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## EXCLUSION AND EMBRACE: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS IN THE WAKE OF "ETHNIC CLEANSING"

By Miroslav Volf

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This article is an attempt to make sense of the demonic aggression in the Balkans today. The practice of "ethnic cleansing" is taken as an occasion to suggest that we place the problem of otherness at the center of theological reflection on social realities. As the ghettos and battlefields throughout the world testify indisputably, the future not only of the Balkans but of the whole world depends on how we deal with ethnic, religious, and gender otherness. The author's response to the problem of otherness is a "theology of embrace" in which the dominant categories of "oppression and liberation" are replaced by categories of "exclusion and embrace."

In the Gospels, Jesus tells a puzzling story about the unclean spirit who leaves a person only to return with seven other spirits of an even more wicked character. The new state of the person is even worse than the old (see Matt. 12:45ff). I am sometimes tempted to apply this story to the situation in Eastern Europe after the 1989 revolution. The demon of totalitarian communism has just been or is being exorcised, but worse demons seem to be rushing in to fill the empty house.<sup>1</sup>

This is how I introduced a paper in April, 1991, on the tasks of the churches in Eastern Europe following the 1989 revolution. It was at a conference of Third World theologians in Osijek, Croatia. Some six months later, the Evangelical Theological Faculty, which hosted the

conference, had to flee to neighboring Slovenia; Osijek was being shelled day in and day out by Serbian forces. What during the conference had only seemed about to happen has now in fact taken place. New demons have possessed the Balkan house, preparing their vandalistic and bloody feast, first in Croatia and then in Bosnia. Signs of their presence in other parts of Eastern Europe are less tangible but real, nonetheless.

The task for Eastern European churches remains the same today as it was in 1991--to ward off the onrush of both the old and the new demons. What has changed is the complexity of the task. I intend, however, neither to repeat nor to supplement my previous analysis and recommendations. Instead of asking a primarily missiologically oriented question about what churches in Eastern Europe today should do, I will discuss a more fundamental issue involving the challenge that being caught between the old and new demons presents for theological reflection--reflection that, of course, must always take place under the horizon of the mission of God in the world.

What are some of the key theological issues facing Christians in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Balkans? When the heat of the battle subsides and attention is focused neither on killing nor on surviving, two issues are at the forefront of peoples' minds. The first is evil and sin: How does one make sense of the vicious circle of hell-deep hatred and the baffling network of small and great evils that people inflict on each other? The second is reconciliation: How do we stop the killing and learn to live together after so much mutual hatred and bloodshed have shaped our common history? These issues coalesce in the more abstract but fundamental question of otherness--of ethnic, religious, and cultural difference. In Eastern Europe this question is seldom posed in such abstract terms and often is not asked consciously at all, but it frames all the other questions with which people are grappling existentially.

Those whose theological palates long for some exotic fruit from foreign soil might be disappointed with my list. Are not these same issues surfacing everywhere in the world today? Am I not offering staple foods that can be found anywhere? My answer is, yes, probably, but as a theological chef I do not think this should bother me. My responsibility is not to tickle the palates of (Western) theological connoisseurs dulled by abundance and variety but to fill the empty stomachs of people engaged in a bloody conflict. I have to prepare the food they need. Opinions of connoisseurs might be interesting and instructive, but nutritious value for the hungry is what matters. This is what it means to do contextualized theology. So my question will be: How do the issues of otherness, sin, and reconciliation look from the perspective of the social upheaval and ethnic conflict in the Balkans?

Much of my reflection on these issues took place as I was living and teaching in Osijek during the fall of 1992. By that time, the war in Croatia was over (or at least its first phase

was,<sup>2</sup> but its traces were everywhere--broken windows, scarred facades, destroyed roofs, burned and desolated houses, a ruined economy, and, above all, many deep wounds in the hearts of the people. Meanwhile, the war was continuing with even greater brutality in the neighbors' courtyard. As Croats were watching the unabated Serbian aggression in Bosnia and trying to cope with the never-ending stream of refugees, they were reliving their own war inferno. There was much pride over their newly won statehood, even if it had had to be paid in blood, but there was even more trepidation about the future: When would the powerful aggressor be stopped and brought to justice? Would Croats ever regain the lost territories and return to their villages and cities? If they did, how would they rebuild them? The feeling of helplessness and frustration, of anger and hatred was ubiquitous.

From the beginning of the conflict, I was sharing in the destiny of my people--first from afar, from Slovenia and from my home in California, then first-hand, when I arrived in Osijek for a prolonged stay. It was then that I was forced to start making sense of what I encountered. What I present here can best be described as a "preliminary account of an exploration." This exploration would never have been undertaken and would have long since been given up had it not been for the powerful experience of the complex and conflicting social realities brought on by revolution and war. Experience goaded me to explore, so I will not shy away from appealing to it here.

### The Other

I was crossing the Croatian border for the first time since Croatia had declared independence. State insignia and flags that were displayed prominently at the "gate to Croatia" were merely visible signs of what I could sense like an electrical charge in the air: I was leaving Hungary and entering Croatian space. I felt relief. In what used to be Yugoslavia one was almost expected to apologize for being a Croat. Now I was free to be who I ethnically am. Yet, the longer I was in the country, the more hemmed in I felt. For instance, I sensed an unexpressed expectation to explain why as a Croat I still had friends in Serbia and did not talk with disgust about the backwardness of Byzantine-Orthodox culture. I am used to the colorful surrounding of multi-ethnicity. A child of a "mixed marriage," I grew up in a city that the old Habsburg Empire had made into a meeting place of many ethnic groups, and I now live in the (tension-filled) multicultural city of Los Angeles. However, the new Croatia, like some jealous goddess, wanted all my love and loyalty and wanted to possess every part of my being. I must be Croat through and through, or I was not a good Croat, I could read between the lines of the large-lettered ethnic text that met my eyes wherever I looked. "Croatia," I thought to myself, "will not be satisfied until it permeates everything in Croatia."

It is easy to explain this tendential omnipresentia Croatiae in Croatia. After forced assimilation under Communist rule, it was predictable that the feeling of ethnic belonging would vigorously reassert itself. Moreover, the need to stand firm against a powerful and destructive enemy leaves little room for the luxury of divided loyalties. The explanations make sense, yet the unsettling question remains: Does one not discover in Croatia's face some despised Serbian features? Has the enemy not captured Croatia's soul along with Croatia's soil? Serbian aggression has enriched the already oversized vocabulary of evil with the term "ethnic cleansing": Ethnic otherness is filth that needs to be washed away from the ethnic body, pollution that threatens the ecology of ethnic space. But, not unlike many other countries, Croatia wants to be clean, too--at least clean of its enemies, the Serbs! There is, of course, a world of difference between whether one suppresses otherness by social pressure to conform and emigrate or even by discriminatory legislation and whether one works to eliminate it with the destructive power of guns and fire. Is not the goal the same--a monochrome world, a world without the other?

During my stay in Croatia I read Jacques Derrida's recent comments on today's Europe, reflecting on his own European identity:

I am European, I am no doubt a European intellectual, and I like to recall this, I like to recall this to myself, and why would I deny it? In the name of what? But I am not, nor do I feel, European in every part, that is, European through and through. . . . Being a part, belonging as 'fully a part,' should be incompatible with belonging 'in every part.' My cultural identity, that in the name of which I speak, is not only European, it is not identical to itself, and I am not 'cultural' through and through, 'cultural' in every part.<sup>3</sup>

The identity of Europe with itself, Derrida went on to say, is totalitarian. Indeed, Europe's past is full of the worst of violences committed in the name of European identity. Europe colonized and oppressed, destroyed cultures, and imposed its religion--all in the name of its identity with itself. It was not too long ago that Germany sought to conquer and exterminate in the name of its identity with itself (and Croatia participated in the project its own way). Today, the Balkans are aflame in the name of Serbia's identity with itself. Identity without otherness--this is our curse!

The practice of ethnic and other kinds of "cleansing" in the Balkans forces us to place otherness at the center of theological reflection. The problem, of course, is not specific to the Balkans. The processes of integration in Europe place otherness high on the agenda. So do, for instance, the disintegration of the Soviet empire and the fragility of multi-ethnic and multireligious nations such as India. The large framework for the problem is set by developments of planetary proportions. Modern means of communication and the emerging world economy have transformed our world from a set of self-contained tribes and nations into a global city. The unity of the human race is no longer an abstract notion. The closer humanity's unity, the more powerfully we experience its diversity. The "others"--persons of

another culture, another religion, another economic status, and so on--are not people we read about from distant lands; we see them daily on the screens in our living rooms, pass by them on our streets. They are our colleagues and neighbors, some of them even our spouses. The others are among us; they are part of us, yet they remain others, often pushed to the margins. How should we relate to them? Should we celebrate their difference and support it, or should we bemoan and suppress it? The issue is urgent. The ghettos and battlefields throughout the world testify indisputably to its importance.<sup>4</sup> It is not too much to claim that the future of not only the Balkans but of the whole world depends on how we deal with ethnic, religious, and gender otherness.

Liberation theologians have taught us to place the themes of oppression and liberation at the center of theological reflection. They have drawn our attention to the God who is on the side of the poor and the oppressed, as well as the demands that God's people be on the same side.<sup>5</sup> Nothing should make us forget these lessons, for the "preferential option for the poor" is rooted deeply in biblical traditions. Nevertheless, the categories of oppression and liberation are by themselves inadequate to address the Balkan conflict--or, indeed, the problems in the world at large today. The categories are, of course, almost tailor-made for both Croats and Serbs: each side perceives itself as oppressed by the other, and both are engaged in what they believe to be the struggle for liberation. Unless one is prepared to say that one side is completely right and the other wrong, this is precisely where the problem lies.

Categories of oppression and liberation provide combat gear, not a pin-striped suit or a dinner dress; they are good for fighting, but not for negotiating or celebrating. Even assuming that one side is right and the other wrong, what happens when the fight is over and (we hope) the right side wins? One still faces the question of how the liberated oppressed can live together with their conquered oppressors. "Liberation of the oppressors" is the answer that the "oppression-liberation" schema suggests. But, is it persuasive? Victors are known for never taking off their soldiers' suits; liberation through violence breeds new conflicts. The categories of oppression and liberation seem ill-suited to bring about the resolution of conflicts between people and groups. I suggest that the categories of "exclusion and embrace" as two paradigm responses to otherness can do a better job. They need to be placed at the center of a theological reflection on otherness, an endeavor I will call a "theology of embrace."

A "theology of embrace" would, however, amount to a betrayal of both God and oppressed people if it were pursued in such a way as to marginalize the problems of oppression and liberation. Rather, we need to see oppression and liberation as essential dimensions of exclusion and embrace, respectively. Those who are oppressed and in the need of liberation are always "the others." Indeed, almost invariably, the oppressed do not belong to the dominant culture of the oppressors but are persons or groups of another race, gender,

or religion. To embrace others in their otherness must mean to free them from oppression and give them space to be themselves. Anything else is either a hypocritical tap on the shoulders or a deadly "bear hug." Thus, the question must never be whether one should struggle against oppression but what theological categories are most adequate to accomplish the task.

I will address the issue of otherness by looking first at the nature of Christian identity. This will provide a platform from which to talk about sin as exclusion and about salvation as embrace. However, within the confines of a single essay, I am able neither to ground the "theology of embrace" sufficiently in the work of Christ nor to reflect extensively on its concrete implications. Nor can I work out the differences in the way exclusion and embrace take place on individual and group levels.

### Aliens

In his reminiscences, From the Kingdom of Memory, Elie Wiesel defined the stranger as someone who suggests the unknown, the prohibited, the beyond; he seduces, he attracts, he wounds--and leaves . . . The stranger represents what you are not, what you cannot be, simply because you are not he. . . The stranger is the other. He is not bound by your laws, by your memories; his language is not yours, nor his silence.<sup>6</sup>

How should we respond to the strange world of the other? In answering this question, Christians will have to reflect on their own identity as strangers.

From the inception of the Christian church, otherness was integral to Christian ethnic and cultural identity.<sup>7</sup> Toward the end of the New Testament period, Christians came to designate themselves explicitly as "aliens and exiles" (1 Pet. 2:11).<sup>8</sup> By the second century these metaphors became central to their self-understanding. They saw themselves as heirs to the Hebrew Bible people of God: Abraham was called to go from his country, his kindred, and his father's house (Gen. 12:1); his grandchildren and their children became "aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev. 19:34). The nation of which he and Sarah were foreparents lived as exiles in the Babylonian captivity, and, even when they lived securely in their own land, Yahweh their God expected them to be different from the nations that surrounded them. However, at the root of Christian self-understanding as aliens and exiles lies not so much the story of Abraham and his posterity as the destiny of Jesus Christ, his mission, and his rejection, which brought him to the cross. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (Jn. 1:11). He was a stranger to the world because the world into which he came was estranged from God, and so it is with his followers: "When a person becomes a believer, then he moves from the far country to the vicinity of God. . . . There now arises a relation of reciprocal foreignness and estrangement between Christians and the world."<sup>9</sup> Christians are born of the Spirit (Jn. 3:8) and are, therefore, not "from the world" but, like Jesus Christ,

"from God" (see Jn. 15:19). It is not at the disposal of Christians whether to be alien in their own culture. The "difference" from one's own culture--from the concrete "world" one inhabits--is essential to the Christian's cultural identity.

Why be "different"? Simply for the sake of difference? Even that is progress in a world without the other. Belonging without distance destroys: I affirm my identity as Croatian and want either to shape everyone in my own image or eliminate them from my world. So, why not dirty the walls of a monochrome culture with some spiteful, colorful graffiti? There is a value in difference even simply as difference, yet the difference will remain sterile if it is nothing but a protest gesture. It might also turn into its very opposite. If belonging without distance destroys, distance without belonging isolates: I deny my cultural identity as Croatian and draw back from my own culture, but, more often than not, I become trapped in the snares of counter-dependence. I deny my Croatian identity only to affirm even more forcefully my identity as a member of this or that anti-Croatian sect. As the "positive fusion" is substituted by "negative fusion," an isolationist "distance without belonging" slips into a destructive "belonging without distance." Difference from a culture must never degenerate into a simple flight from that culture. Rather, to be an alien and an exile must be a way of living in and for a culture. In biblical terminology, the realm and reign of God are not of this world, but they are in and for this world. Distance must involve belonging, as belonging must involve distance.

Given, then, the need for interpenetration of distance and belonging, what is the positive purpose of the distance? The category of "new creation" sets us on the trail leading to an answer. In a key passage about the nature of Christian existence, Paul declared: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). The rebirth of a person by the Spirit is nothing less than an anticipation of the eschatological new creation of God, a gathering of the whole people of God and of all the cultural treasures that have been dispersed among the nations. By the Spirit, that future universal event becomes a concrete reality in each believer.

One consequence of the re-creation of a person by the Spirit is that she or he can no longer be thought of apart from the rich and complex reality of the new creation. The Spirit sets a person on the road toward becoming what one might call a "catholic personality," a personal microcosm of the eschatological new creation. Catholic personality is a personality enriched by otherness, a personality that is what it is only because all differentiated otherness of the new creation has been reflected in it in a particular way. The distance from my own culture that results from being born by the Spirit does not isolate me but creates space in me for the other. Only in distance can I be enriched, so that I, in turn, can enrich the culture to which I belong.

Because everything belongs partly to a catholic personality, a person with catholic personality cannot belong totally to any one thing. The only way to belong is with distance.



This distance from any particular reality, from any particular person and culture--which exists for the sake of transcending the exclusion of all other reality from that person's identity--might be called "catholic foreignness." Christians are not simply aliens to their own culture; they are aliens who are at home in every culture, because they are open to every culture. Something of this catholic foreignness might have been in the mind of the anonymous author of the Epistle to Diognetus when he wrote, "Every foreign land is their fatherland, and every fatherland a foreign land."<sup>10</sup>

The notion of the catholic personality avoids exclusivism because each person has become a particular reflection of the totality of others. At the same time it transcends indifferent relativism. Each does not simply affirm the otherness as otherness but seeks to be enriched by it. But, should a catholic personality integrate all otherness? Can one feel at home with everything in every culture? With murder, rape, and destruction? With nationalistic idolatry and "ethnic cleansing"? Any notion of catholic personality that was capable only of integrating but not of discriminating would be grotesque. For, there are incommensurable perspectives that stubbornly refuse to be dissolved in a peaceful synthesis, and there are evil things that we should stubbornly resist integrating into our personalities.<sup>11</sup> The practice of exclusion cannot be given up. The biblical category for it is "judgment." This brings us to the second positive purpose of the distance.

Distance that results from being born by the Spirit--"catholic foreignness"--entails a judgment not only against a monochrome character of one's own culture but also against evil in every culture. The new creation that an authentic catholic personality should anticipate is not an indiscriminate affirmation of the present world. Such an affirmation would be the cheapest of all graces and, hence, no grace at all--neither toward the perpetrators of evil nor, of course, toward their many victims. There can be no new creation without judgment, without the expulsion of the devil and the beast and the false prophet (Rev. 20:10), without the swallowing up of the night by the light and of death by life (Rev. 21:4, 22:5).<sup>12</sup> The notion of "catholic foreignness," therefore, necessarily involves a conflict with the world: the struggle between truth and falsehood, between justice and arbitrariness, between life and death.<sup>13</sup> Distance from a culture that rebirth by the Spirit creates is a judgment against the evils of a culture. It creates space for the struggle against the various demons that assault it. 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.

Does not talk about demons and darkness return us to the exclusion that the notion of the "catholic personality" should have overcome? Indeed, does not the notion of catholic personality presuppose exclusion, because it rests not only on belonging but also on distance? The best way to tackle these questions is to look at the significance of "centrality." It seems rather obvious that, when talking about identity, one cannot do without a center; otherwise,

the talk of difference and its being internal to oneself makes no sense. To what is the difference internal? Derrida, who is not known to be graceful toward what he calls "hegemonic centrality," recognizes as much when he insists that self-difference "would gather this center [the human center of an individual], relating it to itself, only to the extent that it would open it up to" the divergence from itself.<sup>14</sup> Derrida cannot give up the center, for then the difference would remain everywhere and nowhere. The center seems to function, however, only as a precondition for openness for the other, as a contentless container of difference.

But, if the self is not a center organizing the difference but merely a container of the difference, does one not end up--exactly contrary to Derrida's intention--with a "melting-pot" (or some chaotic "salad-bowl")? The lesser trouble with the melting-pot is that it never existed. The greater trouble is that it dissolves the difference. The identity with oneself--a personal centeredness--must be preserved for the sake of difference.<sup>15</sup> My being centered in distance from the other is not a negative act of exclusion but a creative act of separation. The Book of Genesis rightly describes creation as successive divine acts of separation (see 1:3ff.). Because the other and I can be constituted in our mutual otherness only by separation, no genuine openness to the other is possible without it. This is why the encounter with a stranger is creative only if, as Wiesel has put it, you "know when to step back."<sup>16</sup>

In the case of Christians, superimposed on the center that creates their human identity is another center that creates their Christian identity. Emergence of this new center is also an act of creation--the new creation--and it takes place through separation. Why this new center? Why the additional separation? It is because a human center is not an impersonal axis but a personal self--a heart--that cannot exist without a "god," without a framework of meaning and value. The god of the self is the doorkeeper who decides about the fate of the otherness at the doorstep of the heart. To embrace a Christian God does not mean to place a doorkeeper at the entrance of one's heart that was without one before but to replace one doorkeeper with another. One cannot get rid of one's gods; one can only change them. When one thinks one has gotten rid of them, a restless demon who wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place but finds none has already taken their place (see Mt. 12:43). So, the question is not whether one has a doorkeeper but who the doorkeeper is and how the doorkeeper relates to otherness. Does the Christian doorkeeper prohibit anything non-Christian from entering?

There are two injunctions that surface persistently 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 to participate in God's advance toward where God and God's reign are not yet. Without such centeredness, it would be impossible either to denounce the practice of exclusion or to demand the practice of embrace.

### Exclusion

What strikes one immediately in the Balkan war is the naked hate, a hate without enough decency--or, shall we say, hypocrisy?--to cover itself up. Not that hate is unique to this conflict: Most wars feed on hate, and the masters of war know how to manufacture it well. It is the proportions of the Balkan hate and its rawness right there on the fringes of what some thought to be civilized Europe that cause us to stagger. Think of the stories of soldiers making necklaces out of the fingers of little children! Never mind whether they are true or not--that they are being told and believed suffices. The hate that gives rise to such stories and wants to believe them is the driving force behind the ruthless and relentless pursuit of exclusion known as "ethnic cleansing." This is precisely what hate is: an unflinching will to exclude, a revulsion for the other.

It might be that the most basic sin is pride, though this way of defining sin does not seem to capture with precision the experiences of most women.<sup>18</sup> However, I doubt that it is helpful to go about reducing all sins to their common root;<sup>19</sup> the Bible at any rate does not seem to be interested in such a business. I will not pursue here the search for the one basic sin but will indicate a fundamental way of conceiving of sin: sin as exclusion.<sup>20</sup> For those who are interested in exploring the connection between exclusion and pride, one could point out that exclusion, which is a form of contempt toward the other, might be considered "the reverse side of pride and its necessary concomitant in a world in which self-esteem is constantly challenged by the achievements of others."<sup>21</sup>

One of the advantages of conceiving of 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, those who failed to keep the Law as interpreted by the religious establishment, and gentiles and Samaritans. A pious person had to separate 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 has written, "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)."<sup>22</sup> 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 not only the younger brother but also the elder brother--the one who withheld an embrace and expected exclusion. Sin is a refusal to embrace the other in her otherness, a desire to purge him 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. For the father an act of exclusion called for an embrace. By excluding his younger brother, the older brother excluded the father who longed for an embrace. But, did not both brothers exclude the father? Are they not both sinners? Are not both equally sinners? This brings us to the problem of the universality of sin.

From a distance, things look fairly simple in the Balkan war: Croats and especially Muslims are the victims, and Serbs are the aggressors. Has any city in Serbia been destroyed, any of its territories occupied? The macro-picture of the conflict is clear, and it does not seem likely that anything will ever change it. I approached the clear contours of this picture with a pre-reflective expectation that the victim is innocent and the oppressor guilty. This natural presumption was aided by my belonging to the victimized group. I had, of course, never doubted that Croats share some blame for the outbreak of the war (just as I never doubted that only Croatia's renunciation of sovereignty would have prevented the conflict from breaking out in the first place), but I expected Croats to be more humane victims. At night in Osijek, I would hear explosions go off and know that another house or shop of a Serb who did not emigrate had been destroyed, and rarely was anyone brought to justice. Refugees, those who were victimized the most, looted trucks that brought them help; they were at war with each other. Are these simply necessary accompaniments of a war? If so, they prove my point: the more closely one looks at the picture, the more the line between the guilty and the innocent blurs, and all one sees is an intractable maze of small and large brutalities. I was tempted to exclaim: "All are evil, equally evil!" Then I heard those same words broadcast by the Serbian propaganda machine. The logic was simple: If evildoers are everywhere, then the violence of the aggressor is no worse than the violence of the victim. All are aggressors, and all are victims. Placing the micro-picture of the maze of evil so close to our eyes was calculated to remove the macro-picture of aggression and suffering from our field of vision.

Christian theology has traditionally underlined the universality of sin. "[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," said the Apostle Paul (Rom. 3:23), echoing some central Hebrew Bible passages. In the bright light of the divine glory, stains of injustice appear on all human righteousness, and blemishes of narcissism, indifference, and sometimes hate appear on all human love. In addition to freeing us "from delusions about the perfectibility of ourselves and our institutions,"<sup>23</sup> the doctrine of the universality of sin pricks the thin balloons of self-righteousness of aggressor and victim alike and binds them in the solidarity of sin, thus preparing the way for reconciliation. This is why the doctrine of the universality of sin should not be given up.

If all are sinners, then are all sins equal? Reinhold Niebuhr, who in our century most powerfully restated the doctrine of the universality of sin, thought so. However, he sought to balance the equality of sin with the inequality of guilt.<sup>24</sup> If one affirms the equality of sin, such a balancing act becomes unavoidable. But, why assert the equality of sin in the first place? From "all are sinners" it does not follow that "all sins are equal."<sup>25</sup> Aggressors' destruction of a village and refugees' looting a truck are equally sin, but they are not equal sins. The equality of sins dissolves all concrete sins in an ocean of undifferentiated sinfulness. This is precisely what the prophets and Jesus did not do. Their judgments are not general but specific; they do not condemn anyone and everyone, just the rich and mighty who oppress the poor and crush the needy. The sin of driving out the other from her possession, from her work, from her means of livelihood--the sin of pushing him to the margins of society and beyond--weighs high on their scales. How could there be universal solidarity in this sin? The mighty are the sinners, and the weak are the sinned against. Even if all people sin, not all sin equally. To deny this would be to insult all those nameless heroes who refused to participate in power-acts of exclusion and had the courage to embrace the other, even at the risk of being ostracized or imprisoned. The uprightness of these people demands that we talk about sin concretely.<sup>26</sup>

But, if we always speak of sin concretely--if we speak of it only in the plural--do we not reduce sin to sinful acts and intentions? Is this not too shallow a view of sin, and does it not lead to unhealthy and oppressive moralizing? The answer would be yes, if it were not for the transpersonal dimension of sin and evil.

"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 keep it going are made in the centers of intellectual, political, and military power, but there is far too much will for brutality among the common people. Once the conflict started, it seemed to trigger an uncontrollable chain reaction.<sup>27</sup> These were decent people, helpful neighbors. They did not, strictly speaking, choose to plunder and burn, rape

and torture--or secretly enjoy these acts. 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. 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."<sup>28</sup> Evil engenders evil, and, like pyroclastic debris from the mouth of a volcano, it erupts out of aggressor and victim alike.

In a fascinating book, Engaging the Powers, Walter Wink accessed the problem of the power of evil by looking at the "Powers" and their perversion into the "Domination System." The Powers, he claimed, 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."<sup>29</sup> The Powers are essentially good, but when they became "hell-bent on control," according to Wink, they degenerate into the Domination System. This system itself is neither only institutional nor spiritual; rather, the "powers of this present darkness" (see Eph. 6:12) 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 economic, social, or psychological. Wink is right, however, 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 else 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 recently suggested?<sup>30</sup> 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. 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.

The desire for identity could also explain why so many people let themselves be sinned against so passively--why they let themselves be excluded. It is not because they do not have the will to be themselves but because one can satisfy that will by surrendering to the other. Their problem is not so much exclusion of the other from their will to be oneself but a paradoxical exclusion of their own self from the will to be oneself (what in feminist theology is called "diffusion of the self"). I call this exclusion a "problem," not a "sin," for it often comes about as a result of introjected acts of exclusion that we suffer.<sup>31</sup> Sin "is lurking at the door" when the introjected exclusion of ourselves by others starts crying after our exclusion of the others--when we begin looking for everything dark, inferior, and culpable in them. Like Cain, we then become ready to kill the otherness of the other.

### Embrace

What do we do against the terrible sin of exclusion that lurks at our door or has already entered our soul? How do we master it? Is there a way out of the circle of exclusion to an embrace? The tragedy of the Balkan situation is that very few people seem to be asking these questions. Vengeance is on everybody's mind. Serbs want to avenge the slaughter of their compatriots in World War II and to repay others for their injured sense of national pride during the post-War years. Croats and Muslims want revenge for Serbian atrocities, some from the present war and some from the previous one, and for their economic exploitation. The greater their success at revenging themselves, the more Serbs feel justified in their aggression. An evil deed will not be owed for long; it demands an instant repayment in kind. Vengeance, as Hannah Arendt wrote in The Human Condition,

acts in the form of re-acting against an original trespassing, whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered course. . . . [Vengeance] incloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end.<sup>32</sup>

The endless spinning of the spiral of vengeance has its own good reasons that are built into the very structure of our world. If our deeds and their consequences could be undone, revenge would not be necessary. The undoing, if there were will for it, would suffice. Our actions are irreversible, however. Even God cannot change them. Therefore, the urge for vengeance or for punishment seems irrepressible. Arendt called this "the predicament of irreversibility."<sup>33</sup> The only way out of it, she insisted, was through an act of forgiveness.

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. However, 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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 that hate belongs before God--not in a reflectively managed and manicured form of a confession but as a pre-reflective 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 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. However, 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 oneself 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 one's humanity and imitate God's love for oneself. When one knows that the love of God is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself in light of the justice of God and, so, to rediscover one's own sinfulness.

Yet, even when the obstacles are removed, forgiveness cannot simply be presumed.<sup>36</sup> 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 has suggested.<sup>37</sup> The perpetrator deserves unforgiveness. When forgiveness happens, there is always a strange, almost irrational, otherness 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. It leaves a distance, however, an empty space between people that allows them either to go their separate ways in what is called "peace" or to fall into each other's arms.



"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 battle 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." We will each be clean of the other and identical with ourselves, 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 always involves 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 both 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, to become part of me so that she can enrich me with what she has and I do not.<sup>38</sup> 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)<sup>39</sup>--and still something other than either.<sup>40</sup>

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 that "the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (Jn. 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 each is the other persons in their 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 voluntative levels--a refusal to recognize that the others have already broken in through the enclosure of our selves and an unwillingness to make a "movement of effacement by which the self makes itself available to others."<sup>41</sup> In the presence of the divine Trinity, we need to strip 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.<sup>42</sup> The Spirit of embrace creates communities of embrace--places where the power of the Exclusion System has been broken and from whence the divine energies of embrace can flow, forging rich identities that include the other.

#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Miroslav Volf, "When the Unclean Spirit Leaves: Tasks of the Eastern European Churches after the 1989 Revolution," OPREE, Vol. XI, No. 1 (February 1991), 11.

<sup>2</sup>This article was completed in January, 1993.

<sup>3</sup>Jacques Derrida, The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 82-83.

<sup>4</sup>For a short analysis of the political and cultural, but mainly philosophical, importance of the "difference," see Mark C. Taylor, Altarity (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. xxi. See also Tzvetan Todorov's classic treatment of the problem of otherness in the account of the encounter between European and American civilizations, The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Harper, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>See the classic work by Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation, tr. Sr. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

<sup>6</sup>Elie Wiesel, From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences (New York: Summit Books, 1990), pp. 59-60.

<sup>7</sup>See Reinhard Feldmeier, Die Christen als Fremde: Die Metapher der Fremde in der antiken Welt, im Urchristentum und im 1. Petrusbrief, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 64 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992).

<sup>8</sup>Gustav Stählin, "xénos ktl," in Gerhard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. 5, tr. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), p. 30. Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>10</sup>The Epistle to Diognetus 5:5, in Henry G. Meecham, The Epistle to Diognetus: The Greek Text with Introduction, Translation, and Notes (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1949), p. 81.

<sup>11</sup>See Richard J. Mouw, "Christian Philosophy and Cultural Diversity," Christian Scholar's Review 17 (December, 1987): 114ff.

<sup>12</sup>See Miroslav Volf, Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 120-121.

<sup>13</sup>See Jürgen Moltmann, Der Weg Jesu Christi: Christologie in messianischen Dimensionen (Munich: Kaiser, 1989), p. 226. Cf. idem, "Dient die 'pluralistische Theologie' dem Dialog der Weltreligionen?" Evangelische Theologie 49 (December, 1989): 528-536.

<sup>14</sup>Derrida, The Other Heading, p. 10. He says as much when he speaks of the contradictory demand that the European cultural identity not be dispersed but that, at the same time, it not accept "the capital of a centralizing authority" (ibid., pp. 38-39).

<sup>15</sup>In his Gifford lectures, Paul Ricoeur distinguished categorically between idem-identity and ipse-identity. In the circle of idem-identity, the other is "distinct" or "diverse," and it functions as the antonym of "same." In the circle of ipse-identity, the otherness is constitutive of sameness; here the selfhood of oneself "implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other" (Paul Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, tr. Kathleen Blamey [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992], p. 3). So, when we speak of the loss of identity--of Ichlosigkeit--then the "I" of which the subject says that it is nothing is "a self deprived of the help of sameness" (ibid., p. 166).

<sup>16</sup>Wiesel, From the Kingdom, p. 73. On p. 65, he noted that a stranger "can be of help only as a stranger--lest you are ready to become his caricature. And your own."

<sup>17</sup>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 has suggested 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 not; it cannot be partly an apple and partly a pear. Fuzzy sets, by contrast, 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. For Hiebert, the category of "Christian" should be understood as a centered set. While a demarcation line exists, 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 [July, 1983]: 421-427; see esp. 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.

<sup>18</sup>See Judith Plaskow, Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980); and Daphne Hampson, "Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique," in Richard Harries, ed. and intro., Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time (London: Mowbray; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), pp. 46-60.

<sup>19</sup>So, also, Jürgen Moltmann, The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation, tr. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 127.

<sup>20</sup>"Exclusion," as I am using the term here, should not be confused with "separation." Separation, as I noted earlier, is a creative act through which otherness is constituted. If one speaks of sin as separation (see, e.g., Barry Ulanov's reflections on sin as separation ["The Rages of Sin," Union Seminary Quarterly Review, vol. 44, nos. 1-2 (1990), pp. 137-150]), one should think of it as a second-order separation--a rendering asunder of things that in their otherness belong together.

<sup>21</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation. Vol. 1: Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), p. 211.

<sup>22</sup>Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 115-116.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>24</sup>Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, pp. 222ff.

<sup>25</sup>So, already, William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, Library of Living Theology 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 240.

<sup>26</sup>See Moltmann, Spirit of Life, p. 126.

<sup>27</sup>On the eve of World War II, Carl Gustav Jung wrote: "The impressive thing about the German phenomenon is that one man, who is obviously 'possessed,' has infected a whole nation to such an extent that everything is set in motion and has started rolling on its course towards perdition" ("Wotan," in Herbert Read et al., eds., Collected Works of C. G. Jung, tr. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series 20 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), p. 185.

<sup>28</sup>Carl Gustav Jung, "After the Catastrophe," in *ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>29</sup>Walter Wink, "All Will Be Redeemed," The Other Side 28 (November-December, 1992): 17. See Wink, Engaging the Powers, pp. 33-104.

<sup>30</sup>See Wolfhart Pannenberg, Systematische Theologie II (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), pp. 298-299.

<sup>31</sup>Such introjection is possible, of course, because our will to be one with ourselves can be satisfied in part by giving ourselves to others.

<sup>32</sup>Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 240-241.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>34</sup>See Carl Gustav Jung, "Epilogue to 'Essay on Contemporary Events,'" in Read, Collected Works, pp. 240-241.

<sup>35</sup>See Christoph Barth, Introduction to the Psalms (New York: Scribners, 1966), pp. 43ff.; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Enemies and Evildoers in the Psalms: A Challenge to Christian Preaching," Horizons in Biblical Theology, vol. 4, no. 2 (1983), pp. 61-77.

<sup>36</sup>See James Wm. McClendon, Systematic Theology I: Ethics (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 224ff.

<sup>37</sup>Lewis B. Smedes, Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 124.

<sup>38</sup>See Wiesel, From the Kingdom, p. 61.

<sup>39</sup>For the categories, see Julia Kristeva, Au commencement était l'amour: Psychoanalyse et foi, Textes du xxe siècle (Paris: Hachette, 1988), pp. 35ff.

<sup>40</sup>This rather schematic analysis of embrace needs to be fleshed out concretely, of course. The identity of a person or a 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.

<sup>41</sup>Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, p. 168.

<sup>42</sup>Moltmann, Spirit of Life, p. 219.