

Miroslav Volf. *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World.* Yale University Press 2016. 304 pp. \$28.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780300186536); \$18.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780300227130).

Amid growing tensions between religious believers and advocates of globalism, Miroslav Volf's book arguing for the complementarity of both is exceptionally timely and provocative. Indeed, the central thesis of his book is that although both religion and globalization are sometimes antagonistic, working in tandem they might yet achieve the good of human flourishing. Far from being opposed, globalization 'needs world religions to deliver it from its shadows' (55).

But why? After all, hasn't religious extremism been the chief obstacle to peaceful globalization? An openly committed Protestant theologian, Volf readily admits that religion is often a destructive foil to globalization. But he also surveys the sociological evidence that traditional religion isn't going anywhere. Indeed, the nineteenth-century expectation that globalization would simply mean the disappearance of religion is empirically false. Religions worldwide today are growing in terms of both numbers and public assertiveness (61-66).

But it is not simply globalization that must tolerate religion. A further premise of Volf's argument is that globalization is itself a highly ambivalent force. It has not only spread human rights, cosmopolitanism, and technological innovation, but has also created new forms of exploitation, environmental catastrophe, and ethically deadening materialism. For this reason, Volf believes 'we ought neither to demonize nor sacralize the present form of globalization' (45-46).

Religion's key role in this context is to help correct globalization's tendency to facilitate greed, the objectification of people and nature, and the spread of the view that 'nothing is more important ... [than] young and beautiful bodies, at whose disposal are abundant varieties of food, clothing, gadgets, and games' (51). Religion achieves this by directing large sectors of humanity away from the material acquisitiveness and market brutalities of globalization and toward unegoistic service of neighbor and a transcendent good.

In order to develop this claim, Volf draws a distinction between 'world religions' and 'local religions.' World religions (including Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) began emerging nearly three millennia ago with the dawn of the 'axial age.' These axial religions rejected the polytheism of local religions in favor of a transcendent, extramundane reality (e.g., God, Nirvana). This transcendent notion of the good was universally valid for 'all human beings, irrespective of their local culture' and in stark contrast to local religion's worship of ethnicity, race, and culture (68-69). World religions call on *individuals*, not polities, and they valorize the material world without ever deifying it. In this way, world religions provide resources for combatting the crass materialism and xenophobia that plague globalization.

If part of Volf's book is an attempt to persuade secular, skeptical readers that religion is a vital resource for human flourishing in a globalized age, he also deftly reverses his plea to address the world's religions and insist that globalization offers them an unprecedented opportunity to return to their authentic, universal, axial roots. Volf believes that today's religions too often revert to pre-axial, local forms by becoming what he dubs 'political religions,' worshipping a particular 'ethno-cultural' identity (85). Political religions betray the axial breakthrough by becoming 'tools in the hands of the powers that be' (85). Traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism are not immune from this temptation, animating certain violently nationalist movements (188-189). Globalization can help world religions escape this distortive trap by offering political conditions in which priority is given to individual freedom to respond uncoerced to the universal sources of transcendence.

Clearly, there is much of profound importance and insight in Volf's bold argument. Specifically, he is elaborating on certain crucial philosophical breakthroughs made by Charles Taylor concerning the nature and predicaments of a modern, secular age. Indeed, one might read Volf's book as an attempt to elaborate on Taylor's 1996 essay 'Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights' as well as 2006's *A Secular Age*.

Yet shortcomings in Volf's argument also arise when comparing it with Taylor's work. Taylor calls for creative re-immersions in the thick details and cultural life of particular religious traditions in order to experimentally see if there are resources available for an 'overlapping consensus' on human rights. But this kind of thick engagement of particular traditions is underdeveloped in Volf's book. Volf champions culturally 'thick' religions (and identifies himself as a member of such a tradition), but nonetheless offers mostly an abstract account of 'world religions.'

Unfortunately, this level of abstraction affects how persuasive Volf's call is to square cosmopolitan, liberal globalization and traditional religions. Although his treatment of Christianity is the most rich in detail, harder cases like the ethnic features of Judaism, or tendentious elements within Buddhism, Islam, and the other world religions are not treated in their thick, historically particular and embodied dimensions. Volf's argument omits thick historical engagement with founding texts, rival theologies, and variant historical practices.

Instead, Volf makes his argument from a meta-traditional vantage point. Crucial to Volf's argument in this regard is his leveraging of the axial features of world religions. Indeed, it is from his characterization of the axial age that Volf deduces world religion's support for liberal tenets like freedom of religion, equality, and separation of church and state (134-135). This abstract deduction replaces carefully parsing through rival traditions internal to particular religions in order to resolve culturally and theologically thick disputes.

This tendency to argue or speak from a meta-traditional perspective ('world religions') is linked to a deeper problem. Specifically, it is unclear how valid Volf's crucial distinction between 'world religions' and 'political religions' is in its current form. This point needs explanation.

Volf often rightly claims that world religions don't share an essentialist 'common core' (92). However, his deduction of liberal features from axial characteristics risks sliding toward just such core essentialism. So, for instance, Volf's way of handling 'malfunctioning' and anti-liberal forms of religion isn't generally to delve into the thick particulars of a tradition, but rather to deduce from the meta-perspective of 'world religions' (75-78). In other words, orthodoxies that don't comply with political liberalism are being excluded. This shortcut toward politically liberalizing the world's religions comes at the expense of philosophical cogency and is related to a few other problems.

First, it means that although Volf explicitly rejects the project of 'world theology' (92) in which a common core of religious doctrines is used to correct particular historical instantiations of a faith, he is arguably inadvertently involved in just such a task. Second, it sometimes seems the opposite of violence in Volf's book isn't so much religion (which he sees as an ambivalent force) as liberalism. Liberalization becomes the antidote to both political and religious violence. This might explain the otherwise strange affinity Volf displays for the zealously anti-religious Steven Pinker—namely, they both believe the liberal state is key to overcoming violence (162-164).

Perhaps for this reason Volf doesn't adequately wrestle with the coercive violence of liberal, pro-global states and neglects hard cases. For example, what if some Catholics want to practice natural family planning in a way that globalist Greens argue is ecologically untenable? Can these Catholics be coerced by liberal states into complying with the 'world religions' framework that serves globalization? Or what if traditional Muslims and evangelicals don't want to

accommodate the demands of second wave feminism? Volf might very well have good answers to these sorts of questions, but they aren't in his book.

In a similar vein, Volf only briefly wrestles with the arguments of those like Saint Augustine who advanced axial, transcendental religion, while also not being in favor of absolute individual freedom (105). Every world religion has its own version of Augustine's position. Yet instead of detailed engagement with the thick cultural and theological arguments, Volf argues to exclude these positions on the basis of a quasi-transcendental deduction of the common core features of world religions.

To be clear, the problem I see is one of justification, not advocacy. I am very sympathetic to Volf's call for complementarity between religions and globalization. But I wish for greater depth of argument. In general, Volf needs to be clearer about recognizing that he is as much arguing for what world religions *ought* to be as what they in fact *are* (75). Yet what world religions ought to be can only be established through internal routes, from deep inside the details of these traditions.

These reservations withstanding, Volf nonetheless deserves a large and intelligent audience for his book. He is asking bold, highly relevant questions and he is giving provocative, intelligent, and important answers. A theologian by training, Volf's book admirably crosses the boundaries of philosophy, political theory, and social science and can be fruitfully read by students and researchers across the disciplines. Whether or not future readers find Volf's book agreeable, they only harm their own sense of the wider picture if they ignore it.

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