

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

**Transcript of**  
**“Religious Exclusivism and Interreligious Dialogue:  
Incompatible or Not?”**

THE BRIEN O'BRIEN AND MARY HASTEN LECTURE IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

presented on October 11, 2017 by  
**Dr. Miroslav Volf**

**Dr. Catherine Cornille:**

My name is Catherine Cornille and in name of the Department of Theology, the School of Theology and Ministry, and The Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I want to welcome you all to this year's installment of the Brian O'Brien and Mary Heston and Lectures in Interreligious Dialogue. These are lectures that have been going on for the past five years where every year we invite a major scholar in the area of interreligious dialogue to speak to us. And we are particularly honored this year to have Professor Miroslav Volf with us. And in a moment, you will understand why it's a particular honor this year to have Miroslav Volf with us.

Miroslav Volf is the Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology and founding director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. A native of Croatia, Professor Volf received a B.A. from the Evangelical Theological Faculty of Osijek, and an M.A. degree from Fuller Theological Seminary, and a doctorate and a post-doctorate degree from the University of Tübingen in Germany. He has authored or coauthored more than 20 books and over 90 scholarly articles focusing on topics of reconciliation, public theology, and Muslim-Christian dialogue.

His work focuses on pressing social, cultural, and political and religious issues, and he attends to all of these issues from a deeply Christian theological tradition and faith. I will mention only a few of his books that are relevant for the topic of interreligious dialogue, which is the focus this evening: *Exclusion and Embrace, A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* in 1998; *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* in 2010; *Do We Worship the Same God? Jews, Christians and Muslims in Dialogue* in 2012. And then finally, his latest book called *Flourishing, Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*. This is his latest book that was just published last year in 2016, in which he argues for the importance of religious tradition and religious engagement in a pluralized world, and in particular, he argues that religious exclusivism can exist perfectly in harmony with political pluralism.

But the topic of his lecture tonight will be on “Religious Exclusivism and Interreligious Dialogue: Incompatible or Not?” And the reason why we are so happy and honored to have him with us this evening is that Professor Volf was one of the lead initiative takers to respond to a document that was published in 2007 by 138 Muslim theologians who published a document called “A Common Word Between Us and You.” And this was a document that attempted, on the Muslim side, to reach out to Christians to focus on elements of faith that we have in common, notably faith in God and love of God and love of neighbor.

And Professor Volf organized the first really Christian response to this document and published a full page commentary on the document in the *New York Times* in 2007. So this year is the tenth

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anniversary of "A Common Word," which at the time seemed like it was a new chapter or a new beginning in the dialogue between Muslims and Christians. And we're very happy and grateful to have Professor Volf with us, and he has been very engaged in continuing dialogue between religions, and we look very much forward to his lecture. So please join me in welcoming him to the podium.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you so much for these words of welcome. It's a great honor to be here with you. I have prepared a lecture and what I would ask you to do as I'm lecturing is to get used to having to squint a little bit. You know how when you want to kind of get in the contours of something, if you will look at it straight you don't quite get the contours of them. So if you squint from a distance you can see a contour of things. So my lecture is going to be more a kind of from the 30,000 feet perspective, looking at the contours rather than delving deep down into the very fine texture of various aspects of the argument that I possibly could make.

So there's a kind of a risk entailed in this kind of approach. On the other hand, I think we need today kind of broad visions, even if they don't quite, or people have sense that they don't quite fit, so that we can actually see how this religious engagement can live in the contemporary world and take roots. So one of the things that I will talk about is, I will talk about more generally about something like world religions. And immediately, as soon as I say that, obviously the word religion is, can be very much problematized in religions. And especially something like world religion can be problematized.

Indeed, some folks have said that what we generally describe as world religions, the great religions, are better described as secondary religions that follow on the primary ones, or that we can describe them as majority religion. Again, it's a very contested terrain. I'm kind of wading into it. And I think it's partly contested because more generally we have difficulty saying "we," first person plural, without kind of crossing our fingers when we say that, because any time we say "we," somebody is excluded from that "we." And as soon as we start looking more carefully down, suddenly the picture is much more complicated.

I think some of us have difficulty saying "I" because once we start looking very carefully, the "I" itself also starts to kind of swim and we cannot kind of take it in as such as a stable self. So bear this in mind that I'm going to operate with some of these contested words in a rather unproblematic way. We can then problematize them later if we, if that's what we need. And I hope we have a good enough time for discussion as well.

Now, I'm going to approach the question of exclusivism and pluralism, religious exclusivism, and political pluralism, not addressing it simply head on here, but coming from the side. If you want to see it addressed head on, I have an entire chapter devoted to that in my book *Flourishing*.

And the way this question arose for me as I was writing the book was simply that as I was teaching a course at Yale on religion and globalization or faith and globalization, and it was taught to students of from the entire university. Almost invariably, first question was about religious exclusivism and the possibilities of religious exclusivists existing together in a globalized world. Exclusivism and something like political pluralism was a central kind of central question that needed to be addressed from the get go. And then I thought, well, we've got to face that question head on.

I'll just say, so by the way of introduction, only that much and then I'll go into my own text. Some of my co-teachers, they insist that you had to be religious pluralist in order to be embraced, political pluralism as a political project. And as I thought about it, that just seemed to me completely an implausible position, and unworkable on top of it. If we waited for all the religious exclusivism, majority of world religion people who are religious are some version of religious exclusivists. If we

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had to persuade them to become religious pluralists in order to become political pluralists, we would have to wait for a very, very long time.

Not only did I see that it was not necessarily coherent, not historically plausible, but also practically not really workable. So I've tried to then make an argument that actually you can be a religious exclusivist, and just on account of being religious exclusivist, embrace pluralism as a political project. And as a matter of fact, not too far from here there are folks who did just that and initiated the whole tradition of political liberalism way of treating religion, somebody like Roger Williams. But all of this, we can take up in the discussion. I'll approach this slightly from different angle.

And I want to emphasize what I would describe as something like a great agreement that exists among world religions, and that we better focus on zero, in especially as it concerns a very contested and very important question of our contemporary life, and the question that is kind of falling by the wayside. And that is a particular way of reading what it means to be a human and what it means to cultivate humanity. So I'll first zero in on the great agreement, and then after that I'll take a look at what I describe as Cont religions, and there are also secular ideologies, of course: Contending Particular Universalisms.

And I'm going to call them CPUs. Contending Particular Universalism. And I'm going to trying to give you example of what we do in the classroom about the issue and how interreligious dialogue inter-worldview dialogue is being brought to bear in order to shape the very account of what it means to cultivate the humanity in our self. So roughly, that's my, that's my lecture. You'll see the exclusivist side of things will be in the contending and in the universalism that is going to be slightly relativized by the particularism that's going to be also an element of this.

But first, what is this great agreement among religions? And I can put it maybe, maybe best to put it concretely in terms of the tradition from which I come, Christian tradition, which took it straight over from the Jewish tradition. And I think that the great agreement is that human beings do not live by bread alone. And I think to emphasize that agreement is one of the very important functions of all great faiths. I want to put it this way, and I built here on some of the work in the *Flourishing* book.

The mother of all temptations, equally hard to resist in abundance and in want, is to believe and to act as if human beings lived by bread alone. As if our entire lives should revolve around creation, improvement, distribution, and securitization of worldly goods. Succumb to that temptation, and the best you can do in terms of enjoyment, I think—this is a contested claim. Many have contested the claims that I will make—you will have something like a pleasure or fun, but true joy and true depth of life will escape you.

Turn these stones into bread, the tempter taunted Jesus, famished after 40-day fast in the wilderness, and Jesus resisted him responding, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Now, Jesus was quoting the Hebrew Bible. Moses, the great deliverer and lawgiver, first uttered these words to the children of Israel as a summary of the main lesson they were to have learned in the course of their 40-year long wandering before entering the Promised Land.

Bread was what they needed in the wilderness. That much was never in doubt. And that relatively trite truth, as insistent as a growling stomach, they did not need to learn. Nobody needs to, in a sense, learn it. But they needed. that they needed more than bread alone, that truth, not as obvious as hunger, but as real as the possibility of losing our very humanity. That truth, that we don't live by bread alone, as real as the possibility of losing our very humanity, they did need to learn. All humans do. Perhaps above all, we moderns need to learn it.

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Now, in the course of modernity, we have made our greatest temptation into the chief goal of our lives and the main purpose of our major institutions. The state, the market obviously, science and technology, and education. German philosopher Sloterdijk has said once that “modernity is an age in which people believe that only world can be the case.” I think more significantly, modernity is also an age in which people act as if only world were the case, whether they believe in transcendent realities or not. Most of our social and individual energy and imagination revolves today around turning bread, turning stones into bread.

And yet we, the rich, both the rich and the poor, are still in the wilderness, plagued by hunger, plagued by thirst. For when we all live by bread alone, there is never enough bread. Not enough even when we make so much of it that some of it rots away. When we live by bread alone, someone always goes hungry. When we live by bread alone, every bite we take leaves a bitter aftertaste, and the more we eat the more bitter the taste. When we live by bread alone, we always want more and better bread, as if the bitterness came from the bread itself and not in fact from our living by bread alone.

Living by mundane realities and for them alone, we remain insatiably restless, and that restlessness in turn contributes to competitiveness as inversely competitiveness feeds that restlessness; but restlessness contributes to competitiveness, to social injustice, and destruction of the environment. It also constitutes a major obstacle to more just, generous, and caring personal practices and social arrangements. But why, you might say, won't bread alone? Why want, why will not the unending stream of amazing things and services we create with such incredible ingenuity—and I want you to hear what this last statement as what it is. I think that's exactly what we are doing, right?

It's absolutely stunning what we are making, right? Starting with this little iPhone that I have and through all sorts of other amazing both things and services which we create. But why won't these things steal our hunger and keep us delighting? And why won't bread alone steal our hunger even if he created it? This is a question mark. I should maybe make a claim first: why won't bread alone steal our hunger even if we created it righteously and distributed it equitably so that no one goes underpaid, and that basic needs of all are met? Which I think ought to happen.

After all, we are material creatures living in a material world. Our senses ready for enjoyment of material things. For life to flourish, I believe, we need to do much to improve the state of the world. Famously, as you know, World Economic Forum has its own motto, “Improving the State of the World,” right? So I might disagree with how the improvement of the world is conceived by a majority of the folks in World Economic Forum, but I'd certainly agree that we need to do much to improve the state of the world.

But I submit to you that it is possible to benefit for a myriad of world's genuine improvements and still not flourish, and still not be happy. Two reason, two reasons. One, are kind of inescapable shadows of these improvements, and you can trace kind of the development of technology and the kind of shadow side that they have. You can think about it in terms of risk societies in which we live, that in a way we can never attend to the potential risks of any improvement and any development that we undertake. But also, quite apart from those shadow side. you can see it in ecological destruction and other areas of life. But apart from those kind of shadow sides of this, in the way in which we relate to the world is often problematic.

So we accomplish an extraordinary feat of self-subversion daily. We receive gifts without being enriched by those gifts. We give without ourselves being ennobled by this most human of our acts. And our pleasures, they are fleeting, they are fickle, and they're often self-canceling. We often feel short-changed if we don't flatten into mere fun what could have been deep and genuine joys. And we

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do so even when we know that fun, a thin pleasure laid on as a coating—that's a quote from Seneca—fun as a thin pleasure laid out as a coating, which is absolutely perfect, I think; that kind of fun lasts for a moment, and lasts as long as it lasts and leaves us empty.

Whereas joy, deeper joy, associated with the goodness of the life well lived, irradiates our past and future with meaning, so to improve the world we need both, or to flourish we need both. To improve the world and to learn to experience the world in a new way. And you might then ask, why do we need that? And I think the response to that is that we are—this is now a theological response—but I think this is the great agreement. This is also a fundamental conviction of the great traditions, great religious traditions, that we are in one way or another creatures of two worlds: transcendent and mundane.

And it's only in this unity that we can live truly human and truly enjoyable lives. That's the, I think, believe, the great agreement. And I think that's the great agreement of the great world of religious traditions that stands in contrast. Maybe not so much in terms of what, philosophically, we think about the world, but how caught in the daily living that is shaped in profound ways by market economy, a particular form of market economy. We have come to actually live in the world as if only the world were the case, as if we weren't creatures of the world, as if the reality wasn't the entirety of reality, wasn't to be seen as kind of two worlds—reality in a very specified sense.

I'm building here on Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was famous for—he coined the phrase “two worlds, two worlds, accounts of reality,” and obviously he himself contested this account of reality. Now, there's a big debate of how do you relate transcendent and mundane realities, and religions disagree on that. Within religions there are profound disagreements about that. Those disagreements are worth pursuing, but I think we need to step back and take in what I think to be uncontested claims, that for these traditions we need to rediscover transcendence anew to be able to live in a responsible and also enjoyable way in the world itself. So that much on this great agreement.

Now comes, that's almost like a substantive agreement with much differences, with quite a few differences, obviously, in how this is orchestrated. But there are also important formal agreements between great religions, and those can be also kind of formal agreements, but as such, sources of disagreement and clashes. And here I come, then, to my proposal. I'll deviate from the text because otherwise it's going to end up being too abstract. I'm going to look you in the eyes more when I speak.

Here I come to my account of these contending particular universalisms. I think we live today in the globalized world, in the situation culturally of contending particular universalisms. Great world religions are such universalisms, I would want to propose; so are also other operative philosophies or even ways that unthematized ways in which we organize our lives. Utilitarianism, for instance, is such; Kantianism, for instance, is such; and in their varieties they profoundly shape in which we orient ourselves in the world. And so you, we, deal in these universalisms that are contending.

Let me take each one of them on their own, and then I will take up also or give you an example what we do with this contending particular universalisms in the classroom itself, so as to bring it a little bit closer to experience of most of us, whether we are here teachers or whether we are students.

So first, let me take universalisms. I think great religious faiths are universalism in the sense that they make truth claims about, again, contested stuff. Some of your eyes are going to go up when I say that. I think the great religious traditions, they make truth claims about the true life of any human beings or of human beings qua human beings. They are not about how people in particular period and particular cultural sphere ought to live. They are not about how we might imagine

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ourselves as living. Or to use a very popular and somewhat crass example, they're not like different flavors of ice cream in an ice cream shop, and then you go and then you take one or the other and occasionally you want to combine, right, and have some sprinkling or something fourth, maybe on the thing. I'm sure that people that we do this with religions as well, but the great, great religions I think were about something that it's not created, so to speak, by us but something that we embrace as a truth of our lives and truth of lives of other people as well. At least that makes a claim to be such a truth.

Think in terms of Christian faith. Think in terms of Jesus. Speaks about the Kingdom of God and says that there is a person and he sees the treasure and then sells absolutely everything he or she has and buys this treasure. I think something of that characterizes all great faiths, in my judgment.

Again, you'll give me hundreds of examples to the contrary. But I think at the very, they've got that element as a fundamental to who they are historically, they have been those great traditions. So they are universal; they make truth claims. But they're also, I said, Contending Particular Universalisms. They are particular. So when we say they make truth claims, but they all make truth claims from a very particular place and particular time, and you can see how those truth claims, over the period of history, how they're also developed as they encounter different kind of settings; they are all particular.

And they share then, truth claims of religion, share in the characteristic way in which we human beings can make truth claims. We cannot make them in some kind of absolute sense because we ourselves are not absolute. We always have to make them rooted in the particularities in which we find ourselves, as expressed in a kind of classical sense, not viewing the world from nowhere, but viewing the world from a particular standpoint.

Consequence of that is that no individual religion can be seen as absolute. That if it's self-aware, it cannot see itself as absolute. Now Christians are very famous, especially in certain periods of time, to have thought that Christian faith is the absolute religion. How would you possibly know that? How could you possibly know that, right? There is a, even if it were, you wouldn't be able to articulate that because we are relative and we can formulate truths only from the relative standpoint.

I said there's a third word to it, to describe the great religious traditions and secular ideologies. They're contending, they're particular, they make truth claims, and they contend with one another. That's not the only thing that they do, and religions contend in variety sorts of ways. We have mentioned the "Common Word," right? "Common Word" was, kind of, grew out of a very contentious contention. It was out of statement that then Pope Benedict XVI has made about Islam. A negative statement, and then the response, actually a kind of open response, inviting response on the part of the Muslims. In particular, my very good friend Prince Ghazi, which initiated whole process of the "Common Word."

But I can tell you that in the course of working on the "Common Word," even though we were working on something that was common, and even if it was, even if it was the friendly embrace both of friendly hand extended to us, and certainly on my part and on our part it has been a friendly embrace of that hand. But as we were shaking our hand we were contending at the same time. There was quite a bit of contention about, say, question of evangelism, which there was quite a bit of contention about the Doctrine of the Trinity. And you can go down the line. There was quite a bit of contention, whether it's possible to say that God is love or that God loves. And you might say, those are simply semantic differences. You should have seen how long we struggled on that very question.

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So even in the very friendly settings, contention is there. Put differently, I don't think contention here is a bad word. I think it's a question of how the contending is going on rather than whether we should be contending or not. And the reason why I think it's not a bad word, and the reason why I think we ought to not think of religions simply as varieties of flavors of ice cream—so as we are indifferent which one we or somebody else chooses—the reason is, I think that they are about the truth of our lives.

They're not simply about this or that aspect that I might improve here and there, and I might try and figure out whether it's going to go. But it's something on which I, on which we rest our entire lives. Something that actually kind of shifts the directionality of our entire being. I think they answer the question, to the kind of question that Nietzsche has pursued his entire life. Now obviously, I'm invoking Nietzsche who was not particularly good friend of religions, but he was pursuing the same, I think the same or in terms of category, the same kind of question as religions were. One of his last pieces that he wrote was his little book on the antichrist. And obviously, it was kind of a devastating critique of Christianity and Judaism in the process, and Buddhism as well, though he was friendlier to Buddhism, I think than he was to Christianity.

But the point I wish to make, so the beginning of that antichrist, he talks about what his main question is: what kind of human being ought we cultivate? Now, he used a different word. He used, "what kind of human being should we breed?" It's a little bit crass. You can put it in terms of cultivation. What kind of human beings ought we aspire to be? And I think that fundamental question is worth contention.

Let me say a few comments about some of the developments in the kind of university education, then switch from there to the experiment or the course that we are teaching where we try to embody just some of the things that I have described to you in this more abstract way. I think one of the, traditionally, at certainly American, but also generally Western universities, a question of: What kind of life is worthy to be lived? What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of our existence?, was one of the essential questions around which the entire university curriculum pivoted or circled. Obviously, at universities many other things were being pursued; many forms of knowledge. But at the heart of it was also an exploration of meaningful life.

I built here on the work of my colleague from the law school, not always agreeing with him, but it's a very good diagnosis, I think, in the book *Education's End*, on why American colleges, universities and colleges, have given up on the meaning of life. And he gives an account of why this question has been pushed aside, whereas it was classically both in great Western philosophies and also in great world religion at the very heart of the pursuit itself.

Now, if it's true that it is marginalized, then we don't nurture sufficiently culturally, broadly culturally reflection on the ends, on the purposes of our lives. And sometimes I put it this way: we have become, or our universities have allowed us to be, or our universities, to put a little bit stronger, are shaping us to be expert in means, but armatures in ends. We are left to our own devices to figure out what is it that we desire, what it is that we ought to strive for. And generally, then, we operate on the default mode. We desire what we desire. We don't reflect too much about it. When we reflect about it, how we step back and ask what do I want, and then we identify our wants. When we are really a little bit more reflective, then we said, wait a second, what do I really want?

And that takes certain form of self-reflection to realize now behind the surface wants there may be some more deeper wants that I need to satisfy. But even when we ask that question—What do I really want?—I haven't asked the important question of my life. I haven't asked the question, what is actually worth wanting. The fact that I really want something doesn't mean that it is desirable. It

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means that I desire it; and desirability of our wants, that's what's at issue. But the only way to figure out what is really worth wanting, is to pursue the question: What kind of human being is worth cultivating? Who am I supposed to be? And that question is, I think, a contested one; sometimes not addressed. And when it's addressed, then it's contested, contested among religions. It is also, I think, pushed at us, almost foisted upon us by developments in something like gene editing and artificial intelligence.

Suddenly, we need to ask ourselves who it is that we are as human beings. And I think in that conversation about who we are as human beings, great religions can be fantastic and important interlocutors. In fact, that's how we teach this course that I mentioned to you. That's how we don't so much teach world religions as engage in dialogue with them.

We have a course at Yale which is called Life Worth Living. Four years ago, I and a doctoral student of mine have started the course. And basically, we asked the question. Our main question is, what in these religions—religious and we have also secular traditions—what do they say about what kind of life is worth living? And so that as to not make this course as kind of introduction into religions and world philosophies for dummies of the dummies, right, so that you spend about three days on each world religion and know nothing about it, right, after that? We have seven questions that we ask as we read original texts. And we read original texts in all religious traditions. In those religious traditions we address, and in philosophies like we would read John Stuart Mill, we'll read some of Karl Marx, we'll read some of Nietzsche, but all guided by the following questions.

Three of them have to do with what is the shape of, what is the vision of being human? And how do we get at it? We get at it by asking the following questions. What does it mean, according to this tradition, for life to be led well? That's about my agency, right? What does the tradition say? How should you act in the world? And a lot of traditions have a lot to say about how you should act. And so we try to figure out, okay, what's the gist of how you should act?

Second question is, what according to this tradition does it mean for life to go well? That's about circumstances of life. That's about my body. That's about the set of friends that I might have, about communities, about the cities, about political arrangements, about ecological arrangements. That's about circumstances in which the plant that our life is can properly grow.

One is about agency, the other one is about circumstances, and the third one is about our affective states. What, according to this tradition, does it mean to feel rightly? And many traditions have different things to say about what kind of feeling ought to qualify our lives. So you put these three together, affective, circumstantial, and agential dimensions of life, and we ask, according to each of these traditions, what do they say about it? Some traditions say very much about agency but very little about circumstances. Stoics are a very good example of that. Or some traditions say a lot about circumstances but very little about personal responsibility and agency. Marx might be a good example. And so forth, right? And we kind of debate this issue.

Then we ask the question, what motivations do they give you, this tradition give you, to live life, to have this vision of a flourishing life? What reasons do they give? And obviously, often a lot of time they have a good deal of reasons. They interpret the world in a particular way so you can study what motivations and reasons might you have. And then may say, well, you may like this vision of life that was sketched. You may also think that the reasons are good. But your question, my question, how do I live that?

I can agree with something, I can desire something, but not able actually to implement it. So many traditions have a kind of ways, practices that they cultivate so as to help you, move you along the way



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to where that idea or ideal of being human. And then we ask the question, what happens when you fail? Anything? Do you just get up and dust yourself off? What happens when you kind of not just fail in one or the other thing that you do, but kind of fail in the basic directionality toward which you want to live in order to live the fully humane life.

And finally, we ask the question, to whom are you responsible? To yourself? To your tradition? To your country, to God? Who is the one who calls upon you to do, to live in this kind of way? And then we have a what we describe as truth seeking conversation. I tell the students, assume that these traditions, for the purposes of this class, assume that they are making truth claims, and that means they're talking about your life. They're not talking about somebody's life in 2,000 years ago or 3,000 years ago. They're talking about you. And they're talking about your friend sitting next to you. They're talking about all of us. And they're asking something of us.

And at some point, we shift the conversation and say, okay, so if this tradition were true, how would your life have to change? Most fascinating stuff happens. Last time that I taught the course—I'll come to an end fairly quickly—last time when I taught this course, I think we started with Buddhism and we were reading some original text about Buddha's enlightenment. And then one of the students said, "You know what, if I were to take this really seriously, would I have been able to get into Yale? Had I taken this seriously, would I have been able to get into Yale? Would we be able to actually work, study here, and study responsibly?" There are many possible answers to this question, but the fact of asking it I think is incredibly significant.

And similar kinds of questions occur all the time. I personally think this is some of the most fruitful interreligious dialogue that I've ever had is with 15 to 16 students of mine, and I sit around table, and not some of them are, they come from different traditions. A few Christians, a few Jews, a few Muslims, and Buddhists and then a contingent of a variety of stripes of secularists, and we go at these questions assuming that each of these is making claim on our lives. Fantastic. It works like a charm.

And obviously, you will now say, if I step outside of a small curated setting of a classroom where I primarily function as a referee, right? I function as a referee in a sense that I try to make sure it is about truth of your existence and your friend's existence, and you've got to respect each person in this classroom. So the rest, I'll let flow relatively freely. But you step out and you ask yourself, is that also, could that be possibly a way to think about interreligious dialogue more broadly?

And I think, in fact, it might be. One would have to think about how one structures the political space for instance, in order to make possible such a dialogue. Obviously, all religions would have to be politically on equal footing, which is to say you would have to have something like political pluralism as a condition of possibility of it. And then each could bring in the public debate at various levels, the visions or aspects of vision of their own lives. And I see no reason why that could not take place all the way from classrooms to a variety of circles in which we find ourselves. And by the way, we have tried to tailor this type of course for religious institutions, for high schools as well, and some also for Divinity School so that folks can do it in a variety of settings and engage in what is transformative dialogue about truth of our individual lives and of our living together all in one.

I think this is the great challenge of our time. This is a great challenge that we are facing, both those of us who are religious in terms of certain shallow forms of secularism. And I here primarily mean a kind of practical secularism of denial of transcendence carried on the wings of economic kind of institutional forms of making a living as we have it now. But we can discover and rediscover the depths of our humanity in conversation with great religious traditions. I think, as a religious person, this would be such a cool thing, that we will then contend with each other. That seems fine. Why not just contend in peace? But what's at stake is really the very shape of our existence. Why not contend

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about it? Just be kind and make bridges towards others. See in the others not just how you differ. And especially if you want to start making it about truth seeking conversation, then the goal is also to see the truth in the other, rather than simply peddle your own truth. Therefore, be enriched and enrich others while stabilizing and enriching your own identity.

Thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]

**Participant:** Thank you very much for your talk. Your class sounds fascinating. I really wish I could take it, but then I wondered if I took your class, whether I would in fact be very depressed. And here's why. When I think about truth claims being made by different religious traditions, and you come in with your own religious tradition and you encounter other religious traditions, when you think about that in the abstract it's one thing. But when you think about it in the concrete, your religious tradition, you know the Western religious tradition embodies a certain kind of metaphysics. A whole imaginary of time. A whole set of connections. A whole set of—imbued but almost taken for granted tacit pre-suppositions about how the world works.

And if I say, as a Christian past the age of 25, we'll just leave it there, sort of say, oh my gosh, I'm part of a religious tradition that has all of these assumptions. But it's wrong. Buddhism seems to me to have the truth, or Islam seems to have the truth, or Judaism. But I can't reconfigure all of the substrate of the metaphysics of the culture, of the language to be Islam, the role of Arabic. Past 30, Arabic is a bit tough. What do you do? What do your students do when they confront the fact or if they confront the fact that they may have been born in, they may have been unlucky enough to be born in the wrong tradition?

**Dr. Volf:** It's a fantastic question. I really like it. Most of them don't. And we don't track carefully what happens afterwards. Maybe we should. I mean for no other reason than for being able to teach this class better because we are interested in their lives being transformed. Last paper they write, they write their own little credo in the light of these seven questions that we were asking. But most shifts that I have seen that occur in the class are not this global shifts of the entirety of my commitments and all of their implications, which is what you are articulating quite rightly, that they often come with a package that has a weight to it.

Shifts come more on an existential level, and the implications may be worked out over periods of time. Shifts come mainly within each of the traditions, so that they suddenly become more deeply aware in the light of other traditions of their own. So majority of students that leave the class, they leave the class with kind of almost stabilized tradition; clarity about their own tradition; clarity about the reasons, possible reasons why. Not very deep reasons, right? But kind of a—we need, we want to set them on the journey so that it doesn't end with the class, it begins with the class.

And most of them, frankly, said—I was completely surprised after I taught the class for the first time. I saw that it was a decent class, and I think I'm relatively emotionally intelligent teacher. I'm not brilliant emotionally but I'm not totally dumb either. So I can assess what's going on, and I thought the class went well. And then last class everything was already fishing and I tell students, help us. I want to teach this again. Help us do better. What did we do right? What did we do wrong? It was just amazing how hungry they were for something of that sort. I had students arguing opposite side of the table should this be taught for first year students or for seniors? I had debates going on, should it be taught for one semester or two semesters? I had testimonies of transformed lives. And not what kind of religious conversions, but sense of self awareness. And a lot of them said, this is the

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best class I've ever taken. So I am sure it can be improved, but I less worry about the seismic shifts. But if they go on a journey, it will happen.

**Participant:** You mentioned that in order to kind of bring together different people of religious backgrounds that we need to see the truth in one another. I'm curious to hear what your definition, may not be the right word, but what your description of truth is, because it almost sounds like you think that truth could be something flexible, something that may differ from religious groups to religious group. And truths don't necessarily cancel each other out. Can you speak a little bit to that?

**Dr. Volf:** Oh, I do think that they sometimes cancel themselves out. I was speaking about truth claims. I didn't make a statement that all religions were true. I said that all religions, for the majority part, they claim to be true. So I deal with them as truth claims. And some of them you can see how there are overlaps there, how there are variations of maybe one and the same thing with slight difference, but some of them you see that they kind of butt against each other in significant ways. And the example that I gave was when the discussions were about the "Common Word," and that is discussion among friends, doctrine of a Trinity for instance for Christians, for a lot of Christians this is a kind of fundamental conviction. You can see how it's not at complete opposite of what Muslims think about God, but you can see also how differences are significant, how they push to the side.

I don't think Ghazi will mind that if I tell you, even before the, immediately after we wrote the response to the "Common Word," maybe a few weeks later, I went to see Ghazi. I was on the way to Dubai, I stopped in Jordan, he received me with, we were all these friends now because we were on the same page in so many things because I was supporting this. And then in the course of that first evening, first time I met him, in the course of the conversation became okay, question of evangelism. And I said, you know, Christian faith is evangelistic religion.

We had a discussion until 3:00 in the evening about that very issue. And we wrestled with it. What does it mean? Obviously, Muslims perceive that often, and it's often practiced in a horrible way, right? But does that mean you step back from it? Or does it mean, well maybe part of a common word is to have a common ethics of bearing witness or something of that sort, right? And so the debates were clearly about something that we couldn't quite agree. And I think we became friends through the discussions of this sort.

**Participant:** Hello, thank you. You said that in this course you function as a referee. I like to make sure everybody—I found that—and so do all dialogues require an authority figure, and who decides who this gets to be?

**Dr. Volf:** Well, they either require some kind of a, they require a set of rules. I think either implicit or explicit kind of rules; very simple ones. And they are not very difficult to agree on. They are rules of decency. Normally kids learn them when they sit around the table and have conversations with their parents and with their siblings. I don't think much more complicated rules are necessary. It's just sometimes needed to enforce to make sure that they're observed when things become really volatile.

Now, once you start digging deeper down there is a whole huge complex world of reading oneself, reading the other person, reading oneself in conversation with the other person. It becomes very quickly very rich I think, I would say conversation. But something like agreed upon rules. And students, students easily agree. I do very little actually interventions. They think it's—I'm sure it's the same in Boston College. They have no problem with the kind of pluralism, with kind of respect of other persons. Indeed, the pushback that one receives with this idea of truth is not so much

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because students—that's my experience at Yale—not so much because they don't believe that certain things are true, but they don't want to impose truth upon other people.

Imposition is a very, very thing, they're very, very sensitive. And so sometimes, unthinkingly, they might go a relativist route rather than affirmation of truth, just because they're sensitive to imposition upon others. I am very sensitive about imposition. Imposition is just a bad thing. And it's a bad thing from whichever end you look at it. And this is the kind of thing that we try to, just make sure that the people don't move there. So yes, some rules will be good and there will be folks who might need a referee.

**Participant:** Just like going off of what you were talking about, you said you identified as Christian. And since you're speaking on world religions, do you find it difficult to kind of speak on things that you are an outsider of? So do you think that you sometimes have to work on operating outside of a certain lens that you've been shaped into seeing things with?

**Dr. Volf:** Yeah, this is a very good question. I think one needs something like, that's why we need interlocutors, right, so that I don't simply in my imagination make a leap to try to imagine myself how things feel and look from inside of the faith. But I actually have a living and breathing human being who after I've formulated this can talk back to me and say “no, no, no, you've got it completely wrong,” or “you missed this side of it.” And once you add this side of it, everything looks very different. I mean my experience is the same when I talk to some of my secularist friends.

There's a very, very fine book that I mentioned, Tony Kronman, he's written recently a kind of a doorstopper of a book of about 1,100 pages called *Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan*. And when he was talking on the occasion of publication of this book he said a friend of his came to him and said, “Tony, I bought two copies of your book.” And Tony said, “Why two?” He said, “When I park my car on an incline so I can make sure it doesn't roll off. And maybe the other one I might read.”

But it's a magnificent and wonderful book and we're close friends. But when when, when he talks for instance about gratitude as something that is a feature of Christian faith, I think Tony, you just . . . it sounds like Christian but it doesn't feel like Christian might feel that way but we don't, and here are the reasons why.

And I can imagine myself very well when I talk about any of the other religions doing exactly the same thing. To me, from outside, it sounds like this is how it reads. This is what consequences are. This is what feelings it should illicit. And I find myself completely in the wrong. So I need that other set of eyes and I need to imaginatively place myself and see myself. I read the other from my vantage point and then get corrected. And continue engaging in the process.

**Participant:** So after all of this kind of exchange of truth among different religions, do you think the ultimate goal of a society would be to come to some kind of consensus? Would that bring us to more enrichment in general if we had some kind of consensus? Or do you think that it's going to always be an individual process of finding the meaning of life, and it's always going to be something that you pick out certain truths that are meaningful to you? Or would, let's say a Utopian society have some kind of universal idea of truth?

**Dr. Volf:** Yeah, I'm not very hopeful that, and I don't think we should aspire to come to a single truth, which would be somehow then kind of characterize some kind of Utopian society. Presumably it would have to be in some ways then managed. And managing of a single truth society seems to me a rather bad idea. I think that in terms of a common life that we have, I think kind of for search for common word, to use that phrase. Commonality without eraser of differences seems to be workable, seems to me possible.

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And I think that's what we should aspire. Which is to say, we may, in democratic processes we may come to common agreements. These agreements would be kind of rolling agreements, right? They are negotiable all the time. While at the same time, each one of us more personally might have much more sturdy convictions about things that concern personal life. Certain forms of compromises, and above all, certain forms of not thinking that all our ethical norm ought to be legislated upon everybody else.

A kind of discernment, what is it that needs to be common and needs to be assured to be common. And what can be simply a moral code of a community or a moral code even of an individual. Those kinds of discerning judgments would need to be, would need to be made. I'm very much a political pluralism as you see in what we're talking right now is. I think most people are some form of religious exclusivist that you can be either very open or very closed kind, but it's very hard to avoid it. So some form of religious exclusivism I think is just fine. I mean, people can have opinions that they have, but I wouldn't worry too much about that, provided you affirm robustly political pluralism.

Because I think the two notions or two forms of political arrangements we must resist is on the one hand is the secular exclusion of religion from the public sphere. But on the other hand is a kind of totalitarian self-position on religion, a single religion upon the whole society. These have been traditionally butting against each other, and frankly, religious folks have not very much difficulty embracing, embracing democracy as they have difficulty embracing political pluralism. But secularists aren't much better, actually, at it. Especially if you bring in religious folks. Suddenly hesitations become similar to those that religious folks have, just in a little bit different register. And so I think we need to work on having a kind of workable political philosophy that will accommodate robust forms of committed views in a pluralistic setting.

**Participant:** I know you've talked about tradition texts in the classroom. Have you talked at all about the classroom-specific practices of each tradition and what role does that play?

**Dr. Volf:** That's a great question. Another thing that we do, we try to take signature practice of each of these traditions. Sometimes it's more difficult to do it for secular traditions, but we kind of figure it out. And it has been tremendously illuminating. So we devote a whole—I'm not sure, one or two sessions—about each tradition is devoted to a particular practice. So in Judaism it will be Sabbath keeping. In Christian tradition, Eucharist. We discussed last time Eucharist or something like that.

What we would often do is, that's what I did last time with my students. I said, you know I'm not Jewish, but for one day, one Sabbath, I'm going to observe. Who's going to join me? And so out of 18, I think 13 of us, complete observance of Sabbath and then having Shabbat meal together and then discussing what have we learned? How would it be to inhabit this tradition? Plays a very, very important role.

We also bring, for each tradition, we bring a kind of non-specialist representative of the tradition. So if it's say, of a religious tradition, we don't want, don't want, we would prefer not to have somebody who is either theologian or priest, but somebody who in secular vocations, life, represents and embodies that tradition. We bring them in and said, "What does it mean for you to live this tradition in the here and now?" We ask them to read what they have read so that they know. The person who comes knows roughly how, what discussions were and the basis of which text. And then ask them to assign us reading as well, what's significant for them as they practice that particular faith. And then we discuss it. Those sessions are very, very important.

**Participant:** Thank you. Great talk and conversation. One thing I'm really curious about is how this learning from other religious traditions . . . At some point, if you could give actually a specific

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example, perhaps of some way that some part of that learning from some other tradition actually began to inform what it means to have a meaningful conversation; such that people were beginning to learn about, maybe to notice, that I haven't been entering into the conversation in the way I really mean to, which is actually part of the theme of your course: how to cultivate, how to actually learn to live. And it begins to affect how at least some students are entering into conversation. What it means to have a meaningful conversation is actually being informed by the learning and the changing. Any example of that?

**Dr. Volf:** That's a great . . . I'd have to think about this. What mostly comes to mind is a kind of attentive learning. Learning about something and then that kind of shift of the attentiveness to other traditions. So I remember one kid who never, somehow forgiveness was such a strange concept for him. And we had the one-time practice of forgiveness as a, as a Christian practice. And he was just completely puzzled by this idea. How it works, what happens. He was certainly attracted to the idea, but didn't know the mechanics of it were, what the background of this could be.

It had an effect where we're not just kind of attending more to say in this particular case a Christian tradition, but also to other traditions in terms of how what he might learn and surprises that might occur. I think that's shaped, above all, I think how the teacher acts in the class. If the teacher is porous to learn from students as they are engaged. Students kind of almost mimic sometimes, or at least learn a certain style of engaging with other ideas. Generosity which one does; a certain kind of openness to and vulnerability. And it works the best if that's nurtured on the part of teachers.

So maybe I short-changed our role as referees, because that seems so incredibly impersonal. In fact, I think it works the best. We always, each teacher identifies themselves traditions from which they come, so it's no secret to the students. It's not something that they can identify themselves. We're happy with traditions which we inhabit. And then when students see a certain porousness, a certain learning that occurs on the part of the teachers themselves, it's amazing.

Or other vulnerabilities. We had a teacher who had two close family members have died in the course of teaching that course for the first time she taught it. And she is highly, highly emotionally intelligent and was very vulnerable with the students. They just absolutely loved her, and the whole course acquired a different meaning for them, a deeper meaning.

**Participant:** I have a question about the tension that I feel between the way you set up the course and the way religions understand themselves. So the title of the lecture was on religious exclusivism and interreligious dialogue. But when I think of how you set up the course, it seems like you enact a form of pluralism where the students have all these religions at their disposal and they all have elements of truth and they create a sort of self-aware religiosity based on what they find in different religious traditions. But the religions themselves are, of course, in a very different situation of tension and incompatibility in many respects with one another. So I was trying to understand sort of the tension that I felt between, on the one hand, the religious exclusivism of the religions and what you enact in the course, which is, in fact, a form of pluralism where students can pick from different religions. So that's one part of it.

But then I, in fact, just wanted to end by asking if you could say something about how the "Common Word" and your dialogue with Muslims has changed your own self-understanding, maybe about those two topics, love of God and love of neighbor, as a Christian. Whether there is something that you have learned in the process from your dialogue with Muslims about those two topics maybe as a final note.

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**Dr. Volf:** Great questions. So the way I think of the class is that the environment is one of social and kind of structured pluralism, which corresponds roughly to kind of political pluralistic arrangements. That's the framework in which class occurs. There, affirmation that each religious tradition makes truth claims. There is not a claim that each of these traditions is exclusive in the class. And I'm not sure that I would want to make that claim. I just want to make the claim that they make truth claims.

Whether students then think that they can pick and choose and make something third, or what I think more often happens is that they treat the religious tradition or secular tradition as actually making truth claims. Many of them, they resist. Some of them they don't just take and transplant making something third. They kind of a learning process occurs. Certain forms of enrichment of their tradition while not denying the truth claim. So that would be a form of maybe religious exclusivism with which I'm very comfortable.

I'm very comfortable about talking about Christian faith being true. When I say Christian faith is true, I have to say somehow that in a significant sense others aren't, right? In certain significant areas. But that at the same time, kind of learning process can occur. Now I'd have to have an account, then, why that's possible. Both kind of epistemological account and maybe religious metaphysical account of why that kind of learning is possible. And I do have it. But so in some sense my experience of the class was, it's kind of negotiating exclusivist claims that is being embodied here.

Of course, students sometimes, students that we get often aren't representatives of those traditions. And that's where for them it may be complicated. So what we have as a task is don't just treat them as something that you can simply pick and choose. It's too simple, too easy for you to do that, because tomorrow you're going to decide oh no, I'm going to combine some other different thing which seems to be helpful in this particular moment. We try to emphasize that these traditions are, generally they think of flourishing life is life that is across the span of lived life. That somehow has a weight.

Sometimes we talk about martyrdom and issues of this sort where this is, this is more important than life itself for many of the folks. So trying to kind of bring it close to them. Some of them are responsive easily to that. Others have to learn as something really maybe a bit strange for them. But in the strangeness is I think important for them.

"Common Word." Specifically on . . . I can talk a lot of things about what I have learned. I can think also of transformation in spiritual practice that has occurred for me.

The kind the kind of reverence with which Muslims approach—at least Muslims that I encountered—obviously it's a very, very general claim, Muslims right? But the kind of reverence with which unity of God and uniqueness and in a very significant sense uniqueness of God is being lived out by Muslims, has for me left a deep mark on how I relate to God. And it wasn't something strange in a sense, but it's something that kind of shook, shook me into actually taking seriously what I believed. So, it was in a sense an insight into what I thought my tradition was saying, but somehow I've been accustomed not to think.

Something like holiness of God, which I tended not to think in those terms. I tended to subsume very easily holiness into love, which I still do, but in maybe too mushy of a way. And a kind of robust push on their side I think it was very important, very significant. I think for me it was genuine learning. I remember also—maybe this is a good point to end. It's a very kind of personal and spiritual if you want. But my mother is a woman of prayer, she was. She used to pray for one and one-half hours a day, early in the morning, and she was trying to nurture that in us as well.

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And I try to pray for five minutes and I think all these words are bouncing off of walls coming back to me. That means nothing. Somehow it's not getting to me. So she was always worried about her son who . . . I was very honest with her what was happening, but she was worried and so I remember once I had a conversation with Ghazi and I think I told him a story about a friend of ours whose son had religious experience and he heard God speaking to him. And so I'm telling that to Ghazi because it was our mutual friend. And so Ghazi said to me—and my mother is there listening to the conversation, phone conversation, but she could hear everything.

And so he says, "But you know Miroslav, we have in Islam, we have a very careful kind of criteria by which we can adjudicate and judge, discern when and how it is that we can know whether it was God speaking or I don't know what he was speaking to a person." And I said, "Yeah Ghazi, we have the same or similar things. And so we go on into the whole process of how we discern our spiritual experiences, right? And then I end the conversation. My mother said, "You know, this Ghazi guy is really good for you."

Which is exactly right. He is good and we have become very close friends.