

# RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE GLOBAL AGE

REVIEWED BY SR. ANNELLE FITZPATRICK, CSJ, PhD

In his book, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion In A Globalized World*, Miroslav Volf presents a fascinating analysis of the interplay between religious belief and world globalization. His work is both scholarly and insightful as he argues his fundamental premise — that these two social forces need not be antagonistic to one another but, rather, by working collaboratively, these essential human institutions have the potential to generate an unparalleled force for good that would ultimately improve the quality of life for all of mankind and the flourishing of diverse societies.

Although I found the book very enlightening, and I applaud Volf for raising insightful questions, I must caution prospective readers that the author assumes they are familiar with the basic tenets of major world religions. He references many of the greatest theological and philosophical minds of past centuries (i.e., Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Martin Luther, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Sayyid Qutb), and his analysis often is right on target. However, to the reader who has little to no knowledge of organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the philosophical school of nihilism, such insights, I suspect, would be very confusing. At least a cursory familiarity with diverse philosophical and theological theories is essential to understanding many of Volf's assertions.

Volf argues that religious belief could offer an alternative to the unbridled greed inherent in the human heart, which denies to others the abundant

life (or, as Volf would call it, the ability to flourish). He points to the glaring economic disparities in a world where people of faith continue to both tolerate and perpetuate a global economic system that allows 1 percent of the population to

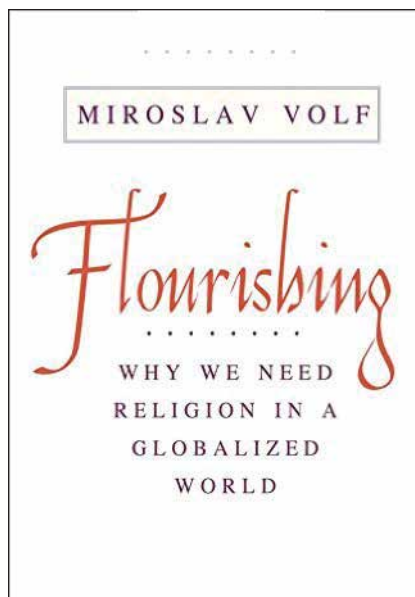
own more wealth than the remaining 99 percent — and more than 1.5 billion people to live in poverty. Such disparities of wealth would not be tolerated if the faithful truly followed the respective dictates of their respective religions, Volf asserts, citing human greed as one of the central culprits fueling ecological disaster through misuse of Earth's resources.

Volf refers to the urgency of addressing an array of societal concerns where religious teaching could be used to raise the level of public debate. He urges people of faith to alert governments to alter course, writing, "Such disparities in wealth aren't just morally unacceptable; they are also socially and politically unsustainable."

Referencing the Buddhist condemnation and assessment that human greed of-

ten is the cause of both individual and collective suffering, Volf again underscores the premise that greed is a vice condemned not only by Buddhism, but also by all faith traditions.

Likewise, in citing specific examples of escalating violence engulfing many parts of the world, Volf points to reconciliation and forgiveness as virtues taught by all religions. He cites the indispensable role that religious teaching played in healing wounds caused by government-san-



**FLOURISHING: WHY WE NEED RELIGION  
IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD**

BY MIROSLAV VOLF  
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## FROM FLOURISHING: WHY WE NEED RELIGION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

*The unity of meaning and pleasure, which we experience as joy, is given with the God who is Love. This conviction cradles this entire book; it is the main reason why I believe we need religion in a globalized world. ... Let my Christian account of the unity of meaning and pleasure serve as an invitation to adherents of other religions and to a-religious humanists to articulate theirs.*

tioned apartheid in South Africa. Echoing the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that there can be no future without forgiveness, Volf delineates five basic components of genuine reconciliation, which, he poignantly reminds us, “leaves little room for quick and self-exculpating forgetting that would allow the penitent to gloss over the genuine pain and suffering that he/she inflicted on innocent victims.”

Volf raises many provocative questions as he describes several specific areas of tension, such as civil freedom of speech laws vs. religious blasphemy laws, and cites lessons we should have learned from history.

“If we don’t reconcile, we risk either being crippled by resentment or consumed by a cycle of revenge,” he states. He issues a clarion call for religious institutions, despite their past failures, to rise up and again provide moral guidance to today’s world.

The author recalls being present in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001, and watching the inferno that engulfed the World Trade Center towers. The men who flew jets into the Twin Towers “all believed they were acting under God’s guidance and securing God’s blessing for the attack on an oppressive and decadent enemy,” Volf observed. Here, he echoes the pioneering insights of sociologist Emile Durkheim. Volf, like Durkheim, sees the innate power of religious belief to cement group solidarity and notes, “the blend of the religious, moral and cultural self-understanding of a group can generate high levels of solidarity.”

Volf cautions against the entanglement of religion and political power, for this, he believes, often is the major culprit in the eventual distortion of authentic religious teaching. We see examples of such blending in the growth of movements like ISIS, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab.

Although extremely scholarly, Volf’s research makes a significant contribution to understanding the potential for good that universal religious teachings have to offer a world desperately in

need of a moral compass. However, the operative word is “potential,” for the book leaves the reader with few concrete steps related to the dilemma of what Volf calls “colliding social visions.” For example, in his chapter called “Mindsets of Respect, Regimes of Respect,” Volf references Muslim fundamentalism and the obsession of Islamic State followers to usher in a new caliphate, a new regime “intent on ruthlessly suppressing all internal dissent, systematically cleansing the territory under its control of remaining Christian populations and waging aggressive jihad.”

It is my sincere hope that Volf writes a sequel to this book specifically aimed at how world governments and adherents of the Islamic faith can combat the scourge of a fundamentalism that is threatening to tear asunder the very soul of Islam. In his concluding chapter, Volf states that “religions need not be breeding grounds of violence,” and he offers a four-point paradigm to prevent a religious tradition from being co-opted by those with a self-serving agenda.

Unfortunately, dangerous religious zealots such as ISIS have demonstrated via their beheading of journalists, their rape of school girls and their destruction of priceless relics of antiquity that they have developed their own set of rules. They blatantly use fear as a weapon of war in order to perpetuate a perverted interpretation of a major world religion. They are not interested in dialogue or four-point plans to usher in an age where religious pluralism is the norm.

It is becoming clear that the United States and the nations of the world need a strategy far greater than military superiority. We look to theologians such as Volf to help show the way forward before the potential inherent in religious wisdom is made irrelevant in a world torn apart by religious strife.

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