

by Miroslav Volf

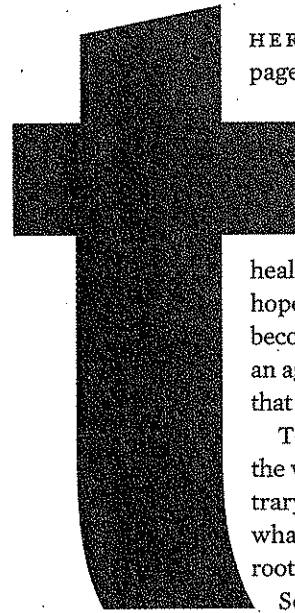
the church's great malfunctions

THE
CHRISTIAN
VISION
PROJECT

Though theology, like nearly every human endeavor, is a collaborative process, not many eminent theologians turn in articles with the names of co-authors attached. But Miroslav Volf's article arrived bearing no fewer than five additional names—Joseph Cumming, David Miller, Andrew Saperstein, Christian Scharen, and Travis Tucker, his colleagues at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

That generosity is a good clue to Volf's contribution to Christian theology. His 1996 book *Exclusion and Embrace* was both a serious work of biblical and theological investigation and a deeply personal reflection on the horrors of sectarian violence in his native Croatia, setting a standard for personal engagement with its subject that theology, unfortunately, rarely meets.

The Yale Center for Faith and Culture is dedicated to advancing faith as "a way of life," not just a way of thinking—a way that should transform every human practice. While the essay responds to the question we've been addressing in *CT*'s 50th anniversary year—How can followers of Christ be a counterculture for the common good?—the Yale Center staff's collaboration is also an eloquent answer all by itself.



HERE IS A REMARKABLE IMAGE in the closing pages of Scripture that has become a touchstone for the way my colleagues and I think about faith and culture. Amid its descriptions of the New Jerusalem, Revelation includes "the tree of life, bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). The tree holds out hope that whole cultures will be healed and mended, becoming places where people can flourish. And it sets an agenda for faith as a way of life that contributes to that flourishing, in anticipation, here and now.

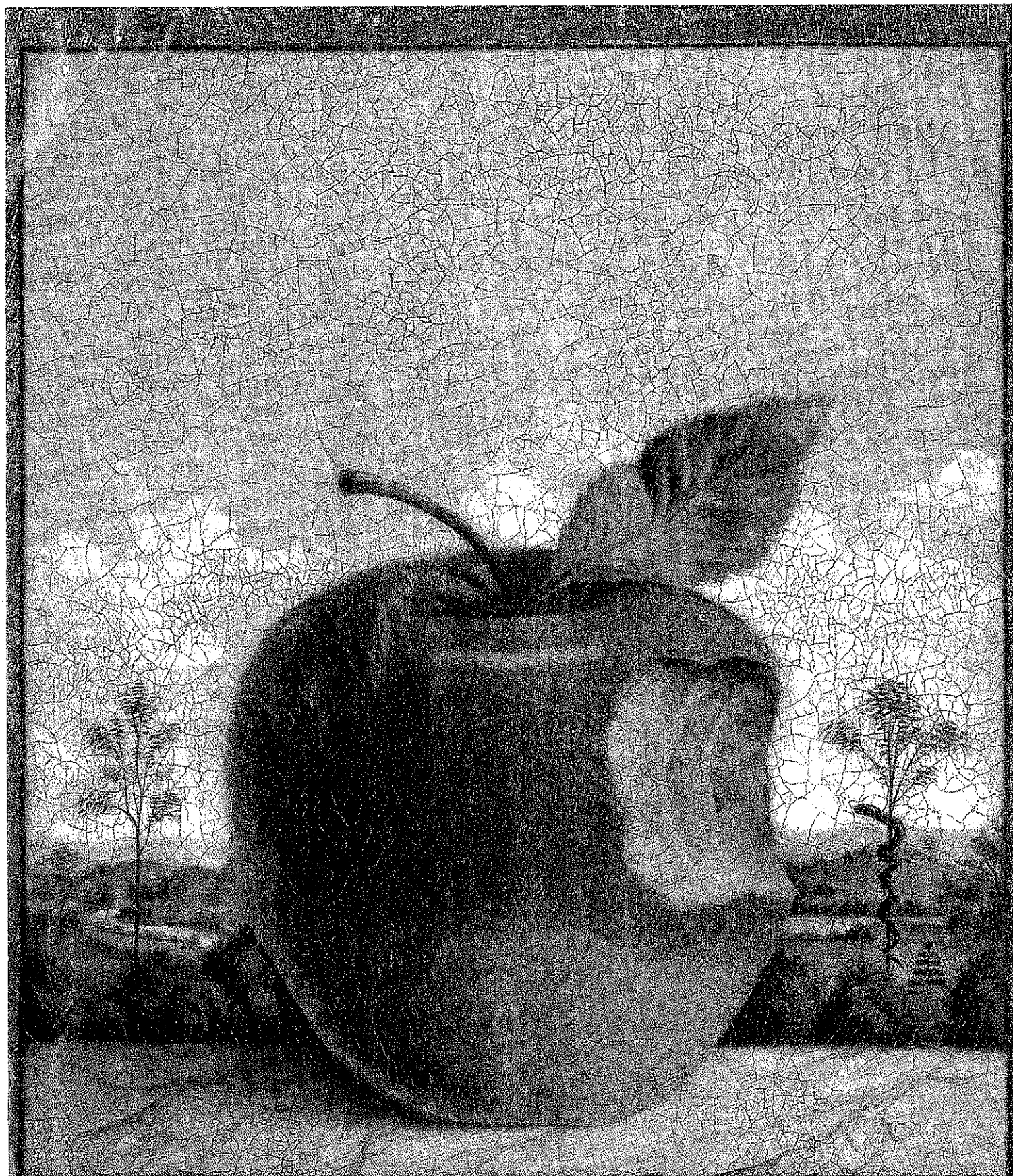
Too often, however, Christian faith neither mends the world nor helps human beings thrive. To the contrary, it seems to shatter things into pieces, to choke what's new and beautiful before it has chance to take root, to trample underfoot what's good and true.

Some of faith's damaging effects are a matter of perspective. Prizing power, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche derided Christianity for its "active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak."

But even according to its own standards, Christian faith has been put to the most scandalous uses. As we reflect on how followers of Christ can exemplify "a counterculture for the common good," it's important to keep these ill effects of faith in mind. I'll call them "malfunctions" and group them under two rubrics: idleness of faith and oppressiveness of faith.

SPECTACULAR FAILURE

He was a "good Christian man," he even taught Sunday school, and yet he ended up presiding over one of the worst business frauds in history, involving thousands of people and billions of dollars. I could be referring



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to any number of executives in the business-page headlines of the past several years, from Enron to WorldCom and beyond. Why didn't their faith prevent their crimes? I suspect at least three factors were at work in their faith's spectacular failure.

First, the *lure of temptation*. In a way, fraud in business is no different from infidelity in marriage or plagiarism in scholarly work. Even people committed to high moral standards succumb.

Giving in is as old as humanity—but so is victory over temptation. Virtuous character matters more than moral knowledge. Like Adam and Eve in the Fall or the self-confessing apostle Paul in Romans 7, most of those who do wrong know what's right but find themselves irresistibly attracted to evil. Faith idles when character shrivels.

Second, the *power of systems*. The lure of temptation is amplified by the power of the systems in which we work. This may be true most of all in the nearly ubiquitous market, whether that is the market of

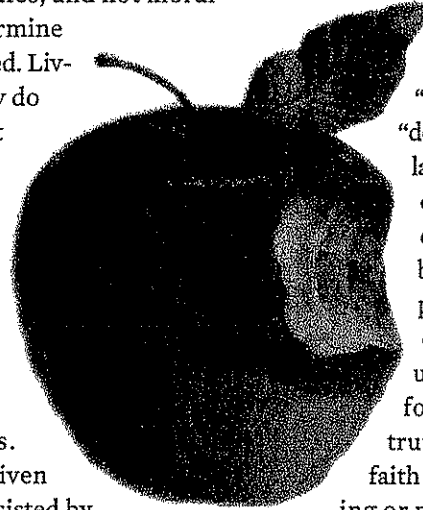
ideas, goods and services, political influence, or mass communication. More than a century ago, Max Weber spoke of the modern market as an "iron cage." The rules of the market demand that profit be maximized; these rules, and not moral considerations, determine how the game is played. Living as we inescapably do in various spheres that follow their own internal rules, we find ourselves leading divided lives.

Most people of faith living in the modern world have experienced the pull of divided loyalties. Though many have given in, many have also resisted by refusing to play by the rules of the game when those rules conflict with their deeply held convictions. They know they must be people of faith not only in the inner sanctuary of their souls, in their private lives,

or when gathered with likeminded folks at church, but also in their everyday activities when scattered to the various places in which they do their daily work.

Third, a *misconstrued faith*. Karl Marx famously noted that religion—Christian faith, he primarily meant—is the "opiate of the people," a "downer" or depressant insulating them from reality and consoling them with a dream world of heavenly bliss. Marx missed the point that religion can often be an "upper," a stimulant that energizes people for tasks at hand. But the truth is that when Christian faith functions only as a soothing or performance-enhancing drug, that faith is, in fact, malfunctioning.

To be sure, the Christian Bible bears two great traditions that very roughly cover these two functions of faith, "deliverance" and "blessing." As deliverance,



faith helps repair broken bodies and souls, including healing the wounds and disappointments inflicted on us. As blessing, faith energizes us to perform our tasks excellently, with requisite power, concentration, and creativity.

Yet if faith *only* heals and energizes, then it is merely a crutch, not a way of life. There are faiths of this sort—for example, mystical faiths of various kinds, including New Age spiritualities. But the Christian faith is not one of them. This faith does its proper work when it sets us on a journey, guides us along the way, and gives meaning to each step. When we embrace faith—when *God* embraces us—we become new creatures constituted and called to be part of the people of God. We are invited into the story of God's engagement with humanity. As we embark upon that journey, faith guides us by indicating paths to be taken and dark alleys to be avoided. Finally, faith's story gives meaning to all we do, from the smallest act to the weightiest. Is what we do in concord with that story? Then it is meaningful and will

remain, glistening like corrosion-resistant gold. Does it clash with the story? Then it is ultimately meaningless and will burn like straw, even if we find it the most thrilling and fulfilling activity in which we've ever engaged.

For Christian faith not to be idle in the world, the work of doctors and garbage collectors, business executives and artists, stay-at-home moms or dads and scientists needs to be inserted into God's story with the world. That story needs to provide the most basic rules by which the game in all these spheres is played. And that story needs to shape the character of the players. I fear that few leaders in business, or in any field, think of their faith in those terms today.

VIOLENT FAITH

For Christians, faith is a precious good, the most valuable personal and social resource. When it is left untapped, the common good suffers—not just the particular interests of Christians. But many non-Christians today would consider the idle-

ness of faith a minor blessing. *Active* faith is what they fear. As Sam Harris put it in *The End of Faith*, the Bible contains "mountains of life-destroying gibberish," and for Harris, when Christians take the Bible as their final authority, they act in violent, oppressive, life-destroying ways that undermine the common good.

A Serbian soldier rides on a tank and triumphantly flashes three fingers into the air—a symbol of the most holy Trinity, a sign that he belongs to a group that believes rightly about God. Clearly, his faith, in some sense, gives legitimacy to his triumphant ride on that killing machine. He's not alone in draping the wild-eyed god of war or the fierce goddess of nationalism with the legitimizing mantle of religious faith. Some of his Croatian enemies did the same, as have many Americans who eagerly merged the Cross and the flag. They follow in the footsteps of many Christians over the centuries who've left behind them a trail of blood and tears.

Consequently, critics say that by positing

a cosmic struggle between good and evil, Christianity and other major religions are inescapably violent. Yet the absence of struggle against evil may bring more violence than the struggle itself, and not all struggle is properly described as violent. Critics say that monotheistic religions in particular divide the world into "us" (followers of the one true God) and "them" (followers of false idols). Yet polytheism divides people who worship incompatible gods into "us" and "them" even more fundamentally than does monotheism. Moreover, if we take the question of truth out of the sphere of religion, the only way to adjudicate competing claims of diverse gods is by violent struggle. And atheism did nothing to curtail the ravings of Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot.

Christianity, of course, is not merely monotheism. And its particular claims about both divine reality and human history are a powerful resource for human flourishing. Critics can only see the death of the Son of God as divine child abuse, but Christians respond that Jesus Christ is

not other *than* God but other *in* God. On the Cross, God takes the consequences of human sin on God's own divine self. The New Testament insists that such divine action provides the model for relations between human beings. Critics charge that Revelation's vision is one where a divine Rider kills all the enemies of God, but Christians are never encouraged in Revelation to imitate the Rider; to the con-

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trary, they are told to imitate the martyrs—the *victims* of violence. Should not the violent, who persistently refuse to be redeemed by self-sacrificial love, be excluded from the final world of love? The "violence" of the divine Rider on the white horse is no more than the divine enactment of such exclusion.

So why have Christians, who embrace a peaceable faith, often been so violent? There are three main reasons, and they roughly correspond to the three reasons for faith's idleness.

First, a *thin faith*. Too many Christians embrace the ends mandated by their faith (for instance, maintaining the sanctity of unborn life or just social arrangements), but not the means by which faith demands that these ends be reached (persuasion rather than violence). The cure for religiously induced violence is not less faith but *more* faith—faith in its full scope, faith enacted with integrity and courage by its holy men

and women, faith pondered responsibly by its great theologians.

Second, seemingly *irrelevant faith*. Can a faith born 2,000 years ago tell us anything useful about democratic governance, running a modern corporation, or defending a nation from terrorists? Sensing a tension, we use faith merely to bless what we think is right to do. It takes hard intellectual and spiritual work to learn to understand and live faith authentically under changed circumstances. This work cannot be placed only on the shoulders of theologians; it

must be an endeavor in which faithful people from all walks of life are engaged, and study of a variety of disciplines must be involved.

Finally, *unwillingness to walk the narrow path*. Often "impractical" slides into "overly demanding." Someone has violated us or our community; we feel the urge for revenge—and we set aside the explicit command to love our enemies, to be benev-

produces devastating results when it devolves into a mere personal or cultural resource for people whose lives, like the life of that Serbian soldier, may be guided by anything but that faith.

THE TASK AHEAD

Is it really possible for our faith to become functional again in spite of these two great and troubling malfunctions? Only if we

"public theology" unrelated to concrete communities of faith. The Christian pursuit of the common good must be church-based without being church-centered. We need to build and strengthen mature communities of vision and character who celebrate faith as a way of life as they gather before God for worship and who, sent by God, live it out as they scatter to pursue various tasks in the world.

In all of this, we will do well to learn from non-Christian endeavors. A temptation for any group that sees itself as a counterculture is to understand its relation to society in oppositional terms. But blanket opposition isn't right for those who believe in God as the source of all truth, goodness, and beauty. We do not need to melt down all the gold of the Egyptians. While some non-Christian approaches may have to be rejected, others can be taken over as they are, and still others repaired or improved. As a counterculture, we work for the common good—because we believe in the common grace of the one God. ❶

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olent and beneficent toward them. Or we believe that our culture is going down a perilous road; we want to change its self-destructive course—and we forget that the ends that Christian faith holds high do not justify setting aside its strictures about the appropriate means.

And so we're back at the question of character. In addition to applying an authentically understood faith to various spheres of life, we need properly formed persons who resist misusing faith in oppressive ways. For the Christian faith

expose the malfunctions with the honesty of those who know that our salvation doesn't depend on our moral excellence. We Christians should be our own most rigorous critics—and be that precisely out of a deep sense of the beauty and goodness of our faith.

Then we can begin to think of faith neither as simply a system of propositions to be believed, nor as merely a set of energizing and healing techniques to be practiced, but as an integral way of life. This will not take the form of a free-floating