



For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference

Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun

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The question of what makes life worth living is more vital now than ever. In today's pluralistic, postsecular world, universal values are dismissed as mere matters of private opinion, and the question of what constitutes flourishing life--for ourselves, our neighbors, and the planet as a whole--is neglected in our universities, our churches, and our culture at large. Although we increasingly have technology to do almost anything, we have little sense of what is truly worth accomplishing.

In this provocative new contribution to public theology, world-renowned theologian Miroslav Volf (named "America's New Public Intellectual" by Scot McKnight on his *Jesus Creed* blog) and Matthew Croasmun explain that the intellectual tools needed to rescue us from our present malaise and meet our new cultural challenge are the tools of theology. A renewal of theology is crucial to help us articulate compelling visions of the good life, find our way through the maze of contested questions of value, and answer the fundamental question of what makes life worth living.

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Date : Published January 22nd 2019 by Brazos Press

ISBN : 9781587434013

Author : Miroslav Volf , Matthew Croasmun

Format : Hardcover 208 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Faith, Spirituality



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From Reader Review For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference for online ebook

Robert D. Cornwall says

To many theology is a rather irrelevant and esoteric exercise with no real world application. As one who is trained as a theologian (historical theology), I would beg to differ. Despite my protests, I expect most would continue with prior assumptions. Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun have written a powerful response to those who suggest that theology has little to offer the modern world. In doing so, they recognize that the study of theology is a moment of deep crisis. Seminaries are in decline, making it more difficult for those trained in theology to get positions. Seminaries are in decline because the churches that relate to them are in decline. As a result we either long for a lost era of importance or settle in and teach classes and go about our business, but is this the way it should be?

"For the Life of the World" is written as a manifesto by theologians who believe that theology should and can make a difference in the world. While theology is, at one level, about God, and theology is engaged in for the sake of God, it is not for God's benefit that we do this, as God does not need theology. Theology, done for God's sake, leads, in their estimation to the flourishing life. In other words, this is an extension of Volf's earlier work *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*. While this isn't a popularization of the earlier book, it is geared differently, in that the focus is on the value of Christian theology and not religion in general to a life that is good or lived well.

The authors begin in chapter 1 with the premise that "Christian theology has lost its way because it has neglected its purpose." That purpose is "to discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life in the light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ" (p. 11). This God's primary concern, and thus it should be true of theologians. As laid out in chapter 1, the "human quest" is for the flourishing life, that is abundant life or the good life, a life that is worth living. Theology done right helps orient us toward that form of life as is understood in light of Jesus. This is something the church could engage in, but rarely does.

The question of the human quest leads in chapter 2 to "the crisis of theology." The crisis is related to the way in which theology is pursued, largely in academic contexts, where theologians essentially write for colleagues. By theology, Volf includes the broader theological faculty, including biblical studies, church history, ethics, ministerial arts, not just systematics. Part of the problem is the job market, which is shrinking, and thus those with positions must focus on keeping them, while those without jobs must focus on gaining credentials to get that job. As noted earlier, seminaries are shrinking, because the services of their students are finding it difficult to find work (shrinking churches). I understand all of this well, having trained for the academy, but have spent my life in the church (not that I'm complaining, but it wasn't my original intention). While all of this is an external crisis, there is the internal one, the loss of vision and forgotten purpose. The authors go into some detail as to the reasons for this, which I found compelling and worth looking at closely. In the end, they note the cost of being a theologian -- both in training and in actually engaging in the work. So why bother?

The remainder of the book is a response, an argument for why theology matters. Remember this is a manifesto. It is a call for the renewal of theology by rediscovering the purpose of theology, which is the flourishing life. They make a bold declaration, which will get pushback. That is, "Christian theology shouldn't be mainly about God because the mission of God isn't mainly about God" (p. 64). It's not primarily about redemption either, whether we mean forgiveness of sins or freedom from oppression. Those might be central to the quest, but they are not the goal. You might say that the goal is the realm or kingdom of God,

that is, finding our home in God. As Augustine reminds us, we are restless until we rest in God. That would be the focus of theology.

If the work of theology is to understand and live into the life of flourishing, a life that is fully rooted in our relationship with God as revealed in Christ Jesus, that raises a problem. That problem, as outlined in chapter four is "The Challenge of Universality." If we affirm the premise that there is one God, who is revealed in the incarnation, then what of other faith traditions? It's not so much a matter here of exclusivism, as it is of inclusivism. What they note in this chapter is that universalisms are contested visions. With that as a starting point, they believe that it is possible to advocate for this vision while peacefully coexisting and working with those having different visions of the divine reality. They also understand that even within Christianity there is the matter of particularity. I found this to be an important chapter, that helps me think through how I as a committed Christian and follower of Jesus can engage with partners in life's work who come from other faith traditions. Central here is the recognition, as the authors note, that there can be no absoluteness in our claims. The particularities of our claims rules out such absolutes. Theology, therefore must, if it is to contribute to the quest for the flourishing life, take into consideration the pluralism of our realities.

Remembering that this is a manifesto for the renewal of theology by reengaging with its purpose (not simply as an academic institution), the authors remind us that theology needs to be connected to life. It is a way of living, that involves faith seeking understanding, but more than this. They put this task this way: execution of the central theological task requires a certain kind of affinity between the life the theologian seeks to articulate and the life of the prophet seeks to lead" (p. 118). They go into some detail as to what this means. Again, it relates to a flourishing life.

The final chapter offers a "vision of flourishing life." That vision is finding our home in Christ, who is the dwelling place of God, so that we might be part of the church which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. They speak of form and content. They do so in conversation with Paul. The focus here is on the "teleios," the perfect as it's often translated in 1 Corinthians 13. The kingdom is the form, while the content is defined in terms of love, peace, and joy, or in terms of the "life led well" (righteousness, which is love); the "life going well" (peace -- right relationships), and finally "life feeling as it should (joy). Peace and joy are not fully experienced in this life, but love is always to be pursued as the foundation of peace and joy. All are understood to be the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As a theologian, I find this manifesto to be compelling and encouraging. The crisis we find ourselves in won't end soon. The traditional centers of theology will continue to struggle, and yet if we will take hold of this vision we may reclaim its value. Theology in other words is more than a science or a means of study, it is a vision of flourishing. That is worth engaging in. The book is accessible though not easy to read. This is not popular religion, and so it will take committed effort, but it is more than worth the effort.

A word about the title, the authors acknowledge that they borrowed it from Orthodox Alexander Schmemmann, because, in their words, "in our own way, we share both Schmemmann's sacramental vision of the word as the site of communion with God and his opposition to either seeking refuge from the world in God alone or to employing God as tool to improve the world according to our own preset plan" (p. 190). That is a good summation of their vision.

Jared Abbott says

This is an excellent book that accomplishes what it set out to do--which is to take a step toward a "theology

of flourishing life."

The authors argue that the fundamental human question is, "What is the true, good, or flourishing life?" They point out that present-day Christian theologians have neglected this question, and this has contributed to a crisis in theology. As it stands today, theology and theologians are irrelevant to most Christians (both clergy and laity). If academic theologians began to concern themselves again with theology that actually made the world and the lives of real people better in practice, the crisis would come to an end. In the last chapter the authors sketch out a picture of the good life rooted in the Apostle Paul's description of the kingdom of God as "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," which they correspond to life led well, life going well, and life feeling as it should.

There are some aspects of the book I don't care for. I'm not interested in the theological contributions of Marxists or radical Feminists. I think the authors think a little too highly of pluralism. However, they are explicitly opposed to relativism, and they quote Martin Luther more than any other theologian. There is certainly more good than bad in this book.
