

**A Critical Review of**  
*'Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of  
Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation'*  
by Miroslav Volf

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## **Introduction 200**

In the preface of *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf recounts the difficulty in responding to a razor-sharp question springing from the lips of the eminent theologian Jürgen Moltmann after a lecture on the Christian call to embrace the enemy: “But can you embrace a *četnik* (the infamous Serbian militants who wreaked havoc on Volf’s native Croatia)?”<sup>1</sup>

The conversely daunting task of this review is to critically engage with what has been (not for lack of reasons) hailed as “one of the most profound theological treatises of our time”.<sup>2</sup> Significantly negative points of criticism are scarce even among academic reviews. Nonetheless, we will survey Volf’s work drawing attention to themes which have been fruitfully developed as well as carefully probed in the literature, particularly a) ‘forgetting’ b) ecclesiology, and c) violence/pacifism.

## **Summary**

### **‘The Cross, the Self and the Other’**

The introduction places before us the initial and central problem of personal identity and alien otherness seen in (for example) modern ‘tribalism’.<sup>3</sup> Particularly drawing upon Moltmann’s theme of divine ‘self-donation’, Volf previews his argument in the coming chapters to come, and providing an exemplary outline of his theological and biblical method.<sup>4</sup>

### **‘Distance and Belonging’**

Chapter 1 outlines the call of God’s people to ‘depart’ from culture ‘without leaving’ by drawing upon Abraham’s departure from Ur and appropriating it into a New Testament context.<sup>5</sup> Monotheism, equality and the mission of blessing all nations together underwrite an ethic which both creates space for the other and judges evil in every culture.<sup>6</sup>

### **‘Exclusion’**

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 9; hereafter ‘Volf, *E&E*’.

<sup>2</sup> Manfred T. Brauch, ‘Choosing Exclusion or Embrace: An Abrahamic Theological Perspective’ *Religion and Security: The New Nexus in International Relations*, Ed. Robert A Sciple and Dennis R. Hoover (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 23, 29-31.

<sup>5</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 38-44.

<sup>6</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 45-52.

In Chapter 2, having noted the failure of ‘inclusion’ to respond to evil, Volf carefully distinguishes ‘differentiation’ (unavoidable) from ‘exclusion’ (inherently violent), and then argues that ‘judgments’ are not always acts of ‘exclusion’.<sup>7</sup> A ‘de-centered’ self can better avoid all kinds of acts of ‘exclusion’, as insightfully drawn out of the story of Cain’s assault.<sup>8</sup>

### **‘Embrace’**

The complementary chapter opens by challenging easy, category distinctions between ‘oppressor’ and ‘liberator’ and raises the need for “non-final” reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> Even the oppressed are called to repentance and a ‘certain kind of forgetting’.<sup>10</sup> The ‘Drama of Embrace’ is modelled on self-giving non-contractual love, seen in the New Covenant and in Volf’s cogent survey of the story of the Prodigal Son.<sup>11</sup>

### **‘Gender Identity’**

In chapter 4, after mapping the language of gender relations against the triune God, Volf addresses questions regarding the formation of gender identity.<sup>12</sup> Gender identity is rooted in the sexed body, yet socially-constructed according to the ‘complete openness’ of triune inter-relations.<sup>13</sup>

### **‘Oppression and Justice’**

Chapter 5 first works through modern, postmodern and tradition-synthesising attempts at pursuing justice.<sup>14</sup> Christians stand in both their Scriptural tradition and the world, by ‘enlarged thinking’ and a ‘double vision’ that seeks to take the ‘other’ fully into account, as seen in the diversity-affirming and Babel-overcoming Pentecost events.<sup>15</sup>

### **‘Deception and Truth’**

Chapter 6 observes that “oppression needs deceit as a prop”, revealing the necessity of a persistent, yet humble and patient struggle against lies.<sup>16</sup> ‘Double vision’, the ‘will to

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<sup>7</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 58-68.

<sup>8</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 69-79, 92-8.

<sup>9</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 101-10.

<sup>10</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 113-9, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 140-5, 147-65.

<sup>12</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 169-72.

<sup>13</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 174-82.

<sup>14</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 197-207.

<sup>15</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 207-31; particularly striking is the Christological grounding of ‘double vision’ by reference to Gundry-Volf’s treatment of the ‘mission-enlarging’ encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

<sup>16</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 236-40.

truth' and the 'will to embrace' are epistemological prerequisites to a genuine truth-knowing where Truth (Jesus) stands confidently and humbly against Power (Pilate).<sup>17</sup>

### **'Violence and Peace'**

The final chapter wrestles with the failure of 'civilized' reason and nonviolence to allay violence.<sup>18</sup> He defends Revelation's "carnivorous lamb" against charges of inherent violence inspiration, and boldly states that desires for a non-violent, non-justice-bringing God wreek of a comfortable "suburban ideology".<sup>19</sup> God alone separates darkness from light, leaving Christians free from "the automatism of revenge".<sup>20</sup>

### **Interaction and Criticism**

*Exclusion and Embrace* is breathtaking if only for its engagement in such a wide range of fields: theological-biblical, ecumenical, cultural, socio-political, psychological, and philosophical. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that its ideas and compelling themes have met with rich interaction.

For example, *The Conrad Grebel Review* dedicated an entire issue to Volf, and discussion from a Mennonite/Anabaptist angle, including a review by Gerald Shenk.<sup>21</sup> Volf's ideas about the 'will to embrace' and forgiveness contribute to Nigel Biggar's discussion in *Forgiveness and Truth*, where he picks up Volf's language in distinguishing between 'forgivingness' (will to embrace) and 'forgiveness' (the embrace).<sup>22</sup> Volf's ideas have also featured in works focusing on issues of restorative justice, such as *Evil and the Justice of God*, by N.T. Wright.<sup>23</sup> Manfred T. Brauch applies the language and logic of *Exclusion and Embrace* in his contribution to *Religion and Security*, where he considers the question of why the Abrahamic religions have at times chosen 'exclusion' over 'embrace'.<sup>24</sup> Finally,

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<sup>17</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 250-69.

<sup>18</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 278-82.

<sup>19</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 295-6.

<sup>20</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 301-6.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald Shenk, 'Review: Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*', *The Conrad Grebel Review* 18(3): (2000), 67-70.

<sup>22</sup> Nigel Biggar, 'Forgiveness in the Twentieth Century: A Review of the Literature, 1901-2001' *Forgiveness and Truth: Explorations in Contemporary Theology*, Ed. Alistair McFadyen and Marcel Sarot (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 203, 205.

<sup>23</sup> N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 132-3.

<sup>24</sup> Brauch, 'Choosing Exclusion or Embrace', 61-80.

Volf's ideas contributed to the argument of John B. Hatch in an article in the non-theological journal *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, pursuing an argument against 'cheap reconciliation'.<sup>25</sup>

Again, *Exclusion and Embrace* has been such a well-respected work, negative points of criticism were few and far-between. Before noting the three main areas of critique, we note in passing three minor examples: Brian Walsh gives brief, minor and vaguely critical remarks; Ellen T. Charry gives an isolated caution against Pelagianism; and Gregory Baum charges Volf with not applying the language of 'noninnocence of victims' to Croats.<sup>26</sup>

The first area of criticism targets Volf's language of 'forgetting' or 'non-remembering'.<sup>27</sup> In a chapter from *God and the Victim*, L. Gregory Jones suggests that the emphasis should be more on memories being "healed rather than erased or forgotten".<sup>28</sup> Jones argues that 'healing' language better serves the need for "continuity in the stories of our lives" and better fits the biblical imagery, positing that erasing memory would seem more akin "to 'uncrucifying' Christ".<sup>29</sup> In his *Christianity Today* review, he adds the rhetorical suggestion that God surely 'remembers' all human history "precisely in the wounds of the Lamb ...albeit wounds that are healing".<sup>30</sup>

Jones also touches on a second area of criticism: a lack of a clear ecclesiology, particularly the need to articulate how 'basic Christian commitments' are formed in the tension between incoherent tradition(s) and hybrid cultures.<sup>31</sup> William T. Cavanaugh echoes this concern in his *Modern Theology* review, warning that Volf's 'double vision' can easily morph into "postmodern *bricolage*" and be co-opted by liberal inclusivism.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John B. Hatch, 'Reconciliation: Building A Bridge From Complicity To Coherence In The Rhetoric Of Race Relations' *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6(4): (2003), 748-50.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Walsh, 'Book Review: Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation' *Christian Scholar's Review* 28(1): (1998), 217; and Ellen T. Charry, 'Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation' *Theology Today* 56(2): (1999), 249; the warning against Pelagianism is isolated and seems not to take into account Volf's point (though not explicit) that *only God* can forgive (i.e. 124-5); and Gregory Baum, 'Liberating Victims And Victimizers' *The Christian Century* 115(4): (1998), 120.

<sup>27</sup> As described in Volf, *E&E*, 135.

<sup>28</sup> L. Gregory Jones, 'Behold, I Make All Things New' *God and the Victim: Theological Reflections on Evil, Victimization, Justice, and Forgiveness*, Ed. Lisa Barnes Lampman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 177.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 177-8.

<sup>30</sup> L Gregory Jones, 'Finding The Will To Embrace The Enemy' *Christianity Today* 41(5): (1997), 31.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 31; referring to language used in Volf, *E&E*, 211.

<sup>32</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, 'Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation' *Modern Theology* 15(1): (Blackwell, 1999), 98.

Cavanaugh also draws attention to a third area of criticism: ambiguity on the question of if “*all* human use of violence” is precluded in Volf’s understanding.<sup>33</sup> Gorman joins the discussion in *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, duplicating Volf’s sentiments.<sup>34</sup> Charry (other than giving the Pelagianism warning), however, notes the lack of a discussion of the role of anger.<sup>35</sup>

Of the numerous strengths which far outweigh the relatively sparse criticisms levelled against Volf’s book, we will quickly note three. First, the clarity with which ‘judgment’ was distinguished from ‘exclusion’ was superb.<sup>36</sup> Judgment between “evil exclusion” and “good differentiation” is not itself “an act of exclusion.”

Second, the blend of sensitivity and honesty with which ‘contrived innocence’ was dealt with was both exemplary and courageous.<sup>37</sup> Whether we like it or not, even ‘victims’ must repent of their sinful hatred if reconciliation is to be full.<sup>38</sup>

Thirdly, the relation of gender to the Trinity, and especially seeing the content of gender identity as rooted in the sexed body yet socially negotiated is brilliantly relevant.<sup>39</sup> The guiding of this identity negotiation by Triune identity and relationship is pure genius, ensuring that the identity of all ‘selves’ are necessarily formed by openness to the presence of ‘others’.<sup>40</sup>

The three criticisms noted above, however are also important. First, the concerns about over-‘forgetting’ need to be taken seriously. Indeed, Volf wants to take seriously the Isaianic vision of divine ‘nonremembering’ taken up by St John in Revelation and explore the implications for human ‘forgetting’ – but Jones is right to take equally seriously the presence of the wounds of history even in the risen Lamb.<sup>41</sup>

Second, the question of ecclesiology is worth asking. If both postmodern indifference and sluggish inclusivism are to be avoided, Volf needs to develop his ‘double

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 98; referring to entire discussion of divine and human violence in Volf, *E&E*, 301-6.

<sup>34</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 159-60.

<sup>35</sup> Ellen T. Charry, ‘Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation’ *Theology Today* 56(2): (1999), 249.

<sup>36</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 64-8.

<sup>37</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 79-85.

<sup>38</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 111-9.

<sup>39</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 169-74.

<sup>40</sup> Volf, *E&E*, 174-89.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, ‘Behold, I Make All Things New’ *God and the Victim*, 177-8; Jones takes Volf’s statement about things not being worth comparing, and not being compared, and thus not being remembered, and adds that “it will not *need* to be remembered because it will have been fully healed and reconciled”, 178fn12.

vision' understanding clearly enough to show the Church how to recover her genuine identity from its splintered traditions whilst existing in a splintered cultural world.<sup>42</sup>

Third, and perhaps most urgent, is the question of human violence. On one hand, Volf fails to provide a much-needed (and far from irrelevant) explanation of how the oft-quoted Old Testament *harem* ('ban') texts fit into his framework.<sup>43</sup> On the other, whilst his presentation is truly non-violent, he needs to spell out more clearly whether or not, for example, uncompromising human non-violence ends up being a kind of 'suburban' complicity with the evil decay of violent oppression – all in the name of 'leaving room for the wrath of God'.<sup>44</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Those quite specific critiques aside, the breadth and depth of *Exclusion and Embrace* makes it a theological *tour de force* to be reckoned with. It is an exploration that has and will continue to provoke thinking and discussion among theologians and non-theologians, believers and non-believers. It is a vision that has and will continue to challenge all of us to both open *our minds in understanding of* and *our arms for embrace of* the other – even, nay *especially*, our worst enemy.

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<sup>42</sup> For Cavanaugh, this requires showing how "the narratives of the cross and the virtues required for a full embrace" are instilled in the Church; Cavanaugh, 'Exclusion', 98.

<sup>43</sup> Indeed, one could apply Volf's dictum to himself: "We must either reject the violence of the *harem* texts or find ways to make sense of them; we cannot deny them"; revising from Volf, '*E&E*', 296; Volf also fails to mention the *harem* texts in his lecture entitled 'Christianity and Violence'; Miroslav Volf, 'Christianity and Violence' Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics, Boardman Lecture XXXVIII, University of Pennsylvania Department of Religious Studies. <http://repository.upenn.edu/boardman/2>, (accessed 5.5.10).

<sup>44</sup> Again, using Volf's logic against him; see Volf, '*E&E*', 35-7, 304.

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