**A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good**

By Miroslav Volf

*Summarised by John Coleby*

Volf begins with the fact that religions are growing around the world. Furthermore, their adherents are unwilling to keep their faith private, but want it to shape public life. The interaction between many religious traditions, which were previously confined to particular parts of the world, is another feature of modern life. All this has given rise to a fear of the imposition of one religion on others.

Such fear is not groundless, as can be seen from the work of Sayyid Qutb, a leading advocate of political Islam. Volf summarises Qutb’s position (outlined in the book *Milestones*) in eight points, and returns to these with eight points of his own in his conclusion. For Qutb, there is no middle ground between living in a land governed by Islam (Dar-ul-Islam), and one where there is conflict (Dar-ul-Harb). Qutb’s view is also found in Christian form (e.g. dominion theology in the U.S.), which shows that it is not a uniquely Islamic idea.

The alternative Volf puts forward to Qutb is religious-political pluralism. This system may have a Christian origin but like Qutb’s system it is not unique to any religion. Volf summarises his alternative as follows:

1. Christ came to redeem the world, so Christianity must seek to be prophetic, to transform the world. Faith should impact all spheres of life, and if it doesn’t, it is not working properly.

2. Christ brought grace and mercy, not coercion, so the imposition of Christianity is a serious malfunction of Christian faith.

3. Christ came for people to have life to the full, and so seeking the common good and human flourishing must be central to Christian social action.

4. The world is fallen but was created by God, and Christ came to save it. We therefore have no right to unmitigated opposition to the world. It is more complex than that.

5. Jesus is the Faithful and True Witness and his followers are witnesses. Our method is to bear witness to Christ not to impose him.

6. Many political arrangements are compatible with Christianity. However, due to the Golden Rule, we must grant to others the same rights and freedoms that we want ourselves.

**Malfunctions of Faith**

‘The leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations’ is a summary of our task in the world as Christians. However, Christian faith can malfunction. Often our faith is used instead to steal, kill and destroy, as critics of Christianity allege. Nonetheless, to say that our faith can malfunction is not to say with modern secularists that our faith is a malfunction.

**Prophetic Religion**

Religions are either prophetic (world-transforming) or mystical (world-escaping). The mystic does not want to return to the world, but the prophet seeks to transform it. In the Abrahamic religions (all prophetic), ascents to God are followed by returns to the world. Both ascent and return involve a degree of reception from God and creativity with what is given by him. The defining ascents and
returns by the religion’s founding figure are also replicated by believers in their own lives. At both stages, faith can malfunction.

Ascent Malfunctions

The two malfunctions in the ascent stage are reduction and idolatry. The first is where believers lose faith in the importance of receiving revelation from God, and see ideas with a human origin as more relevant or useful. The language of experiencing and receiving from God is then used as a shell to give legitimacy to these human ideas. Faith itself is reduced to fairly generic moral teaching that can be found outside the church.

Idolatry is the transformation of God or his commands into something less than God, possibly in an attempt to make things more understandable in a new culture. While this translation may be more appealing than the hard work of genuine application, part of the message ends up being lost.

Return Malfunctions

Return malfunctions are a failure to communicate and apply a genuine message from God. This takes the form of idleness or coercion. Idleness is when faith does not change one’s life, perhaps because we give in to temptation to sin. More often, this happens when we are lured into systems which imprison us in wrong action. For example, the modern market is ‘an iron cage,’ (Weber). Faith may also be misconstrued as being primarily an opiate or focused on the afterlife, which can justify idleness here and now.

Coerciveness

Coerciveness is the opposite of idleness: hyperactive not inactive, imposed upon the unwilling. The church can easily alternate between these two extremes. However, sometimes coerciveness is used as a stock charge against all non-idle faith by secularists, so we must be careful to discriminate. What Volf means by coercive faith is the belief that an attempt to serve God can justify means that override the free will and desires of our fellow human beings. We must show that this is in fact a malfunction of faith, and that there is a better way.

Coerciveness is the result of a thinned out faith, where faith isn’t robust or well-rooted enough to dictate the means believers use as well as the ends. True faith, for instance, would urge that believers put it into practice, but would also restrain them from using violence against those who do not share their faith. On the other hand, a thinned out faith does not matter to its adherents sufficiently to restrain them from acting on more fundamental and violent influences, such as the politics of identity and suspicion of outsiders.

Thinned out faith also represents detachment from the tradition and heritage of any religion, as in all three of the Abrahamic religions, for example, there are many voices that condemn such coercion. Thin faith springs from a refusal to take this heritage seriously. Coercive faith is also fundamentally a failure to resist temptation to revenge and violence. It is the broad way rather than the narrow one. Its attraction comes in being a simple way of applying faith to public life, rather than making the effort to apply it properly.
**Active Faith**

For Volf, the better path to be presented against an idle faith is an active faith. For faith to be active it must relate to our daily work. Volf sees four areas in which real faith does this: blessing on success, deliverance from failure, guidance in life and meaning for our work.

**Blessing**

What does God have to do with our success? To succeed we need ability and also creativity, but these come and go because we are fallible. They are not ours perfectly, but as with everything else we depend on God for them. Hence our success is itself a sign of God’s generosity and blessing, and this prompts us to bring all that we are doing to God in prayer.

We may worry that this trivialises prayer by focusing it on seemingly minor things, or that it goes against our responsibility to get things done ourselves. However, we cannot avoid the fact that Scripture connects God’s blessing with our work going well. Also, God blesses us through blessing our actions with success, so this is no abdication of our responsibility to act in the first place.

**Failure**

Failure is inevitable, even if we try and avoid or conceal it. Failure often drives people to God, and again there is a risk that God just becomes someone we turn to in failure alone. Nonetheless, Scripture does narrate deliverance as well as blessing. Only God can keep us from failing, but God also gives us identity outside our work when we do fail. This also delivers us from disappointment in mere material success.

**Guidance**

Faith that only blesses and consoles could fall into the trap of blessing and consoling people in their work, when their work itself is ethically problematic. Therefore we also need faith to guide what we do, private and public. There are moral dilemmas and ‘grey areas’ even within legitimate occupations, and many other influences exist in the world of work besides our faith. Our faith has to give an ethical vision which goes beyond merely keeping within the law. It must also motivate us to go beyond what is merely permissible to strive for what is excellent. As it guides our public action in this manner, faith cannot simply be private.

**Meaning**

It isn’t enough for humans just to work. We also need to reflect on our work and whether there is any significance to it beyond taking care of our needs. Even work for our communities may seem empty when we do not achieve the results we hope for. Instead, we must see God as the motivation for our work. The work he gives us is to achieve his purposes in the world, and he works with us, which gives work dignity. Even temporary setbacks can be seen in the context of God’s work, which will come to completion no matter what.

**Coercion**

For many, 9/11 was an unpleasant reminder that religion was still an active force. This has been seen as a threat to on-going secularisation and a step back towards to the wars of religion. Eliminate
religion, so the theory goes, and you eliminate violence. Volf argues that this idea is both coercive itself and misguided. The cure for religious violence is in fact a deeper faith. Shallow religiosity is more easily hijacked, as it does not matter enough to its adherents to dictate means as well as ends. This is Volf’s concept of thick vs thin faith. Volf goes on to identify four Christian doctrines that have been accused of fostering coercion: monotheism, creation, redemption and final judgement.

**Monotheism**

Critics have attacked monotheism as a belief which invalidates other forms of religious belief in a coercive way. Belief in one truth implies opposition to what is not consistent with it. On the other hand, one can equally say that monotheism means that everyone is equal spiritually, as opposed to the struggles between national gods under ancient polytheism. The vague monotheism that is criticised is also a poor summary of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

**Creation**

Creation has been characterised as the imposition of form and identity on us. However, this goes against *creatio ex nihilo* where nothing existed to be imposed upon. To say that it is imposition is to say that humans have a nature and identity apart from God, which is false. Our identity is given to us by God, which is in fact a guard against imposition of identity by other created beings.

**Redemption**

Redemption is not creation, as it is a struggle against the old nature, a *creatio ex vetere*. However, this is attacked by post-modernists for assuming that there is a ‘right’ way, or ‘wrong’ ways from which we need redeeming. Postmodernists like Derrida and his pupils urge ‘absolute hospitality’ instead. However, this does not deal with the violence in the world but instead leaves it unchallenged and unresolved. The redemption Christ brings is also not achieved with violence, and so it cannot be used to justify violence.

**Final Judgement**

Critics of Christianity see more approval of violence in the book of Revelation, especially with the Last Judgement. In Revelation, however, the martyrs are the real victors, imitating the Lamb. Final judgement is also the only way not to embrace unrepentant evil, and the destructive impact of evil upon the perpetrators as much as the victims. Judgement is also contingent on human response to God’s offer of mercy. The fact that God may coerce at the end does not mean that we have a right to do this in the present.

Volf concludes that Christian convictions can be removed from their context and historical understanding and be used to justify violence, but this is faith malfunctioning. Such ‘thin’ faith ends up ‘baptising’ cultural ideas which are hard to resist rather than critiquing them. Furthermore, in the portrayal of religion in the world the violent minority will always get more coverage due to a fascination with violence and with hypocrisy.
Human Flourishing

Volf begins by looking at hope, which he defines as a positive expectation for something in the future that doesn’t come as a matter of course. This is different from optimism, which is based on good in the past and present. Hope, by contrast, requires things to change. It therefore comes back to God’s generosity and willingness to act. A key element of our hope is for human flourishing.

Human Flourishing and Satisfied Desires

Volf contrasts the idea of flourishing with mere satisfaction of each person’s desires. Instead, flourishing is based on an external standard for what a good human life is. As Augustine taught, humans flourish not only when their desires are satisfied but when their desires are right, aligned with God. As God is love, this means their desires are summed up in loving God and their neighbour.

Volf then analyses the departure of Western culture from this ideal. With the rise of humanism, God was removed from the picture, but love of neighbour in the form of universal human solidarity remained. However, in the end this also fell to one side, to be replaced by satisfying one’s own desires. This reduction of the idea of human flourishing is seen by Volf as the reason for the decline of hope. This can be traced historically in American society, from the Puritan hope in God to the secular hope in the nation as a guardian of liberty, and finally to a focus on pursuing one’s own desires.

This fulfilment of desire, disconnected from its original context, becomes unsatisfying. With possessions, for example, we end up comparing ourselves with others who have even more than we do. Even when we have more than everyone else, the victory is hollow. This is because we can only find true joy in God. Pleasure is only really pleasurable when it points to something meaningful and significant beyond it. We need God at the centre, which allows us to organise and structure our own desires, which gives them greater significance. We need a better account of human flourishing than mere satisfaction.

Faith and Human Flourishing

Human flourishing in this life is in fact central to faith. Faith is not simply concerned with the next life, despite secularist claims. This can be seen from major thinkers across several religious traditions, such as Al-Ghazali, Maimonides, and Augustine. There may be disagreement between religions about what flourishing looks like, but there is agreement on its importance. Indeed, this vision was what once drove higher education, which was seen not as preparation for a particular career, but for a good human life.

Most ethical thinking, religious and otherwise, has in the past connected what it is for humans to flourish with certain facts about what the world was like, and what it meant to be human. To many today, however, such questions are irrelevant because they provide answers that contradict the immediate experience of satisfaction. Rather than our ideas defining what satisfies us, the experience of satisfaction is used to judge our ideas. As satisfaction varies by person, relativism ends up being preferred.
Faith has to return to the view that what satisfies us, and what counts as human flourishing, must be defined by our idea of God. God is not there to legitimise existing experiences. God is love and has created and commanded us to love him and our neighbour, and it is here that a flourishing human life is to be found.

Christians must show that the idea of God is indeed relevant to human flourishing, and to modern ethical questions. In other words, we need to do the work of application. Our lives also need to make this look plausible. This comes from believing thoroughly ourselves that faith in God is vital to human flourishing, and showing this in the way we think and act.

Identity and Difference

Christianity is no longer dominant in the West but is one player among many. Being prophetic remains central to Christianity, but we increasingly do it from the margins of society. Some Christians respond with nostalgia for the past, dread for the future and anxiety at these present circumstances. This response is odd given how the church started, and the confidence and creativity that emerged despite early persecution.

A Church or a Sect

Max Weber made a distinction between a church and a sect, and highlighted the different characteristics of religious movements in each category. Volf uses this to show some of the changes faith has undergone in the West. For example, religion is less something you are born into (Weber’s church), but more something you choose (Weber’s sect), in the modern world. Secondly, there is a greater focus in a sect on being distinct from the world outside, in contrast to a Weber’s church.

However, Volf critiques Weber’s third and fourth distinctions between church and sect. To Weber, churches affirm the world while sects deny it. In fact the modern world is so complex it cannot be affirmed or denied as a whole. The fourth distinction between a church at the centre of society and a sect at its margins is also too simplistic. There are many diverse kinds of influence today, and power is no longer found mainly at the centre. Changes that come about are now local and piecemeal.

Responses to a New Situation

Volf then evaluates three responses to this new situation: accommodation, post-liberalism and rejection of the world. Accommodation is meant to prevent the church becoming irrelevant by seeing modern trends as an expression of God’s will (e.g. classic liberalism). However, the age changes too fast, and contemporary culture is in any case pluralistic, which makes this a questionable approach. Simplistic rejection of accommodation, however, is often accommodation in itself to different features of the modern world (e.g. fundamentalism).

The post-liberal approach seeks to avoid conformity by interpreting world history on the basis of the Biblical story alone. In this view, there is no compatibility between Christian and non-Christian worldviews. However, there must be some overlap, or communication would be impossible, as would a readiness to listen and even learn from others. The post-liberal approach puts this at risk.
Separatist programmes involve leaving the world altogether. The world is like a foreign country. However, this can lead to the malfunctions of idleness and coercion discussed above. God is the Creator and Sustainer of the world. We are only estranged from the world insofar as it is estranged from God, and separation will only take such a radical form in a badly deformed culture, such as Nazi Germany.

A Better Response

Participants in a culture change it in different ways, even when they are not the dominant members of that culture, as studies of colonial societies have shown. As Christians, sometimes we follow the surrounding culture (e.g. with cutlery), but at other times we use something general in a different way (e.g. a meal to show hospitality) which may in turn affect how we do it. Words and institutions are also defined differently (e.g. marriage). At other times faith is more radical, rejecting things like slavery, and proposing new things not previously envisaged.

This complexity is what is needed, not the simple solution of total transformation or accommodation. The New Jerusalem, after all, is God’s work and not ours. Our approach in the present will be more piecemeal, augmenting an existing city not building a new one from scratch. Nonetheless, we cannot accommodate completely and erase our difference. Our identity is not based on similarity to the culture or difference from it. Instead our identity is in Christ.

Our relationship to the surrounding culture must also be governed by love. Christ came to all, friends and enemies, and we must do the same. While there must be boundaries to preserve Christianity’s distinctiveness, those boundaries must be permeable, allowing dialogue with and receptivity to those outside. This is the basis for a deeper and more comprehensive engagement with the surrounding culture, affirming where it is good and seeking achievable change where it is not.

Sharing Wisdom

Our witness to non-Christians can best be characterised as sharing wisdom. This involved pointing people away from small hopes (e.g. material satisfaction), towards bigger ones, and by seeking solutions to the world’s great conflicts, including ones which appear to be legitimised by religion. In this, faith is not an addition to life, but a way of life itself, which we describe as wisdom. For Christians wisdom is also embodied in Christ.

Wisdom is therefore not a matter of personal preference, but an eternal truth that should be shared, and which seeks to be shared, with others. We are commanded to share Christ with others, as an expression of our love and God’s love for them. However, wisdom also seeks to be imparted, as it is part of the prophetic character of our faith, and the monotheism which means that all are on the same terms with God.

There is an overlap between sharing specific insights into situations from our faith, sharing our faith as a way of life, and sharing Christ with others – all three are described as wisdom. We are to share the wisdom of our faith even when this results in opposition and persecution, though we are warned not to cast our pearls before swine.
Giving Wisdom

Sharing wisdom is meant to be a gift, but it is like playing someone a piece of music in that their gain is not your loss. As we are witnesses to Christ, such wisdom cannot be imposed. Nor can it be a ‘product’ that is ‘sold’ to people, as a product is tailored to fit the buyer, often exaggerated by advertising, and the buyer can pick and choose what they like – not so with wisdom!

At the most fundamental level of defining what wisdom is and working in the minds and hearts of those who receive it, it is God and not us who is active. Wisdom is already defined by Christ, and people will not accept it without the work of the Spirit. This prevents us either from changing the message to make it more palatable or imposing it on others by force.

Receiving Wisdom

We can receive wisdom from those of other faiths and traditions even while we see Christ as the source of all wisdom. The Early Fathers reveal this in their use of Jewish Scriptures and of Greek philosophy. All wisdom is Christ’s wisdom, and the depth and breadth of Christ allows a deep and broad search for wisdom that goes beyond our own background. Those outside the church may even be used by God prophetically to challenge us.

This is not an invitation to pluralism, however. What we adopt must resonate with the centrality of Christ, and such adaptation can be distinguished from those who leave Christianity completely and centre their life on something else. For us to be centred on Christ and receive wisdom from others does not imply that these others are also centred on Christ.

Wisdom and Love

Sharing wisdom in this way is a form of love, and it is love that defines how we do it. However, we must recognise that love has been absent in the past, and our dialogues must include repentance and forgiveness over this. We must repent of past mistakes, and forgive others who have acted similarly towards the church, examining our history and ‘purifying the memory’.

Our offer of forgiveness must not be conditional on the repentance of others, as forgiveness is not simply a nugget of wisdom, but it is wisdom itself. Forgiveness is to acknowledge a wrong was done but not to let it count against the wrongdoer, in order to restore communion. Such forgiveness itself is a sharing of wisdom, and to refuse to forgive is to deny wisdom. It is not one option out of many that we suggest, but the only solution to vast conflicts.

Public Engagement

Despite the secularisation thesis, religion is flourishing, showing that the thesis itself is Eurocentric. Secularism, once thought of as liberation, has itself been used for oppression. Christianity and Islam are the two fastest growing movements, in the context of a very diverse world, and the elimination of a shared religious culture in the West, and the privacy of faith commitments.
Liberal Values

Liberal democracy is based on freedom and state neutrality, and it has usually been assumed that religious people should not bring their faith into the public square. To insist on this, however, goes against real liberalism, as secularism itself is a rival worldview that is favoured by this arrangement. Impartiality is more coherent, as this does not exclude religious people arguing on a religious basis.

Such a political arrangement has a Christian foundation. All are equal before God, and the Golden Rule means that we must give others the same rights and freedoms we expect. It is harder to embrace this from a dominant political position, but easier from the margins. This system allows religious people to speak with their own voice. The fear this creates is that we will return to religious wars, as there is no common core between religions to give unity.

Pluralism

Pluralism, which argues that all religions are manifestations of one truth, is often seen as the best response to this risk of violence and exclusivity. However, this relativizes people’s sincere religious convictions, and ends up excluding people anyway when they reject this pluralist assumption. In any case, going from the overlapping concerns of religion to the idea of a ‘common core’ is far too simplistic.

This raises the question of how believers are to use their distinctive voice in a pluralist society. Religion cannot be defined by a ‘common core’ or simply by where a religion differs from others. Instead, religions define themselves by their own distinctive structure of beliefs, whether they overlap with others or not. Religions relate to others not simply by accepting or rejecting, but in the complex way they also relate to culture (see above).

The question of how to prevent coercion remains, but we must note that coercion is already here, as can be seen in European secularist responses to Muslims, for example. The best antidote to coercion is not secularism but the use of the resources of each tradition, religious and secular, to promote peace.

How do we do it?

Volf identifies three ways of doing this. First he notes the potential within Christianity, in focusing on Christ, the offer of the Gospel and the command to love. This combines moral clarity to reject evil with compassion for those who do evil. This, and the insistence on dialogue with those outside, is Christianity’s distinctive contribution to promoting peace.

His second approach is borrowed from G. E. Lessing, who proposed that religions should seek to rival each other in love more than in arguments, showing their power through gentleness and generosity. While, contra Lessing, we cannot give up on truth claims altogether, showing truth in love is a sure guard against violence and coercion.

Finally, Volf proposes ‘hermeneutical hospitality’ where believers look at each other’s Scriptures and discuss them, looking for wisdom and seeing how others perceive our own texts. This is not aimed at
finding some easy ‘resolution’ or ‘common core’ but it encourages friendly hospitable and generous relations even in the midst of disagreement.

**Conclusion**

Volf concludes by examining Barack Obama’s 2009 speech in Cairo as an example of the approach he has been advocating, in contrast to the ‘clash of civilisations’ rhetoric that had predominated after 9/11. However, if this approach is not adopted, we have nothing to look forward to but the coercive religion found in Qutb, or the dogmatic secularist approach which uses Qutb and those like him as justification. Volf’s different path is therefore vital for religious believers to function well in a pluralist society, and yet prophetically critique current debate about what it means to be human.

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<th>Qutb/Totalitarian Approach</th>
<th>Volf/Political Pluralist Approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is only one God, so God has absolute sovereignty on earth.</td>
<td>There is only one God, but his command is to love our neighbours as ourselves. This commits us to pluralism.</td>
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<tr>
<td>All human authority is illicit except that of God and his revelation.</td>
<td>God has our ultimate allegiance, but human authority can be an expression of God’s will.</td>
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<td>Guidance for life comes from God alone through revelation.</td>
<td>God does guide us by revelation, but our understanding is fallible, and many areas are unregulated and left to our judgement. Goodness, truth and beauty can be found in other cultures and religions.</td>
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<td>Faith is a whole way of life, from which we must directly derive all our values. Believers must therefore cut themselves off from unbelieving communities.</td>
<td>Our values must be compatible with our faith, but do not need to be derived from it alone. Believers are to be in the world and not of the world, and be different in following Christ rather than in establishing a different civilisation.</td>
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<td>Laws revealed by God are no less universal than the laws of nature.</td>
<td>While God’s laws have universal validity, they may not be imposed on the will of the people but must be adopted democratically if they are adopted as laws at all.</td>
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<td>Believers have a duty to take power from those who do not believe.</td>
<td>‘Christians have no such duty,’ and a violent Christian revolution would be deeply unchristian. Christ brought grace and mercy rather than coercion, so the imposition of Christianity is a serious malfunction of Christian faith.</td>
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<td>Faith must nonetheless be embraced freely and without compulsion.</td>
<td>There should indeed be no compulsion, but compulsion includes imposing a religious political or legal system on people. Instead we affirm political freedom of religion.</td>
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