

Alternative ways

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 9, 2011](#) issue



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In 1997 I traveled to Croatia on behalf of my denomination to visit the Reformed churches and the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek. The shooting war had stopped, but bullet holes marked the facade of the hotel I stayed in. Racial and religious hatred was palpable. We talked with Roman Catholics who blamed the Serbian Orthodox for the violence and with Orthodox who blamed the Catholics and Bosnian Muslims. During my stay Presbyterian mission worker Steven Kurtz drove me across a bridge. As soon as we passed the Croatian checkpoint he removed his clerical collar and shoved it under the front seat. "What are you doing?" I asked. "That collar gets me through the Croatian checkpoint, no questions asked," he said, "but it could get me shot, or detained for a long time, on the other side."

In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf writes out of his experience of life in Croatia. In the preface, he reports how theologian Jürgen Moltmann once asked him if he could embrace a Chetnik, one of the Serbian fighters who had been burning churches and raping and killing in Volf's native land. Volf answered: "No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to."

Volf is one of the few major theologians read by both mainliners and evangelicals. He taught at Fuller Seminary and is now at Yale Divinity School. In this issue ("[All due respect](#)"), he reflects on a verse in 1 Peter, which he says speaks to Christians' relations with non-Christians. Volf insists that the text means what it says: honor everyone, even the one you do not agree with, even the one you believe is utterly wrong.

How we relate to the "other," ethnically, nationally, religiously, is the most important moral and theological issue of our time. It is so easy to identify all Israeli Jews with fanatical settlers, all Muslims with suicide bombers. It is easy for outsiders to identify all Christians with the radical fundamentalists who threaten to blow up abortion clinics.

Shirley Guthrie, in *Always Being Reformed*, writes that the results of Christian exclusivist thinking are always the same. "First, those who are sure their interpretation of the gospel is the correct one try to 'help' others understand and accept their true religion. . . . If that does not work, then in one form or another, violent or nonviolent, come the crusades, inquisitions, religious wars, and colonial or economic or cultural imperialism that try to *force* everyone to accept and live by this or that version of true Christianity."

Is there no alternative to the dreary dynamic of "my way is the only way, and the only way you and I will ever be reconciled and live in peace is for you to acknowledge the error of your ways and believe what I believe and become what I am"?

There is an alternative. We can view religious diversity as part of God's economy. We can hold together two ideas: that God's love is universal and unconditional, and that Jesus Christ is the full expression of that love.