

A Public Faith

Miroslav Volf

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2011 (192 pages)

Miroslav Volf is a figure worthy of Sophocles. He is clearly one of the most gifted Protestant theologians of his generation, yet seems unable to free himself from captivity to the deeply destructive ideologies that define the boundaries of orthodoxy in modern academia. In book after book, Volf haphazardly combines sound and frequently brilliant biblical exposition with an ever-flowing stream of discredited Marxist and Gnostic nostrums. The result is like a car with a state-of-the-art engine and no steering or brakes—it is impressive to hear it rev but any attempt to put that power to use would yield disastrous results.

Volf's theological genius and ideological captivity are both on full display in his latest work, *A Public Faith*. The book's goal is admirably suited to the needs of the times. A rediscovery of the first principles of godly political, economic, and cultural life, freshly applied to the new challenges of the twenty-first century, is desperately needed; when he sticks to theology proper, he makes important contributions. However, when he turns to practical application, he can only repeat the same tired ideas that are even now driving Western civilization to the brink of disaster.

In chapters 1 through 3, Volf provides an excellent basic theological framework for what it means for faith to be prophetic—mending the world rather than escaping or ignoring it—and the various ways in which prophetic faith can malfunction. His characteristic strength is his ability to condense a complex and interlocking set of concerns into a concise and easily assimilable package:

For prophetic religions, both “ascent” and “return” are crucial. “Ascent” is the point at which, in the encounter with the divine, representatives of prophetic religions receive the message and the core identity is forged—whether through mystical union with God, through prophetic inspiration, or through deepened understanding of sacred texts. The ascent is the *receptive* moment. “Return” is the point at which, in interchange with the world, the message is spoken, enacted, built into liturgies or institutions, or embodied in laws. The return is the *creative* moment.

And yet “ascent” is not *merely* receptive. In receiving, the prophets themselves are transformed—they acquire new insight; their character is changed. So ascent is very much creative—a case of creative receptivity. Similarly, the “return” need not be merely creative—the prophets unilaterally shaping social realities. They themselves may be shaped in the process, return then being a case of receptive creativity.

Chapter 4 summarizes how society's definition of what counts as “human flourishing” has transitioned from serving God and neighbor to mere personal satisfaction. This radical subjectivization renders irrelevant the question of whether your way of life fits with the objective truth about the universe at large, and thus ends in irresponsibility. Faith can lead people back to a robust model of human flourishing by reestablishing the fit between objective truth and daily life.

Chapters 5 and 6 concern the problem of cultural boundaries and identity, and the challenges of exchanging wisdom with people of different beliefs in a highly complex cultural environment. Volf argues cogently that some form of exclusion is necessary to cultural identity. However, maintaining boundaries in a humane way has become radically more difficult in the context of freedom of religion (where civic membership is not tied to faith, and church membership is a matter of choice) and functional differentiation (activities in different spheres of life become isolated from one another, thus making integrated life harder).

As good as much of this is, the catastrophic derailments begin almost immediately. The lake of his cultural engagement is fed not only by the clean fountain of his theology but also by a toxically polluted river of ideological claptrap.

Volf relies uncritically upon Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, a book about religion and economics in which ignorance of religion and ignorance of economics vie fiercely for predominance. He parrots a litany of economic fallacies imported from Weber and a few other sources: the purpose of business is to make money; economic exchange does not make people better off but simply moves stuff around; "the market" is an autonomous and amoral force that dictates economic decisions to actors within it.

Volf conceives of economics as a purely materialistic system that must always threaten morality and spirituality—a nearly perfect assimilation of Weber's Gnostic dualism. By contrast, for most of the history of the West, it was understood that economic relationships are a fundamentally moral and spiritual phenomenon whose purpose is not making money but serving people's needs.

Politics is likewise an exclusively material phenomenon for Volf. Like his earlier books on public issues, *A Public Faith* contains no treatment of the concept of justice. He rejects the historic majority view of both philosophy (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero) and theology (Augustine, Aquinas, Locke) that politics is fundamentally about justice, thus joining the minority report (Thrasymachus, Machiavelli, Hobbes) in thinking that politics is fundamentally about power. Chapter 7, in which Volf—drawing heavily on Nicholas Wolterstorff—lays out his approach to politics, clearly illustrates where this approach leads.

Volf and Wolterstorff uncritically accept John Rawls's groundless fantasy that the essence of liberal democracy is its "neutrality"—its aspiration not to favor one worldview over another. They correctly perceive that Rawls' plan to use "public reason" to establish neutral ground is impossible and leads to coerced suppression of faith. However, instead of rejecting Rawls' neutrality, they reject his desire to build common ground.

They claim there is no possibility of shared reason, morality, or metaphysics—which is tantamount to saying there is no common humanity—across traditions. They would instead have government serve as an impartial referee between cultural groups without claiming to have any basis in shared reason, morals, or metaphysics.

This approach removes all moral restraint on political power. Without shared moral commitments, relationships among cultural groups would be driven entirely by competition for power. The resulting mobilization of grievances and resentments would make earlier culture-war blood sport look tame by comparison—not to mention that this system

invites unlimited persecution of disfavored individuals or minorities within cultural groups, because the aspiration to a standard of justice that transcends the group has been abandoned.

As a result of Volf's economic and political fallacies, his approach to culture is fundamentally oppositional. One of the strongest aspects of his theological framework is that it aspires to an affirmational approach grounded in the essential goodness of human culture. In practice, however, his recommendations always seem to involve subverting or opposing culture. Virtually every dimension of human culture intersects with economics and politics, and Volf's zeal to combat a host of half-imaginary economic and political demons leaves him little space for real affirmation.

That is not the only deep contradiction in *A Public Faith*. Volf's political neutralism is directly contradicted by many other elements of his thinking. His calls for cross-cultural dialogue and peacemaking, for example, presuppose that moral and even theological concepts can transcend cultural boundaries.

On a deeper level, one common thread in Volf's fallacies is the very same radical subjectivism that he rightly diagnoses as one of our biggest problems. For him, economic and political systems irresistibly dictate our assigned tasks within them (e.g., businesses are only able to do that which maximizes profit). Thus, infusing our faith into our economic and political lives consists merely of carrying out our tasks with the right subjective attitudes.

It is telling, for example, that Volf's list of the things Christians should do in the service of human flourishing contains only subjective activities: Believe in, explicate, and make plausible God's connection to human flourishing. He does not call on us to actually create human flourishing through our daily work and our cultural lives; that, apparently, is someone else's job.

One major cause of Volf's errors is his excessive deference to prestigious theorists such as Marx, Weber, and Rawls. These theorists know much less than he thinks they do. Moreover, he lacks a sound approach to integrating theological and natural knowledge. For example, he criticizes Marx and Weber's reductively materialistic explanations for religious behavior, but he never questions their similarly reductive explanations for economic behavior.

Another cause of Volf's errors is his implicitly Gnostic sociology. Beginning with his *Free of Charge* (2005), he adopted a false distinction between "taking, getting and giving"—acts of coercion, exchange, and generosity. In Volf's universe, acts of generosity are assumed to be radically distinct from either economic or political acts (except in a few rare cases). He morally stratifies the three classifications: coercion is always wrong, exchange is licit but not praiseworthy, and giving is good. (To my knowledge, he has never squared his claim that coercion is always wrong with his claim that political power can be legitimate; nor has he squared his claim that participation in the economy is licit with his view that the economic system is illicit.)

Thus, Volf expects economics and politics to be dehumanizing and enslaving, so he naturally gravitates toward theorists who gratify that expectation. His appropriation of their ideologies is uncritical because he conceptualizes the life of faith as something that intersects with economics and politics from the outside, being grounded in a separate

sphere of activities (the “giving” and ecclesial ones) rather than as something naturally at home within *all* the structures of human civilization.

This line of development reached a head in *Captive to the Word of God* (2010), and *A Public Faith* seems to be more or less a popularization of that work. For example, the most striking conclusion of his treatment of Weber in *Captive to the Word of God* is that economic productivity should not be considered a moral virtue because it enslaves us to the evil economic system. This dovetails nicely with chapter 4 of *A Public Faith*, where we are enjoined to think and talk a lot about human flourishing, but the task of actually producing (note that word) a flourishing cultural life goes unmentioned.

In 2001’s *Work in the Spirit*, which was if anything even more subordinated to Weber’s Gnosticism, Volf had demanded government planning of the economy. *Captive to the Word of God* drops that demand. Alas, the change is not because he has come to realize economic planning directly imposes unlimited political control over all aspects of human life. No, he still thinks free enterprise is totalitarian and a form of slavery. He has just (grudgingly) come to acknowledge that socialism would be “likely to produce worse forms of slavery.” Even so, he continues to stress that we should be “finding ways to limit growth.”

The extremity of Volf’s ideological blindness is shocking. If free enterprise is totalitarian slavery, what words are left to describe the genocide he encountered in Yugoslavia? Does he really see them as comparable?

As Arthur Brooks has recently remarked, societies tend to become what they describe themselves as being. For the better part of the last century, our social elites—people such as Weber, Rawls, Volf, and Wolterstorff—have been describing our politics and economics in terms that frame them as arbitrary, dehumanizing, and enslaving. Sure enough, in the past half-century or so, our politics and economics have in fact become significantly more arbitrary, dehumanizing, and enslaving. The ideologies favored by Volf are themselves the primary causes of the social problems they purport to alleviate.

Only those who have a strong affective attachment to a society’s cultural institutions will have the social standing to create positive change within them. Christians would do well to heed Volf when he calls on us to affirm the goodness of godly life within our culture. They must therefore shun the ignorant rejectionism of his blinkered ideological agendas. If Volf himself ever got tired of living in the academic fantasy world where human flourishing is good but economic productivity and growth are bad, the contribution a man of his talents could make to godly life in American civilization would be formidable.

Is there hope for that? With God all things are possible.

—Greg Forster
Kern Family Foundation
Waukesha, Wisconsin