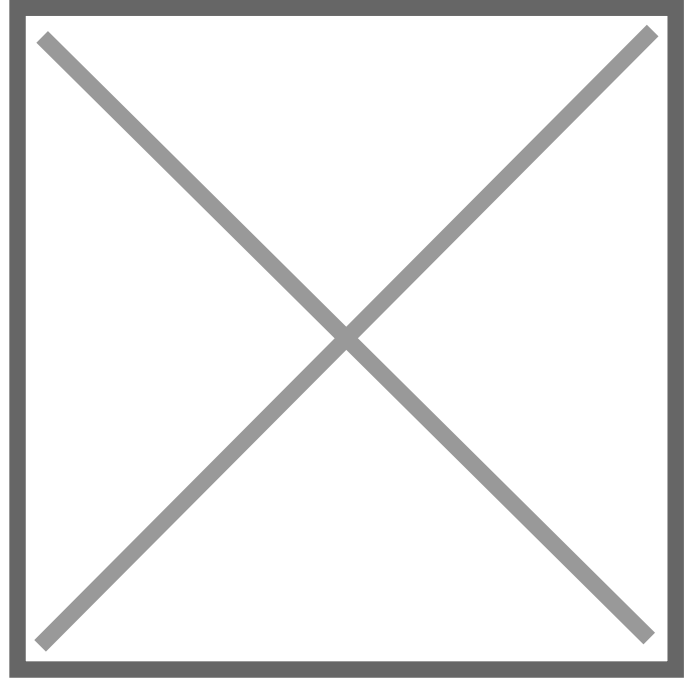


FOCUS – Exclusion and embrace

by Dr. James Read

One of the exciting new ventures for the Ethics Centre in 2001 will be a theology and ethics symposium that we are co-sponsoring with the international Doctrine Council. As part of the rationale for the symposium we have said: “The Army has a contribution to make to theological/ethical dialogue in the church, especially with respect to the inclusive gospel. As our internationalism is crucial to the credibility of our witness to a universal gospel, so the nurturing of Salvationist theologians/ethicists from all regions is crucial to our theological/ethical development.”

So in May about 60 Salvationists from around the world, including the Chief of the Staff and all the members of the Doctrine Council, will be hunkered down in Winnipeg for four days to sharpen our skills in Christian theology and ethics. Joining us will be Professor Miroslav Volf of Yale Divinity School, one of the world’s foremost evangelical theologians.



Volf is originally Croatian. That means the events tearing apart Yugoslavia in the past decade have been tearing his own soul. *Exclusion & Embrace*, a profound book he wrote while a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, is in some respects his effort to come to grips with all of that theologically.

He recounts this story of a war-ravaged Yugoslavian woman: “I am a Muslim, and I am 35- years-old. To my second son who was just born, I gave the name ‘Jihad,’ so he would not forget the testament of his mother—revenge. The first time I put my baby at my breast I told him, ‘May this milk choke you if you forget.’ So be it. The Serbs taught me to hate. For the last two months there was nothing in me. No pain, no bitterness. Only hatred. I taught these children to love. I did. I am a teacher of literature. I was born in Ilija, and I almost died there. My student, Zoran, the only son of my neighbor, urinated into my mouth. As the bearded hooligans standing around laughed, he told me: ‘You are good for nothing else, you stinking Muslim woman...’ I do not know whether I first heard the cry or felt the blow. My former colleague, a teacher of physics, was yelling like mad, ‘Utasha, utasha....’ And kept hitting me. Wherever he could. I have become insensitive to pain. But my soul? It hurts. I taught them to love and all the while they were making preparations to destroy everything that is not of the Orthodox faith. Jihad—war. This is the only way...”

Her statement becomes Volf’s question. Is Jihad the only way? This Muslim woman has justice on her side when she cries for revenge. But the Serbs who abused her, and the Serbs whom her son is destined to abuse, will claim justice on their side too. And to some degree they are all right. So is there any ethically legitimate hope this side of heaven?

You have to read the book to begin to get a real sense of Volf’s alternative. But in brief it is that the cycle of justice must be broken by action that emulates the embrace Jesus extends from the cross.

Embracing is a drama in four acts.

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“Act one: *opening* the arms....a sign of discontent with my own self-enclosed identity, a code of *desire* for the other....The self that is ‘full of itself’ can neither receive the other nor make a genuine movement toward the other.

“Act two: *waiting*....We can describe waiting as the work of the desiring self on itself for the sake of the integrity of the other—the other, who may not want to be embraced but left alone....The other cannot be coerced or manipulated into an embrace. If embrace takes place, it will always be because the other has desired the self just as the self has desired the other.

“Act three: *closing* the arms....In an embrace a host is a guest and a guest is a host. Though one’s self may receive or give more than the other, each must enter the space of the other, feel the presence of the other in the self, and make its own presence felt. Without such reciprocity, there is no embrace.

“Act four: *opening* the arms again....If the embrace is not to cancel itself, the arms must open again...[otherwise] embrace would signal the final disappearance of the ‘I’ into the ‘we’ that is characteristic not only of totalitarian regimes but of many cultural movements and family relations.”

In one sense Jesus was unjustly *put* to death. In another and more profound sense, he *went* to the cross of his own accord. So that he might, in Volf’s phrase, begin the drama of embrace—to open his arms even to us his enemies; to wait for us to respond; to enclose us in love; and then to release us so we can embrace others in turn.

Professor Volf asks: “Does the crucified Messiah have any bearing on our lives in a world of half-truths and skewed justice?” Christian ethics is an effort to say how the answer “Yes” fits the particularities of life. Salvationists ought to have something to contribute to that answer. And that’s why we’ll be meeting for a symposium in May. Pray for us, please.