



Protestant Theological University

review of Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference.

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Dat brengt bij de tweede vraag, die naar de bruikbaarheid van dit handboek. Wat moet de lezer met de gepresenteerde breedte? Het komt in het recht immers vaak aan op nauwkeurigheid. Zo zal het in bij de doop (344-350) uiteindelijk altijd aankomen op wat de kerkorde van het specifieke kerkgenootschap zegt. Het gemaakte onderscheid tussen kinderen van ouders onder censuur, van geëxcommuniceerden, van doopleiden en geadopteerde kinderen (344v) zal vooral zinvol zijn voor wie over de hiermee verbonden vragen nog eens na wil denken. Dat geldt *a fortiori* voor de paragrafen over de tucht (388-441), aangezien de procesrechtelijke kant daar zwaar weegt. Toch bevredigt deze bezinnende functie niet zonder meer. Het zou dit handboek ten goede zijn gekomen als in de vele overzichten niet alleen meer systematiek te ontwaren was, maar de verschillen tussen de gereformeerde kerkordes ook theologisch geduid zouden zijn. Ik besef bij dit laatste dat dat geen eenvoudige exercitie is, maar het zou de waarde van het boek sterk vergroot hebben.

Samenvattend biedt het *Handboek gereformeed kerkrecht* een royaal overzicht van hetgeen er op het Nederlandse gereformeerde erf kerkrechtelijk speelt. Theologisch had een extra slag gemaakt kunnen worden. De kwaliteit van de bijdragen wisselt. Studenten theologie kunnen zich oriënteren op de gereformeerde kerkrechtelijke praktijk. Geïnteresseerde leden van de kerkgenootschappen wier kerkorden worden besproken, zullen voor de praktijk vrijwel altijd aanvullend materiaal nodig hebben. Maar dat is bij een handboek eigenlijk altijd het geval.

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Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), ISBN 9781587434013; vii + 196 pp., € 20,95.

Miroslav Volf co-authored this book as a *manifesto* with Matthew Croasmun, associate researcher at Yale, Pauline scholar and founder of a community-based Vineyard church. And a manifesto it really is. In times of “the mounting deaths of black Americans at the hands of police officers” (57; this book was written before the Black Lives Matter movement), perhaps Christian theologians need a manifesto to become more theological and more transformative. According to the authors, theology has fallen into a serious crisis, because it does not focus on what matters most, that is, flourishing life. Instead, theologians have become

knowledge producers, without a theological *eros* for the deepest human quests. Against this misled self-understanding of theologians, this book urges them to hear and see how humanity along with the whole creation is yearning to become the “home of God”. Theologians should not contend themselves with merely describing the developments of Christianity, but they should offer imaginations and proposals of how the world can be transformed into that home of God. And they should live a life that reflects these proposals.

“Flourishing life” is more than just a good life with all its consumerist overtones. By “flourishing life” the authors refer to a life led well in righteousness, a life going well in peaceful circumstances, and a life that feels as it should: full of joy (17, 164). All religions and philosophies of life can offer proposals for this vision of a flourishing life, and Christian proposals are meant to feed the imagination and agency of all people, not only the believers among them. The claim that Christ is the light of the whole world does not lead to absolute truth claims, but it leads to allegiance to this particular universalism: that and how Christ is orienting entire lives, grounding values, and shaping preferences (100). Flourishing life in the light of Christ entails setbacks and suffering. Flourishing life is not about God alone, neither about the world alone, but about this world becoming the dwelling place of God. This includes the still much needed topical translation of sin and redemption, but the real flourishing in the presence of God is more encompassing than sin and redemption.

Volf and Croasmun offer a valuable analysis of the crisis of theology and they have the guts to show a way out. In their view, theology is more than a set of managerial tools. It is more than “jeremiads about the demise of Christian values” (51) and it is more than the hyper-critique of other theologies. Of course, unmasking ideologies, naming causes of suffering, and fighting brutal oppression is part of a theologian's task. But it cannot stop there. Volf and Croasmun want theologians to construct and to generously give an intellectual sound underpinning of genuine good life for all. They offer a Christian theology, mainly based on the Pauline letters, as a positive contribution to the concern for freedom, inclusion, and the relief of suffering. Their choice to do extensive contemporary theology “with” Paul (153) could be at the expense of a deep reading of the Hebrew Bible and of the gospels on “flourishing life”. However, it does shed new light on the righteousness, peace, and joy of that flourishing life. Those readers who are acquainted with Volf's work, probably most known for his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, will not be

surprised by the emphasis on joy. And even if one cannot agree with all arguments, the book is timely in this year of a Covid-19 crisis when so many people are wondering what a truly good life is. What is a life worth living? Theologians can perhaps find the joy of doing theology with and for the people asking this question. For it is not God who needs theology (185), but people seeking dignity and hope.

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