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**A PUBLIC FAITH: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good.** By Miroslav Volf. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011. Xvii + 177 pp.

Should religious faith play a role in modern American public life, and if so, what should this role look like? Theologian Miroslav Volf takes up this question, advising Christians on the perils and possibilities of entering a politically pluralistic public realm, suggesting a way between a passive and private “idling faith” that fails to engage public life and a coercive stance that seeks to co-opt public life.

The Croatian-born author — a former student of Jürgen Moltmann at Tübingen and now a professor of theology at Yale — recently published an important Christian engagement with Islam (*Allah*, Harper One, 2011) and grew up in the religiously diverse former Yugoslavia. This background is evident

throughout this important book, as Volf invites the reader to take his or her place in public life.

Volf identifies one pole as religious totalitarianism, which is evidenced in Christian Dominionism, but even more so in the ideology of Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian Islamist whose writings provide the foundation of modern radical Islam. The goal of religious totalitarianism is the imposition of a single religion on public life. At the other end of the spectrum is a radical secularism that seeks to completely eliminate religion from public life. Rather than argue for a privatization of religion, he seeks to offer a view toward living within “religious political pluralism.” The goal of this engagement is to create an environment that supports human flourishing, which Volf believes is a view found in many of the great religious faiths. It is not a search for pleasure, but, put in Judeo-Christian terms, loving God and neighbor.

The author identifies possible faith malfunctions, including idleness and coercion, and offers advice as to how to counter these two temptations. He then describes what an engaged faith looks like, noting that one must take into consideration both identity and difference. To effectively operate in a religiously pluralistic environment, one must recognize that all faiths are not alike, and recognizing this fact will better enable one to operate in this context.

When it comes to identity, we must recognize that in the United States, at least, religious involvement is voluntary, which means we’re all sects. We must also recognize the nature of religious boundaries, which may be permeable, but still exist. We must also recognize the limits placed on faith involvement by political pluralism, which means that we must work vigorously for what will be limited change and that evil will not be completely eradicated, and yet celebrate whatever good we can accomplish. That is, we must be realistic in our engagement, so that we commit ourselves to the enactment of the common good without seeking “total transformation” or accommodation.

So what does public engagement look like? It is one that recognizes the religious diversity present in the world, and understands the way religion functions in the context of liberal democracy, wherein each person is free to live in accordance with their own interpretation of life and one must recognize that the state is to remain neutral with regard to these perspectives. With these understandings, we must also recognize that when faith leaves the public square, the square doesn’t remain empty, but is filled by secularism, one that in the West is defined by the “marketplace.” Thus, the key to this project is learning to speak in the public realm with one’s own voice in ways that respect other voices and allows for working together in pursuit of the common good. This involves, what Volf calls “hermeneutical hospitality. The point isn’t the removal of disagreements, but rather learning to negotiate our differences with mutual respect, and in doing so finding places of convergence and agreement.

The common good needs the active presence of people of faith, acting from their faith traditions, in a politically pluralistic context. It requires that we forgo any idea of religious

totalitarianism or even the idea that we can reach total transformation of the world. This premise, that one can oppose religious totalitarianism and support political pluralism, is fully defensible from a Christian perspective, and the same is true of other faith traditions, including Islam.

As one who believes in the importance of engaging the public realm with a perspective rooted in my faith tradition, I find that Volf’s book is extremely helpful. It is a program that offers a way of engaging the public sphere in a noncoercive way while recognizing the differences that faith traditions bring to the conversation. It is a call to working together in a project of moving toward human flourishing and the common good that moves us beyond simply the pursuit of happiness in terms of pleasure. It rejects totalitarianism or retreat from public life. That is, Volf doesn’t seem to agree with the idea that the church can function as a separate entity from the public square and hope its witness gets caught by those within the public sphere. That is, he’s not an Anabaptist or a Hauerwasian.

If one reads Volf together with Parker Palmer’s recent book *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (Jossey Bass, 2011), one will have, I believe, the foundations for engaging the public square in a way that will bring healing and hope and the common good to our world. This is a must read for every Christian who seeks to enter the public square as a person of faith. It is an especially important book for clergy to read as they discern how to be present in the public square – speaking both to the square itself and to the congregations that they represent.

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**THE CHURCH IS FLAT: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement.** By Tony Jones. Minneapolis, MN: The Jopa Group, 2011. 230 pages.

An important leader himself within the Emergent Church movement, Tony Jones takes an in-depth and inside look at the Emerging Church Movement, noting its strengths and weaknesses with a special focus on ecclesiology. Borrowing from Jurgen Moltmann, Jones argues for a flattening of the church structures, so that it might be freed from clerical domination and enabled to engage the contemporary world with openness.

The book is essentially his Princeton dissertation in Practical Theology. Choosing to release the dissertation outside the normal publishing parameters, this is a rather raw book. You will also have to go to Amazon to purchase a copy. That being said, it is also a provocative book that is worth engaging, especially prior to the annual meeting and our engagement with another younger Christian thinker and leader Carol Howard Merritt. One might not be convinced by Jones’ perspective, but it is one to be reckoned with!

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