I can easily understand that it has all kinds of connections to the particular social and political contexts of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. But as you yourself point out, it has implications for other situations,

such as how we relate to each other as men and women. I heartily concur. Indeed, your book constitutes a rather full-orbed theology of peace and peacemaking. I am personally deeply challenged by the way you allow grace, identity, truth, and justice to intersect with each other. Too often those are rather discrete agendas.

In this book you help us as Mennonites to think deeply about what love for enemies might mean. In our faith community that has become a rather well-worn concept, and because it is so much at the center of what we all believe we don't have to think about it a whole lot. The freshness with which you explore it around issues of exclusion and embrace are profound and challenging.

There are three things I want to point out briefly. First, your book contains an important discussion around what you call "solidarity in sin" (82). You speak of the way in which victims are often perceived to be innocent. And you suggest that sin needs to be the common ground for even entering the process of peacemaking. I worry, though, about making that an axiom. Are there not many situations in which people are profoundly injured where they have not been "at fault"– whether we speak of the abuse of children or the rape of women, for example? Does such "solidarity" not play into the culturally pervasive suspicion that they are in some sense at fault? I worry about such double victimization in relation to that otherwise challenging and profound insight.

Second, Mennonite churches, among many, are being shredded by the issue of homosexuality within the church. A very important term in this controversy is "inclusion." You make a big distinction between, on the one hand, "inclusion" which is non-discriminant and thus ultimately says nothing (nor does it reinforce identity) and, on the other, "embrace," which both recognizes the identity of the other and at the same time, however much reshaped, reaffirms the embracer's identity. Have you made any connections between your very important insight and that vexing discussion? I suspect that part of the resistance to homosexuality within many church communities – Mennonite or no t– emerges out of a sense that identity is being threatened, that boundaries are being eroded and removed.

Finally, in your last chapter, you speak of what you call the "violence" of God. In some respects it represents in your thinking the premise for the courage

to make peace. That is, ultimately it is God who is the guarantor of justice, a guarantee which emerges, to be sure, from the fathomless love of God, as you rightly point out. I think you are correct in this view. This notion is woven into the biblical narrative from beginning to end. Divine judgment is never eliminated from the biblical narrative, even as it serves ultimately to usher in a "nonviolent embrace without end" (300).

In the history of the church two rather different inferences have been drawn from the notion of a "violent" God. One is that God's patience runs out, and so does ours. This has served in the majority of church traditions to undergird a resort to violence when patience could no longer be sustained. You seem to reject that as not preserving the "fundamental difference between God and non-God," and state that "the biblical tradition insists that there are things which only God may do. One of the them is to use violence" (301). Here you are reflecting a historic Anabaptist/Mennonite conviction. You are correct in identifying that Mennonites and Anabaptists have historically believed that God was the guarantor of justice. One can perform one's non-resistant righteousness because one knows that God will ultimately vindicate the righteous. That is the Easter conviction. Anabaptists, or at least those Anabaptists who got it right, believed it was that which allowed them to be the church, and they therefore did not have to fix the world, or even see that they received justice, that is, to resort to the "sword." On your very last page, you speak very clearly: "Assured of God's justice and undergirded by God's presence, [followers of Jesus] are to break the cycle of violence by refusing to be caught in the automatism of revenge" (306). You go on to say: "[O]ften enough, 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 others' languages and share in each others' goods" (ibid.).

This is where I get confused. The very next sentence reads: "It may be that consistent nonretaliation and nonviolence will be impossible in the world of violence. Tyrants may need to be taken down from their thrones and madmen stopped from sowing desolation" (ibid.). You then mention Dietrich Bonhoeffer. "It may be that in a world suffused with violence the issue is not simply 'violence versus peace' but rather [here you quote Suchocki] what forms of violence could be tolerated to overcome a social 'peace' that coercively

maintained itself through the condoned violence of injustice." I return now to your own words: "But if one decides to put on soldier's gear instead of carrying one's cross, one should not seek legitimation in the religion that worships the crucified Messiah. For there, the blessing is given not to the violent but to the meek (Matthew 5:5)" (ibid.).

Could you clarify your view as to whether to call oneself a follower of Jesus means that one does not put on the soldier's garb but rather takes up the cross, or whether followers of Jesus occasionally have to take on the soldier's gear, but shouldn't call it "Christian" ? If so, does that not put us back into the mainstream of Christian "realism?" I cannot put this together with the gist of your argument regarding cross and the divine prerogative regarding "violence."

Volf: Thank you, Tom, for your kind words about my book. You put it right: the book was intended as a "full-orbed theology of peace and peacemaking." I agree with your first comment in terms of the solidarity of sin and its possible misuse. I think there is a possibility of misuse of which you do not speak. My own project is predicated on a relatively ambiguous relationship between victim and perpetrator. It's predicated on the impossibility of writing a very clear moral narrative that portrays one party in black and the other party in white. Now there *are* situations in which such ambiguity is rather minimal, and you have named some of them. But what I'm resisting in the book is making these into paradigmatic situations. When one looks at the world as a whole, these are more or less exceptional cases that claim our attention precisely on account of their exceptionality. Much more widespread is the low-intensity violence and strife that permeate society, that form part of how we as families, as siblings, as churches, as ethnic groups and nations, operate. And it is for this kind of world that I'm writing.

I don't address the question of homosexuality in my book except in the sense that whatever one's particular stance on the issue may be, what I'm hoping to offer is a kind of procedure and attitude that may guide the way in which we go about negotiating our differences – and unconditional will to embrace the other. The book is predicated on the fact that moral judgements will be made. Making judgements about what belongs in and what belong out – that is part and parcel of the salutary effort to preserve the integrity of

identities, and all groups whether they are pro-gay or anti-gay engage in making such judgments. But it is extraordinarily important *how* one does that – at least for the followers of the Crucified it ought to be.

You rightly point to the end of my book. Mennonites catch it; Reformed people tend to miss it. Some of my Reformed friends see me as a champion of nonviolence who is blind to the fact that the alternative to violence need not be non-violence but just war. Because they are fixated on just war, which I reject, they never quite get the thrust of the last pages of the book. Some Mennonites, on the other hand, seem to think that I am taking back at the end of the book what I have argued for throughout it. What I'm concerned about is the religious legitimation of violence. I do think there are situations in which violence must be deployed by Christians, but it is never religiously sanctioned or justified violence. It is the lesser of two evils – an evil that does not become good on account of its necessity. One could sketch scenarios where I very clearly wouldn't think that it would be morally responsible not to deploy violence. Nonetheless, repentance for violence would be in order even in those situations; in my view there is no *innocent* use of violence.

Conversation with the audience

Question 1: I haven't read your book, but now I'm inspired to do so. I'm trying to compare what you are saying with what I've heard from thinkers like Gustavo Gutiérrez. If you replace a theology of liberation with reconciliation, it seems to me that the danger might be that the new theology of reconciliation would become ideological. For Gutiérrez, the theology of liberation happened at a historical moment; it came onto the world stage and therefore will leave the world stage. What is more important is the preferential option for the poor, since after the liberation and revolution, there will be new victims. I am wondering if Gutiérrez would worry that after the reconciliation, there will be new victims, and so you will have to go back to liberation theology and not reconciliation theology.

Volf: For me, liberation is a moment in reconciliation. I think Gutiérrez is not the right person to target here, because for him liberation *is* perceived as a moment in something larger. If justice is part and parcel of the will to embrace, that means the struggle for justice is part and parcel of the struggle for the embrace. But I'm concerned only that as we design our theologies, from the

start we sketch out something larger than liberation. After liberation, each side can simply go their own way and replicate modern liberal democracies in various forms, where each side doesn't interfere with the other, but neither does one have a reconciled society or community. I'm not opposed to the pursuit of liberation. But if you don't insert the pursuit of liberation into the larger framework of reconciliation, then you will have exactly what you describe: the liberation of one set of victims will create new victims, who will seek liberation again, and so on. This can be observed very clearly in history. Reconciliation ends the spiral because it aims from the start at communion between victims and perpetrators. So, no: reconciliation does not "need" liberation, because the search for justice is integral to it. But liberation needs reconciliation.

Question 2: Coming from the Reformed tradition, I want to say that I thoroughly enjoyed and have highly recommended your book. And I did catch the last page. I wonder whether your indiscriminate will to embrace has universalist overtones – that hell is not the end, but we will all finally be in the embrace of God.

Volf: Notice, however, that the will to embrace is indiscriminate but the embrace itself is not claimed to be indiscriminate. That may have some bearing on your question too. To answer it directly: I'm praying for hell to be empty. It is very hard for me to imagine any human being consigned to hell. I'm deeply disturbed by it. On the other hand, I'm not completely certain. There are the classic Scriptural passages, of course, and the weight of tradition on this issue is immense.

Question 3: I would argue that reconciliation will come but only at the end of time. I'm thinking of the kind of political theology of Christian Ducoque in France, who talks about the permanent revolution, because all human societies are never final, never perfect. Every liberation will have its own victim, so after the reconciliation you need a new liberation. So there will be a final reconciliation, but only after the trumpet sounds.

Volf: But you may need repeated reconciliations, or rather a continued engagement in the process of reconciliation, within which again liberations are moments. I understand reconciliation here as very much a provisional thing, always on the way to the final reconciliation. Such reconciliations are a way to live in a world that is always and inescapably marked by struggle and non-

reconciliation. The problem, again, is that liberation creates victims by attending to victims, but has no way of dealing with the victims it creates.

Question 4: I'm wondering whether you see war as a natural tendency, or in Hobbesian terms, that man naturally exists in a state of war.

Volf: The term "natural" is a difficult one. Is "natural" a descriptive term or is it normative? Traditionally theologians have spoken of the inescapable sinfulness of human beings. That also qualifies their mutual relations. It is easy to see that this is the case – unless one does not know how to look. It is part and parcel even of our best relations. Call it "natural" or not, low-grade violences, deceptions, and injustices that are part of *all* of our relations. Can human beings be imagined without such a "state of war"? Absolutely. This is what we Christians hope for the world to come.

Question 5: Could you as a Christian theologian work without a sense of finality, without worrying about hell or positing the idea of human immortality? Could you do theology without that?

Volf: People do do theology without that. If I *had* to I could do it too, but why should I? I don't think the belief in life after death is dead, though there are serious challenges and we need to be honest about that. If that belief is not over, then it's helpful theologically to reflect on the interconnection between reconciliation in the present and the final reconciliation. I'm also very much concerned that the demise of the belief in life after death in the present culture seems to go hand in hand with the demise of any kind of utopian ideas. We are living in a world in which we have first cut ourselves off from any normative idea of the past, then more recently in postmodern culture – not just postmodern thought, but late industrial capitalist society, which as a form of social exchange embodies certain postmodern ideas – we have cut ourselves off from any normative future. I was recently at a prominent gathering with a number of Nobel prize winners who were talking about the future. Every single comment was about extrapolation from the trends today. Not a single comment was *normative*. It's scandalous, and absolutely unacceptable from a moral human standpoint, to think of the future only in terms of extrapolation. For me as a Christian theologian, a way to think about life after death is also a way to think about a normative future for our world and for our situation, and a

normative future that is promised to us by God. And so something like a *final* reconciliation is very much part of my hope for the future.[1]

Question 6: You stated that in the end there is a responsibility for Christians to use violence in the pursuit of justice, as the lesser of two evils, but not to invoke Christian justification for it. Does that lead you in the direction of a Niebuhrian realism about the world or in the direction of traditional just war thinking? Just war theory tends to move in the direction of a moral and theological sanction for war which the so-called "realist" tradition does not do. It simply says that this is the way the world works and one is thrown into that but does not invoke divine justification.

Volf: I'm very much afraid of just war theory and the coupling of that theory with religious legitimation. But I also think that one ought to be careful how one makes the claim "this is just the way the world is" and I suspect that it would be a matter of judgement and a matter of wisdom in a particular situation. But it is important not only not to invoke divine justification for violence but also to stress the inescapable guilt that is incurred in every deployment of violence. Not only may I not seek divine legitimation for violence; much more, I must repent before God for engaging in it.

Question 7: The problem with Niebuhr is then he also decouples any sense of moral limit from that use of violence. Once one enters into that world, one doesn't invoke the limits that just war theory provides, one says that when you go into war you descend into hell. That is just the way the world is. And the Christian is involved in that dynamic as well. Is it possible to invoke moral limits that are not then theologically justified?

Volf: Now, since I am calling for repentance after any deployment of violence, it is clear that I am operating with a normative moral vision. I don't see why I cannot stipulate that necessary violence should be only as much as is – well, *necessary*, and why I cannot stipulate that some forms of violence are unacceptable, and do so in a way that is not too far from some of the moves made by just war theory.

Notes

[1] See my article "The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition," *Modern Theology* 16 (2000): 91–113.

Conversations with Miroslav Volf

Part 2

Miroslav Volf: Most of the autobiographical information that is pertinent to the book *Exclusion and Embrace* is already in it. I came to it, in part, because I was faced with the war in the former Yugoslavia and was trying to make theological sense of it. Then I received an invitation from Germany to try to do so publicly. I tried to write my paper for that conference way in advance. Two weeks before I was going to go, the paper was still not going anywhere, though not for lack of trying. It wasn't working because I was trying to address the issue more or less in terms of the categories of liberation theology – in terms of oppression and liberation. I tried to put that grid onto the conflict and it clearly did not work. Or, as I've said in the book, it worked all too well. It would have been very readily embraced by both sides and they would have felt inspired to continue fighting by that kind of theological grid placed on their interchange, for each side felt itself oppressed by the other and each considered itself involved in the struggle for liberation. That struck me as deeply problematic, and so I searched for an alternative. At the last moment, I had this "revelation" connected to the story in the Gospel of Luke about the Prodigal Son, which ended up forming a central piece of the book. If one wants to think adequately in a theological way about conflicts, one has to do so out of the heart of the gospel. One has to think out of the heart of the nature of salvation, in particular out of the heart of the work of Christ. And there one finds not so much liberation as reconciliation. Or, if one has to use the term, it is liberation as restoration of community. That realization set me on the journey that resulted in the book.

The book as a whole ended up being not simply about ethnic conflict, which gave it its original impetus, but about a way of engaging social realities as an alternative to the categories that did and still do dominate the theological landscape – those of liberation theology. I thought that I could keep some of the best insights of that tradition but also incorporate them into something

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This conversation was held in a pastor's seminar led by A. James Reimer at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario, on March 17, 2000.

larger. That incorporation into something larger is important to me, so I'll say a few words about that.

The book has two significant and interrelated aspects to it. One aspect concerns the question of grace and reconciliation, the other the question of identity. It is bringing together these two questions that is central my project. Let me briefly address each one.

I'll start with the question of reconciliation and grace. Fundamental to the project is a certain dialectical relationship between grace and justice. One simple way to offer an alternative to liberation theology, which has built itself around the category of justice, would have been simply to replace it with that of unconditional hospitality, acceptance, love. That, I think, would have been a misguided way of proceeding. I wanted to make sure the concerns for justice for the past victims of violence are not outside the scope of what I'm pursuing because that would not be faithful to either the biblical or the theological traditions, nor to human realities. When one looks very carefully at the inner logic of what in biblical texts is called grace, and applies it to situations of conflict, then one sees immediately both an emphasis on justice and an emphasis on its transcendence.

One can see that also from the soteriological vocabulary of justification. Justification is not simply justice, but it is clearly related to justice. It is making an unjust into a just person (or counting an unjust person as just, depending on your theological persuasion). You can make the same point using the notion of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not simply an act that negates justice; rather, it affirms justice in the very act of transcending justice. If I said to you right now, "I forgive you," you would be upset with me and tell me, "There's nothing to forgive, because I've never seen you in my life, and therefore could not have done you any wrong." Clearly I would have blamed you by forgiving you, and it is this sense of blame made against the backdrop of affirmed justice which forgiveness needs in order to be forgiveness. By transcending justice, forgiveness affirms it, rather than leaving it behind. To see justice as a constitutive element of grace is essential to my project, but unfortunately *Exclusion and Embrace* is not always read in that light. Sometimes "embrace" is understood as "sheer gift" without any sense of justice being affirmed.

One way to emphasize this would be to underscore the difference between "embrace" and what we like to call "inclusion." Modern societies are characterized

by the consistent drive towards inclusion. Groups that have been historically marginalized are now being included. It is a movement of "taking in" and including larger and larger portions of people on the same kind of footing. I have nothing against that social development; it has been for the good. But I want to underscore the fact that embrace, or the logic of grace, does not operate in quite the same way. Inclusion makes no moral judgements. Inclusion does not discriminate – it does not say "yes" *and* "no." It simply opens the door and lets in. Everybody is included except those who don't include. Everybody is tolerated except those who are intolerant. The logic of grace is similar, yet radically different. It condemns; it makes moral evaluations and judgements – but it does so by enveloping a "no" into a larger and more dominant "yes." The logic of grace does not simply say "yes" but it also says "no."

You can find that also in the biblical traditions. If you look at the life of Jesus, of course there is a drive towards inclusion. There are outcasts being brought in, the gift of hospitality and so forth. But there is also a clear sense that Jesus not only heals bodies and includes people into the larger community, but also makes very discriminating kinds of judgements. Sins are forgiven, which is to say they are condemned and then people are released from them. You have this sense of affirmed justice that is then transcended in a host of stories. Matthew 18, the ungrateful servant. Zaccheus, Luke 19. Luke 15. That is one major part of my project – the logic of grace in which love is unconditioned but justice is at the same time affirmed. This is the background for the *fundamental thesis* of the book, found on page 29 towards the end of the first paragraph: "The will to give ourselves to others and to 'welcome' them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgement about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity."

It is important to note the distinction between the will to embrace and the embrace as such. I say here that the "will to embrace" is absolutely indiscriminate. The embrace itself is not, for in full embrace one has to attend to matters of truth and justice. Later, I go on to say that the way in which one attends to the questions of truth and justice is precisely also by pursuing the will to embrace. You have this dual emphasis on the indiscriminate nature of the will to embrace and the conditional nature of the full embrace itself. There too, you have this notion of grace on the one hand as a gift, and on the other hand entailing concern for justice. The structure of grace is seen in this distinction between the will to embrace and the embrace itself.

The other major theme concerns the question of identity. It seemed significant to me to connect the question of identity with the question of reconciliation. It is often around identities, discrete identities – of cultural groups or of individuals – that conflicts rage. It is very interesting that although the book is primarily about culturally situated conflicts, many people who have written to me have mentioned the impact of the book on their personal struggles. Just recently I was reading the book with a group of students, one of whom had just gotten married. He told me, "This applies so terribly well. I am going through these struggles of adjusting, getting used to being married. We're negotiating our differences and the book is proving to be helpful on that very personal level." I have nothing against this more personal appeal of the book. Cultural and gender differences are always embodied within particular selves and given shape by being situated in particular persons.

Just a small comment about the impact of the book on me. Sometimes you write books because you have an interesting idea. So you write the book, and, if you are successful, it *is* interesting, it has solved a small problem, and you are a bit proud of it – or embarrassed about this or that mistake you have made. But that's it. *Exclusion and Embrace* was not such a book; it had a retroactive impact on me. I often find myself in situations in which the book will speak to me and I hear myself saying "But you wrote.... You argued in your book...." It makes a claim on my own life and behaviour. I have to either suppress the voice or conscience speaking to me or readjust my behaviour in light of it.

But back to the question of identity. Central to the book is a notion of the kind of identity that is both bounded and not self-enclosed. You can find the most succinct account on pages 65ff., which is the same kind of thing you can find repeated in a different voice in the chapter on "Gender Identity." The idea is that on the one hand, I'm not simply myself. The other is always part and parcel of who I am, and that other is always in fact multiple others in shifting and changing situations. So I'm always open to others, and yet I'm not simply a flux. I have boundaries, and I monitor those boundaries, though the incursion of the other into my identity can happen even without my knowing it, so that I find myself retroactively asking the question, "But is this really part of who I am?" In an important sense I have a say in what comes in and what stays out as I encounter other people. The best example that I can give is

what happens when we go on a trip to a different country. Generally, we like to bring home some kind of artifact that reminds us of where we have been. I like to get a piece of art from a local artist, and hang it in my house. And so I have a symbol of the encounter that I've had with a particular culture in my own proper space, which is my home. Occasionally I look at the piece and say "What on earth was I thinking when I bought this?" and so it goes into the garage and a new piece comes in. The home is constantly being rearranged. It's definitely my home – it has boundaries. Not everything can happen in it, not all arrangements are permissible. There is a certain propriety to what is inside. But the door is constantly opening and closing – things are being brought in, brought out, rearranged. My home's identity is shifting and changing all the time, while at the same time its boundaries are being maintained. To me, it's very important to emphasize both of these things. Often, what gets to come in and what has to stay out is not a matter of right or wrong; sometimes it's how much novelty I can stand and how much tolerance I have for sameness.

Now, these two things – the question of identity, and the question of grace – have to be connected. We have conflicts partly because we don't want our boundaries or ourselves to be changed, and the reason why we aren't reconciled is partly because we don't want to make this journey of changing our identity to accommodate the person with whom we are in conflict. The example that I give of these two dynamics at work is the story of the Prodigal Son. The father, when he is left behind by the prodigal, is no longer the same father. He now has to think of himself as the father of the prodigal. That's a different sort of identity, and one way to deal with that identity is simply to disavow the son and then keep one's identity intact or at least not quite as damaged. In the story, however, being the father of the prodigal means "traveling" into the far country with the son, changing one's own identity, and then altering it again when the son returns. This will to embrace the prodigal is at the same time the father's will to shift his own identity and his own journey along with his son, because he won't simply let his son go. The other belongs to me, and I to that other.

Question 1: Since you began with an autobiographical issue, I'd like to raise one as well. I found it very early on in your presentation. We as a class observed that in your writing, you are aware of Serbian oppressive activities and the need of Muslims to forgive Serbian atrocities. What we didn't find

was stories of Croat abuse. We wondered if you didn't have stories or just what the absence of that material indicated.

Volf: I have very few stories in the book – maybe two or three, and I do speak of Croatian atrocities from the previous war in the chapter "Deception and Truth." I believe that in this particular war Croatians have been victims – there is not a single building in Serbia that has been destroyed (until now) but there are whole cities and villages that have been leveled in Croatia. Not a single person has been driven from their home in Serbia. I think one of the most important insights for me was how difficult as victims we Croatians were. By that I mean we did not at all behave in ways that would in any sense suggest anything close to innocence. Sure, atrocities have been committed. Especially when one adds to that atrocities that have been committed in previous wars, including the Second World War. The numbers are certainly contested – estimates range from 30,000 to 700,000 – but even if it is as low as 30,000, what does "only" mean? It's an incredible number. I've been very critical of the Croatian government that has contributed to the problem in significant ways; it could have handled it much better (though I don't think that any of its actions short of abdicating sovereignty would have prevented Serbian aggression). I don't think I want to try to exonerate and portray Croatia as innocent.

What you don't find in the book is what one often thinks one ought to find in books of this nature, namely, a sense of parity. I don't think there was parity, and it's a mistake to create parity just in order to create balances of blame. That's what the Communist government did. Whenever you clipped one party's wings, you had to clip the other's, in order to create a certain kind of moral and political balance – and thus control the situation. I don't think the situation ought to be controlled in this way, and I think that part of the reason why we had the war was because of this kind of control through establishing equality of blame. Everybody's wings were clipped, and thus everybody felt cheated, and nobody felt they could speak the truth as they saw it.

Let me say a little about the reception of the book in Croatia. My Croatian compatriots did not think that the book advocated our cause with sufficient force – they felt betrayed. Why? Because we were not portrayed in it as innocent, and what was demanded of us was not simply to stand up and defend but to negotiate, indeed to seek to "embrace" the enemy. The book is

not really about the war in the former Yugoslavia. I don't offer an analysis of the war – its causes and its progress. There are other people, historians and political philosophers, who are much more capable of doing this than I am. That's why you don't have historical narrative or political analysis in the book but a theological argument. Would my thesis have to be changed if I had to revise the apportioning of blame? It would have to change if I thought there was a parity of blame or if one side were purely innocent and the other wholly guilty. But both of these options are implausible. We need differentiated ways of reading situations and action within the context of the perceived and accepted non-innocence of all. One of the very crippling things that one finds in situations of conflict is a presumption that one can act only if a clear moral narrative can be construed about the nature of the conflict. You have to have good guys and bad guys in order to support the good guys against the bad guys. Then you can get involved. But if you don't find that kind of a clear moral narrative, then you withdraw and say, "Well, they're all barbarians. Let them bleed a little bit and when they get tired things will fall into place." That's precisely how the world reacted to the situation in Bosnia – no clear moral narrative could be construed, in which one side is innocent and the other is guilty. And therefore there was paralysis. But the next worst thing to doing nothing on account of moral ambiguity is to artificially create clarity in moral situations in order to justify action. We see that happening in many places. Democracies have to justify interventions with an appeal to the larger public, and so need to construe a moral narrative. To construe a moral narrative you need to engage in propaganda (such as happened during the war with Iraq). Politicians may have to do that, but I think theologians would betray their calling if they were to construct their political engagements and political theologies along the simple polarities or parities with which democratic politics is forced to operate.

Question 2: I've seen something similar happen in a church when it's responding to a marriage break-up. There are two ways this thing can go – either both parties are to be blamed equally and there is parity, or one is totally bad and the other a saint. You can create a script according to either of these two stories, and it's easier for people to work with.

Volf: We all know that it helps people resolve the sense of ambiguity, but it does not help that couple at all. They know that things are much more com-

plex than that, in most cases. There are exceptions. We often take very clear-cut cases and make them paradigms for all action. But clear-cut cases are exceptions. A person is walking on the street and is shot – there is clearly a blameworthy perpetrator and an utterly innocent victim. But most situations of conflict are not as clear and yet often, in the theological literature, you would almost assume that's how the world looks: when conflict takes place, it's like an innocent person walking down the street and getting shot.

Question 3: You talked about the perceived non-innocence of all, and in the action of grace you talked about condemnation and blame. In the construction of pastoral therapies, "blame" is a word we chaff at regularly. We don't want to blame others, in fact we help people not to practice blaming behaviors so that I might confess my own non-innocence. But it leaves the non-innocence of others to their own confession. How do we experience grace when this is ambiguous?

Volf: One of the things that we need to retrieve is a robust theology of grace. In America, the popular psychology practiced over the last decades says that you have to feel good about yourself. In order to feel good about yourself, you need to say nice things about yourself and other people need to say nice things about you. So feeling good about oneself demands that we abstain from blaming. The result was that – all the evil in the world notwithstanding – nobody is to blame. But that is no way to come to psychological health; it is to practice ideology, to bury one's head in the sand. Rather, we need to re-learn how to love others despite their transgression. That is grace. It's not whitewashing, but rather knowing that precisely with all the sins I have committed, I am loved. We need to re-learn this for our own good. And it is really not the case that blaming can be avoided. We can shy away from it, and one sees good reasons to shy away from certain forms of blame. But our relations are inescapably governed by a sense of what is right and what is not, and hence blaming wrong actions cannot be avoided. The question is how one does this. I embrace the theological tradition in which one's own sense of transgression and ability to repent is predicated not so much on an act of blaming but on the offer of grace. It's predicated on the giving of the space – grace – where one can admit blameworthiness and nonetheless feel accepted. That's why the gospel precedes the law. Gospel is not outside law, but precedes it by providing space in which confession is possible.

As a side remark, it's an extraordinary thing that repentance is more difficult than forgiveness. One would think that forgiveness is the more difficult thing to do; after all, victims are those who practice it. Yet, repeatedly in concrete situations, we see that this is not the case. You will repent only when your back is against the wall and you can't do anything but repent and then when you start repenting you're going to do it halfheartedly and offer zillions of excuses for the deed that you have committed. We see that in public life; we see it in personal lives. In contrast to that, you have extraordinary stories of victims who you think could never forgive. But they do. Why is that? Because forgiveness is an act of power. Repentance is an act of relinquishing power. That's why it is relatively easy to forgive but terribly difficult to repent. And that is why confession of sins must take place in the context of grace – the grace that God offers, but also the grace that victims offer to offenders.

One of the things people always ask me is whether I'm not asking too much of victims in my book. I have a twofold response. First, I'm not asking. The will to embrace ought *not* to be commanded. What I'm doing is portraying a social vision, and asking: Does that resonate with who you are? Forgiveness and the will to embrace must come from the depths of a person's own heart and willingness; and in that sense, even the will to embrace the other results from an act of prior grace. What I don't do sufficiently in the book is to show how fundamental to this social vision is a certain ontology, a certain understanding of who we are created, redeemed, and communally crafted to be. In a sense, the call to embrace is simply mirroring back to one's neighbor what has profoundly shaped one's own being in relationship to God. The will to embrace should not be seen as an extrinsic command but as something inserted into our very being by God's grace in the context of communities of grace. Before we are commanded, we are freed to want to obey the command.

Secondly, I say: Look at the New Testament texts. Arguably most of the people to whom the message is addressed could be construed as the underclass, the marginalized, those who are weak, of whom we ought not demand very much. But in the texts, they themselves have found liberation precisely in that action toward the other. There is also an insulting character to the question of whether I am not asking too much of victims – as though a victim is not morally capable of deeply human actions. As if only the perpetrator had the power to act morally. To forgive, to will to embrace – these are all acts of

power. They do not take away power. They presume power, and if acted upon, they enact a certain kind of very important power. Now, even when all this is said, one still has to become pastoral and say that there are situations in which it is extraordinarily difficult for a victim to act in that way. There are situations of shattered selves, of terrible violence and abuse. In those kinds of situations, persons ought to find time and space to retreat, to re-constitute themselves. But that is not a final stage. Retreat is a moment in something larger. It's a moment in the drama of grace rather than exclusion.

Question 4: You refer to God as "nothing but" pure love and perfect love. What you mean by the "nothing but"? I always struggle with limiting God and defining God from the bottom.

Volf: "Nothing but" may be too strong, depending on how it is understood. Rhetorically, it is staking out a position against the dialectical understanding of the relationship between God's love and God's justice, God's holiness, that makes these two quite distinct things, related only by simple opposition: Holiness is that which punishes and love is that which redeems. In contrast, I'm interested in emphasizing that love is an overarching category of which justice, holiness, etc., are particular instantiations. God is a just God, but justice is part and parcel of the divine love, rather than an independent addition to God's love. That's what is behind the "nothing but" language. The phrase would be quite wrong if it were taken as implying a "mushy" kind of love in God, unrelated to justice.

Question 5: I find it interesting that you refer to the world of God before the creation of the world.

Volf: Did I use that phrase? Of course, the only usage possible is a metaphorical one. We have to speak of God as other than and apart from creation; otherwise you would have to say that creation is integral to the very being of God. So the distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity, which is a different way to express what I was after, is an absolutely crucial one in the Christian tradition. One has to distinguish between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity – and within the economic Trinity, one has to distinguish between the Trinity engaged in struggle against the world of sin and the Trinity in relation to us in the consummation, where sin will be overcome. And I think it is important to distinguish between two forms of divine love in conjunction with

the two forms of the economic Trinity. The love of God in the world of sin is love that suffers, love that struggles for justice, love that says no to the world of sin. The divine love in the world to come is not such a struggling, suffering love; it is love as sheer delight, love which dances and celebrates. That latter love – which is actually the same love in a changed context – corresponds more to the love of the immanent Trinity.

Question 6: I was surprised by your last chapter. It suddenly became very apocalyptic, and it struck me that everything you had written seemed kind of dependent on sharing that apocalyptic view of the end. You made a statement: "Without such judgement, that is, the violent judgement of God, there can be no world of peace, of truth and of justice." You made another statement: "Every day of patience in the world of violence means more violence." This is very strong talk, so that if someone didn't buy into your view of last things, it's almost as if the rest of the book doesn't work, unless we know that in the end God is going to get vengeance for us. I think this is a very old Anabaptist idea too. I'm not sure I like it, though.

Volf: I know it's an old Anabaptist idea, and I think the old Anabaptists are more right than the new Anabaptists on this score. But I'm not sure that the whole argument is predicated on it. A new Anabaptist might well read the whole book without the last chapter and still be persuaded. In other words, I could construe human nature and the relationship between human beings and God *differently* than the end of the book suggests and still have the whole book work. But I would then have to have a much more optimistic view of human nature and I would have to affirm that the lure of divine love will in the end be successful. Why don't I affirm that? First, if you read what I wrote carefully, you'll see that I actually neither affirm nor deny this. I speak of the "deeply tragic *possibility*" (p. 297) of the final exclusion. Secondly, I don't affirm the success of divine love without qualification, because that affirmation doesn't strike me as right from the perspective of the biblical or theological traditions, on the one hand, and from the experiences of people, on the other.

I have a theory as to why a shift took place in Anabaptist theology. To me that shift in Anabaptist theology is a most significant one because Anabaptists are historically the most consistent of the peace churches. Here's my suggestion: They've been shaped by the cultural sensibilities of advanced industrial societies

and have become suburban. They talk about non-violence without ever *really* facing violence. They've inherited a venerable tradition of non-violence from their forebears and applied it to the low-grade violence of their living rooms, streets and so forth; but they are protected by the police and modern bureaucratized nation-states – forces which effectively control and subdue violence in the modern world. And so they don't need God to resist the evildoers.

Question 7: In your chapter on "Gender and Identity," you say what God is, and then you reappropriate that for yourself in terms of how we should relate to one another as males and females. You take an idea of the Trinity, you project onto God, and then you reappropriate that for us.

Volf: That's a serious charge! If the doctrine of the Trinity were simply a human construct, rather than an attempt to give an account of the divine being quite independent of who human beings are and what they think of God, then I would indeed be projecting. But I believe that the doctrine of the Trinity states what is in some sense true of God. Hence I don't believe that I am just projecting. But I am certainly giving my own, human account of who God is. Let me just add that the idea of the complex identity of the divine persons is not predicated on the distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity or on any specific account of the doctrine of the Trinity. If you take the Gospel of John simply at the narrative level – read it as literature – and analyze the identity of divine actors, I think you will come up with something like the notion of identity that I'm trying to advocate. You'll come up with a notion of identity that is not self-enclosed – the Spirit rests on Jesus and prods Jesus, Jesus does the work of the Father, the Father glorifies Jesus, etc. The actions are multidirectional and the actors interpenetrate one another. Thus you could arrive at the nature of identity as I am describing it very easily, without much of the Trinitarian speculation, but simply on the basis of a literary analysis of the Gospels. So let me suggest: Sure, I'm constructing, but that's what theology – and sermons – are always about; they are human speech about God. But am I *only* constructing? I hope not. I hope that I'm getting at something that is true of God, and that therefore in an analogous sense ought to be true of us.

Question 8: You talk about using the narrative in John. I would probably have an easier time with your point in that chapter if you did something like that rather than using the Trinity. You go to great lengths to explain that God is beyond gender, both/and, neither, or whatever, yet you use something like the Trinity, which even in your use of it is hopelessly rooted in gender identity and language. Jesus is the Son. At one point you say, "just as the Son is completely from the Father." Well, what happened to the Mother?

Volf: I hear what you are saying. The very Trinitarian language I use may be construed as going against the thesis of the chapter. I use masculine language about God very specifically in relation to the Trinity, and yet I say that gender distinctions do not apply to God. I think God is beyond gender. But we do have difficulty speaking adequately and appropriately about God and about God's triune nature. I'm not very happy, for theological reasons, about any of the substitutes that have been suggested – for instance, "Creator/Redeemer/Sustainer." I think these are false, theologically wrong, as designations of the individual Trinitarian persons. Because then you sever creative activity from the Spirit, and you sever creative activity from Christ. I think you make divisions where no divisions are possible. I could have referred to the "first," "second," and "third" persons; that would have gotten rid of the gender problem, but would have underscored a notion of hierarchy in God. On the whole, if properly understood – and the job of the theologian is to try to help this happen – I think the traditional designations for the persons of the Trinity are still by far the best.

Question 9: Can you comment on the pope's recent mass of repentance for sins committed in the name of the church?

Volf: On the whole I think it's a good thing. One can of course debate its character. One can question why particular things were not mentioned, but then the response of one bishop seems appropriate: There are so many sins that if we mentioned them all, we would go for days and days. Which ones do you include and which ones do you exclude? I think that the whole idea of purification of memory is very significant. And it's significant that the pope brought it up in the setting not of bilateral negotiations and dialogue, but of liturgy. That has its limitations, but also its strengths. Within the context of particular kinds of negotiations, apologies can be seen as moves in the political

game, and that is how they are sometimes pursued. Whereas once you place them in the liturgical setting, they gain a different kind of quality. Reflection still needs to go on about how best to apologize.

The whole question of memories has not been adequately addressed, and one of the areas in which I intend to work is the question of memories. I say some very controversial things in my book on this. And there are other, less controversial things that I've said between the lines that need to be developed. One is the question of how we go about pursuing historical memories. I don't think sufficient attention has been paid to the politics and the ethics of memory. There is definitely a politics of memory – the way history is written and what is done with that history. Regarding just about any conflict you can imagine, the retrieval of historical memories has played a crucial role in shaping and forming that conflict – for instance, how the memories of the Holocaust are playing themselves out in the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. We have come to think that remembering is good and forgetting is bad and therefore we just ought to remember – and so we haven't framed ways of remembering within the ethical context. Often an appeal is made – by such people as Elie Wiesel – to the Old Testament command to "remember." He picks up on the "remember" part – "remember that you were slaves" – but he stops there. The text goes on to say: "so that you may not treat an alien in the way in which you were treated in Egypt." In other words, the ethics of memory is situated within a whole way of life, and serves that way of life rather than being a kind of free-floating thing that any politician or person can snatch and use for their own particular purposes. I think similar arguments can be made from a New Testament perspective, and so I'd like to write a book that would critique the dominant mode of dealing with memories, also in theological circles.

Question 10: I understand that any one of my individual actions has an effect in God's moral universe. If I choose not to take revenge, that can be of ultimate significance, for myself in terms of my personal salvation. But even Jesus' death on the cross does not have any apparent, immediate effect on the political and social structures of Rome. Is your book about personal salvation or world peace? And is there a distinction between those? Will embrace have any immediate social impact?

Volf: I'm not averse to talking about personal salvation; to the contrary. I'm also interested in talking about personal integrity – living in "sync," to put it in

those terms, with who we are created to be, whether it's future or present. But I don't think that the "personal" stands in mere opposition to the "social." Such an opposition is a fruit of the modern construction of persons as self-enclosed individuals. But human beings like that don't exist. The "personal," for me, is always already "social." And the "social" is also always the "personal." So I'm interested in persons and I'm also interested in alternative communities, and in shaping cultures and institutions. World peace, however, is a very far-reaching goal. I dream about it occasionally, but then I give it very much over to the eschatological future. So, to me embrace is not a recipe for world peace, though if one were to follow the vision of the book, one might get there. But it's not very likely to happen. I'm suggesting that embrace is a way to live in the world of non-redemption – a way to live that creates sustainable communities in the midst of non-redemption.

Question 11: What about God's own actions and the centrality of the cross, when the cross has become not just scandal but offense beyond scandal to people? How is that cross able to sustain the center as God's own action, when it seems that between the cross and the final victory there is a radical rupture (in the Holocaust or the crusades, for instance)? They are an offense to those with whom we would like to be reconciled.

Volf: Yes, it's a question of owning history and what we do with the symbols of our tradition. One way to go is to give up on those symbols and seek alternative ones. I sense that these new symbols would be muddied very quickly and I'm not sure whether that would be the appropriate thing to do in the first place. I don't think the cross can be given up. Giving up the cross would mean giving up the Christian faith. The cross lies at its heart. The only way to retrieve the message of the cross and the power of the cross in social realities is to embody its message. In discussion with Muslims or Jews, one can certainly appeal to aspects of their traditions which are in "sync" with aspects of Christianity other than the cross. And certainly one would not want to force the cross down their throats. Nonetheless, for us as Christians, what remains is a retrieval and protection of the very heart of our faith rather than its abandonment or radical reinterpretation. Indeed I think it is radical reinterpretation that has gotten us into trouble: for instance, severing the cross from the narrative of divine action recorded in the Gospels and Epistles and using it simply as a cultural symbol. You see that happening all over the place with the symbols of

any religion. Just think of the war in the former Yugoslavia: Serbian fighters often lifted three fingers high in a gesture similar to the victory sign. The reason they used this sign is that it suggested the way the Orthodox cross themselves – the three outstretched fingers representing the Trinity and the two bent fingers the two natures of Christ. Thus the three-finger sign meant that you were Orthodox. But it had absolutely nothing to do with what the Orthodox faith really means. Here, Orthodoxy has been reduced to a cultural symbol, to a marker for a particular kind of difference. Since that happens all the time with religious symbols, if one is not to give up on religion altogether, the only way to guard against such corruption is not to allow the needs of the moment to keep reconfiguring what we believe, but rather to draw the contents of our beliefs and symbols from their sources in the biblical traditions.

Question 12: I wouldn't mind if you would just speculate a bit on where you would go on the question of "Yes, but what do we do in the meantime?" For example, on page 225: "True justice will always be on the way to embrace." There's an eschatological thing. In relation to your time question – how far in the future is that goal. It does seem to me that at some points, you do in fact suggest a Niebuhrian option. You don't actually spell it out but do say "in the meantime, how does one restrain evil and preserve the good, in situations of violence?" You never quite go there, but on page 224 you say: "Must the perpetrator be restrained? By all means! Is punishment for the violation necessary? Probably. But all these indispensable actions against injustice must be situated within the framework of the will to embrace the unjust." I'm just wondering what you mean? What techniques, what mechanism? Where does violence play, in the Niebuhrian sense, a temporary role in the preserving of good and the restraining of violence in the minimalist sense of this way to embrace?

Volf: In John Howard Yoder, if I understand him rightly, there's this interesting and strange notion that the powers are good but that they have been corrupted. But all of the discussion is then about the corruption of the powers and none of it is about any potential goodness in them. Why is that the case? Then this aspect of the positive development of institutions is lacking. The way I come at it is to make relatively strong statements to the effect that the struggle for justice is part and parcel of the will to embrace. That is connected with the idea that grace is not outside of justice, but affirms justice in the act of

transcending it. So the question becomes one of the acceptable *forms* of struggle for justice. At the very end of the last chapter, which some of you find problematic, I allow for the possibility of the use of violence. I argue, however, that violence ought never be religiously sanctioned. It is the religious sanction of violence that I'm profoundly against. But there is the Bonhoefferian solution – you sometimes find yourself in situations of two evils and therefore you have to act in a particular way although you know that by acting you are also transgressing and doing wrong. You're doing both the right and the wrong at the same time.

Question 13: How does your Pentecostal background drive your project?

Volf: I grew up in a Pentecostalism that is rather different from TV-evangelism Pentecostalism on this continent. I've come to differentiate between what I call "machine-gun Pentecostalism," which relates the Spirit primarily to mission and the overcoming of the powers of darkness, and "holiness Pentecostalism," which relates the Spirit primarily to a sanctified way of life. The Pentecostal tradition from which I come was very much rooted in the holiness tradition. For instance, there is little place in Pentecostalism, as I observe it in this country, for being quiet before God, for waiting upon God, for yielding to God. That was absolutely fundamental to the Pentecostalism in which I grew up. In addition to being in the holiness tradition, the Pentecostalism in which I grew up was a peace church. The Pentecostalism that one observes now in North America is an astonishingly militarized ecclesial tradition – which was not the case with Pentecostalism originally in this country. I grew up in a Pentecostalism where one of the main apologetic challenges for us, under the Communist regime in the former Yugoslavia, was: "What would happen in the case of war? You can't fight? How will you prove your patriotism? How can you simply let people be slaughtered by the enemy?" True, for us pacifism was not as much of a carefully nurtured distinguishing mark, as it is in Anabaptist traditions, but nonetheless it was one the pillars of our identity. That is also what informs *Exclusion and Embrace*. We were about following Christ, emulating the life of Christ, with an emphasis on grace and reconciliation. Loving one's enemies was the milk on which we were raised. The Communists were there to crush us, but we were not supposed to respond in kind. You are supposed to love those who persecute you.

In addition to my Pentecostal parents, an important person in my life was my nanny, who took care of me from my birth to the time I was five years old. She was an absolute saint – at least in my memory – a wonderful woman, who was 56 when she came to us. She was Serbian, and because her husband was killed in the war, she lived with our family. She had lost everything in the war, and so she lived with us and helped raise us. Interestingly, she kept saying that she was ready to go and be with the Lord every day, but ended up living to 93! She was filled with serenity and joy – extraordinary for any person, let alone one who had suffered so much. I don't recall her ever scolding me. The way she disciplined me was by being sad if I did something bad. Well, that can be guilt-inducing, but I didn't feel it that way. I loved this wonderfully saintly woman, and I knew that when I did something wrong it pained her. She figures prominently in my picture of God in *Exclusion and Embrace*, even if she is not mentioned. Superimposed upon the picture of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son is an image of my nanny. That's how I view God. God somehow has her shape. Now, I know that is a bit simplistic. She could be the good nanny because my parents took over some of the harsher aspects of my discipline; she may have been a saint, but I was not.

Question 14: Something that you do that was very refreshing for someone who has grown up with John Howard Yoder and Anabaptist history and theology is that you talk very much about the spiritual Christ. We often talk about the exemplary Christ. Maybe that is also a difference between you and Yoder. I found it really refreshing because the Anabaptists have a very hard road towards salvation and moral behavior, whereas this other view focuses on love. An active love on the part of Christ, in that he would have died for our sins. That sort of notion, at least among the Mennonites that I've grown up with, hasn't been talked about as much as Christ as a model of behavior.

Volf: It's interesting that you pick up on that, because one of the criticisms I occasionally receive from, say, representatives of the Reformed tradition is that my book is moralizing to no end. And you point out a completely different side, one that underpins the whole vision as you rightly point out. The book is predicated on and motivated by the notion that the love of Christ, who died for the ungodly, has been poured into our hearts, indeed that by the Spirit Christ himself is present in our lives. Romans 5:1-10 and Galatians 2:20 are central texts for me here.

Question 15: How do you work with the tension between the church living as the faithful church in dialogue and tension with a society that is not, at least explicitly, Spirit-empowered?

Volf: Sometimes I'm asked the question, "Well, is embrace for non-Christians?" My response is, "You know what I'm amazed at – how many non-Christians actually do it, and how often we as the church radically fail." Now, especially in the light of what I just said, that observation then needs a theological backing. Basically it is this: I don't see the Spirit of Christ as limited to the church. I see the Spirit of Christ as much broader than that. Christ is not simply the giver of the Spirit, so that the Spirit only comes from him, but Christ is also the bearer of the Spirit, so that Christ himself is constituted by the Spirit. It is as the bearer of the Spirit that he is the giver of the Spirit, which is to say that the Spirit is given precisely to create Christ-like behaviour. This happens in some significant measure even where Christ is not explicitly recognized. There is a notion of common grace here, grace that is not substantially different than the grace that calls and empowers us to live in Christ-like ways.

So I don't operate with a sharp distinction between the church and the world. That's partly also the reason why I don't place a great emphasis on the church as alternative community. Not that I find the notion of the church unimportant. To the contrary. But I'm also very much aware of the fragility of the church, the failure of the church. Having been a preacher's kid for a while, and looking at myself in the mirror every morning, I know the stuff of which the church and its people are made. So I can't quite see in the church the solution to all the world's problems, as some of my good friends do. I'm aware of how much the church is dependent on grace, how much it is *not* an alternative society, and yet also how much it is at the same time a place where this vision of embrace is being celebrated and nurtured in profound ways. I've come to see that just as there can be no church without reference to the reign of God – because the reign of God is much larger than the church and the church serves something larger than itself – so also the vision of God's reign is dependent on communities of faith to nurture and sustain it.

Question 16: The idea of the Spirit nudging people from all over the world, not just Christians – how does that come out in the afterlife? Are you a universalist?

Volf: Well, I say I am not, but God may be. I'm desperately hoping for hell to be empty. But I'm not a principled universalist, in the sense of taking universalism as a given. The last chapter could not be written if that were the case. But on the other hand, I'm very clear that I do hope for universal non-refusal of the divine offer of grace. Anything less than that kind of hope would not be adequate to the view of how God has revealed Godself to be in the cross of Christ.