

Embracing theology: Miroslav Volf spans conflicting worlds

by [Mark Oppenheimer](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

When I talked to Yale theologian Miroslav Volf last summer, he was being considered as possible dean of Harvard Divinity School. He had told Harvard's president Lawrence Summers quite clearly that if he were to head the school, he would want to lead HDS back to its roots in constructive theology and the formation of Christian ministers. Not that disciplines like comparative religion or social science would be banished. But Volf had no interest in presiding over a school where the expression of evangelical belief was unchic.

As it turned out, Volf was not offered the job, so we won't know how that partnership would have worked. Volf did say, afterward, that he thought Harvard was making a mistake by going the "religious studies" route.

"I don't think analysis of religion suffices. I'm happy to benefit from sociology, anthropology, psychology. But you have a vibrant religious world, and academics sometimes aren't aware of how potent 2 billion Christians, 1 billion Muslims and all the other religious folks are. If you just analyze religion, you're doing good work, but socially you're inconsequential. You're not shaping the world."

Volf might seem like an unusual person for Harvard even to have considered. But then Volf is unusual in many settings. He is a Pentecostal among evangelicals, a mainline Christian among evangelicals, and an evangelical in the mainline. Growing up, he was a Christian among communists.

"Mine was a quieter type of Pentecostalism, one more associated with the holiness tradition," Volf told me when I asked about his Pentecostal upbringing. There was more a sense of "waiting upon the Lord, rather than taking fortresses by storm—the machine-gun type of Pentecostalism.

"My father was the general secretary of the Pentecostal movement of Croatia, and I became a Christian at 16. I attended all these camps and meetings, and we prayed

late into the night for baptism in the spirit. For me, it was a meditative experience.”

“Did you speak in tongues?” I asked.

Volf gave me the look of a man not often caught off guard who has suddenly been caught off guard.

“I haven’t thought about this for a long time,” he said after a long pause. “I have, as a young person, ‘spoken in tongues.’ It was a result of prayer in search of words that couldn’t find them. There was nothing miraculous in what I experienced. I experienced it as a freeing. It came gently, then subsided.”

Pentecostals in Croatia, I learned, do not fit the American model of Pentecostals. Peter Kuzmic, Volf’s brother-in-law (he married Volf’s sister, Vlasta), a professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, pointed out that in Croatia evangelical Christianity offered a refuge from communist mind control and from ethnoreligious ideology.

“In the U.S.,” Kuzmic said, “Pentecostal churches emphasize gifts of the spirit over the apostolic spirit of the transcendent church. . . . But in Tito’s Yugoslavia, we were part of an evangelical world that was more a subculture. We were in a unique position to become bridge builders and reconcilers. If you listen to the Croatian Catholics, you can come to think God is Catholic. The Serbian Orthodox seem to worship a Serbian god. But the evangelicals there don’t have a tribal religion, they don’t serve an ethnic God.

“Miroslav was born in Croatia and lived in Serbia,” observed Kuzmic, who gave Volf his first theological books and founded the Pentecostal seminary Volf later attended. “His father was half-German, his mother was part of the Czech minority. He refused to buy into ethnoreligious homogenization.

“In a modest way, we Pentecostals became involved in what I call a ministry of reconciliation. So evangelicals there are not viewed, as they are here, as a rightist provincial group.”

Volf has the catholicity of a refugee. He’s reluctant to join any camp—military, ethnic or intellectual. His books are a conversation among diverse voices: postmodernists like Gilles Deleuze, feminists like Julia Kristeva, Anabaptists like John Howard Yoder, liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, and political philosophers like John

Rawls and Seyla Benhabib.

“He is eclectic,” says Michael Horton, a Reformed evangelical who teaches at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. “And in an age that is suspicious of systematization, his eclectic borrowing from different traditions gives him certain advantages over more traditional ‘school’ theologians. He was raised Pentecostal, but he’s critical of Pentecostal ecclesiology. He’s clearly not a Calvinist, but certain themes of Reformed theology echo in his work.”

In his first book, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (1991), Volf argues that the Lutheran and Calvinist notion of vocation is not adequate in our time. Luther’s idea of an earthly calling to complement one’s religious calling fails because people frequently hate the work they do, are often exploited, and nowadays change jobs every few years. People are often underpaid. The global market’s race to offer the lowest wage drags children to assembly lines. Luther has no good answers to these problems, Volf contends. Luther’s “understanding of work as vocation is indifferent toward alienation in work. . . . Hence it seems that virtually every type of work can be a vocation, no matter how dehumanizing it might be.” Christians, according to Volf, should not accept this dehumanizing reality.

Volf proceeds from the insight of his graduate school mentor, Jürgen Moltmann, that Christian faith is insistently eschatological and therefore always concerned with new creation. “And the Spirit of God should determine the whole life, spiritual as well as secular, of a Christian,” Volf writes. “Christian work must, therefore, be done under the inspiration of the Spirit and in the light of the new creation.” If we are called to participate in the eschaton, then we must not be alienated from that world to come—for who we are in this world has some bearing on who we’ll be in the next. Rather than allow for vocations that leave us miserable and dejected, we ought to look for work that honors the world to come by honoring our place in it. We have a religious duty to find work that fulfills us.

Using language he learned as a Pentecostal, Volf suggests that such work be thought of not as vocation but as a charism, or gift. According to this pneumatological or Spirit-defined theology of work, the Spirit ensures that “the results of the cumulative work of human beings have intrinsic value and gain ultimate significance, for they are related to the eschatological new creation.” We are not meant to suffer in our jobs, waiting for heaven to deliver us, and we can’t allow that fate for others, either. God has given us certain gifts that, if properly used,

will help us flourish in the new creation, rather than just bide time until that world comes.

Volf's theology of work, understood as defined by the Holy Spirit, is part of a larger trinitarian project. In his most recent book, *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity* (1998), Volf quarrels with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologies of the Trinity, taking two leading theologians, the Catholic Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and the Orthodox Metropolitan John Zizioulas, as his interlocutors. By interrogating their visions of how the Trinity corresponds to the church on earth, Volf arrives at his own, one that honors the Protestant "free church" congregational tradition.

Ratzinger and Zizioulas each emphasize the unity of the Trinity, downplaying its three diverse parts. By analogy, they each see local congregations as inferior in meaning to the church as a whole. Volf, by contrast, describes a Trinity that resembles a community of equals: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are locked in an embrace of dependence.

"In their mutual giving and receiving," he writes, "the trinitarian persons are not only interdependent, but also mutually internal, something to which the Johannine Jesus repeatedly refers: 'so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.'"

This mutual interiority, according to Volf, should lead us to valorize the local congregation—which, not coincidentally, is the place where individual Christians' gifts can shine: "Relations between charismata, modeled after the Trinity, are reciprocal and symmetrical; all members of the church have charismata, and all are to engage their charismata for the good of all others." This happens best not in a cloistered order, nor in service to an imperious hierarch, but in the small, gathered community of Christians—where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name.

This vision of the church eschews priesthood. Offices in the church "are a particular type of charismata . . . Because the ministry of officeholders involves the entire local church, the charismata of office require reception by the entire congregation, [and] ordination is an act of the entire local church led by the Spirit of God." Volf's vision unites a Pentecostal theology of gifts with a Catholic emphasis on the Trinity and an Anabaptist preference for small, nomic communities.

Volf begins his most popular book, *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996), with a question that has become rather famous in theological circles. It was posed by Jürgen Moltmann, who after hearing Volf speak at a conference asked: “But can you embrace a cetnik?”

“It was the winter of 1993,” Volf writes. “For months . . . the notorious Serbian fighters called cetnik had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities. I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a cetnik—the ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other?”

Exclusion and Embrace is Volf’s way of answering yes.

The metaphor of embrace describes two people who can ultimately separate but who are, for the moment at least, dependent on each other, each holding and leaning on the other. “I suggest a complex notion of identity where the self is inhabited by the other,” Volf says. “So one needs to maintain the boundaries of the self, but also keep the boundaries porous. Fundamentalism is a hardening of the boundaries. I want to keep them porous.”

For the Croat, this means acknowledging that his Croatian identity is formed against the Serb. “I tease non-Croatians, ‘To be a Croat is to have a certain relationship with Serbs.’” And, in a similar way, “To be a white American is to relate to the blacks.”

The concepts of justice and forgiveness, which govern the typical Christian response to violence, neglect this aspect of mutuality. Bringing the Serb to justice—jailing him, perhaps killing him—is unsatisfactory, as is forgiving him; for in each case, the Serb remains an alien other. To embrace the Serb is to recognize that, as in the Trinity, human beings comprise multiple identities, none of which can be extracted from the whole. And so embrace becomes a matter of both Christian charity and self-respect: “If you think of yourself as apart,” Volf told me, “you do violence to yourself and others.”

Volf is embarking on two new projects. The first is “Faith as a Way of Life,” a project funded by a \$1.5 million grant from the Lilly Endowment. It is designed, in the language of the grant proposal, to enable pastors “to achieve excellence in helping mediate faith as a way of life in contemporary cultures, through a collaborative initiative involving working pastors, academic theologians, and laypeople.”

In other words, Volf wants to help make better, more faithful pastors. He believes that weak theological education—either lacking in rigor or rigorous but too theoretical—has conspired with the demands of the church marketplace to turn pastors into either psychologists, helping people cope but without deepening their Christianity, or salesmen, so desperate to grow a church that they forget that ministry's "primary function is to help make faith a way of life for persons, communities and cultures."

Perhaps because Volf has been an evangelist, he takes a greater interest in the state of ministry than do many of his professorial colleagues. And he is a tough critic. He left the Pentecostal movement, he says, "in flight from bad preaching. My sense was I just wasn't getting the gospel in the church I was visiting. I think preachers want to mediate between faith and the contemporary situation, but I felt the substance of faith was dribbling away. I didn't need to go to church to be psychologized or given second-rate social theories. I can chill out on my deck with a cup of coffee and the *New York Times* for that. So I sought comfort in the Book of Common Prayer seven years ago."

Volf admits that some people may best connect to their faith via comparisons with politics or the theories of Freud, but "that's just not me," he says. "There are extraordinary preachers, but I think preachers don't take enough time to prepare their sermons, and I think in many cases they have lost faith in faith."

Like Kuzmic, Volf goes back to Croatia every year to teach (though only for several weeks, while Kuzmic spends half the school year there). These trips are, perhaps, part of his own pastoral work. His regular "Faith Matters" column for the *Christian Century* often takes a personal, pastoral tone (he will write about his two adopted children, for example). Reading his columns, or listening to him describe speaking at the United Nations prayer breakfast as the World Trade Center was collapsing, one understands how central is Volf's desire to have an audience, to have a flock, to resist the cloistering effect of a university professorship.

But Volf would never abandon the academy, which was his escape from the intellectually narrow world of a preacher's kid. Volf's next academic project, a theological investigation of memory and forgetting, arises from his dissatisfaction with the centrality of the category of justice in recent theology.

“You need modes of love that go beyond the demands of justice,” Volf says. “As Hannah Arendt said, time doesn’t run backwards—somebody has been raped, and you need something more than justice, which you may not get. You need grace, or forgiveness.

“My new book is on the question of memory. My question is, How do those who love remember, especially the injustices that others have done them, or the guilt that they have incurred? Memories can be both a shield and a sword. They are ambiguous. Conflicts around the world are motivated by certain readings of the past. So how does one remember so as to heal wounds rather than deepen them?

“We may need ‘eschatological forgetting.’ To forgive is to forget. Augustine, at the end of *City of God*, says that he will remember certain evils—the ones he has committed, not the ones he has forgiven others for.”

Starting with John Locke, Volf says, the West has defined the self by what one remembers. That has been the stable feature of modernity, that we are what our stories are. This means that memories of evil often organize our lives.

“But is that desirable for a world of perfect love?” Volf asks. “Only those who are willing not to remember certain things can remember themselves into the telos of perfect love.” Volf does not use the term “forgetting”; his vision is of a messianic age so ennobled by joy, love and embrace of the neighbor that there will be a “not-coming-to-mind,” a leave-taking of worldly memories. This, he suggests, is what is meant by Nehemiah’s promise of “the joy of Jerusalem.” While that day will come only with Jesus’ return, we can, in the meantime, strive to approximate that not-coming-to-mind of memories that would provoke anger or aggravate violence.

If Volf challenges the power of human differences, he can never forget them. Growing up a Pentecostal in an atheist country, Volf was taunted by classmates. As a college student, he played guitar and sang lead vocals for a Christian band. In one town, the band members were assaulted by a gang of young communists, who beat them up and slashed their van’s tires. He came to the U.S. and thence to Germany—a foreigner in both places. Between getting a master’s degree at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and studying for a doctorate in Tübingen, Germany, he returned to Yugoslavia to serve in the army. His experience there was chilling.

“The whole unit was organized around spying on me . . . I knew there’d be spies, but I wasn’t prepared for the extent. The room where I worked was bugged. There was a thick file collected on me. Photos were taken of me from high places. They gathered people I knew and placed them all over my unit to create trust.

“After three or four months, there was a period of interrogation. They’d come any time of day or night and wake me up. They’d threaten to try me for treason. Eight years of prison was always hanging over my head.”

That experience seems mild, of course, in light of what was to come—the destruction of Croatian towns, the murder of friends and countrymen. The search for reconciliation after the war, amid charges and countercharges—“But the Croats allied with the Nazis to kill Serbs! These are their just desserts!”—has made Volf suspicious of the easy polarities of American culture. Volf appreciates American freedom, and he likes American culture. On this matter, he disagrees with smug anti-Americanism on both the left and the right.

Says Michael Horton: “He has very strong convictions, which he writes about with great passion. That reflects the suffering he has endured. So much American theology is trite, boring, optimistic. He really believes something, and is willing to defend it as true in the ultimate sense.”

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Volf’s career as a theologian is that there are no fights between Volfians and anti-Volfians. There don’t even seem to be any anti-Volfians.

“I have never heard of a bad review,” said Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, the school Volf left in 2000 when he accepted a position at Yale Divinity School. “This is very interesting, because even people who are much celebrated get bad reviews. He seems to be universally appreciated. Why is that? Maybe because people know about his background; his is such a rare voice that no one wants to exclude him from the conversation.”

Mouw recalled a recent conference at Wheaton College that included Volf and a diverse group of other scholars. At one point Volf said in answer to a question, “Well, of course I believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ—he will return.”

“If he had come from Fuller Seminary,” Mouw reflected, “and been up there with a postmodern Jewish thinker and people reading Derrida and Levinas, and had said, ‘I

believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ’—well, you know how people would have perceived it. But to come from Yale and say that—it had a whole power to it.

“I have always regretted his leaving Fuller,” said Mouw. “But at the Wheaton meeting I had this kind of ah-ha experience. I thought, ‘Thank God he is at Yale.’”

By combining elements that mainline churches and divinity schools often only aspire to bring together, Volf is a rare contemporary theologian. He joins impressive scholarship with an unembarrassed expression of Christian faith and attachment to the church, and he draws on both his faith and scholarship to address, in distinctively theological ways, the evils of our time.