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A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

Miroslav Volf

Interview with Miroslav Volf

on 21st May, 2010, at Holy Trinity Brompton, London

A. *Could you please outline for us how your theology has developed over the years.*

V. Well, that is a really tough question. I don't know exactly how my theology has evolved but I do know what kinds of circumstances triggered certain developments. I was always a circumstance orientated theologian. That is the way I decided what I should do for my doctoral dissertation. I thought at that time, "I'm going to be living in a Marxist society and I need to know something about Marxism which informed the worldview of that society." I looked for a dissertation that would let me do that and in an area that hadn't been ploughed through. So I decided that I would do Marx on work. From there, a series of my publications followed. The book on church was born out of ecumenical dialogue. I was part of the official Roman Catholic and Pentecostal dialogue for about 9 years. That book is a fruit of these discussions. *Exclusion and Embrace* 1 was born out of a request to try to think theologically through some of the upheavals that were happening in Eastern Europe, in particular in my part of the world, South East Europe, when the war started. I invited to give a lecture on that topic in Berlin, and out of the lecture grew the book. I tried to think the circumstances through theologically. Behind multiple engagements with concrete issues presented by circumstances, is a unifying theological vision.

A. *And would that be the same for your books on the Holy Spirit and the Trinity?*

V. The book on the Trinity was really the book that grew out of the ecumenical dialogues. It was an attempt to think through the free church ecclesiology in dialogue with Roman Catholicism and the ecumenical conversations about the church as '*communio*'. In the middle of the 1980s this was the big theme in ecumenical discussions and so this was an attempt to think through, from more free church perspective, what it means for a church to be *communio*, community. In order to get there I had to deal with the Roman Catholic understanding of it and this was clearly Trinitarian. I added to it also the Orthodox reflection, and drew the Trinitarian line straight through: Church as the Image of the Trinity.

A. *In The End of Memory* 2 you write about a biblical metanarrative. What does that mean?

V. That book too grew out of a concrete situation, my experiences in military service, being interrogated and trying to figure out how one works through not just psychologically but theologically through memories of abuse. At the same time it was tied to *Exclusion and Embrace* because the question of memory plays an immensely significant role in just about all the conflicts in the world today. Certainly it did play such a role in former Yugoslavia. The conflict started by a certain "reading" of the recent history. That reading provided a vision that was then translated into concrete aspirations that leadership around Milosevic tried to realise through violent means. So memories played a central role in the conflict, and I tried to attend to the question 'how does one remember rightly the violence that one has suffered?' I argue that the memory of exodus and of the passion function to regulate how one ought to go about remembering oppression and abuse. Take the exodus narrative. "Remember that you

were a slave in Egypt,' we read often, and then there comes a lesson from that memory. What happened to you when you were a slave in Egypt and you were delivered from slavery regulates how you should relate to others, including how you should remember their wrongdoing against you. The can be said to be true of the passion and of the Eucharist as its remembrance. The Eucharist structures the way that we understand who we are as Christians and how we relate to others. Therefore it also structures how we remember wrongs that we have committed and how we remember wrongs that were committed against us. And in that sense memories of these two great saving events frame the whole life of a Christian and therefore the way we remember the past and project ourselves into the future as well as the way we live in the present.

A. *Can you tell us a little about Archbishop's book for Lent from 2005, Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace. 3 How do you think we can express grace more profoundly, particularly in Western cultures?*

V. Western cultures on the whole are increasingly becoming rule-based cultures, which is to say they are law-based cultures. That's understandable given the pervasive individualism of Western cultures because it is very hard to regulate relations between "individuals" (as distinct from persons), especially on a mass scale, except through the enforcement of rules. But rules are often graceless things and they limit the sphere of freedom in such a way that the limits are more imposed from the outside than embraced by individuals from within. That has consequences on how we deal with wrongdoing. We claim our rights over against somebody else and there is very little leeway given; I disregard a wrongdoing or I simply claim my right against the other. I think grace goes largely against this way of regulating relations between people because grace is a gift. It's an act of generosity. We, on the other hand, live in a culture that is more a "trading" than "giftgiving" culture. We exchange equivalents. So it is in many spheres of our lives. I think grace is a fundamentally different way of relating, not outside the concern for equivalence but much more attuned to specificities of the life of individual persons and their relationships, and much more attuned to the fact that with the help of retributive justice we cannot restore relationships. It is both a more beautiful and more risky way of relating.

A. *Why risky?*

V. Grace is always risky, because grace is a form of giftgiving and as distinct from the exchange of equivalents you don't specify in advance what the other person is going to do. You give a gift and hope that there is going to be some kind of reciprocation. If you are lucky then there is a reciprocation of the sort that starts the circle of gift-giving moving, and the beautiful life begins. If you are unlucky, you have given and the other person has just taken, or you have forgiven and the other person has gotten away with it without recognising any wrong that they've done. Grace always entails risk. There's a certain fragility to it and therefore unpredictability and yet, partly just because of that, great power.

A. *Can you please tell us about your two most recent books — one on the Bible and one on Islam.*

V. One is entitled *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection*. 4 I have a major chapter on reading the Scriptures theologically. I've also reprinted in it some of my own texts in which I interpret the Scriptures. For instance, the text on First Peter called "Soft Difference," in which I explore the relationship between

church and culture. There is a text there on Johannine dualism and contemporary pluralism. There is a longer text on Ecclesiastes called 'In the Cage of Vanities'. I think that it is crucial for theologians today, as in any age, to interpret biblical texts theologically. One of the most promising theological movements today is retrieval of the theological reading of the scripture. After everything in theology goes back to the Bible, church traditions, liturgy, our knowledge of Christ. Hence theology has to be captive to the word of God.

The other book is entitled *Allah: A Christian Response* ⁵ on the question whether Muslims and Christians believe in the same God and what are the political implications of how we answer this question. How do we decide whether they do believe in the same God? What would "the same God" here mean? And if they do believe in the same God or maybe more precisely, if they have a common God differently understood in part, what implications does that have for the way they relate to each other as religious communities? And what implications does it have for the way that Muslims and Christians might be able to live under the same political roof or in an increasingly shrinking common globalised world? The issue is crucial because to the extent that Muslims and Christians are committed believers, their understanding of God, their accounts of who God is, shape who they are and how they see themselves in the world; those accounts define the contours of the moral universe they inhabit. And if you have two radically clashing conceptions of God, it is very hard to see how we would not also have people who embrace these conceptions of God, clashing as well.

There is one more recent book than the two about which you ask. It is called *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. ⁶ The title speaks for itself. It is basically about how to live our public lives as faithful Christians, given that we live in a religiously pluralistic world. I argue both against exclusion of religion from public realm and saturation of public realm by one religion.

A. *Tell us about the Yale Centre for Faith and Culture, and in particular the Faith in Globalisation series of lectures that you were giving with former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair.*

V. The course we are offering is informed by a very simple observation that on the one hand globalisation processes are the most powerful forces in the world today — on three levels, the level of cultural globalisation, the level of political globalization, and particularly economic globalisation. Globalisation really is revolutionising our world and I think one of the first people to recognise this was Karl Marx in his Communist Manifesto. I don't agree with the Communist Manifesto, its proposals or its vision, but in terms of its analysis of what is going on, it is a very prescient text. "Everything that is solid melts into thin air," and that's what is happening with globalisation processes — whether that is established customs, whether that is way we go about producing things, etc. Everything is being shifted and changed, at high speed. At the same time I think that faith traditions — like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism — are still very powerful and in some areas resurgent forces. After all Christianity has been with us for 2000 years. Empires have come and gone. Similar longevity is characteristic of other faiths. They are very powerful forces orientating people. Sometimes forces of faith and forces of globalisation clash. They clash because globalisation brings people closer together, and their proximity makes them rub each other the wrong way, so to speak, as religious groups. But partly they clash also because globalisation processes create appalling inequalities and themselves seem to carry visions for human good and are often incompatible with what faiths have understood to be the goal of human striving and so forth.

A. So back to the Center, what are some of the issues that you engage at the Centre for Faith and Culture?

V. In addition to engaging issues of faith and globalization, we are interested with Muslim Christian relations. That's a very important part of what the Centre does and we've been involved quite extensively with The Common Word initiative, organizing encounters between emerging Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders, and more. I have been involved in the series of consultations organised around the notions of human flourishing: what does it mean for us to flourish as human beings? What bearing does our understanding of God has on our notions of human flourishing and our ability to flourish as human beings?

A. How would you define human flourishing?

V. Following Nicholas Wolterstorff, I think human flourishing has two components. At an abstract level, one component is that life goes well for one and the other is that one leads one's life well and has lived well. The first component is passive, naming what happens to one; the second active aspect, naming what one does in response to what is happening. I think we need to attend to both of these components of human flourishing. If you take some Stoic visions of human flourishing, they were all orientated to some agent; you can flourish under any type of circumstances. And that isn't really Jesus' vision of flourishing. He healed people, he didn't explain how they should live around whatever circumstances they found themselves in, but rather how circumstances themselves need to be changed. At the same time, he stressed the need for inner transformation and I think these two components are central to human flourishing. Now the question becomes what does it mean to live one's life well and what does it mean for a life to go well for one. The answer is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.

A. Do you have a favourite theologian?

V. David Kelsey is a superb theologian. I think Rowan Williams is an excellent theologian. I like my own supervisor Jürgen Moltmann as a theologian. He is still amazingly full of life at 85 years of age. Those are some of my favourite theologians.

A. What do you see as the future trends or trajectories of theology — particularly from a global perspective?

V. I don't know, I don't pretend to be a prophet. First, I would like to see theology be self-consciously and robustly Christian, and comfortable in its own Christian skin, not be defensive, but celebratory, highlighting the beauty of the one who lies at the centre of Christian theology, Christ who is "the key," as my colleague Kathryn Tanner argues in her recent book. At the same time, I would like to see theology open to learning from others, secular thinkers and thinkers from other religions. Second, I hope that theology will pick up real issues that move people, that touch their lives, that express both their afflictions and their aspirations. I hope theology could take critical issues of the day up and shed on them the light of the Gospel. It ought to foster knowledge and love of God and neighbour, and make it plausible that such life is a life of true human flourishing.



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Endnotes

- 1 Volf 1996
- 2 Volf 2006
- 3 Volf 2005
- 4 Volf 2010
- 5 Volf 2011a
- 6 Volf 2011b