

In my own voice?

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [December 15, 1999](#) issue

"We would like to have you speak in your own voice about what you believe as a Jew or Christian," wrote the editors inviting me to contribute to a volume in which Jews and Christians were to engage each other's traditions. I accepted the invitation, but the more I thought about "in your own voice," the more ambivalent I felt about it. I knew, of course, what the editors meant. I should not write as if I were not involved, as if I did not identify with my tradition. Instead of bracketing my own religious commitments and perspectives by using a descriptive and distancing mode of discourse, I should let these commitments and perspectives come to the surface and let the reader see where and how the tradition has a claim on me.

All this was fine with me—a theologian who believes that his calling is also to be a witness. And yet I felt uneasy. I was troubled about how my own voice would be heard in the contemporary climate, which places a high premium on "authentic," "unique" and "properly one's own" experiences and views. With my own voice in the foreground, people would be more likely to stay with the text. But would they not get the wrong impression about the character of the Christian faith? Might I not be suggesting to them that the Christian faith is some private philosophy put together from a smorgasbord of traditionally inherited or contextually available beliefs and practices, so as to suit a person's affinities and needs? Which, of course, it is not.

In Christianity as in other major religions, the content of one's faith is primarily something one receives rather than something one puts together or creates. When a Christian says, "I believe" he or she always means, "I too believe"—I believe what the prophets and the apostles believed, I believe what the community of faith believed through the centuries. They believed, and together with them I *too* believe. What I believe as myself, a person living in a particular time and place, is important. But at its heart, that should be nothing but a personally and situationally appropriate variation of what others have believed and what I have received.

In his comments about what Jesus Christ means to him, Karl Barth expressed the idea with his usual rhetorical flourish:

If I were to single out something special that he is for me, I should be missing what in fact he is specifically for me. He is for me in particular precisely what before me, outside me and alongside me, he is for all Christians and indeed for the whole world and for all men. He is this specifically for me too.

If this were understood, I thought, I could speak in my own voice. Indeed, as a believer living here and now, I must do so. Speaking in my own voice would be letting the "received" shine through what is "my own" and offering "my own" as a particular case of the "received." But would this be understood by readers?

Beliefs in living religions are characterized by a peculiar interrelation of "received" and "one's own." Paying heed to that interrelation is especially important in interreligious exchanges. But widespread cultural sensibilities want things differently. When representatives of religions disagree, people today increasingly expect of them what they expect of their politicians—a negotiated settlement. The one side needs to give up a bit here and the other side a bit there, and, barring some culpable stubbornness on one or both sides, we should arrive at a happy compromise.

If religious beliefs were privately constructed "life philosophies" which satisfied an individual's private needs and desires, such an expectation would be reasonable. But if religious beliefs, in addition to whatever else they may be, are received deposits of faith with a claim to truth, then it is not at our discretion to give up—or take over—a bit of them here and there.

Interreligious exchanges should be very *unlike* political negotiations. Instead of aiming at pragmatic compromises that suit our own idiosyncratic needs and wishes, we must embark upon a much more interesting and profitable venture of reading others' beliefs and practices through the lenses of our own tradition and examining how our own beliefs and practices are read by others and why. It will be a venture of trying to make sense of other traditions on their own terms as well as from our perspective, and of noting their responses to our beliefs and practices. We will inquire what light such process sheds on our own tradition and on how it can be clarified, purified and enriched, or even—God forbid!—given up.

We must engage religious beliefs not in isolation, but as elements of traditions—dynamic and evolving traditions maybe, but traditions nonetheless. So I

wrote about what I *too* believe. Did this in any way entail a diminution of my own "authenticity"? Certainly not. For I wrote about the faith that came to me in such a way that it became so much my own that it formed that very self who was now, quite cheerfully, writing about what he had received in "his own voice."