

Culture and Identity in the Thought of Miroslav Volf. Current Perspectives for Postmodern Society

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ABSTRACT: Identity has always played an important role in how people have related to each other and how society has functioned. The identity crisis in today's society is profound and there is a need for solutions that reconcile justice with the memories of the past and help people to live in human communities with the ideals of harmony and the common good. Volf's theology of identity, based on the theology of Scripture, can be the answer to the crisis experienced by humanity. The way in which Scripture is revealed through Volf's theology leads to a re-examination of the foundations on which the inner structure of the human being is built. The theology of identity, complex and anchored in the text of Scripture, opens new horizons to profound biblical truths from a social perspective. For the definition of the theology of identity, central to Miroslav Volf's thinking, the truth of Scripture and its interpretation open up new horizons for understanding inter-human relations.

KEYWORDS: embracing theology, identity, cultural identity, history

Introduction

The sudden death of George Floyd has attracted worldwide attention and has prompted both American and, more broadly, Western society to ask questions about the factors that led to such a tragedy. Floyd's death is only the tip of the iceberg because, in reality, many causes can be identified behind his death. An overall analysis, taking into account the social, political, economic and religious context of George Floyd's death, leads us to the clear conclusion that we are dealing with a profound crisis of individual and social identity, a crisis that manifests itself in various forms (Llopis 2020). If we look at recent world history, the conflict in the Gaza Strip also bears the imprint of cultural and religious identity (Ashmore, Jussim and Wilder 2001). The issue of human identity becomes important because understanding it could provide a solution to conflicts in society, a way for people, despite their differences, to live together in relation to a common good (Măcelaru 2014a, 233-236; 2014b, 169-174; 2015, 109-115; 2016, 13-19; 2017, 49-56).

Identity - a central concept in Miroslav Volf's theology

We believe that today's problems in society can have multiple causes, but if we refer to the view that Miroslav Volf holds, we are challenged to observe that the fundamental problem of Western society is that it is going through an identity crisis. So whenever we talk about social ruptures in society, we have to talk about identity. If we are interested in talking about reconciliation as the main solution (Volf 2014, 27) to tense situations, then we also have to talk about identity. Talking about the future of our world, Volf says that it „depends on how we deal with identity and differences” (Volf 2014, 43). In the American theologian's view, we cannot function as church and as individuals, but above all we cannot sustain human well-being and the common good without first understanding our own identity (Volf 2022, 101-102). In his view, identity influences how we socialize (Jersak and Hardin 2007, 274-292) or contribute to the good of society. When he refers to some recent negative aspects, when he talks about the war in the former Yugoslavia (1991-1995),

Volf seeks to understand the causes that led to its outbreak and amplification and concludes that we are dealing with a problem of social identity, which is based on the *exclusion of the other* (Volf 2014, 83). Looking at the horrors of the war in Croatia, he says: „Then and there it became clear to me what, in a way, I had known all along: the problem of ethnic and cultural conflict is part of a larger problem of identity and otherness.” (Volf 2014, 38). In the introduction to *Exclusion and Embrace*, he asks rhetorically, „Could it be that the desire for identity is fuelling much of the 50 or so ongoing conflicts across the globe?” (Volf 2014, 40). And he wonders: „But don't I attach too much importance to identity?” (Volf 2014, 40). It is clear that behind conflicts of all kinds, Volf sees a problem with identity because, in a distorted cultural understanding of identity, identity is placed at the center (Volf 2014, 40). With regard to distorted variants of the perception of identity, in the introduction to *The End of Memory*, Daniel Farcaş points out that the American author observes that, at the level of society, we are dealing with „the search for an *identity without otherness*” (Volf 2023, XiV).

In a recent interview, Miroslav Volf, speaking about nationalism (Michel 2003, 64), advocated open entities that do not exclude people and do not stir up conflict between them. He advocated open national identities (Volf 2023b).

Defining identity

It is important, before talking about Volf's understanding of identity, to look for ways of looking at how he defines identity. It will be obvious that we are not dealing with an immutable, rigid definition, but rather an open and fluid one. Given the methodology (DeJong 2011, 1-16) he uses in constructing his own theology we must be open to interpreting Volf's concept of *identity* in a less technical, rigid manner. The concept of identity can be understood, on some occasions, as the self (McGill, 2016, 28), but only in a general sense or, as I said, in a flexible way. Through the „self” and its expressions, identity finds various forms of expression (McGill 2016, 29). Professor Constantineanu says the following about the definition of identity: „The problem of identity is always a complex one, having to do both with the dynamic relationship between culture and individuals and with the individual's relationship with the «other»” (Constantineanu 2013). When related to God, the problem of identity takes on another, obviously theological, definition; speaking of human beings as images of the Trinity, authentic identity is seen as an act of embracing (Siân Willis 2013, 94). We note that, for Volf, the definition of identity has profound meanings, involving the self, the other and God. His understanding is close to that shared by Wolfhart Pannenberg. In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf quotes him as saying, „We look for the root of sin in the desire to define our identity - the instinctive will to be ourselves; this is written into the very structure of our self” (Volf 2014, 120-121). For Pannenberg, the notion of „openness to the world” is important because, through this expression, we can better understand his anthropology. At the same time, it is a vital expression in the way he defines human identity. „Openness to the world”, for Pannenberg, means that one's identity is determined by one's openness to the world, to the other and to God (Hollingsworth 2012). Volf's approach to the subject of identity is broadly along the same lines of interpretation.

The biblical interpretive framework of identity

In order to understand the theological and biblical foundation of Volf's understanding of identity, it is important to grasp how he interprets and applies biblical principles to real-life situations, which can become representative of how each of us understands identity theologically and aims to appropriate the coordinates of his thinking in this way.

Abraham's departure and cultural identity

Miroslav Volf introduces his theological explanation in the context of observing the deficient relationship between the cultural identity and the religious identity of the church. Historically, the relationship between the two has been difficult because the mixture of culture and religion (Rotaru 2023, 62-79) is a perfect combination for fuelling conflict (Măcelaru 2011, 167-173; 2014b, 169-174; 2014c, 283-290; 2014d, 67-78). Add to this what Volf calls the „sacralisation of cultures” (Volf 2014, 61) and you have the „legitimate” justification for conflict, with people feeling justified in resorting to violence. The inability to understand the relationship between culture and religion, which has frequently generated conflict, leads the American theologian to the idea that only finding a balance between distancing and belonging to religious culture can be the solution. Distancing is necessary for objective analysis and to help us understand our role within the culture. In other words, how can people live in a culture where there are different religious perspectives and still want peace? What would be the role of the church from this point of view? (Rotaru 2017, 57-76; 2012, 5). Would distancing fuel conflict or be a factor of balance and stability?

Volf thus turns to the biblical figure Abraham as a representative model and, by using the image of his departure from his own country, proposes a transformation of identity. He says: „At the heart of Christian identity is an exhaustive mutation of devotion from a particular culture and its gods to the god of all cultures... Departure is part of Christian identity” (Volf 2014, 62-63). We are not dealing here with blind displacement or a desire for emancipation, but with a desire to live and experience a new beginning. Volf contrasts Abraham with the apostle Paul, who in turn undergoes a *departure* that involves separation from his own genealogy and distancing himself from the cold, formal faith that had turned him into a persecutor. Volf believes that in order to preserve the essence of the balance between distancing and belonging we must accept that we have a God who is not limited to a particular culture, but, at the same time, has revealed Himself in its particularity. Therefore, we should seek „the God who is one and who is not hidden behind concrete religions” (Volf 2014, 70).

From the perspective of cultural diversity (Rotaru 2021, 87-92), one factor that poses great problems for social relationships is that relationships are understood from the narrow perspective of limiting culture-specific viewpoints. Volf proposes, in the difficult context of cultural identity that is on man, a broader understanding of the concept of „unity” that begins with the Lord's prayer (John 17:20-24). Through Christ's unity, cultural differences give way to „embrace” (Bryan 2022, 197-198). We can conclude that the relationship between belonging and distancing is vital because belonging without distancing creates intolerance and bigotry (Rotaru 2019, 214-215), while distancing without belonging leads to rejection of the culture of which individuals are a part. Therefore, Volf believes that we should reflect critically on our own culture in order to avoid extremes, but at the same time be able to promote peace and the common good. Despite the fact that we are dealing with cultural diversity, it should not lead us to conflict and exclusivism, but to respect and acceptance. In his view, we are talking about an open cultural identity that integrates values while remaining open to acceptance and tolerance. God's role in this kind of relationship - belonging and distancing - is to be One. He should not be „seized” by particular concrete religious forms, and we should be open to the fact that He can reveal and manifest Himself in other ways.

The Cross of Christ and the refocusing of the self

Miroslav Volf places great importance on the concept of exclusion, which is essential in understanding the *theology of identity*, but also on appreciating the concept of the opposite meaning, namely embracing. He defines exclusion as „severing the ties that bind by stepping out of the pattern of interdependence and settling into a position of sovereign independence” (Volf 2014, 94). Also speaking

of forms of manifestation, he says that „exclusion occurs when the violence of expulsion, assimilation or subjugation and the indifference of abandonment replace the dynamics of acceptance and rejection as well as the reciprocity of giving and receiving” (Volf 2014, 97-98). Volf believes that in order to solve social problems when talking about the consequences of exclusion, people should make judgments that do not lead to the exclusion of others and do not place them in a position of inferiority. The questions in this social context are: How can we eliminate the effects of exclusion? How can we be people of integrity who make judgments without suppressing our identity and at the same time without alienating the other, treating them as strangers through indifference or even violence? The biblical answer Volf finds to this question has to do with how we understand the Cross and how it marks our existence. From his point of view, man without Christ is an individual who has the self at the center of life, living the paradigm of exclusion of others. Therefore, according to Galatians 2:20, crucifixion should be understood as *de-centering* and *re-centering* of self.

By being «crucified with Christ», the self receives a new center - the Christ who occupies it and with whom it lives. Notice that the new center of the self is not a timeless «essence» hidden, deep within the human being, beneath the sediments of culture and history and untouched by «time and change», an essence just waiting to be discovered, unearthed, released. Likewise, the center is not an internal narrative on which the reverberating echo of the community's «ultimate vocabulary» and «ultimate narrative» has been written into the book of the self and whose integrity must be guarded from the editorial intrusions of competing «vocabularies» and «narratives». The center of the self - a center that is both inward and outward - is the story of Jesus Christ, which has become the story of the self. Specifically, the center is the crucified and risen Jesus Christ who became part of the very fabric of the self (Volf 2014, 97-98).

Volf's view of the relationship between the individual, the self and Christ has to do with the fact that he sees the self, the identity, as needing a reorientation away from an egoism inherent in human nature towards an altruism that has to do not with human endeavor, but with „the indwelling of Christ in us”. In his view, human identity is shaped by incorporating the story of Jesus Christ into one's story of self. And this incorporation is done through faith, baptism or Eucharist. For him, the self is not to be defined by one's own history or culture, by one's own narrative thread, but by the way in which man manages to live the experience of crucifixion, of the story of Christ, which becomes part of his identity structure. Moreover, Volf believes that the self, determined by one's own memories, can be made to live in harmony and peace, despite the injustices experienced, when these are passed through the filter of „the memory of Christ's death and resurrection” (Volf 2023, 117). In order for man not to be conditioned at the level of his inner experiences to exclude others, he must pass his life story, the injustices, the sorrows suffered through the filter of the experience and life lived by Christ on earth. „In terms of identity, we are *not fundamentally the sum of our past experiences* (any more than we are fundamentally our present experiences or our future hopes)” (Volf 2023, 221). In this process of reconstructing identity and, by implication, the self, man must pass his experience of life through the history of the Exodus, the Passion, the Eucharist and the final, eschatological experience of total healing. Christ's love, in this way, makes its mark on man's inner experience (Romans 5:8) and causes him to live outwardly the joy of being in harmony with others and embracing those who are different from himself.

The core of our identity is not in our hands, but in God's hands. We are most properly ourselves because God is in us and we are in God. Of course, what we or others have inscribed in our souls and bodies marks and shapes who we are. But it has no power to define us. God's love for us, indeed God's presence in us, and the fact that we are «raptured beyond» ourselves, like the fact that we are seated «in God» defines us in the deepest way as human beings and as individuals (Volf 2023, 221-222).

Of course, this theology of the cross, not only reconciles us to ourselves, but places us in a Trinitarian relationship. The theology that Volf proposes, which has Christ at its center, has an effect not only on the social level, but changes the very way we relate to the image of the Trinity (Oprean 2019, 198). This image, „through Christ,” makes us relate to the relationships within the Trinity as an example of what we can do and become in the social sphere (Volf 2009, 62).

The Trinity - a model of identity formation and a social model

For Volf, the doctrine of the Trinity is important because it projects an image of what we should look for in social relationships. The Trinity can function as a paradigm for the social relations in which we are engaged. But in order to cultivate such relationships, we need to understand the relationship between identity and the Trinity - in this way we can see the ways in which the image of the Trinity impacts our relationships. Volf posits several interpretive (Volf 1998, 407-410) principles, which highlight his ideas:

(i) *identity is irreducible*. Drawing on John 7:16, he argues that the identity of each person within the Trinity is distinct, but at the same time it is also interconnected with the other divine Persons. There is no dilution of the identity of any of the Persons of the Trinity. Applied to the social sphere, the idea expressed by Volf can become a model for understanding identity as he argues that while we are engaged in various social relationships, our identity is unique, special, and simultaneously distinct, being in a reciprocal relationship. Volf comes to this conclusion when he captures the fact that in the postmodern view of identity, identity is formed in a social context, its definition depending on the social environment in which the individual is situated. In order to avoid the dangers of relating to a secular dimension, Volf stresses personal autonomy and relational interdependence. He speaks of the constant risk that the individual may not affirm his or her self and thus be overwhelmed by the other and, at the same time, lead others into relationships involving manipulation or abuse.

(ii) *identity is not closed in on itself*. This implies that we are dealing with a dynamic, changing identity. Acceptance of the other conveys the possibility of sharing and integrating into one's own identity when it comes to the experience of others. What is remarkable is that identity is understood as the possibility of creating space for the other in one's own life.

„Through the two principles we speak of a configuration of identity, of the self that conveys that one is made up of self and other and that one's identity involves both distancing oneself from the other and embracing the other” (McGill 2016, 36-37).

Another important aspect that enhances our understanding of Volf's understanding of human identity has to do with the historico-theological perspective of the *perihistorical* model. At the basis of the understanding of human and collective identity is also this theological concept that Volf interprets from a biblical perspective and which proposes new insights into the understanding of inter-human relationships. Volf believes that the depth of social relations within the church is given by the presence of the Holy Spirit (Volf 1998, 240) in the human being. Social relationships are understood not so much as skills that individuals have and use to live in harmony within the community, but rather as a reflection of the inner guidance provided by the Holy Spirit. In this way, the church reflects the inner life of the Trinity (Volf 2021) in which the individual is both part of the community and a distinct person (Rotaru 2012a, 5).

Another important factor that relates to identity and social life is that each community (church) has its own identity structure, and any opportunity to come into contact with other human communities only enhances the idea of a universal (Catholic) church that reflects the nature of the Trinity (Volf 1998, 241-242).

Another event that proves extremely important and has the power to shape identity is the Eucharist. After the Holy Spirit has worked the inner transformation of man and opened up the prospects of a new world in which redeemed people live in a new creation, according to Volf the following happens: „In the Eucharist we celebrate the self-giving to others and the reception into ourselves of others, a reception which the Triune God has accomplished in the Christ's suffering, while being called and empowered to enact such dedication and such welcome outside in a world dominated by conflict” (Volf 2014, 166).

To concretize Volf's point, individuality and identity in the ecclesial context are marked by the personal and communal work of the Holy Spirit. From this perspective, social relations are influenced by spiritual dynamics, which are anchored in a specific cultural and historical context in which people live and in which they seek harmony and mutual understanding. The Eucharist plays an important role in understanding this ideal.

The parable of the prodigal son - the theology of embrace

The interpretative framework of the theology of embrace is best exposed when Volf speaks of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) as the means by which this theology can be most clearly expressed. The mode he uses to interpret the parable referred to is one in which one looks for the social and identity meanings that emerge when Christ presents the parable. Through it, Volf expresses some identity principles that also underline the theology of embrace, that is, the theology that represents for him the means by which the world can be socially repaired.

The first remark related to the interpretation of the parable is that „the very identity of each character is unimaginable without the other ”(Volf 2014, 196-197). This arises from the fact that each character in the parable is placed in a close social relationship with the other. If we refer to the younger brother's gesture of leaving his own home, it can be interpreted as a gesture of self-exclusion from relationships with others, and his return home is conveying the message that "the self has been constructed in relation to others and only returns to the „self through relationship with others. The first link with the other, in a distant land of broken relationships, is memory” (Volf 2014, 197).

The second remark comes from the perspective of the father, who has the role of the one who rebuilds the identity of the prodigal by embracing him (Luke 15:24,32). His role is to show that a man's identity changes as he is accepted into social relationships. The father's flexibility demonstrates the capacity and power of love tested in verbal confrontations with both sons. It is he who understands that change is only possible within a framework of embrace, not exclusion. The third remark comes from the perspective of the older brother - he is the one who „refuses to adjust his identity to make room for a brother tainted by transgression; the brother's transgression, not the memory of his former presence, now occupies the space vacated by the brother's departure” (Volf 2014, 201).

His identity is marked by the strength of his commitment to deeply rooted moral norms (Rotaru 2015, 318-322), but also by his inability to find himself in his relationship with his prodigal brother. What Volf sees as necessary for living out a theology of embrace in a biblical context is „the willingness to embrace independent of the quality of behavior ”(Volf 2014, 205).

He contrasts the moral approach to behavior with the relational approach. The *theology of embrace and identity* emphasizes that forgiveness, acceptance and living in harmony should not be based on moral behavior, but on mutual love and acceptance. In writing about the power of this perspective he aims to create a balance in inter-human relationships so as not to create the impression that his proposal is one that artificially promotes reconciliation and harmony.

When I read the story of the prodigal, I saw that grace, embrace, reconciliation prevail. Not cheap reconciliation - «nothing that happened between us matters, so let's embrace and everything will be fine». Everything would not be okay. But neither would the pursuit of what might be called «strict justice». As a way of solving problems between people, it simply won't work because strict justice is impossible in the real world we live in. The stage on which we fight for justice has been constructed partly by unjust means, and the struggle for justice itself always and inevitably creates new injustices. If our relationships are governed by the idea of strict justice, they will never be healed. Instead, I see in this story a double emphasis. One can distinguish in it the willingness to embrace and the embrace itself. The willingness to embrace the other is absolutely indiscriminate and unconditional. It does not depend on anything the other person has done and applies to everyone. The prodigal father runs to his son; he is willing to embrace him no matter what the son says. The will is there. And yet, full reconciliation occurs after the prodigal son's confession. It takes confession for the prodigal to be transformed into a son (Miller and Volf 1998).

Santrack (2016, 21) also talks about the role of the will which is important when we understand our own identity in relation to the „other”. The father's initiative in the parable, namely that „the father continues to reconfigure the order without destroying it, so as to maintain it as an order of embrace rather than exclusion” (Volf 2014, 206), is one that takes into account the factors involved: will, openness, repentance or the need to re-understand identity in the context of reconciliation.

Although we are tempted to expound the theology of embrace from this perspective alone, we must recognize that the central theme of Volf's theology cannot be limited to this parable alone (Volf 2010, 190; Volf discusses the *theology of the embrace* from the perspective of the passage in Acts 9:1.4-5, but also passages from the Epistle to the Romans, see Romans 4:5, Romans 5:10, Romans 15:7). For example, he sees the theology of the embrace as closely related to the event of Christ's crucifixion (Miller and Volf 1998).

Conclusion

The identity crisis in society seems deep (Rotaru 2020, 71-82) and without solution. Increasing conflicts involving various reasons and causes only make things worse at the social level. From this point of view, Volf argues that at the heart of many social, political, economic and religious conflicts is a deep identity crisis, which manifests itself in exclusivism, violence and opposition. Volf argues that we need a Christ-centered identity, one that involves anchoring in spiritual realities and that does away with the old paradigm that people define themselves by reference to their own culture and history understood through their own lenses. From this point of view, to have an identity in Christ (Rotaru 2012b, 5) requires distancing oneself from one's own culture and one's own landmarks. Only in this way can we talk about resolving social conflicts and promoting the common good.

Volf's biblical theology anchors us deeply in the dynamics of Trinitarian life, which is one that presents a relational identity and promotes individuality, but avoids tendencies towards exclusivism. The Eucharist and the theology of embrace are ways in which we are brought into relationship with different people and contribute to the realization of different kinds of community. Miroslav Volf's theology places identity transformed by Christ at the center of human existence as essential for promoting reconciliation and acceptance in a divided world.

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