

From Exclusion to Embrace: Reflections on Reconciliation

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Mr. President, Mr. Minister, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen: It is indeed my honor to address you today on the day of the opening of a new session of the General Assembly. It is appropriate, in this place where you do such important and tireless work to resolve many of the conflicts that rage around our world, for us to come before God and ask for God's wisdom and God's guidance. I thank you for your attention for a few moments as I reflect on the theme for today.

Allow me to start by drawing your attention to the character of the world in which we live. I will not do so by quoting statistics that you know better than I do; instead I will offer something written by a young Jewish poet immediately after World War II. It is a poem with unpredictable rhythms, a poem with grim metaphors, a poem with a startling combination of tenderness and brutality. Here is the first stanza.

Black milk of daybreak.
We drink it at evening.
We drink it at midday and morning.
We drink it at night.
We drink and we drink.
We shovel a grave in the air.
There you won't lie all too cramped.
A man lives in the house.
He plays with his vipers.
He writes.
He writes when it grows dark to Germany,
Of your golden-haired Margarita.
He writes it and steps out of doors.
And the stars are all sparkling.
He whistles his hounds to come close.
He whistles his Jews into rows,
Has them shovel a grave in the ground.
He commands us "play up for the dance."

This poem must be one of the most remarkable literary creations about the most infamous event of the twentieth century. The event is the Holocaust; the poem is Paul Celan's *Death Fugue*. Behind the outlandish images of digging graves "in the air" and "in the ground" and about "playing up for the dance" lies a brutal reality. It was common practice in Nazi concentration camps to order one group of prisoners to play or sing nostalgic tunes while others dug graves or were executed. Young German men who were cultivated enough to occupy themselves with writing, and who were tender enough to daydream about their girlfriends' golden hair, were masters of death.

Now the Holocaust is in many ways unique, perhaps not so much in its scale and brutality as in its technological sophistication and the single-mindedness with which this technology was directed against particular people. But the reason that I read this poem to you is because in so many places in the world

today, similar things are happening. In many respects, the Holocaust is not an anomaly in the world in which we live. Death is not just a blue-eyed master from Germany.

Rivers of blood have flowed and mountains of corpses have grown most recently in my own country, Croatia, as also in Macedonia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and other places – you name them, you know them all better than I do. They all bear horrifying testimony to the fact that the world in which we live is also a world in which, in many places, the most brutal practices of exclusion are the order of the day. And I have not even mentioned living rooms. You may know that, statistically, most of the violence in this world does not happen on battlefields but in homes, between estranged spouses, parents and children, and siblings.

The poem that I quoted, *Death Fugue*, ends with the following line: “Your golden hair, Margarita – your ashen hair, Shulamite.” It is clear who “Margarita” is: the blond-haired German girl, the romantic ideal drawn from Goethe’s poetry, of whom the executioner tenderly daydreams. But who is “Shulamite”? Shulamite is no ash blonde, but the black and comely maiden of the Song of Songs, whose hair has grown pale because the ash of burning has fallen on it. Shulamite is the Jewish people, experiencing the most horrid events in their history. When, in *Death Fugue*, Paul Celan puts together Margarita and Shulamite, nothing can reconcile them – they stand next to each other as symbols of the unbridgeable gap created by unspeakable evil.

Now it is understandable why this would be so for Celan; when he wrote this poem, the ovens that had sent his own parents and many of his compatriots into their grave in the air had barely cooled down. But the question remains for us today. Can we simply leave Margarita and Shulamite side by side as symbols of the unreconciliation that governs so prominently in our world, or can we do something? Can we do something in order to advocate or push for reconciliation? Sometimes it feels as if nothing, absolutely nothing can be done to make our world a more peaceful place, nothing except maybe to “contain the situation” – until the next outburst of violence.

I want to draw your attention to the resources offered by the Christian faith for fostering more peaceful social environments. One such resource is the essential theme that I have chosen for my talk: the theme of reconciliation – the reconciliation of humanity to God and the reconciliation of peoples and individuals to one another.

Now some of you might object, and it has been mentioned already today, that religion often is *not* a positive influence in the world of social relations today. Religion, Christianity included, can and does cause conflicts.

But in my experience, Christianity is a factor in conflict (1) when it is regarded as primarily a cultural resource, a marker of a particular group’s identity, in the name of which they then struggle against another group, rather than as the living faith of individuals and of whole communities; and (2) when there is only a superficial relationship to that faith, when one has not been inducted into, sustained and nurtured by a longstanding tradition of that faith. That is a controversial claim, I know. A similar claim could probably be made by other religions, but, at any rate, I think it stands for the Christian religion. There have been studies recently that have shown that.

So it is important, when one looks at the Christian faith, to look at the resources that lie at the center of it – and one of them, as I mentioned, is the notion of reconciliation. I want first to dispose of two *unacceptable* notions of reconciliation and then to advocate a third one.

One unacceptable notion of reconciliation is what some people have called *cheap reconciliation*. Cheap reconciliation is often associated with the critique of the apartheid regime in South Africa; in this context, cheap reconciliation is set in contrast to justice and peace. To pursue this sort of “reconciliation” means to give up the struggle for freedom, to give up the pursuit of justice. It means to put up with oppression. If we were to pursue such cheap reconciliation, it is clear that this would amount to the betrayal of those who suffer injustice, violence, and deception. But I think also that this would amount to the betrayal of the

Christian faith. As I read the Christian message, a prophetic strand which denounces injustice has a prominent place in it. You cannot take away that prophetic strand from the Christian message without gravely distorting it.

Cheap reconciliation, I think, is what has taken place in many countries in recent decades. Oppressive regimes have been replaced by more just governments, but those who committed crimes were never brought to justice – in the name of national reconciliation. Strategies to contain them simply do not rock the boat. That kind of strategy has its own virtues but has significant disadvantages as well. Yet, if I see things rightly, in western cultures especially, cheap reconciliation is not so much of a problem. If anything, we are tempted to pursue justice without even asking the question of reconciliation.

That brings me to the second unacceptable notion of reconciliation. This might be described as follows: *first justice, then reconciliation*. This means *pursue justice first*. Once you have attended to questions of justice, once the requirements of justice have been satisfied, then we can sit around the table and talk about reconciliation. I suggest that this way of going about “reconciliation” suffers from at least three major problems.

First, taken seriously, this stance, *first justice, then reconciliation*, is impossible. As Nietzsche – not a theologian but nonetheless a wise western philosopher – rightly noted, “Given the nature of human interaction, all pursuit of justice not only rests upon partial injustices but also creates new injustices.”

Moreover, all accounts of what is “just” are to some extent relative to a particular group and therefore invariably contested by rival groups. Those of you who have two or more children know exactly what I am talking about. How do you get to the bottom of the little quarrels that happen between children? It’s virtually impossible, because each of them has their own perspective. Multiply that in a certain way, and you get the situation of nations. So no peace is possible within the over-arching framework of strict justice for the simple reason that no strict justice is possible.

Second, even if justice could be done, it would be insufficient, because justice done would not really bring people together. In order to have healing, you have to have people brought together and reconciled.

One of the reasons why this is so is because our identities, our personal and collective identities, are not simply self-contained and internally determined; rather, they are always shaped by interaction with other people. I am Miroslav Volf, not only because I am distinct from my wife, Judy Gundry-Volf, but also because over the past 20 years, I have been shaped by a relationship with her. This holds true also for nations. I was talking to the Ambassador from Croatia this morning. It just happens to be the case that to be a Croatian means to have Serbs as your neighbors. You may not like it, and we certainly have not liked it at certain points because it was a difficult relationship. But that is the way it is.

Thirdly, justice pursued first – in addition to being strictly impossible and anyway insufficient – would also be undesirable. Recall the Old Testament law “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” We think that is very excessive, very harsh; and yet when you think about it, it’s not sufficiently just. Say somebody breaks my tooth. How can it be just if, in recompense, I or somebody else breaks only one of that person’s teeth? Our relationship is asymmetrical: I haven’t done any wrong to that person. So it would seem that at least two of his teeth ought to be broken! Then we might have something like justice! But it should be clear that if we pursue “street” justice in such ways, the result will be a maimed and finally humanly unsustainable world.

As an alternative, I want to look at the resources that lie at the very heart of the Christian tradition. At this center we find the narrative, the story, the event of the cross of Christ as an act of reconciliation of God with humanity. On the cross of Christ, God is manifested as the God who, though in no way indifferent toward the distinction between good and evil, nonetheless lets the sun shine on both the good and the evil; as the God of infinite and indiscriminate love who died for the ungodly in order to bring them into divine communion; the God who offers grace even to the vilest evildoer.

I want to draw four implications from this Christian account of who God is for our understanding of inter-human relations.

First, *the will to embrace another person is unconditional*. The starting point must be the primacy of the will to embrace. Since the God of Christian belief is the God of unconditional love and the God who died for the ungodly, the will to embrace the other, even the evil other, is a fundamental Christian obligation. The will to give ourselves to others and “welcome” them, the will to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity. The will to embrace precedes any “truth” about others and any construction of their “justice.” This will is absolutely indiscriminate and strictly immutable; it transcends the moral mapping of the social world into “good” and “evil.”

This is a scandal when you think about it. But it is qualified by my second point. *Truth and justice are preconditions of actual embrace*. Notice that I have described *the will to embrace* as unconditional and indiscriminate, not the embrace itself. A genuine embrace – an embrace that neither play-acts acceptance nor crushes the other – cannot take place until the truth has been said and justice established.

Hence the will to embrace includes in itself the will to find out what is the case and the will to determine what is just; the will to embrace includes the will to rectify the wrongs that have been done and the will to reshape relationships so as to correspond to truth and justice.

But does this not bring us back to the unacceptable *first justice, then reconciliation*? Not quite. For, third, *the will to embrace is the framework of the search for truth and justice*. How do we find what has transpired between people so as to be able to pursue truth and justice in a particular case? My argument is this: Unless you will to embrace and be reconciled to the other, you will not find what is truth and what is justice. For you can always interpret somebody’s outwardly generous action as a covertly violent action – as a bouquet of flowers in which a dagger is hidden. You have to want to see the other’s goodness in order actually to perceive it.

Fourth and finally, *embrace is the horizon of the struggle for justice*. As in many of our activities, so in the struggle for justice: much depends on the *telos*, on the goal of that struggle. Toward what is it oriented? Is it oriented simply toward ensuring that everyone gets what one deserves? Or is it oriented toward the larger goal of healing relationships? My contention is that it must be oriented precisely toward the latter. The reason is simple. You will have justice only if you strive for something greater than justice, only if you strive after love.

I leave you, then, with two things: *the will to embrace* and *an emphasis on creativity*, on finding out how one ought to implement that will in particular cases. My time is up and I want to invoke God’s wisdom since I don’t have time to suggest how you would acquire or implement the will to embrace in concrete situations, whether in your personal or in your more communal lives. I want to leave you with a challenge and a prayer for your success.

Because of the crisis of September 11th that was happening only 2 miles away, Dr. Volf was unable to finish his speech. The article below reflects the remaining comments he wanted to convey at the International Prayer Breakfast on September 11, 2001.

Piercing the Heart

By Miroslav Volf

He was sitting quietly, almost impassively, as I talked to a group of people gathered in Zagreb at the launching of the Croatian translation of my book *Exclusion and Embrace*. The forcefulness and impatience with which he asked his question as he brought the book to be signed took me by surprise. “But where does that will come from, that will to embrace the enemy?”

I had just finished explaining one of the central claims of the book. I had argued that truth, justice and peace are unavailable without the will to embrace the other. Moreover, the will to embrace must precede any “truth” about others and any construction of their “justice.” In a sense, everything in my argument depended on that will, but I said nothing about how to acquire or sustain it; I simply assumed it.

“Is it instinctive?” he inquired.

“No, instinctive would not be quite the right word, but you are getting at something important with that term...” I said somewhat haltingly. He interrupted me.

“So what then? Can one learn to *want* to embrace the evildoer?”

“Yes, one can learn to will rightly...” As I was responding, my mind was following another train of thought. “To learn,” I reasoned, “a student has to be willing to learn. But what if the student is unwilling?” I was back at the original problem. Moving full circle back to my interlocutor’s initial question, I heard myself talking to him about engaging in spiritual disciplines such as prayer and the reading of scriptures, about seeking communities that practice embrace and about studying the lives of the saints. But the look in his eyes told me what I knew well myself. What I said might be important, but I had not answered his question: I had removed the problem one step further. One has to *want* to engage in spiritual disciplines; one has to *want* to seek out communities that practice embrace.

Other people were hustling to get a few words scribbled into their books or to talk, so our conversation ended. But the problem of the will that wills not what it ought remained with me.

Reflecting on his own inner struggle, the apostle Paul wrote: “For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate.” From the perspective of my questioner, Paul had it easy: he was captive to sin he did not want to commit. My interlocutor’s question was implying something more radical: a willing captivity to sin. At issue was not simply the inability to do the good, but the unwillingness even to attempt doing it. It is difficult enough when people are internally divided and do what they would rather not. But sometimes they seem at one with themselves for doing evil.

The next morning a journalist asked basically the same question. “How can we acquire the desire for reconciliation? How can we sincerely and simply desire to embrace the enemy?” I talked to her about the human propensity to let that desire be buried under the mass of negative images and experiences generated in conflicts. We let the inner logic of the struggle dominate our actions and attitudes, a logic that demands that we see enemies only as enemies so that we can fight and finally overcome them. I implied that we all possess the will to embrace the other, as an aspect of the desire for good implanted in us by our Creator. But conflicts with others generate and intensify a struggle within ourselves in which the will to exclusion often wins and crowds out the will to embrace.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine reflects autobiographically about such a perversion of the will. He recalls being “tied down not by irons outside myself, but my own iron will. The Enemy had control of the power of my will and from it he had fashioned a chain for me and had bound me in it.” By capturing the

will, the Enemy had enslaved the very principle of the self's freedom. The will willed wrongly, and became captive to the evil it willed. What can free the captive will? When the will is bent on exclusion, what can turn it toward embrace? This was the question of my impatient interlocutor, which I did not get to address.

Ultimately, the only answer possible is the one Augustine gave. Addressing God, he wrote about his conversion, "Thou hadst pierced our heart with the arrow of Thy charity." Liberation of the will by a piercing of the heart? Love as the instrument of piercing? Piercing must take place if the walls of the dungeon in which the will has incarcerated itself are to be broken and the will freed. But if the heart is not to be violated, love will have to do the piercing – ultimately divine love, which comes not only from the outside, but is always inside the dungeon, tearing at its walls and striving to transmute the will to exclude into the will to embrace.

Elsewhere Augustine describes the liberation of his will as follows: "Yet Thou, O Lord, art good and merciful and didst not look propitiously upon the depths of my death and didst empty out with Thy right hand the sea of corruption from the lowest region of my heart. And this Thy whole gift was, to nill what I willed, and to will what Thou willedst."

The next time I am asked about the origin of the will to embrace, I'll repeat everything I said to my two prospective dialogue partners from Zagreb. But in the same breath I'll also talk about the freeing of our wills by the love which God has shown to us in that Christ died for us "while we were still sinners" and which was "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

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