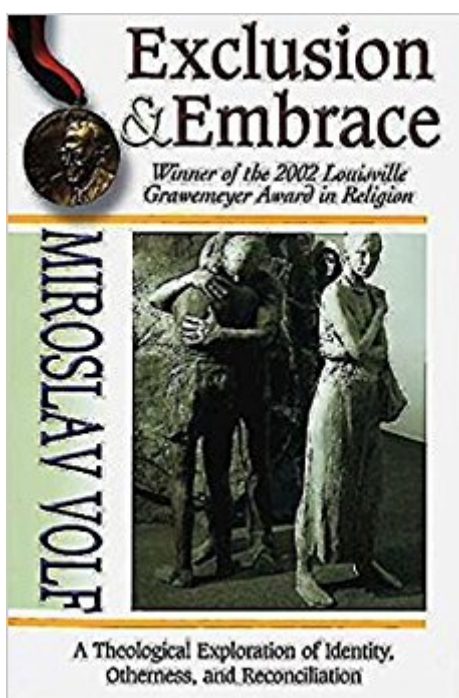


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Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration Of Identity, Otherness, And Reconciliation



Synopsis

Life at the end of the twentieth century presents us with a disturbing reality. Otherness, the simple fact of being different in some way, has come to be defined as in and of itself evil. Miroslav Volf contends that if the healing word of the gospel is to be heard today, Christian theology must find ways of speaking that address the hatred of the other. Reaching back to the New Testament metaphor of salvation as reconciliation, Volf proposes the idea of embrace as a theological response to the problem of exclusion. Increasingly we see that exclusion has become the primary sin, skewing our perceptions of reality and causing us to react out of fear and anger to all those who are not within our (ever-narrowing) circle. In light of this, Christians must learn that salvation comes, not only as we are reconciled to God, and not only as we "learn to live with one another," but as we take the dangerous and costly step of opening ourselves to the other, of enfolding him or her in the same embrace with which we have been enfolded by God. Is there any hope of embracing our enemies? Of opening the door to reconciliation? Miroslav Volf, a Yale University theologian, has won the 2002 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion for his book, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon, 1996). Volf argues that "exclusion" of people who are alien or different is among the most intractable problems in the world today. He writes, "It may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference. The issue is urgent. The ghettos and battlefields throughout the world—in the living rooms, in inner cities, or on the mountain ranges—testify indisputably to its importance." A Croatian by birth, Volf takes as a starting point for his analysis the recent civil war and "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia, but he readily finds other examples of cultural, ethnic, and racial conflict to illustrate his points. And, since September 11, one can scarcely help but plug the new world players into his incisive descriptions of the dynamics of interethnic and international strife. Exclusion happens, Volf argues, wherever impenetrable barriers are set up that prevent a creative encounter with the other. It is easy to assume that "exclusion" is the problem or practice of "barbarians" who live "over there," but Volf persuades us that exclusion is all too often our practice "here" as well. Modern western societies, including American society, typically recite their histories as "narratives of inclusion," and Volf celebrates the truth in these narratives. But he points out that these narratives conveniently omit certain groups who "disturb the integrity of their 'happy ending,'" plots. Therefore such narratives of inclusion invite "long and gruesome" counter-narratives of exclusion—the brutal histories of slavery and of the decimation of

Native American populations come readily to mind, but more current examples could also be found. Most proposed solutions to the problem of exclusion have focused on social arrangements. What kind of society ought we to create in order to accommodate individual or communal difference? Volf focuses, rather, on “what kind of selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with others.” In addressing the topic, Volf stresses the social implications of divine self-giving. The Christian scriptures attest that God does not abandon the godless to their evil, but gives of Godself to bring them into communion. We are called to do likewise “whoever our enemies and whoever we may be.” The divine mandate to embrace as God has embraced is summarized in Paul’s injunction to the Romans: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you” (Romans 15:7). Susan R. Garrett, Coordinator of the Religion Award, said that the Grawemeyer selection committee praised Volf’s book on many counts. These included its profound interpretation of certain pivotal passages of Scripture and its brilliant engagement with contemporary theology, philosophy, critical theory, and feminist theory. “Volf’s focus is not on social strategies or programs but, rather, on showing us new ways to understand ourselves and our relation to our enemies. He helps us to imagine new possibilities for living against violence, injustice, and deception.” Garrett added that, although addressed primarily to Christians, Volf’s theological statement opens itself to religious pluralism by upholding the importance of different religious and cultural traditions for the formation of personal and group identity. The call to “embrace the other” is never a call to remake the other into one’s own image. Volf, who had just delivered a lecture on the topic of Exclusion and Embrace at a prayer breakfast for the United Nations when the first hijacked plane hit the World Trade Center, will present a lecture and receive his award in Louisville during the first week of April, 2002. The annual Religion Award, which includes a cash prize of \$200,000, is given jointly by Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and the University of Louisville to the authors or originators of creative works that contribute significantly to an understanding of “the relationship between human beings and the divine, and ways in which this relationship may inspire or empower human beings to attain wholeness, integrity, or meaning, either individually or in community.” The Grawemeyer awards, given also by the University of Louisville in the fields of musical composition, education, psychology, and world order, honor the virtue of accessibility: works chosen for the awards must be comprehensible to thinking persons who are not specialists in the various fields.

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Customer Reviews

Life at the end of the twentieth century presents us with a disturbing reality. Otherness, the simple fact of being different in some way, has come to be defined as in and of itself evil. Miroslav Volf contends that if the healing word of the gospel is to be heard today, Christian theology must find ways of speaking that address the hatred of the other. Reaching back to the New Testament metaphor of salvation as reconciliation, Volf proposes the idea of embrace as a theological response to the problem of exclusion. Increasingly we see that exclusion has become the primary sin, skewing our perceptions of reality and causing us to react out of fear and anger to all those who are not within our (ever-narrowing) circle. In light of this, Christians must learn that salvation comes, not only as we are reconciled to God, and not only as we "learn to live with one another", but as we take the dangerous and costly step of opening ourselves to the other, of enfolding him or her in the same embrace with which we have been enfolded by God.

Miroslav Volf, is Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale University Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut. A native Croatian, he writes out of his own firsthand experience of teaching in Croatia during the war in former Yugoslavia. Professor Volf won the 2002 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion for his book, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon, 1996).

Miroslav Volf has done a tremendous service by exposing his own wounds as means for theological panacea. Historically, the human race has mastered the art of absolute exclusion of

“the other,” “the subhuman,” or “the nonbeing.” Unrestricted exclusion, or abandonment, is what morphs suffering into agony (26). Why? Because all humans are inescapably and intrinsically intertwined: we are, at the same time, both in distance and in belonging to another (ch. 1). To completely exclude is to mar oneself. So, this dual aspect calls on the dual work of exclusion and embrace. Only by limited exclusion can there be meaningful distinction between persons, necessary for self-identification. And only by daring embrace can there be impassioned communion between persons, necessary for healing. Invite the excluded, wait, embrace with closed arms, and let go. This is the drama of embrace. This is the drama of the crucified Jesus.[...]

This is not a book for the casual reader. It is difficult in two ways. First, it is academic, highly researched with many references to theologians who are not familiar to most. Volf also writes from personal experience. Second, the “embrace” of the “other” of the “enemy” is a very difficult concept. A group at our church is reading this. It has sparked intense discussion on how difficult it is to authentically follow Christ in an angry world. The Kindle version is difficult to read as there are many typos that leave the reader questioning meaning. Almost every page has misplaced punctuation, misspellings and typos that distract from the intensity of the discussion. This is an important work, get the printed edition.

Easily one of the most important books I’ve read. I am with those who consider Volf to be among the preeminent theological thinkers of our time. My first foray into his work was the collection of essays in “Against the Tide,” and I recommend that anyone new to Volf do the same. The metaphor of exclusion and embrace takes on particular poignancy when Volf’s personal story of growing up in the midst of the violence and conflict between Serbs and Croats is kept in mind. It puts the rubber solidly onto the road. Like other scholarly treatises in the discipline of theology, “Exclusion and Embrace” is no easy read. Even if the reader is equipped for the level of the language, the positions presented demand respect and careful consideration. One criticism, though: the Kindle edition of the book is riddled with typographical errors, some making sentences very difficult to decipher. On my 10" device, I had at least one error on every “page.” /Kindle, please fix this and put out an update!

Mr. Volf makes it clear that Jesus comes to us so we may be embraced by God and others, and that often, if not always, when we disobey his calling to us we exclude God and others. Forgiveness and reconciliation which Jesus came for are an embrace by the Father to the prodigal. Sin and

violence which Jesus denounces are forms of exclusion. Peace is impossible without forgiveness. Forgiveness is impossible without peace. Mr. Volf explores some ways to think and act to get out of the cycle of exclusion into the inclusive circle of embrace. An especially good read for those still affected and grieved by our last few decades of war, violence, and genocides.

Highly recommended for people who visualize and verbalize relationships (distance, closeness, overlap, concentricity, boundaries) spatially. And for Christians who battle with trauma. Well expounded. Articulates the intricacies of reconciliation and forgiveness. It was a book that moved me to greater freedom and wholeness where other literature on the topics had really suffocated me and squashed the complex questions that arise...

This is an academic book - Volf is pedantic and verbose. Some in our study group had little, if any, post-graduate education and they struggled. If you are an academic, or you are patient enough to wade through the material, you will be greatly rewarded. I think an erudite person could distill the information and present it to a more pedestrian crowd with tremendous results. There are crucial concepts that are deeply developed; like the fundamental reality that we all accept the role of victim in some sense and then act as a victimizer given an opportunity for retribution. Another, is the concept that true justice is impossible without forgiveness first. There is much to ponder and confess in this important book.

Mr. Volf does an amazing job carrying the weight of his personal struggle through the theological and often times heady explorations of self and definition, exclusionary issues and language and how that affects us all. I saw this book listed while reading N.T. Wright's *Evil and the Justice of God* along with Desmond Tutu's *No Future without Forgiveness*. I'd recommend all three to get a real scope of reconciliation and how it works in a world particularly lived by people who have been victimized and faced the issues they talk about.

This is really a review of the author's writing, not just the contents of the book (which is excellent). Dr. Volf writes wonderfully clearly and logically, always anticipating the questions his argument raises at a comfortably critical level (i.e. not 10 pages arguing a minute point from all directions, but taking the critical reception of his arguments seriously). He's a fair-minded thinker; this book is not a rant. A true theologian, Volf is serious about the nature of his assumptions, about his tradition, and about the trajectory of Christian thought. Through whatever book Volf writes this thread of decency

& intellectual rigor is apparent, and is combined with a refreshing ability to turn a phrase, make a point, and be passionate about one's subject. I can't recommend the author enough.

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