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Book Review: A Critical Analysis of Miroslav Volf's 2015, Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World

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Abstract

Book review of Miroslav Volf's (2015) "Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World."

Keywords

Religious Studies, Book Review, Globalization, Christianity

Disciplines

Christianity | Religion

Comments

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Volf, Miroslav. *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 280pp. \$18

Flourishing is an attempt at presenting a critical argument on how specifically the relationship between world religions and globalization is conducive and key to what he equates with living “the good life” (ix). However in practice, Volf’s piece offers very little grounding for a critical argument in the field of religious studies, and instead writes more alike to that of a personal Christian reflection. While Volf could have maintained some level of scholarly backing in this piece if he had chosen to write only on the topic and from the perspective of Christianity, he does away with this chance by repeatedly claiming that he is dealing with many ‘world religions.’ In his writing, it is easy to see the dichotomy that lies in between his views of Christianity with that of other religious traditions. Throughout the entirety of the book, Volf never allows himself to forgo a blatantly Christian lens of analysis and reflection. In laying out his main argument, he embodies almost a Christian savior style of agency stating, “I had to show *how and why adherents of other world religions have reasons rooted in their own deep convictions to embrace or at least take seriously my proposal*” (19).

Likewise, he writes from a global perspective that comes off as both limited and at times, nonsensical. While it is admirable that he states his shortcomings and that he can in fact, not include all traditions, his reasoning remains vague and almost random. For example, he writes, “I have left aside religions that are equally inadequately, designated as ‘primary,’ ‘indigenous,’ or ‘local.’” He continues by stating that “Local religions have their own, mostly unhappy, history with globalization as well as their own contribution to its reshaping , especially when it comes to globalization’s relation to local natural habitats and the planet as a whole” (3). Here, Volf simultaneously others any tradition and religion that he defines as ‘non-primary,’ and then places an unsubstantiated claim of blame unto them when it comes to reparations and repairs on a basis of the globalization, which he states they did not cause.

The book has two main proposals: “how people with Christian convictions should relate to other religions and to globalization *as well as* how adherents of other world religions should relate to one another and globalization” (19). Here, even in building his central reasoning, we can see the act of othering all that is not Christianity this time. From very early on in the piece, Volf’s reflection lies on normative and ungrounded assessments of how people “should” think and behave, and in kind, how ‘globalization’ can help create these ideal futurisms for all religions. He continues to build such reflections from a point of a non-expert, and does so while showing little to no diversity in his citations and background.

Volf's already vague reasoning and argumentation becomes lost when reading further into the book. It moves from an ungrounded yet still central theme of how to recreate and help world religions to "flourish," to a messy amalgamation of Christian thoughts and reflections. He does this by centering his own experience, and whether purposefully or otherwise, othering other religions in the process. Volf describes how the core of the definition of an exclusivist religion is that "religious exclusivists believe that their faith is *the* true faith." (138) Yet he continues to write from an exclusivist Christian perspective.

Flourishing certainly has its strong areas, but they are not present in what Volf calls his main arguments. Instead of making unsubstantiated claims and applying them to global religions, Volf could have retained more legitimacy if he had chosen to center his writing in his expertise: Christian scripture and theology. Later in the book, Volf begins being more open about his personal religious standpoint, and in kind, the book becomes something pertinent to that of the Christian story.

Volf makes compelling points grounded in the Christian faith in his final chapter, where he creates a theoretical blueprint of how religions can be used for peacebuilding. Volf writes, "In Christian terms, we will both flourish and live in peace with ourselves and one another if our lives are, in Jesus's words, not primarily about 'food' and 'clothing' but about the search for God and God's universal righteousness." (171) Here, he is able to root himself in the Christian faith, in a way that is personal, academic, and approachable for the reader, and this is where his writing does well. While he quickly turns back to the theme of discussing many global religions soon thereafter this section, he could have made a much more compelling piece if he had stuck with the theme and focus of Christianity.

In turn, Volf should consider reframing his book to be one that explicitly argues for a normative assessment of Christianity and its specific relationship to globalization, along with how he believes they may both co-create his idea of what 'flourishing,' truly is.

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