

Exclusion and Embrace

A precis of *Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of "Ethnic Cleansing"* by Miroslav Volf in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, William A. Dyrness, Zondervan 1994.

(Sentences in bold print have been highlighted as possible statements for reflection or discussion.)

There are two injunctions which persistently surface in the Bible. One is to have no strange gods; the other is to love strangers. The two injunctions are interrelated: one should love strangers in the name of the one triune God, who loves strangers. This triune God is the center that regulates a Christian's relationship to otherness, a doorkeeper who opens and closes the door of the self.¹ To be a Christian does not mean to close oneself off in one's own identity and advance oneself in an exemplary way toward what one is not. It means rather to be centered on this God—the God of the other—and participate in *God's* advance toward where God and God's reign is not yet. Without such centered-ness, it would be impossible either to denounce the practice of exclusion or demand the practice of embrace.

Exclusion

One of the advantages of conceiving sin as exclusion is that it names as sin what often passes as virtue, especially in religious circles. In the Palestine of Jesus' day, "sinners" were primarily social outcasts, people who practiced despised trades, failed to keep the Law as interpreted by the religious establishment, and Gentiles and Samaritans. A pious person had to separate herself from them; their presence defiled because they were defiled. Jesus' table fellowship with social outcasts, a fellowship that belonged to the central features of his ministry, turned this conception of sin on its head: *The real sinner is not the outcast but the one who casts the other out.* As Walter Wink writes, "Jesus distinguishes between those falsely called sinners—who are in fact victims of an oppressive system of exclusion—and true sinners, whose evil is not ascribed to them by others, but who have sinned from the heart (Mark 7:21). Sin is not so much a defilement but a certain form of *purity*: the exclusion of the other from one's heart and one's world.

In the story of the prodigal son, the sinner was the elder brother—the one who withheld an embrace and expected exclusion. Sin is a refusal to embrace the other in her otherness and a desire to purge her from one's world, by ostracism or oppression, deportation or liquidation. The exclusion of the other is an exclusion of *God*. This is what one can read between the lines of the story of the prodigal son. The departure of the younger brother from the father's home was an act of exclusion. He wanted his father—and maybe his brother too—out of his world. Yet in his life of exclusion, in the far country, he was closer to the father than was his older brother who remained at home. For like the father, he longed for an embrace. His older brother kept the father in his world, but excluded him from his heart. For the older brother an act of exclusion demanded retaliatory exclusion. But for the father, an act of exclusion called for an embrace. By excluding his younger brother, the older brother excluded the father who longs for an embrace.

¹ 18. The metaphor of the door is helpful insofar as it implies a necessary demarcation, but it is also misleading insofar as it suggests a sharp and static boundary. In analyzing the category "Christian," missiologist Paul Hiebert suggests that we make use of the mathematical categories of "bounded sets," "fuzzy sets," and "centered sets." Bounded sets function on the principle "either/or": an apple is either an apple or it is not; it cannot be partly apple and partly a pear. Fuzzy sets, on the other hand, have no sharp boundaries: things are fluid with no stable point of reference and with various degrees of inclusion—as when a mountain merges into the plains. A centered set is defined by a center and the relationship of things to that center, by a *movement* toward it or away from it. The category of "Christian," Hiebert suggests, should be understood as a centered set. A demarcation line exists, but the focus is not on "maintaining the boundary" but "on reaffirming the center" (Paul G. Hiebert, "The Category 'Christian' in the Mission Task," *International Review of Mission* 72 [1983]: 421—27, 424). The center of a person who is a new creation in Christ is constituted by separation, but around the center there is space for otherness.

“Eruption” might be a good word to describe the conflict in the Balkans. I am thinking here less of the suddenness by which it broke out than of its insuppressible power. It does not seem that anybody is in control. Of course, the big and strategic moves that started the conflict and that keep it going are made in the centers of intellectual, political, and military power. But there is too much will for brutality even among the common people. Once the conflict started it seemed to trigger an uncontrollable chain reaction. These were decent people, helpful neighbors. They did not, strictly speaking, *choose* to plunder and burn, rape and torture—or secretly enjoy these things. A dormant beast in them was awakened from its uneasy slumber. And not only in them: the motives of those who set to fight against the brutal aggressors were self-defense and justice, but the beast in others enraged the beast in them. And so the moral barriers holding it in check were broken and the beast went after revenge. In resisting evil, people were trapped by it. After World War II, Carl Gustav Jung wrote, “It is a fact that cannot be denied: the wickedness of others becomes our own wickedness because it kindles something evil in our own hearts.”² Evil engenders evil, and like pyroclastic debris from the mouth of a volcano, it erupts out of the aggressor and the victim alike.

In a fascinating book, *Engaging the Powers*, Walter Wink accesses the problem of the power of evil by looking at what he calls the “Powers” and their perversion into the “Domination System.” The Powers, he claims, are neither simply human institutions and structures nor an order of angelic (or demonic) beings. They are both institutional and spiritual; they “possess an outer, physical manifestation...and an inner spirituality or corporate culture.”³ The Powers are essentially good, but when they became “hell-bent on control,” Wink claims, they degenerate into the Domination System. This System itself is neither only institutional nor spiritual; rather the “forces of this present darkness” (see Ephesians 6:2) are the interiority of warped institutions, structures and systems that oppress people. I will modify Wink’s terminology and substitute the “Exclusion System” for his “Domination System,” for as a rule the purpose of domination is to exclude others from scarce goods, whether they are economic, social or psychological. But Wink is right that it is through the operation of the System that the power of evil imposes itself so irresistibly on people. Caught in the *System* of exclusion as if in some invisible snare, people begin to behave according to its perverted logic. Should we call this anything but “possession”?

Yet persons cannot be reduced to the System. The System needs persons to make it “breathe” with the spirit of evil, and persons can escape the logic of the System, as the noble history of resistance demonstrates. So if people do acquiesce, it is not because the System forces them to acquiesce, but because there is something in their souls that resonates with the logic of exclusion. Could the culprit be the desire for identity—the instinctive will to be oneself—that is written into the very structure of our selves, as Wolfhart Pannenberg has recently suggested?⁴ The will to be oneself is essentially healthy, of course. Yet it always carries within it the germs of its own illness. To remain healthy, the will to be oneself needs to make the will to be the other part of itself. And so, because the other must become part of who we are as we will to be ourselves, a tension is built into the desire for identity. It is the antipodal nature of the will to be oneself that makes the slippage into exclusion so easy. The power of sin from without—the Exclusion System—thrives on both the power and the powerlessness from within, the irresistible power of the will to be oneself and the powerlessness to resist the slippage into exclusion of the other.

² Carl Gustav Jung, “After the Catastrophe,” *Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (ed. H. Read et al; tr. R. F. C. Hull; Bollingen Series XX; New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 194–217, 198.

³ Wink, “All Will be Redeemed,” *The Other Side* (Nov–Dec, 1992): 17–23. See Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 33–104.

⁴ So Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie II* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 298f.

Embrace

Yet forgiveness is precisely what seems impossible. Deep within the heart of every victim, hate swells up against the perpetrator. The Imprecatory Psalms seem to come upon their lips much more easily than the prayer of Jesus on the cross. If anything, they would rather pray, “Forgive them not. Father, for they knew what they did” (Abe Rosenthal). If the perpetrators were repentant, forgiveness would come more easily. But repentance seems as difficult as forgiveness. It is not just that we do not like being wrong, but that almost invariably the other side has not been completely right either. Most confessions, then, come as a mixture of repentance and aggressive defense or even lust for revenge.⁵ Both the victim and the perpetrator are imprisoned in the automatism of exclusion, unable to forgive or repent and united in a perverse communion of mutual hate.

In the Imprecatory Psalms, the torrents of rage have been allowed to flow freely, channeled only by the robust structure of a ritual prayer.⁶ Strangely enough, it is they that point to a way out of the slavery of hate to the freedom of forgiveness. For the followers of the crucified Messiah, their main message is: hate belongs before God, not in a reflectively managed and manicured form of a confession, but as a prereflective outburst from the depths of our being. Hidden in the dark chambers of our hearts and nourished by the system of darkness, hate grows and seeks to infect everything with its hellish will to exclusion. In the light of the justice and love of God, however, hate recedes and the seed is planted for the miracle of forgiveness. Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans and exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of God for long without overcoming this double exclusion, without transposing the enemy from a sphere of monstrous inhumanity into the sphere of common humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. When one knows that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is freed to rediscover his humanity and imitate God’s love for him. And when one knows that the love of God is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself in the light of the justice of God and so rediscover one’s own sinfulness.

Yet even when the obstacles are removed, forgiveness cannot simply be presumed.⁷ It always comes as a surprise—at least to those who are not ignorant of the ways of men and women. Forgiveness *is* an outrage, not only against the logic of the Exclusion System but also “against straight-line dues-paying morality,” as Lewis Smedes puts it.⁸

The perpetrator *deserves* unforgiveness. When forgiveness happens, there is always a strange, almost irrational, othemess at its very heart, even when we are aware that, given the nature of our world, it is wiser to forgive than to withhold forgiveness. Could it be that the word of forgiveness that must be uttered in the depths of our being if it is uttered at all, is an echo of Another’s voice?

Forgiveness is the boundary between exclusion and embrace. It heals the wounds that the power-acts of exclusion have inflicted and breaks down the dividing wall of hostility. But it leaves a distance, an empty space between people that allows them either to go their separate ways in what is called “peace” or fall into each other’s arms.

⁵ See Carl Gustav Jung, “Epilogue to ‘Essay on Contemporary Events,’ ” *Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (ed. H. Read et al; tr. R. E. C. Hull; Bollingen Series XX; New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 227—43, 240f.

⁶ See Christoph Barth, *Introduction to the Psalms* (New York: Scribners, 1966), 43ff.; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, “Enemies and Evildoers in the Psalms: A Challenge to Christian Preaching,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 4/2 (1983): 61—77.

⁷ See James Wm. McClendon, *Systematic Theology I. Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 224ff.

⁸ Lewis B. Smedes. *Forgive and Forger. Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 124.

“Going one’s own way”- a civilized form of exclusion—is what the majority of the people in the Balkans contemplate in their most benevolent and optimistic moments. “Too much blood was shed for us to live together,” I heard almost every time I participated in conversations about what might happen after the clamor of battles dies down. Never mind geographic proximity, never mind the communication lines that connect us, our similar languages, our common history, our interdependent economies, the complex network of friendships and relations created by the years of living with each other and making love to each other! A clear line will separate “them” from “us.” They will remain “they” and we will remain “we,” and we will never include “them” when we speak of “us.” Each of us will be clean of the other and identical with herself. And so there will be peace among us. What muddies this clean calculation is the fact that the war broke out in the name of Serbian identity with itself. By what magic does one hope to transform exclusion from a cause of war into an instrument of peace?

The only way to peace is through embrace that is, after the parties have forgiven and repented, for without forgiveness and repentance embrace is a masquerade. An embrace involves always a double movement of *aperture* and *closure*. I open my arms to create space in myself for the other. The open arms are a sign of discontent at being myself only and of desire to include the other. They are an invitation to the other to come in and feel at home with me, to belong to me. In an embrace I also close my arms around the other—not tightly, so as to crush her and assimilate her forcefully into myself, for that would not be an embrace but a concealed power-act of exclusion; but gently, so as to tell her that I do not want to be without her in her otherness. I want her to remain independent and true to her genuine self, to maintain her identity and as such become part of me so that she can enrich me with what she has and I do not. An embrace is a “sacrament” of a catholic personality. It mediates and affirms the interiority of the other in me, my complex identity that includes the other, a unity with the other that is both maternal (substantial) and paternal (symbolic)⁹—and still something other than either.¹⁰

(The mutual inclusion of histories and of a common memory is essential to a genuine embrace)

Why should I embrace the other? The answer is simple: because the others *are* part of my own true identity. I cannot live authentically without welcoming the others—the other gender, other persons, or other cultures—into the very structure of my being. For I am created to reflect the personality of the triune God. The Johannine Jesus says: “The Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:38). The one divine person is not that person only, but includes the other divine persons in itself; it is what it is only through the indwelling of the other. The Son is the Son because the Father and the Spirit indwell him; without this interiority of the Father and the Spirit, there would be no Son. Every divine person *is* the other persons, but he is the other persons in his own particular way. Analogously, the same is true of human persons created in the image of God. Their identity as persons is conditioned by the characteristics of other persons in their social relations. The others—other persons or cultures are not filth that we collect as we travel these earthly roads. Filth is rather our own monochrome identity, which is nothing else but the sin of exclusion at cognitive and volutative levels—a refusal to recognize that the others have *already* broken in through the enclosure of our selves and unwillingness to make a “movement of effacement by which the self makes itself available to others.”¹¹ In the presence of the divine Trinity, we need to strip

⁹ For the categories see Julia Kristeva. *Au commencement était l'arnour. Psycho-analyse et foi* (Textes du xxe siecle; Hachette, 1988), 35ff

¹⁰ This rather schematic analysis of embrace needs to be fleshed out concretely, of course. The identity of a person or social group cannot be abstracted from its history. An embrace must include both individual histories and a common history, which is often a history of pain. The mutual inclusion of histories and of common memory is therefore essential to a genuine embrace.

¹¹ Ricour, *Oneself*, 168

down the drab gray of our own self-enclosed selves and cultures and embrace others so that their bright colors, painted on our very selves, will begin to shine. But how do the bright colors shine when the Exclusion System is dirtying us incessantly with its drab gray paint? How do we overcome our powerlessness to resist the slippage into exclusion? We need the energies of the *Spirit of embrace*—the Spirit who “issues from the essential inward community of the triune God, in all the richness of its relationships,” who lures people into fellowship with the triune God and opens them up for one another and for the whole creation of God.¹² The Spirit of embrace creates communities of embrace—places where the power of the Exclusion System has been broken and from where the divine energies of embrace can flow, forging rich identities that include the other.

¹² Moltmann, *The Spirit*, 219