Christ and Human Flourishing
An Introduction to the Thinking of Miroslav Volf
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Dr. Durr, members of the faculty, and students of the faculty, thank you so much for inviting me to be here today with you. You all have been so hospitable.

I must say that I approach this lecture with some trepidation. I am a New Testament scholar, not a systematian. While I have known Prof. Volf for some time and been his student at various times in my coursework at Yale, it has only been for a little more than a year that I have been his junior colleague at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture. Making matters worse, I understand that Prof. Volf will be here himself in June, so you will have ample opportunity to discover any and all inaccuracies in my portrayal of his thought at that time.

I suppose that means that I am cast now in the role of John the Baptist, so I will merely attempt to prepare the way for the one who comes after me—one the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to bend down and untie. He must increase, I must decrease, and all the rest. Be patient with me; he is coming.

Given the fact that my work with Prof. Volf has been relatively recent, while I will attempt to give something of an overview of Prof. Volf’s work, I will focus my remarks on the most recent work and, indeed, on where things are headed in the future.

This past semester, I taught a course in Yale College called “Life Worth Living,” which Prof. Volf pioneered last year and which I have stewarded this past spring during his research leave. In the course, we ask undergraduate students to wrestle with the most fundamental questions of life: what makes a life worth living? What is life for? What is the good life? What does it look like from the outside? What does it feel like from the inside? What does it require of us?

By far the most difficult unit for me to teach was the unit on Christianity—this despite (or seemingly because of) being a New Testament scholar and, indeed, a Christian pastor. It was alarming. Perhaps most alarming was the picture of the Christian account of the good life with which students began. They told me, presumably drawing more on their cultural knowledge of Christianity than on their reading of the Gospel of Luke (the text they had been given)—they told me that the Christian vision of the good life was quite minimal. On the Christian view, they said, nothing matters in life save for whether you go to heaven or to hell. All the rest of life—colors, tastes, smells, joys, sorrows, justice and injustice, love and hate—all this is devoid of meaning on the Christian view because, at the end of the day, the “salvation” decision or some equivalent thereof is the only thing that matters. This sets the eternal path. All else therefore recedes into the background.

This was their take not just on Christianity, but on theism generally. Theism, for these students, appeared to be world-denying. Belief in the transcendent, they feared, empties the mundane of its meaning. And, of course, my students are not alone in this concern. Martin Hägglund, Yale professor of Comparative Literature and Humanities, expresses a more intellectually subtle, but nevertheless quite similar concern. As for my students, for Hägglund the problem focuses quite specifically on the Christian promise of eternal life, which, Hägglund argues, is nonsense. In order for life to be meaningful, real things must be ventured and won or ventured and lost. An eternal bliss, he thinks, makes this impossible, thus emptying at least eternal life of its meaning—and, to the extent to which this life is continuous with the next, this life is at risk of losing its significance as well.

Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher of secularity, would be surprised by absolutely none of this. Modernity, he says, has everything to do with the privileging of “ordinary life.” Ironically, of course, this focus on ordi-
nary life was begun by Martin Luther and this is one of the reasons Taylor insists that secularity is merely a most radical form of Reformation. At any rate, this emphasis on “ordinary life” renders suspect most any appeal to the transcendent. This is a deep and important problem for contemporary theology.

Prof. Volf’s work—while it has covered a wide range of topics—can be seen as an account of this relation between transcendence and the mundane, between transcendence and ordinary life: how does relating to the Triune God—the God who is love—actually imbue ordinary life with deep and surprising meaning, significance, and eternal stakes?

Now, let me be sure to note: with any body of work as diverse and ambitious as Volf’s, there are surely many unifying themes, dialectics, theses, or at any rate threads that one could highlight and thereby attempt to bring some sort of unity to the whole. Any such structure would always be a heuristic and as such would always entail the risk entailed in any heuristic: namely, to be reductive, to marginalize what is actually rather important, to paint with too broad a brush. No doubt the theme I am proposing today is precisely a heuristic of this type and suffers many of the same disadvantages. My only hope is that this heuristic also has the productive value found in Gadamerian “prejudice.” That is, hopefully this heuristic gives us a home base from which to look to the whole of Volf’s work. So, I offer it merely as one lens through which to make some sense of the whole.

The structure of the talk will be this: First, I will describe two sets of convictions that undergird Volf’s work as a whole. Second, I will give a brief historical overview of Volf’s work, sketching his major publications and the contributions they make to this theme of the larger issue of human flourishing. Third, I will describe in more detail some of Volf’s more recent work—and indeed, some of our current projects at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, where Volf serves as the founding director. It is in this work where “human flourishing” is in fact thematized, and I will describe some of the broad contours that are coming together as this next chapter of research begins. And by the end, I promise, we’ll have an answer to my students’ concern.

Two Basic Sets of Convictions

So first, two basic sets of convictions for understanding Volf’s theology:

First, God is love. This is not to say merely that God loves, but rather that God is love. For Volf this basic biblical truth takes a fundamentally Trinitarian form. God is the Holy Trinity and therefore God is love of the other and only via the other is it possible to talk about self-love in God. This is who God is.

And it is the God who is love who creates. God creates out of love and for love. Creation is evidence of God’s kind of non-self-seeking love—that is and this is important to the larger arc of the lecture), creation is a gift.

And it is the God who is love who redeems. God in Christ and through the Spirit redeems wayward creatures out of love. God “dies” for God’s enemies. Christ justifies the ungodly. This is God’s love of the unlovely—God’s embrace of what is other than God even in the face of enmity.

It is the God who is love who indwells the human being. Christ dwells in human beings through the Spirit. This work of the Spirit then means that God’s kind of generosity is the hallmark of the Christian life: so, the love of enemy is essential to Christian life. The Christian life is not primarily oriented toward God but is oriented toward the world, by participating in God’s love at work to suffuse the creation. (Jesus says in John 13: “As I have loved you, you also should love one another…” not the reciprocal “As I have loved you, you also should love me.”) We love God when we open ourselves in faith to receive God’s love and pass it on.

And it is the God who is love who draws all of creation to consummation. The world to come is the world of love, (uniting both transformed realities and transformed interiority—human perceptions, emotions, values, behaviors), to arrive to this eschatological “love that dances.” Of course, in the present world, love—Christ’s and ours—often needs to suffer; but, for Volf, love’s suffering is a means, love’s dance is the goal. It is for this reason that the Bible insists that the world to come is the world of joy!

How does relating to the Triune God—the God who is love—actually imbue ordinary life with deep and surprising meaning, significance, and eternal stakes?
So, this is the first set of convictions, all of which flow from the central conviction that God is love.

The second set of convictions is, in a sense, a “structural” obverse of the more “personal” lineup just described. These deal with the kinds of identities that the above account of love de facto—which is to say not philosophically necessarily—presupposes: First, God’s Trinitarian nature is a perichoretic unity. A divine person is a person only in relation of “being-in” others and that “being-in” others is the One God. Again, God is the Trinitarian God of love.

This has an anthropological analogy. Human beings are created to be indwelled by God—that is, for God to be in them and to work through them. To be human is to be created for this indwelling; this is simply what it means to be human.

This anthropology sets the stage for Christology and Ecclesiology. Christology having been the original foundation for both. God’s indwelling of humans is realized in a unique way in Christ, whose identity is a Trinitarian reality (as evidenced in his baptism). This means that Christian life is not merely one religious choice among many. Rather, Christian life is a unique fulfillment of what it is to be a human being. Christian life is the life of a person being in Christ, and of Christ being in a person by the power of the Spirit. Given the nature of God’s perichoretic unity of love and the fact that human beings are created to be indwelled by this God, relations among humans are also of a perichoretic nature, though in a weaker sense than are relations in God and between this same catholicity applies to ecclesial communities. Churches are enriched by understanding their own identities as being porous to all other churches across time and space. Strikingly, this same “catholicity” structures Christian relations to cultural goods. Christians are better when enriched by the otherness of cultural goods—including other religions. Therefore, it is in the broadest possible sense that “a truly catholic personality must be an evangelical personality—a personality transformed by the Spirit of the new creation and engaged in the transformation of the world.”

With these two sets of convictions in tow, let me turn to a brief overview of Volf’s theological work, which I will outline in roughly three movements:

1. Early Work
2. Theology of Reconciliation
3. Public Theology

Early Work

The first movement of Volf’s work began with his dissertation, which he wrote at Tübingen under Jürgen Moltmann, in which he developed a theological account of work in dialog with Karl Marx (published as Zukunft der Arbeit—Arbeit der Zukunft [1988]). Already, one can see the commitment to seeing faith as a way of life and theology as an articulation of a way of life; the focus of the work was the nature and purpose of everyday human work. In subsequent exploration of work, Volf broke with traditional Protestant thinking about work as vocation and instead proposed “charisma” as the central category for understanding human work. Volf published a refined, pneumatological account of work in Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work (1991). This interest in work extended into Volf’s work on the Oxford Declaration on Faith and Economics (1990) and in the Yale Center for Faith & Culture’s project “Faith at Work,” resourcing churches and Christian leaders to think theologically about everyday work.

A second thread of Volf’s early work—which ran to some extent in parallel with the first—began in 1985 when Volf became a member of the Pentecostal delegation of the official Roman Catholic and Pentecostal dialogue on church as communion. The dialogue, especially the fact that he was one of the principal authors of the final statement at the end of the five years of dialogue, led Volf to consider carefully the relation between the church as a community and the Trinity (this will be familiar from the second set of convictions discussed previously). This work eventually led to his habilitation.
originally published as Trinität und Gemenischaft (1996) and then in English as After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Triune God (1998). The conception of church therein is both egalitarian and communitarian, populated by persons who both have discrete identities and are “catholic personalities,” all of which corresponds to the character of persons and their relations in the triune God.

Theology of Reconciliation

We now come to the work for which Prof. Volf is perhaps best known. Not unrelatedly, of course, this work connects rather directly to his personal autobiography. As I am sure you all know, Volf was born in Croatia, in the former Yugoslavia. He grew up, however, in Serbia, where his father was a Pentecostal minister. This was an experience of deep marginalization—as a Christian in a state openly hostile to all religion, a Croat in Serbia, and a Pentecostal in predominantly Catholic and Orthodox environments in Croatia and Serbia respectively. Of course, this multi-cultural heritage took on new significance during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s.

For a conference of the Gesellschaft für Evangelische Theologie 1993 in Berlin, Volf was asked to reflect theologically on these wars as they were unfolding. It was out of these lectures that Exclusion and Embrace, Volf’s most significant work, was born. In Exclusion and Embrace, Volf tackles the sorts of conflicts of which the Yugoslav wars were a flagship example: conflicts in which it is hard to distinguish “oppressor” from “oppressed,” situations in which today’s victims become tomorrow perpetrators—in which Liberationist categories appear simplistic. (Of course, the enduring significance of this work lies in the fact that perhaps all conflicts are of this type. A key feature of oppression, according to Volf, is that it remakes the victim in the image of the perpetrators.) In place of “liberation,” Volf suggests instead embrace. Embrace entails acting with generosity toward the perpetrator and maintaining porous boundaries of flexible identities. Each of these two key stances has important counterbalances: In the first case, generosity toward the perpetrator does not exclude justice, but rather includes it as a dimension of grace. In the second case, we have to remember that porous boundaries are boundaries nonetheless. Maintaining difference and a sense of self is required for opening oneself to the other in embrace.

The father in Luke’s story of the Prodigal Son is a chief exemplar of embrace, in his forgiving the prodigal son and embracing his own new identity as father-of-the-prodigal. But the paradigm case, of course, is Christ, who dies for the ungodly. Christ’s arms extended on the cross are a picture of embrace. Of course, this concept of “embrace” is rooted in the Trinitarian understanding of the God who is love with which we began the lecture. The mutual indwelling of Trinitarian persons is the paradigm case of porous boundaries. Thus, embrace is the natural expression of the Trinitarian God who is love. And human embrace is participation in God’s self-giving love, the fruit of the very indwelling of Christ in the human being for which the human was created.

Embrace, of course, is a modality of grace. And, indeed, Volf’s next major work after Exclusion and Embrace was Free of Charge (2005), an exploration of grace. In Free of Charge, grace is understood in two primary modes: giving and forgiving. It is here that the two basic sets of convictions that we began with are most fully thematized in Volf’s work: God’s identity as Love of other frames creation as a gift; God’s perichoretic Trinitarian life makes space for this love to express itself in death on the cross for the ungodly.

The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a World of Violence (2006) also can be seen as a follow-up to Exclusion and Embrace. Here, Volf explores in greater depth the acts of remembering that played such a crucial role in Exclusion and Embrace. Volf argues that embrace must always be the goal of remembering. Mere “truth-telling” focused exclusively on justice feeds precisely the processes of trying to sort out perpetrators from victims too simplistically, which feeds the very cycles of violence that remembering rightly aims to undo. Volf proposes that the sacred memory of Christ’s passion in terms of enmity and reconciliation (as opposed to merely suffering and deliverance) should guide Christians’ remembrance of wrongs suffered. Controversially, Volf proposes that, eschatologically, rightly remembering wrongs suffered and committed will result in non-remembrance of the wrongdoing, in the sense that, in the context of reconciled relationships, wrongdoings will simply not come to mind.

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Public Theology in a Pluralistic World

The publication of *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (2011) marked a new trajectory for Volf, though certainly continuities with what came before can be seen. *Exclusion and Embrace* and the two books that followed were quite clearly politically engaged, deeply concerned with political wrongs perpetrated by people groups and the reconciliation possible in the light of such wrongs. In *A Public Faith*, which brings together a strand of work Volf started developing immediately after his Habilitation, he draws together his thoughts on how Christians can work for the common good in the pluralistic public world.

This interest in pluralism, deeply connected to his passion for reconciliation—along with world events—drove Volf into sustained dialog with Muslim theologians after 2001, including authoring the Yale Response to Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad's open letter to Christendom, *A Common Word Between Us and You*. This trajectory of research and interfaith work yielded *Allah: A Christian Response*, which explores Muslim and Christian doctrines of God. In it, Volf finds Muslim so-called “anti-Trinitarianism” to constitute a helpful corrective to insufficiently Christian forms of Trinitarian theology that ultimately are—on both Muslim and Christian accounts—forms of tri-theism.

Volf’s interfaith writing is summarized in *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*, which will be published later this year by Yale University Press. In *Flourishing*, Volf demonstrates what he described in *A Public Faith*, inviting, on the basis of his personal Christian convictions, an interfaith conversation about globalization and the great world religions’ accounts of material life and its significance. Ultimately, Volf suggests that the key resource the world’s religions offer to our globalizing world is their robust accounts of human flourishing—of life that is more than bread alone.

Current Work: Christ & Human Flourishing

This last finding of *Flourishing* signals a “pivot-point” into the next season of Volf’s work, currently underway and continuing to take shape, which is focused directly on the question of human flourishing. Yet this pivot should not be understood as something new in Volf’s work, nor, indeed, as another movement simply in sequence with the others. Rather, I take it, we ought to understand this next phase as in some sense a summation of what has come before—or, perhaps better, a hermeneutical key to the whole. Because while Volf’s current work thematizes human flourishing in ways that the previous work has not, it is certainly his understanding that his previous work has always been about human flourishing—about the good life, the way of life made available through the indwelling of Christ. Work, reconciliation, memory, giving and forgiving, working for the common good alongside people of other religious traditions (and the non-religious)—each is a locus, or at any rate a way of slicing “ordinary life,” as it were.

But in this new season of Volf’s work, the question-behind-the-questions is now thematized and takes the central place. Work and identity in the perichoretic life of the Trinity now finds its place in the context of the whole of life—what it is for, what its abundance, promised in Christ, looks like. Reconciliation now ap-

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pears quite plainly as a means to an end, namely, right relationship, the right sort of maintenance of the self and yet also openness to one another and to God that is a hallmark of the flourishing human life. The key question of the public theology—the question of common good—is now put in the central place: To seek the common good, we must have a compelling vision of the flourishing human life, the ideal to which we aspire. This is the project we share across various lines of difference. This is the human question: What is the good life? What is the flourishing human life?

Of course, while this is the human question, it is not always the question human societies ask. But it is the question that theology ought to ask—and the question theology ought to help society as a whole learn to wrestle with anew. After all, increasingly, we have lost the ability to ask this question in our culture. What is the good life? If somehow the question comes to us, like an overwhelmed student taking an exam, we stareblankly, mouth agape… and go on to the next question. Having skipped the question of ends, we find that the next questions are all about means. These, it seems to us, are simpler—and they are. But with the prior question still blank, the answers we give to the latter are meaningless. Nevertheless, this is how we live. Experts in means, we remain amateurs in ends. We know how to get where want to go—we just have no idea where that is.
And so even our best-intentioned language about “the common good” is increasingly emptied of its meaning. Without this question on the table—indeed, at the very center of the table—pursuit of the “common good” all too easily becomes mere mitigation of suffering, injustice, and exclusion. And, indeed, looking at the lay of the land of contemporary theology, this is precisely what we see: theology oriented around only these most basic features of our impoverished vision of the good life: removing limits to freedom, fighting exclusion, and mitigating suffering. Of course, these are good ends. Volf has written a good bit about each of these (especially fighting exclusion). But Volf’s groundbreaking work was not Exclusion & Inclusion. The absence of the evil we do not want is no substitute for a robust account of the flourishing life we do want. The book was Exclusion & Embrace and embrace was—and remains—the revolutionary idea. This is the task of theology: to go beyond mere “griping” and articulate a constructive account of the flourishing life. Besides, how much theology do you need in order to be in favor of freedom and inclusion and to be against suffering? If theology is merely a matter of griping in a religious register about what other fields have already diagnosed is wrong with the world, then it becomes merely a matter of peddling knock-off knock-downs.

But, if the business of theology is the articulation of a way of life—if its goal is to describe the flourishing life for which humans were created, a life uniquely possible through the spiritual indwelling of the One who came that we might have life and have it abundantly—then now, when Western cultures fall deeper and deeper into a crisis of meaning, now may be theology’s greatest hour. If only we can find our nerve, muster our courage and help the Church—and, indeed, the world—learn once again to ask the most important questions of our lives.

This is the heart of our current work at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture. This is what gets us out of bed in the morning: to articulate anew a robust vision of human flourishing born of the life, teaching, and indwelling of Christ.

So, what does the good life look like? What is this abundant life for which we’ve been created? We’ve only just now begun this research, but, as I wrap up the lecture, I want to share two sets of answers to that question that are starting to come together.

The first thing we’ve begun to see, in considering the many different articulations of the good life found in the world’s various traditions, is that the good life has a “tripartite formal structure”—that is, that there are three dimensions of the good life. It seems that these dimensions are basic to what it is to be human and so, while different traditions will describe each of these differently, we think any robust account of the good life—of the flourishing human life—needs to deal with each of these dimensions. That is, something needs to be said about each.

These three dimensions are:
1. Life Going Well
2. Life Feeling Good
3. Life Led Well

By Life Going Well we mean to describe life’s circumstances—things outside oneself, perhaps even beyond one’s control: health, wealth, reputation. Is the good life tied to certain external factors? While it would be crass to imagine that the good life would consist entirely in the external, it is hard to imagine that the good life—the flourishing life—is a life bereft of at least basic external goods.

By Life Feeling Good we refer to the affective dimension of the good life. How do you feel about your life or how do the circumstances of life make you feel? Might the good life—the flourishing life—be miserable? We might ask it this way: Do you have a right, if you’re a theist, to lament your misery before God? Does God have concern for our sadness? Our loneliness? Does God desire our happiness? Our contentment? Our joy? Again, while it would seem vapid to imagine that the only good in life has to do with feeling good, it is hard to imagine that the flourishing life would not have something to say about our affective, our emotional life.

By Life Led Well, we refer to the agential dimension of the good life. What is required of you in order to live the good life? Do you have certain moral duties to yourself, to other people, or before God? These are important questions and, again, it is hard to imagine that the flou-
is the nihilism of religious world-deniers and world-destroyers; the second, a nihilism of pleasure: the nihilism of a-religious inventors of arbitrary values.

Ultimately, Volf argues in the epilogue to *Flourishing*, we don't need to choose between meaning and pleasure; it is always a wrong choice. Pleasure without meaning is void; meaning without pleasure is crushing. The unity of meaning and pleasure is found in relationship to the God who is love, and through God to the world. This is the unity of life going well and feeling good, on the one hand, and life being led well on the other.

As we said at the outset, relationship to God is not an add-on to our lives. God created us for relationship with God, and in all our desires we also desire God (whether we know it or not). So, Volf suggests a surprising thesis: Attachment to God actually amplifies and deepens our enjoyment of the world.

Why? Because objects are relations. We take pleasure from objects because they convey social relations. This is how gifts work. This is especially obvious in the case of a gift from a small child. These gifts are rarely instrumentally valuable. My four-year-old daughter cannot buy me the sorts of things I use—a computer, a car, or a new cell phone. Rather, a child's gifts tend to be pictures they've drawn or something else they've made. I love a gift that my daughter gives me not because of the object in itself, but rather because it is from her.

Given that God is the God of love who creates, all of creation is evidence of God's kind of non-self-seeking love—that is, all of creation is a gift. The world is a gift. God is the giver. You are a recipient.

Volf concludes: “Each thing in the world is now a relationship marked by love. Each distant star and every gentle touch, each face and every whiff of the freshly plowed earth, in sum, literally every good and beautiful thing shimmers with an aura both vibrantly real and undetectable to our five senses. Each thing in the world is more than itself and just so a source of deep and many-layered pleasure.”

This is the world—ordinary life, even—as God intended it: full of meaning because of the God of love relating to us through it. This is the stage on which life can be led well, go well, and feel good. This is the flourishing life made available in Christ—the life of joy. 😊