

5.36 MIROSLAV VOLF ON THE CROSS OF CHRIST AND HUMAN VIOLENCE

Miroslav Volf (born 1956) has a particular interest in correlating the leading themes of Christian theology with issues of social, political, and cultural importance. His own experience of social tensions in his native Balkans led him to consider how themes from the Christian tradition might be developed in a political theology – a theme explored particularly in his *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996), which considers theological motivations and resources for abolishing exclusion and enabling embrace. During this analysis, Volf reflects on how the cross might be said to break the cycle of human violence. See also 5.33, 5.37, 5.38.

Consider the following four ways in which the crucified Messiah challenges violence.

First, the cross *breaks the cycle of violence*. Hanging on the cross, Jesus provided the ultimate example of his command to replace the principle of retaliation (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for

a tooth”) with the principle of nonresistance (“if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also”) (Matthew 5: 38–42). By suffering violence as an innocent victim, he took upon himself the aggression of the persecutors. He broke the vicious cycle of violence by absorbing it, taking it

upon himself. He refused to be sucked into the automatism of revenge, but sought to overcome evil by doing good – even at the cost of his own life. Jesus’s kind of option for nonviolence had nothing to do with the self-abnegation in which I completely place myself at the disposal of others to do with me as they please; it had much to do with the kind of self-assertion in which I refuse to be ensnared in the dumb redoubling of my enemies’ violent gestures and be reshaped into their mirror image. No, the crucified Messiah is not a concealed legitimization of the system of terror, but its radical critique. Far from enthroning violence, the sacralization of him as victim subverts violence.

Second, the cross *lays bare the mechanism of scapegoating*. All the accounts of Jesus’s death agree that he suffered *unjust* violence. His persecutors believed in the excellence of their cause, but in reality hated without a cause. Jesus was a scapegoat. To say, however, that Jesus was hated without a cause – that he was an innocent victim – is not to say that he was an arbitrarily chosen victim, as René Girard, who proposed the theory of scapegoating, claims. In a world of deception and oppression, his innocence – his truthfulness and his justice – was reason enough for hatred. Jesus *was* a threat. And precisely because of his threatening innocence, he was made a scapegoat. [...].

The cross is, third, part of Jesus’s *struggle* for God’s truth and justice. Jesus’s mission certainly did not consist merely in passively receiving violence. The cry of anguish to an absent God was not Jesus’s only utterance; falling under the weight of the cross on the road to execution was not his only accomplishment. If Jesus had done nothing but suffer violence, we would have forgotten him, as we have forgotten so many other innocent victims. The mechanism of scapegoating would not have been demasked by his suffering, and violence is not diminished by his nonresistance. The pure negativity of nonviolence is barren because it shies away from “transgressing” into the territory of the system of terror. At best, oppressors can safely disregard it; at worst, they can see themselves as indirectly justified by it. To be significant, nonviolence must be part of a larger strategy of combating the system of terror.

Is not the language of “struggle” and “combat” inappropriate, however? Does it not run at cross-purposes with nonviolence? Consider the fact that Jesus’s public ministry – his proclamation and enactment of the reign of God as the reign of God’s truth and God’s justice – was not a drama played out on an empty stage, vacated by other voices and actors. An empty stage was unavailable to him, as it is unavailable to us. It was there only in the beginning, before the dawn of creation. On the empty stage of non-existence, God enacted the drama of creation – and the world came into being. Every subsequent drama is performed on an occupied stage; all spectators are performers. Especially in a creation infested with sin, the proclamation and enactment of the kingdom of truth and justice is never an act of pure positing, but always of transgression into spaces occupied by others. Active opposition to the kingdom of Satan, the kingdom of deception and oppression, is therefore inseparable from the proclamation of the kingdom of God. It is this opposition that brought Jesus Christ to the cross; and it is this opposition that gave meaning to his nonviolence. It takes the struggle against deception and oppression to transform nonviolence from barren negativity into a creative possibility, from a quicksand into a foundation of a new world.

Fourth, the cross is a *divine embrace of the deceitful and unjust*. One way to embrace the evildoers would be simply to “act as if their sin was not there”, as John Milbank has suggested in *Theology and Social Theory*. Jesus on the cross would then be our model. Like him, we would say of the perpetrators, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23: 34). In an act of sheer grace, justice and truth would be suspended, and a reconciling embrace take place. We seriously misconstrue forgiveness, however, if we misunderstand it as acting “as if the sin was not there”. More significantly, whereas the suspension of truth and justice in an act of forgiveness is meant to help create a new world, such suspension in fact *presupposes* a new world, a *world without deception and injustice*. Suspend justice and truth, and you cannot redeem the world; you must leave it as it is. Acting “as if not” in the face of sin might indeed anticipate heaven, in which there is no sin, as Milbank

argues. However, the price of such anticipation is abandonment of the world to the darkness of hell; the world will remain forever awry. The blood of the innocent will eternally cry out to heaven. There can be no redemption unless the truth about the

world is told, and justice is done. To treat sin as if it were not there, when in fact it is there, amounts to living as if the world were redeemed, when it is not. The claim to redemption has degenerated into an empty ideology, and a dangerous one at that.