

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Miroslav Volf. *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011. Hdbk. 167 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1587432989.

As evidenced in the news, the role of faith and spirituality in the public sphere is a matter of interest and concern for people of faith as well as for those who envision a secular society. Miroslav Volf engages this conversation as he focuses the reader's attention on questions related to how Christ-followers can engage the public life and discourse of society. In chapter 1 Volf identifies how the malfunctions of faith (i.e., functional reduction, idolatric substitution, idleness, and coercion) limit a Christian's participation in the public discourse. In chapter 2 he demonstrates how an active faith corrects for idling and in chapter 3 he addresses the problem of coercion, arguing that the Christian faith is neither coercive nor violent. These reflections form the backdrop for a theological reframe (ch. 4) of human flourishing that looks beyond the self and towards the interpersonal, particularly our relationships with those who are unlike ourselves.

Chapter 5 reflects on the character of an engaged faith, identifying three inadequate responses to pluralism: accommodation, reversing the direction of conformation, and retreat. Volf then argues for a fourth response, *internal difference*, which is an attitude rooted in the believer's identity as a Christ follower, grounding the person as s/he interacts with the wider society and permitting him/her to be concerned with all aspects of culture (p. 97). Next he explores two modes of engagement: witness (ch. 6) and participation in public life (ch. 7). Volf characterizes witness as wisdom (i.e., an integrated way of life, concrete advice, and the person of Christ) that is shared in a dialogical

encounter that honors God and the other. Whereas Volf's discussion of sharing wisdom acknowledges differences between individuals, his comments on public engagement propose that rather than ban religion from the public sphere a truly liberal democracy will recognize the plurality of values present and invite religion into the public sphere in ways that foster respectful dialogue on matters related to the public good. Volf envisions that this dialogue would allow participants to become aware of overlapping concerns (i.e., points of co-operation) and differences (i.e., points for dialogue and understanding). For Volf, this dialogue about matters of public concern is an opportunity for Christ-followers to embody Christ's grace while affirming the distinct identity of their Christian voice.

From a Canadian perspective, which lacks the cultural and political narratives that dominate American Christianity, Volf's text not only presents a cogent argument for bringing faith into the public sphere, it offers a credible alternative to the options of private faith, secularism, and reactionism. Indeed, Christians who work in academia and the public sector, as well as professions whose codes of ethics protect clients from the imposition of a professional's values, are likely to find that this text either confirms their current mode of engaging the social discourse or offers a new mode of engagement. In either case, Volf demonstrates that, at the very least, there is a place for informed discussion among professionals as to the role of religion in society and its role in promoting the common good. For this reason, *A Public Faith* is a book that cries out to be read by all Christ-followers who work in the public sphere (civil servants, peace officers, politicians, social workers, teachers, and so on) as well as those who are their pastors.

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