

ARTICLE

An Ecumenical Approach to Interreligious Dialogue in Asia: Volf's Theology of Embrace in Conversation with *Ecclesia in Asia*

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Abstract

This article examines the merits of Protestant theologian Miroslav Volf's Theology of Embrace as a Catholic framework for interreligious dialogue in Asia. The paper claims that the present Catholic orientation on the issue of interreligious dialogue in Asia, presented in the 1999 papal document *Ecclesia in Asia*, exhibits worrying implications: that non-Christians are at best lesser Christians, that adaptation of non-Christian cultural elements is pretentious and disingenuous, that Christianization is the primary motive for dialogue and not peaceful coexistence, and that the recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit in dialogue can even be a hurdle for the Christian mission. The researcher explores the lessons of Volf's ecumenical theology, the Theology of Embrace, and suggests that these may shed light on the shortcomings of *Ecclesia in Asia* on the issue of interreligious dialogue in the region. The author articulates the four gestures of embrace (opening of arms, waiting, closing of arms, and opening of arms again) within the bounds of Volf's ecumenical theology, while at the same time generally considering Asia's colonial history, socio-economic realities, rich religious demography, and widespread religious violence.

Keywords

Miroslav Volf, Theology of Embrace, Interreligious dialogue in Asia, *Ecclesia in Asia*

Introduction

Post-Vatican II discourse features the council's attempt of promoting unity among people of different religions.¹ In *Nostra Aetate*, or the Vatican II's declaration on the relation of the Church with non-Christian religions, one of the key Catholic pronouncements was "[t]he Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions."² This recognition has been a subject of many discussions after the council, especially on the implications this has for Catholic theology on interreligious dialogue and evangelization. The directive of this particular document for Catholics can be summed up in its statement: "[i]t is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's *all-embracing* love"³ to them.

Yet, Christianity's offer of embrace appears hypocritical to Asia. It reminds most of Asia of its colonial past that portrayed the love of the Christian God as ironically oppressive and exclusive, which tried to drain the culture and riches of Asia. This did not stop Asians from thinking that Christian mission is one of the reasons why Asia is poor today. Not only is the phenomenology of embrace generally foreign to Asian experience, it is also a gesture that for them an oppressor does not deserve to initiate offering. Besides, in Croatian Protestant Miroslav Volf's use of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Luke 15:11–32⁴), it illustrates too that the invitation of embrace is not the act of the repenting son but a privilege offered by the forgiving father.⁵

While this council's inspiration to go forward and embrace Asian religions raises the question of how to reconcile the Christian God's loving embrace with the atrocities of the colonial past, it also raises the question whether this framework is going forward too fast. Although Vatican II

1 Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions (Holy See, 1965), sec. 1, para. 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (hereafter cited as *NA*): "In [the Catholic Church's] task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship."

2 *NA*, sec. 2, para. 2.

3 *NA*, sec. 4., para. 8 (*emphasis mine*).

4 The version of the Bible translation used for this article is the *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible* (Society of St. Paul Philippine-Macau Province, 2000).

5 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996), 72.

maintains that Christian beliefs cannot be compromised, there may still be doubts from some Christians themselves, viz., that embracing Asian religions waters down the Christian confidence and belief in proclaiming Christ as Savior. Volf says that “the elevation of deeds above beliefs is the [necessary] consequence of the claim that God is love.”⁶ Evidently, there might need to be a clarification on what elevation of deeds over beliefs implies here.

It so appears, that there is hesitation from both angles of embrace, from the Christian’s invitation of embrace and from Asia’s response to it. The utter need to confront the tendency of religious communities to weaponize religion and the discernible priority of deeds over beliefs, may even elicit the momentum New Atheism⁷ has in the West to manifest in Asia. The countries that exhibited religiosity progressively a century ago have now spiraled down to countries with the lowest belief rates. The world cannot simply deny the possibility that this is the harbinger that faces Asia’s future. Not only then that there are doubts on this interreligious embrace arising from the participants of the exchange, there is also an undeniable doubt from those observing on the sidelines. And all these doubts are substantial enough to be considered in developing a viable framework of Christian engagement in Asia.

Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, presents a framework of Christian engagement in Asia. The document does recognize in a way the threefold doubt challenging the intended engagement: that “[pre-Second Vatican Council Christian missions] proved in no way sufficient [as] the Church was often associated in people’s minds with the colonial powers;”⁸ that “Jesus as the only Saviour is fraught with philosophical, cultural, and theological difficulties, especially in light of the beliefs of Asia’s great religions, deeply intertwined with cultural values and specific worldviews;”⁹ and that “atheistic ideologies are still very much present [in Asia].”¹⁰

6 Miroslav Volf, *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection* (Eerdmans, 2010), 147.

7 The concept of New Atheism projects that religion should not only be tolerated in society but to be confronted and criticized—basically, to strip off its undue influence to the society.

8 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (Holy See, 1999), sec. 9, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html (hereafter cited as *EA*).

9 *EA*, sec. 20.

10 *EA*, sec. 8.

The very problem I see is the document's possible misdiagnosis of this threefold doubt. One, it assumes that the terror of colonial past was already in the past, that "this *was* the situation on the eve of the Second Vatican Council."¹¹ Two, instead of understanding the complexity of philosophical, cultural, and theological contradictions Asian religions have with Christianity, it sees it as an "even greater incentive in striving to transmit the faith that the Church has inherited from the Apostles and holds with the Church of all generations and places."¹² And three, it deduces the influence of secularization and atheistic tendencies to mere "modernization" and "materialism" amidst the growing religious violence in Asia.¹³ It answers the Asian fear of the colonial past by simply forgetting it, resolving philosophical and theological conundrums by sheer imposition and superiority, and confrontation with secularism by reducing it to mere capitalistic tendencies. We get knotted up with questions and doubts, and these are for sure the easiest ways to respond. The convenience and perhaps mediocrity to resolve these complex issues come with a price—another series of controversies.

One of these controversies is the document's "fulfilment theology"—that while the good in Asian religions is acclaimed as the universal work of the Holy Spirit, "whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of people, in cultures and religions [only] serves as a preparation for the Gospel and can only be understood in reference to Christ."¹⁴ The document explicitly says that "the religious values they [Asian religions] teach await their fulfilment in Jesus Christ."¹⁵ Singaporean theologian Ambrose Mong saw it as condescending to Asian religions, making them pre-Christians or lesser Christians.¹⁶ Indian theologian Jacob Kavunkal pointed out that *Ecclesia in Asia* is very much couched in Western language of uniqueness and suffers from the preoccupation of saving Jesus Christ from the other saviors of Asian religions.¹⁷ The glaring critique of the Japanese bishops on the Asian synod of 1998, to which *Ecclesia in Asia* was a synodal document, was "if we stress too much that Jesus Christ is the One and only

11 *EA*, sec. 9 (*emphasis mine*).

12 *EA*, sec. 10.

13 *EA*, sec. 6–7.

14 *EA*, sec. 16.

15 *EA*, sec. 6.

16 See Ambrose Mong, "Is There Room for Christ in Asia," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 31, no. 2, (2015): 223–237, 230.

17 See Jacob Kavunkal, SVD, "Church and Mission in Asia in the Light of *Ecclesia in Asia*," *SEDOS Bulletin* 32, no. 11 (2000): 315–319.

Savior, we can have no dialogue, common living, or solidarity with other religions.”¹⁸

This Christian posturing gives the impression that dialogue is not the focus of Christian engagement in Asia entailed in the document. It appears that the primary motivation is rather Christianization. The document hopes that, “just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, [...] in the Third Christian Millenium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in [Asia’s] vast and vital continent.”¹⁹ It also regards the philosophical, religious, and theological difficulties of this attempt as a moral imperative and “greater incentive in striving to transmit the [Christian] faith.”²⁰ Asian religions may get the impression that this is a sign of arrogance and blind superiority.

This evident priority explains how Christian inculturation may fail in Asia in the larger picture. With Christianization as the goal, inculturation has become simply a means rather than a mission in itself. Part of *Ecclesia in Asia* is mistakenly convinced with its focus of inculturation—“to borrow elements from human cultures...so that faith can become part of people’s cultural heritage, and different cultures will become expressions of the one Christian faith.”²¹ Perhaps one of the reasons why Matteo Ricci failed in his attempt of Christianizing China is his cultural adaptation that is inspired neither by a certain love to the real beauty of the particular culture nor by its consistency with the Christian gospel, but rather by his intention to simply sell Christianity to a particular class of society. Catholic theologian Ambrose Mong writes, “The European model is simply not appropriate in Asia, as we import a failed ‘Christianity’ in the West, as well as a wrong notion of conversion.”²²

As an Asian Catholic, I find interest in how Christianity as a religious minority in Asia should engage with the other religions in Asia, and in particular Miroslav Volf’s thoughts about this. His book, *A Public Faith*, seems to grasp two contextual sentiments in Asia: one, that religion has and should have a place in the public arena, and two, that religion can terribly malfunction in two directions, either to be idle to the issues of the world or to be violently aggressive at the opposite extreme.²³ His book then seems to be

18 Peter Phan, *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries* (Orbis Books, 2002), 30.

19 *EA*, sec. 1.

20 *EA*, sec. 10.

21 *EA*, sec. 21.

22 See Mong, “Is There Room for Christ in Asia,” 229.

23 See Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Brazos Press, 2011), 12.

devoted to Christian engagement in the public arena, which in this paper's context, exhibits an interreligious picture.

Volf confronts the potential problematic tendencies of religions in society, such as indifference and violence, two problems which in wide consensus of scholarship are also concerns of religiously plural Asia. And his theological response is framed under two principles: that communion with God necessarily obligates communion with neighbor, and that communion with neighbor does not mean mere tolerance, but meaningful, equal, and reciprocal engagement. Both fundamental appraisals fit perfectly the concerns of Asian religiosity and diversity.

Volf's first principle harnesses the relationship between faith and social praxis, "ascent" and "return" in his terms, respectively.²⁴ An ascent without return is nonsensical and hypocritical, while a return without ascent is meaningless and confusing. Needless to say, both are fleeting without the other. This principle re-echoes the New Law of Christ of loving God and loving neighbor, which was Christ's answer to the question "what is the greatest commandment?" (See Matthew 22:34–40). Apparently, even the singularity of Christ's greatest commandment is twofold. Goodness, as Aquinas would say, is diffusive anyway.²⁵ The love that invites us towards God, if genuine and true, invites us towards our neighbor, too.

Volf's second principle values and nourishes the particular identities participating in the engagement. Not only does it protect these individualities from possible coercive absorption of the other, but it also develops them to give space for the other.²⁶ It then envisions a conducive communal belonging that gives authentic value to each identity and transforms it in such a way that will make the relation more meaningful and pleasing. Volf understands the self as a being with and for the other.

From these two principles arise his theological response that may shed light to the tyrannies that face Asia today. Indifference and violence are regarded as forms of exclusion and are counterproductive to what it means to be a human being. He proposes the constant mission of the self to approach the other in a loving embrace.²⁷ His theology of embrace captures the idea that each one is always worthy of embrace and should always adjust

24 Volf, *A Public Faith*, 12–13.

25 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia q. 5, art. 4. For English translation, see *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros., 1948), 25–26.

26 Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity is Our Social Program: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (1998): 410.

27 See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

and make space to embrace—as God, our Lover and Beloved, has embraced everybody first.

Volf’s Theology of Embrace for Asia

The exponential advancement of globalization has been a pressure today more than ever for human beings to rethink what “living together” should really mean. We are in a position where small mistakes may lead us to disastrous repercussions, which are in some cases irremediable. The whole irony between making us “closer” together by modernity and generating more chaos or misunderstanding is like the depiction of “deep waters” as a primordial element in the book of Genesis.²⁸ Chaos may be understood as the unregulated mixture of ideals in the “deep waters,”²⁹ so much so that the act of creation is rather more an act of separation between these ideals.³⁰ And so we find ourselves today more compelled to distinguish the line between what is proper and what is not when it comes to “living together.”

Usually, the proper way is associated with “sheer neutrality” as sort of a virtue, only for people to end up demasking their façade of impartiality and transform their resentment into violence. We can no longer live in hotel-like scenarios, doing our own thing in our own rooms, letting the others do the same (while not really knowing who is the one next door), and call it peaceful “living together.” Societies which pride themselves with this pseudo-virtue of tolerance and freedom contribute to greater discriminations in history.³¹ This

28 In the literal sense, the first chapter of the book of Genesis mentions that there are three primordial elements in the story of creation—there was darkness, earth without form, and waters. Yet this is not to contradict the assertion of the IV Lateran Council of 1215 that God created out of nothing.

29 The “deep waters” may allude to Tiamat in Babylonian mythologies, the goddess of sea and chaos.

30 The first account of creation is said to have been written in the priestly tradition. And the task of priests according to Leviticus 10:10 is to separate or to “distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean.”

31 Freedom of worship is so much different than freedom of religion. The difference is crucial, as society’s neutral stance for religion may turn towards a progressive relegation of religion to the private sphere. The final statement produced from a European interreligious conference titled, “Being a Citizen of Europe and a Person of Faith: Christians and Muslims as Active Partners in European Societies,” states that such process contributes to the further “marginalization [of religion] from the public domain, and consequently to the eradication of any sort of public manifestation of one’s faith” (“Being a Citizen of Europe and a Person of Faith Final Statement,” Committee for the Relations to Muslims in Europe [CRME])

erroneous understanding of “peaceful tolerance” becomes neither peaceful nor tolerant and demands re-envisioning the “proper way.”

What makes this re-envisioning difficult is that people do not like to assume responsibilities. This may explain Volf’s observation that in the “growing awareness of cultural heterogeneity brought about by globalization, [there is] ‘tribal identity’ asserting itself as a powerful force.”³² In seeking compromises in a cacophony of ideals, we find it easier to dress up as an oppressed minority, emphasizing the sheer possibility of the majority as oppressive, and leave the responsibility of adjusting, to either them as the majority or the system in general. The narrative of victimization is very convenient to enjoy the comfort of familiar ideologies without the arduous task of maturity and openness for critiques.

While it is true that the system can truly be oppressive and calling it out can be “righteous indignation,” the “self” however should still share responsibilities. Stripping off the self with all its agency is much more a depressing sight, as it would also mean that the “self” has no capabilities to shape a peaceful society. Between an evaluation on the system of social arrangements and the proper attitude of social agents, Volf is more interested to speak on the latter than the former.³³ Hence, the “proper way” to be discussed in this text can be considered as the “proper posturing of the self” towards the other.

The maneuvering of the self in the proper way of “living together” may be understood in a step-by-step process. Besides, although human personhood and human loving relations are complex realities, the human being as a composite being portrays that human activities and development

Conference, October 20–23, 2008, Mechelen, Belgium; statement is available at Den Norske Kirken website as part of a report by Gerd Marie Ådna, “Rapport fra konferanse I Committee for Relations to Muslims in Europe [CRME] og CRME-møter I Mechelen, Belgia, 20.–23.10.2008 og I Pullach, München, 19.–21.01.2009 [vedlagt],” Den Norske Kirke website, uploaded and last updated February 2009, <https://www.kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/mellomkirkelig-rad/2009/sakspapirer%20februar/mkr%2002%20porvoo.pdf> [see page 9 of pdf].

32 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 20.

33 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 20–1. He writes: “In contrast [to focusing on social arrangements], I want to concentrate on social agents. Instead of reflecting on the kind of society we ought to create in order to accommodate individual or communal heterogeneity, I will explore *what kind of selves we need to be* in order to live in harmony with others” (20–1, italics original).

undergo procedural change.³⁴ And every process is fashioned primarily by our fundamental principles, which reveals our goals, which in turn dictate our methods.

The seeming preconception, the goal, and the method of *Ecclesia in Asia* may not appeal to Volf. As argued in the introduction, the document gives the impression that Asian religions are pre-Christian or inferior to Christianity. This then propels Christians to go on a mission of Christianizing Asia as a form of generosity towards them. Accordingly, with this goal in mind, the document sees the method of inculturation as a proper fit. The process is of course reasonable, but the issue is whether it is the “proper way” or not. I argue, rather, that Volf regards the “proper” not on centering on ourselves and bringing the peripheries to our center but on de-centering ourselves and moving out of our center.³⁵ Volf believes that what makes this decentering possible is that God is neither just in “our” center nor just in “our” peripheries, but in both through His universal embrace. Consequently, God also calls us to de-center ourselves into Him through embracing the “other” as well.³⁶ This revolutionary concept of de-centering is what makes, in my view, Volf’s theology different and better than *Ecclesia in Asia*’s framework.

God’s generous and charitable initiative of universal embrace may be the springboard of Volf’s metaphoric drama of embrace. To sketch one’s supposed relation with the other under the tension of differences, he utilizes and elaborates on four gestures of embrace, viz., I. opening of arms, II. waiting, III. closing of arms, and IV. opening of arms again. This text then deciphers Volf’s theology of embrace towards Asian appreciation through each gesture of embrace, highlighting at the end of each discussion its profound difference from *Ecclesia in Asia*, with Asian religions as the profound “other.”³⁷

34 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a18: “One swallow does not make a summer.” Aristotle argues that a life of virtue evokes consistency and espousal.

35 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 70. He writes, “Whichever way the ‘centering’ takes place and whatever its result, the self should be de-centered.”

36 See Galatians 2:19–20: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”

37 See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 141–145.

I. Opening of Arms

Desire and Need for the “Other”

Volf’s embrace basically revolves on the idea that the “other” perfects us. Indeed, if you live alone, you are either a beast or a god—somebody who is ignorant or arrogant of realizing one’s imperfections, or somebody who does not have those imperfections.³⁸ In order to flourish, human society then works through individuals performing their specific duties tantamount to the virtues they have.³⁹ As much as our historicity is limited to the culture we live in time and space, we will only have a better understanding of the world through our relation with the “other.” After all, knowledge of the “other” perfects rational animals; it is in the nature of human beings to know.⁴⁰

Knowledge and truth accompany our mission to conceptualize justice. We are unified not only by our shared experience of imperfections, but also by our common interest towards justice. The aspiration towards justice may be the transcendent third that holds humanity together.⁴¹ But in the plurality of human cultures, Volf believes that it is impossible to have one name for human justice,⁴² as every tradition is equally prejudicial. Seeking justice however is not a lost cause, since for Volf, the “Crucified Messiah” transcends skewed human justice, and subscribes to a divinized concept of justice.⁴³ Hence our path to justice is the path towards Christ.

38 See Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a27.

39 This is very similar to what we can see in Plato’s *Republic*. He divided society into three types of classes: the rulers for those whose prominent virtue is wisdom, the soldier whose prominent virtue is fortitude, and the laborers whose prominent virtue is temperance. The appropriate participation of every individual in this picture accounts to what we can say the virtue of justice.

40 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 980a21–27: “All men [and women] desire to know.”

41 In Book VIII of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle understands friendship as the result not so much of two people being attracted to each other, but of two or more people being similarly attracted towards a “third” thing that is beyond them. It is argued that as long as this transcendent third remains, then friendship lasts. For Thomas Aquinas then, long-lasting friendship lies on the Supreme Good as the Transcendent Third. See Aquinas, *Commentary to Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VIII, Lect. III, Chap. 4, Par. 1577. He writes, for example, “Friendship remains as long as they are good in virtue” (Bk. VIII, Lect. III, Chap. 4, Par. 1577).

42 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 202.

43 See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 277.

However, the claim of the “Crucified Messiah” towards universal justice seems unjust towards Asian religions who accommodate different soteriologies.⁴⁴ Regardless, whether we appeal to tradition, reason, or consensus, the singular justice of the “Crucified Messiah” puts into question the position of the saviors in Asian religions. Asia may be more inclined towards a concept of “one among the many,” but Christianity seems to impose a decision between “one and the many.” Yet Volf attests that if there is one thing that universal justice attends to, it is to be accommodating and all-embracing.⁴⁵ For him, the “Crucified Messiah” is neither one among other saviors, nor one against pseudo-saviors, but one that is present in each tradition—“one in the many.”

Therefore the question is no longer which Judge is which, but is there really a Judge that transcends human justice and saves humanity from religious legitimization of violence?⁴⁶ Humanity may no longer need to risk doing injustice in playing justice, to wield the sword in the name of justice and let God problematize the seeming inescapable ironies of seeking justice.⁴⁷ This is why the “Crucified Messiah” is also the “Rider on the White Horse.”⁴⁸ To have a powerful Judge comes with demands, but nevertheless with direction. We do not want the chaos of being violent waves with the unknown under the “deep waters,” but rather of choosing the judgment of “being above the heavens or below the heavens” (Genesis 1:6). Our relation with the “other” and the whole creation only makes sense to us when we have the “Crucified Messiah” setting for us an example, the Transcendent

44 *EA*, sec. 2 states: “[T]he issue of the encounter of Christianity with ancient local cultures and religions is a pressing one. This is a great challenge for evangelization, since religious systems such as Buddhism and Hinduism have a clearly soteriological character.”

45 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 197. Volf writes: “If God is the God of all peoples, the justice of God must be the justice for all peoples. Universal peace will be the fruit of universal divine justice.”

46 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 303. He writes: “The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by *ourselves* is to insist that violence is only legitimate only when it comes from God. The ‘theologization’ of violence is a pre-condition for the politics of nonviolence.”

47 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 277. Volf writes: “We are caught in a vicious cycle; competing truths and justices call forth violence, and violence enthrones the truths and justices of its perpetrators.”

48 See Revelation 19:11–15: “Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Fruitful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war [...] From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” (Rev 19:11–15).

Third that demands embrace as the proper direction, the Transcendent Other that makes all these acts of embrace possible—such is our desire and need for this “Other.”

Emptying Oneself

Siding with the powerful Judge, with the strong, with the exemplar, is a natural human proclivity. Volf sees this as the reason why people are more inclined to side with the “Rider on the White Horse” that may inflict violence than the “Crucified Messiah” inflicted with violence.⁴⁹ Violence assumes control and control assures immediate gratification. It was never a question why people are violent, as the real mystery is derived from how people control themselves from being violent, to being calm and peaceful amidst chaos. Violence is easy, it is the default. Human nature has the capacity of evil, and good people are not those who are incapable of being violent, but those who are capable and yet chose not to be violent. To accept then our capacity and tendency for violence is human, but to renounce violence is divine.

Hence, positioning ourselves beside the powerful Judge makes us surrender and realize our frailties. As beauty shames the ugly, the strong shames the weak. This demands us to realize that even before making space for the “other,” there is already a vacuum of imperfection in us, our shallow ideologies that need to grow. The temptation to simply capsule this emptiness for comfort and pride just prevents our potentialities to bloom towards perfection. And so, the powerful Judge invites us to see our natural emptiness “not as limitations of what we seem to be, but by His intentions of what we can be.”⁵⁰

The powerful judge is the “Crucified Messiah” who intends for us to share the honor and pleasure in His loving embrace. He guides us by example and credibility to distinguish what is truly essential and empty ourselves of those non-essential things we gather to desperately compensate our insufficiencies. Christ on the cross is empty of worldly riches, fame, and glory, and is only justified by His obedience to the will of the Father, the law of love. Self-emptiness for the “other” is difficult, but for love it is worth it.

49 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 277. He writes: “There are many reasons why we would rather be the army of the Rider than the disciples of the Crucified. We all recoil from suffering and many of us secretly enjoy doing violence. Yet we would be both less desirous of inflicting violence and more willing to suffer it if we lived in a world in which justice were done and truth respected. We do not, however.”

50 See William Young, *The Shack* (Windblown Media, 2007), 202: “Humans are not defined by their limitations, but by the intentions I [God] have for them; not what they seem to be, but by everything it means to be created in my [God’s] image.”

Besides, each one of us has been equally honored and embraced by the self-emptying love of the “Crucified Messiah.”

Seeing the “Other” as Equals

When God embraced humanity through Christ’s salvation on the cross, not only does He divinize the human person, but in the same way He also proclaims His disinterested love to all equal in dignity. The varying degree of our faults is immaterial to His forgiving embrace. He places us on “top of all creation” not of our own merit, but on the merit of His love.⁵¹ His act of embrace is an invitation for us to see the “other” the way He sees everyone.

Volf’s Theology of embrace fundamentally focuses more on “who has been embraced” by God than “who embraced God.” Very often we confuse these two phrases, and just as the lawyer in the Gospel of Luke, we ask Christ, “Who is my neighbor?”⁵² Commanded to love our neighbor, we usually ask ourselves, even subconsciously, “What does she do or have that would have me consider her as my neighbor?” Yet, the Parable of the Good Samaritan as Christ’s example of loving proclaimed the neighbor as the giver of love (the Samaritan) rather than the recipient of it. Christ did not answer the question, because the question is wrong. The question we should ask in order to live together peacefully and justly is, rather, “What can we do in order for the other to consider me as her neighbor?” The adjustment is always on the lover, and not on the beloved. For just as Volf believes, God’s embracing the “other” satisfies all our questions as to why we should embrace the “other.”⁵³

51 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed (Holy See, 1997), I sec. 2, ch. 1, art. 1, par. 6, sec. 356, https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_two/chapter_one/article_1/paragraph_6_man.index.html. It states: “[A human being] is the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake, and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this reason that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity.” See also Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Holy See, 1965), ch. 2, sec. 24, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (hereafter *GS*).

52 In Luke 10:25–37, Christ tells us the two greatest commandments to love God and our neighbor. Somehow, logically, people tend to see the next question as “who is the neighbor Christ speaks of, so as we can follow the commandment.”

53 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 124. He states: “In the presence of God our rage over injustice gives way to forgiveness, which in turn will make search for justice for all

Christianity in Asia should stop overly concerning themselves in setting a hierarchy of who has embraced God more.⁵⁴ Instead, we could start by learning how God embraces the other religions and how God's act of loving embrace is taught and practiced in those religions. No more "lesser Christians" or "pre-Christians" as implied in *Ecclesia in Asia*, but just neighbors sharing with each other the ever-growing understanding of God's embrace.⁵⁵ Besides, God's acts of love in each culture and tradition are equally commendable and pleasurable. Placing oneself on top of a hierarchy in Asia on account of these nuggets of wisdom, as *Ecclesia in Asia* may seem to imply, is the wrong way to go, and is counterintuitive to a sincere desire to open our arms and learn from the other cultures.⁵⁶

II. Waiting

Non-intrusive

Volf reminds us that opening our arms should stop before touching the "other."⁵⁷ This particularly vulnerable moment of pause differentiates the act of embracing for dialogue and the act of grappling for combat. This points out that not all gestures of opening arms projects humility and sincere docility. They may also be mere hypocrisy to simply catch the "other" in its most vulnerable position, to overpower, and force them to submission. We then allow the "other" to assess for themselves the risks of violent intrusion that

possible. If forgiveness does take place it will be an echo of the forgiveness granted by the just and loving God."

- 54 The word "hierarchy" in this statement does not refer to the "hierarchy of truths" in *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism (Holy See, 1964), ch. 2, sec. 11, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html. It states: "When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a 'hierarchy of truths', since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith." Here, "hierarchy" applies more to the truth claims in ecumenical dialogue, not religious organizations.
- 55 See Mong, "Is There Room for Christ in Asia," 230; While a fulfilment theory is more commendable than a conquest theory or an adaptation theory, it is also undeniably condescending to Asian religions making them pre-Christians or lesser Christians.
- 56 See Kavunkal, SVD, "Church and Mission in Asia." Kavunkal writes, "We will realize that [continuing the mission of Jesus of Nazareth] is a tremendous obligation than any claim of superiority or arrogant monopoly."
- 57 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 142.

dialogue may digress to. We let the “other” realize that our inviting arms do not include this violence, that we do not want warranted or unwarranted oppressions either.

Leaving our arms wide open and hanging depicts our surrender and alliance to the power of truth than to the truth of power. Volf believes that while the truth of power is easy and convenient especially for the strong, Christ’s kingdom is on a different plane.⁵⁸ Even having good reasons and motivations, Hobbes’ Leviathan does not speak of the authentic human freedom that Christ offers in truth.⁵⁹ Our surrender is not the result of realizing that we are powerless against the “other,” but that we are powerless without the truth. It is the truth that we no longer need to struggle indefinitely against the “other” to pass our own agenda, but simply wait for the power of truth to take control and guarantee reconciliation.

Our act of waiting is our act of witnessing to the power of the Holy Spirit for dialogue. We are certain that when we open our arms, we are still not the primary agents of dialogue, but mere participants in it.⁶⁰ It implies that there is not much we can do on our own, let alone by intrusive force to demand to be accepted. Hence our waiting is a way of trusting the incomprehensible works of the Holy Spirit in His proper time, that is, not intrusive but always inclusive.⁶¹

58 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 266. He writes, “In the exchange with Pilate, Jesus argues against ‘the truth of power’ and for ‘the power of truth.’”

59 Hobbes’s Leviathan is founded on the argument that by absolute freedom human beings are wolves (destructive) to each other. But for Christ, it is when human beings are good to each other that they are truly free.

60 *EA* sec. 15 states: “The Synod was therefore right to see the Spirit of God as the prime agent of the Church’s dialogue with all peoples, cultures and religions.” The Spirit is the “agent of evangelization” (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation [Holy See, 1975], sec. 75, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html) and the main “principal agent of mission” (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missi*, Encyclical Letter On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate [Holy See, 1990], sec. 21, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html).

61 *GS*, sec. 26, states: “[The Spirit] guides the course of time and renews the face of the earth.”

Moves the “Other”

Although we are not actually creating truths in “living together” and are simply referencing the Spirit of Truth, our act of waiting is not absolute passivity.⁶² Instead, it is a constant grounding to the truth of our faith that we offer, a consistent genuine form of witnessing to the tradition that makes us who we are (contributing to the society’s integral understanding of life).⁶³ Besides, we cannot simply enter into dialogue without delineating our identity and position as participant of the dialogue.⁶⁴ That is why a Christian who neither reads the Bible nor embraces a life of witnessing to the Gospel of their faith does not appeal to other Asian religions. However, a Christian who stands by their convictions through words and deeds, polishing their passive act of waiting into an active and genuine invitation, interests the “other” in dialogue.

Most importantly, this identity and conviction should be able to convince the “other” of the genuineness of one’s “signaled desire, created space, and opened boundaries.”⁶⁵ While the “other” may see promising results that can emerge from the dialogue, they also want to see the assurance that a genuine dialogue can really take place. If the “other” notices certain contradictions between one’s cultural conviction and openness to the “other,” the gesture of embrace comes across to the “other” as mere act of tolerance and a surface manifestation of hidden oppressive agenda. Besides, without appropriate grounded convictions, one will find the act of waiting unreasonably difficult, if not entirely impossible. Hence, our act of waiting is a moment of evaluation to not just furnish our convictions but also to prove to ourselves and to others our sincerity for dialogue.

Our act of waiting is not only a reassurance for those who are advocating dialogue, but also a corrective example for those who are against it. Waiting shows us an illustration of the efficacy and beauty of non-violent dialogue. Importantly, waiting never ends up a failure, but it simply delays success. What others could possibly see is either an invitation that gets

62 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 142. He writes, “The halted movement of the arms outstretched toward the other has its own proper power, of course. This one-sidedness of action is not useless.”

63 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Modern Library Publishers, 1917). In aphorism 6 he writes: “It has become clear to me what every great philosophy up till now has consisted of—namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography; and moreover that the moral (or immoral) purpose in every philosophy has constituted the true vital germ out of which the entire plant has always grown” (6).

64 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 207. He writes, “Nobody stands nowhere.”

65 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.

reciprocated, or an invitation that has not yet been reciprocated. And the more we patiently wait for the appropriate welcome from the “other,” the more we harness our conviction and show to the world that non-violence is achievable. Our act of waiting will be like a sun, unreservedly shining to both the advocates and non-advocates of non-violence, moving everybody towards dialogue.

Authentic Cultural Integration

True enough, our task is not merely to shine but to enlighten.⁶⁶ Our determination to set an example is not to commend ourselves above others, but to raise everybody up for a better understanding and practice of “living together.” Waiting for embrace does not reach its goal without reciprocity. Our primary motivation remains cultural integration.⁶⁷

However, authentic cultural transformation comes from within. When Christians mistake Asian religions as “thinned-out faith,”⁶⁸ or a culture of mere unreasonable impositions, we will also mistake cultural imposition as authentic cultural transformation. *Ecclesia in Asia* may seem to run into this very mistake.⁶⁹ Cultural expressions are simply expressions of what holds beneath, of what substantially constitutes the person’s tradition, of the principles that hold their beliefs all together. Though how much other people may appear unreasonable to us for not sharing our thoughts, we cannot simply regard them as mindless brutes that go along with forced training rather than education. Needless to mention, we are not in a better position on knowing how to appropriately apply the truth of Christian faith in other cultures. Hence, the transformation of one’s culture is only made possible by the realization of those who belong to that culture.

66 See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 188, art. 6, “For even as it is better to enlighten than merely shine, so is it better to give to others the fruits of one’s contemplation than merely contemplate.” See also II–II, q. 180 a. 4, q. 182, a. 1.

67 “Cultural integration” here refers to the re-evaluation of unchristian practices in the culture, and not integration of Christian worship.

68 Volf, *Public Faith*, 20. He writes, “[Thinned-out faith is when] a person takes faith as [simply ritual] source of energy or healing for the body and soul, but not as a guide for shaping a vision of human flourishing, or when a person [simply] embraces the ends mandated by his or her faith.”

69 *EA*, sec. 21 is mistakenly convinced with its focus of inculturation—“to borrow elements from human cultures [...] so that faith can become part of people’s cultural heritage, and different cultures will become expressions of the one Christian faith.” Somehow, this is understandably effective if the motivation is simply to multiply nominal Christians.

Without welcoming responses of Asian cultures, the only thing that Christians can do is wait, live a witnessing life, and pray for the work of grace. And as grace comes from within, grace too makes use of the elements within the tradition. Besides, grace builds on nature.⁷⁰ Christians must realize that the work of cultural transformation is way beyond them as outsiders of the culture. Rather, it is only satisfied by the never-failing work of the Holy Spirit inside the culture. Only through this recognition can the welcoming embrace of Asians be genuine, and as such truly fulfilling. This takes time, but the wait is worth the genuine warmth of a close embrace.

III. Closing of Arms

Mutual Reciprocity

The warmth of close embrace is the goal of both the self and the “other.”⁷¹ The dialogue may have been initiated by the self and fulfilled by the welcoming arms of the “other,” but this dialogue does not hold the self indebted to the other’s generous approval, nor the other indebted to the self’s generous initiative. All possible debts are paid through the embrace, where the “host is a guest, and the guest is the host.”⁷² Each individual partakes in mutual reciprocity not on account of their willingness to embrace and dialogue, but on account of what is felt and enjoyed in the embrace or dialogue. Thus, the dialogue is only sincere and productive when both the self and the “other” share this same goal of warm embrace without ulterior motives.

With the self or the other having a covert motive of assimilation or insincerity, closing of arms may go wrong in two ways. First, the self or the “other” may embrace too tight as to crush and assimilate the “other,”⁷³ hence inflicting pain and trauma. Or second, the self or the other may embrace too softly or far away to actually offer open space for the “other”—as though it seems there is no embrace to start with. In addition to reciprocity, Volf also adds that soft touch is necessary to make warm embrace possible so that the closing of arms not devolve into an act of assimilation or insincerity.⁷⁴

70 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad. 2.

71 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.

72 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.

73 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.

74 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.

The soft touch is respectful to the other as an “other.” In the act of embrace, it is crucial that the self is able to identify the “other.” Mutual reciprocity is only possible when there is a movement from emptiness to fulfillment, from misunderstanding to understanding. It is for this reason that Volf regards the “inability-to-understand” as a crucial aspect of dialogue and embrace.⁷⁵ The ever-growing recognition of the “other’s” uniqueness from the self propels the continuous moment of learning, and, without which, embrace becomes unnecessary. These moments of non-understanding continue to be there because the “other” is still the “other.” Our touch of embrace continuously adjusts in this dynamic exchange, to just give the right amount of softness and have then a distinguishable mutual reciprocity with the “other.”

*Fusion of Horizons*⁷⁶

The “other” that remains the “other” in this mutual exchange does not evoke failure but rather dynamism and creative differentiation. First, by dynamism, one understands that beside the bilateral exchange, the self and the “other” is in constant growth and complex formation with other “others.” There are elements of otherness that emerge, die out, evolve, or devolve, beknown or unbeknown to the self or the “other,” as influenced by other “others.” The fast pace of globalization emphasizes all the more this flexible reality of intermingled horizons. But this does not imply that genuine bilateral embraces are no longer possible, instead it illustrates the liveliness of these exchanges. Second, by creative differentiation, the “other” that remains an “other” projects the constant process of separating-and-binding.⁷⁷ The idea of distinction and separation is creation and binding. Binding does not mean assimilation, just as Gadamer’s fusion of horizons does not mean mere combination. Volf points out that even in the exchange, we are “both distinct

75 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 144.

76 In a framework of dialogue that is against the assimilation of the “other” and the forgetting of oneself, this paper suggests a dialectical concept called “fusion of horizons.” The proper way of engaging with the “other” is the proper way of “having a horizon.” See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (Continuum Publishing Company, 1989), 313. Gadamer writes: “[T]o have a horizon’ means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it. A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small. Similarly, working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.”

77 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 65.

and related, and the boundaries that mark our identities are both barriers and bridges.”⁷⁸ The distinction guides us to the kind of relation we should have towards the “other.” We are to cross the boundaries, not tear them down.⁷⁹ Our fusion of horizons and binding is a new understanding of each one’s role towards the “other,” fitting our identities. After all, God’s act of creation is also separating-and-binding to lay out the relation between a man and a woman as well as their relation to God and His creation. Problems arise when we try to mix up this order and not assume the responsibilities of our being. Hence, securing the otherness in this exchange features the dynamism and productiveness of our ontological differences.

Religions in Asia are gaining more dynamism and responsibility compared to those outside Asia. Recently in Asia, there is undeniable growth in the number of people identifying themselves as religious, in the number of new religions springing forth, in the spread of some religions to neighboring Asian countries, and in the impact of religions on current state policies. These religions remain distinct and unique in the sea of traditions, while assuming changing roles and responsibilities respective to each “other.” And so, the vigorous “closing of arms” religions partake in Asia all the more raises the need to evaluate the responsibilities religions assume in Asian societies.

Human Flourishing as Primary Goal

Volf asserts that religions’ responsibility is to assure authentic human flourishing.⁸⁰ In the midst of injustice, violence, and oppression, religion must be the conscience of society. Capitalists and politicians may subscribe

78 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 65.

79 Regarding crossing boundaries, see Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14. Barnes writes, “We practice our faith face-to-face with the other.” In other words, to exist is to inter-exist. Regarding tearing boundaries down, see Edgar Javier, SVD, *Theology of Mission cum Introduction to Missiology* (Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, 2019), 95: “In the ‘passing over and coming back’ fusion does not take place where identities—whether individual or group—are lost. Nor is it a border diffusion or dissolution. But it is a *crossing over* and a *returning from movements* so that the *coordinates* of one’s identities may now be redrawn in a much richer way on due to the gift from the other” (italics original).

80 Volf, *Public Faith*, 54. He writes: “As a prophetic religion, Christian faith will be an active faith, engaged in the world in a noncoercive way—offering blessing to our endeavors, effective comfort in our failures, moral guidance in a complex world, and a framework of meaning for our lives and our activities. To be engaged in a

to a different understanding of what it means to be a human being. The enlightenment theory has also failed us.⁸¹ Some modern and post-modern ideologies regard humanity in its finiteness and objectify it as perhaps a mere product of experience.⁸² Volf believes that the human being can only be understood beyond its finiteness, in their relation to God and His love⁸³—the understanding of human flourishing accommodated by religions.

Proper “closing of arms” for Volf is evaluated by its coherence to human flourishing attested by the “Crucified Messiah.” It is the responsibilities we come up with in the dialogue with the “other” that projects our humble position towards God and unconditional love towards the “other.” Our engagement with the “other” should firstly not manifest our prejudicial account of human justice but, rather, a surrender to divine justice for universal peace and, secondly, our unconditional love towards the “other.”⁸⁴ Just as we [continuously] rediscover our intimacy with the Father through

world well, Christians will have to keep one thing at the forefront of their attention: the relationship between God and a vision of human flourishing.”

- 81 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 199. Volf states: “Enlightenment thinkers argued that the only impartial court of appeal is reason. [...] From some time now, the idea of ‘pure reason’ has fallen into disrepute.” Elsewhere he writes: “Modernity has failed to deliver on the promise of peace. It has also failed to displace religion in the name of reason” (219). Not only has the concept of justice been elusive through pure reason, it also brings into question how the countries who pride themselves on being enlightened have taken a huge part in painting the world with injustice and violence in World War I and II.
- 82 For one, Sigmund Freud characterizes the person through the objective relation between id, ego, and super ego. Yet, he is unable to specifically define the person in the moment of moral discernment. This is the precise sentiment of Martin Buber saying that the best way to understand the human person and action is referring to the person as an “I” or “You” rather than an “it” or mere object of observation and experimentation.
- 83 Regarding transcending human finiteness: through Christ’s redemption, God divinized the human person. The relationship is no longer between mere creatures and Creator, but between children and Father. It is for this reason that Ambrose exclaimed that the Fall was a “Happy Fault”: “O happy fault, that merited such a redeemer” (“The Exsultet: The Proclamation of Easter,” *The Roman Missal in Latin and English for Holy Week and Easter Week* (The Liturgical Press, 1966), 183. Regarding humanity’s relationship to God and God’s love, see Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 28. Volf states: “[M]odernity has set its high hopes in the twin strategies of social control and rational thought. [...] But if ‘design’ and ‘argument’ are not to create larger wounds than the ones they are seeking to heal, ‘design’ and ‘argument’ will themselves need to be healed by ‘weakness’ and ‘foolishness’ of the self-giving love.”
- 84 Volf, *Public Faith*, 8–9. He writes: “Without the ‘receptive ascent’, there is no transforming message from God; without the ‘creative return,’ there is no

affirming our sense of stewardship to Him for everything He has entrusted to us, we also continuously “rediscover the ministerial structures the Church requires to offer human society through contemplating God’s will.”⁸⁵ Such is also how Volf’s ascent-return principle for human flourishing should be applied in the “closing of arms” in Asia.⁸⁶

The Asian Church should be an avenue for experiencing God’s presence and action for the weak and the oppressed.⁸⁷ Asia is bombarded by issues and scandals against the poor, the weak, and those who cannot make a stand. Although *Ecclesia in Asia* did mention this particular context of Asia and even insisted to recall the Church’s message of service to the people, especially the poor in the social, political, religious, cultural, and economic realities of Asia, it was not followed up. The document could have incited collaboration with all cultures in different levels of society, calling out the injustices done to Asians, more than the concern of Christianization of Asia. The Church may have mentioned those in its social encyclicals, but *Ecclesia in Asia* could have been the perfect avenue. Besides, Jesus is very much concerned with the enduring social elements that can actively direct or influence human lives at any time. In Asia, salvation is closely knit to liberation. The Asian Church should manifest more Volf’s idea of “closing of arms” that assumes specific roles towards human flourishing characterized by divine justice and unconditional love.

IV. Opening of Arms Again

Individual Responsibility

Bilateral dialogues may actually accommodate more effective initiatives towards human flourishing, but efforts may vary according to the capacities

engagement in the transformation of the world. Leave out either one, you no longer have prophetic religion.”

85 Daniel Oh, “Mission Spirituality of Jesus” *Missiology* 40, no. 1 (2012): 77–82, 80.

86 See Volf, *A Public Faith*, 8: “‘Ascent’ is the point at which, in the encounter with the divine, representatives of prophetic religions [as well their adherents] receive the message and their core identity is forged—whether through mystical union with God, through prophetic inspiration, or through deepened understanding of sacred texts. The ascent is the *receptive moment*. ‘Return’ is the point at which, in interchange with the world, the message is spoken, enacted, built into liturgies or institutions, or embodied in laws. The return is the *creative moment*.”

87 Oh, “Mission Spirituality,” 81.

of each party. After an embrace, the self and the “other” do not dissolve into one, which would actually undo the embrace.⁸⁸ An embrace can only be an embrace if one and the “other” are distinguishable. And the goal of each party is not to dissolve into one but to come out of the embrace better than before and perform a better embrace to all “others” again and again. Each participant improves itself in a distinct way, refining the talents and sensitivities particular to their tradition. The unified effort towards human flourishing gets greater vitality through the different competencies supplementing each other. Besides, we aim for unity not uniformity.⁸⁹

Uniformity in this sense is ambitious, unnecessary, and most importantly, neglectful to individual responsibility. As we are coming from different cultures and are shaping the suitable framework of living together, we are demanded by our very roots to flourish as a unique culture towards a more meaningful understanding of “living together.” Not only are we the best fit for the job, but also, we are more likely the most compelled to do it. In so doing, we appreciate in us a sense of meaning in this responsibility, in our differences and unique judgments. After all, having differences and making judgments are not necessarily exclusionary acts for Volf.⁹⁰ Hence, we open our arms again not because it is the pessimistic reality of embrace.⁹¹ Rather, we open again because we trust ourselves and the “other” to be in a better disposition to assume our own meaningful responsibilities, always remembering the embrace that had happened.⁹²

Preservation of Integrity

Right memory preserves integrity. It is not the act of letting go after the embrace that entirely defines respect for the “other.” Every embrace, for it to be a genuine embrace, ends in letting go. But what makes fruitful embraces different from disappointing ones is right remembering. In the complexity

88 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.

89 Ranhilio Aquino, “Sitting at the Same Table,” *The Manila Times*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/11/23/opinion/columnists/topanalysis/sitting-at-the-same-table/800163>. Aquino writes, “[U]nity need not be uniformity. In fact uniformity would make unity an empty concept.”

90 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 65.

91 The pessimism I mean here refers to the undeniable frailty of human actions, which may lead us to think that good things have an end, and that having fleeting embraces is life’s absurdity.

92 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 234. He writes, “Forgetfulness is damnation; memory is redemption.”

of human participation in these exchanges, human forgetfulness presents a challenge. The act of letting go remains a crucial part of the whole drama of embrace, as it requires right remembering to do it properly.⁹³ Without right remembering, “*bon voyage*” becomes “good riddance;” the “other” becomes a pest, if not a stranger.

For Volf, right remembering is only done by remembering the “first embrace” done by God for human beings. This is the only way we should understand all the succeeding embraces we had and we will have. We cannot let the imperfections of our embraces define the “self” and the “other” but rather let the “first embrace” do so. The “first embrace” teaches us that all of us deserve a loving embrace from another and that we are capable of doing the same,⁹⁴ even despite how our experience after the embrace is sometimes degrading, often regressing, and always unsatisfying.⁹⁵

Constant Struggle

The “first embrace” is our reinvigorating soul to our failing experiences of human embrace. When “opening of arms,” “waiting,” or “closing of arms” devolves to hypocrisy, rejections, disappointments, or violence, we are tasked to still “open our arms again,” being hopeful that this is the only way to experience the “first embrace” once again. Christians posturing themselves to engage with Asia, in open arms and seeing them as depositories of truth, in waiting and allowing them to freely inculturate Christian principles into their tradition, and in close embrace and having a dialogue with the poor of Asia, may actually find themselves failing many times for different reasons and in different degrees.⁹⁶ Yet, the Spirit of the Lord gives us hope and vibrancy to “open our arms again” making us remember that just as the “Crucified Messiah” stood triumphant by God’s loving embrace, we will as well.

93 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 144.

94 Lest it be misunderstood, this statement does not imply that we can replicate the “first embrace.” To do so is logically absurd and perversely ambitious.

95 The human embraces being always unsatisfying echoes Augustine. In Book 1, chapter 1 of *The Confessions* Augustine says, “[O]ur hearts are restless until they rest in You.” Aquinas speaks of this human pursuit of ultimate satisfaction through the *exitus-reditus* event, that God is both the beginning and the end.

96 Regarding depositories of truth, see, e.g., Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Holy See, 1964), ch. 2, sec. 16, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. It states, “Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.”

Seemingly, *Ecclesia in Asia* is not able to fully comprehend this collaboration between remembering Christ’s embrace and proclaiming it through the work of the Spirit as a framework of dialogue with Asia. Indeed, “the chapter [of *Ecclesia in Asia*] on the proclamation of Jesus Christ is intimately linked [...] to what it says in a few pages on the Holy Spirit, acknowledging the role of the Spirit in unifying people and building relationships.”⁹⁷ The document does recognize the pneumatological character of doing Christian mission in Asia, presenting it as the “prime agent of the Church’s dialogue with all religion, cultures, and peoples.”⁹⁸ Yet unfortunately, this inspiring message is downplayed by the document’s suspicion that this role of the Spirit might be used in Asia “as an excuse for a failure to proclaim Jesus Christ as one and only Saviour.”⁹⁹ Our constant struggles should not be regarded as failures, and entrusting these struggles to the Spirit should not be considered as a separate and substandard option. Besides, the Federation of Asian Bishops’s Conferences (FABC) understands the primacy of *Missio Spiritus* as not in any way competing with the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ as Savior. In fact, it reiterates the central duty of proclaiming Christ as Savior.¹⁰⁰ However, a verbal proclamation is not usually the smart way to follow in Asia.¹⁰¹ *Ecclesia in Asia* should have highlighted more its understanding of the role of the Spirit guiding Christian dialogue with Asian religions towards “mutual understanding and acceptance,”¹⁰² to “bring into completion Jesus’s mission of love and service in Asia.”¹⁰³

Conclusion

As it appears, Volf’s Theology of embrace stands as a striking contrast against *Ecclesia in Asia*’s framework of engaging with the “other,” which in this paper

97 See also Wilfred, “Ecclesia in Asia.”

98 *EA*, sec. 15

99 *EA*, sec. 16

100 Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, Documents from 1970 to 1991*, vol. 1 (Claretian Publications, 1992), 25. It states: “We [FABC] affirm that there can never be true evangelization without the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and the primary element of evangelization without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and validity.”

101 Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 105. It states, “Christ cannot yet be proclaimed openly by words [in many places in Asia] but through witness of life.”

102 *EA*, sec. 15

103 *EA*, sec. 17

refers to Asian religions. It presents itself as a critique to *Ecclesia in Asia* in four ways. First in its discussion of “opening of arms,” Volf’s framework may regard Asian religions no longer as pre-Christians or lesser Christians as *Ecclesia in Asia* may imply, but instead as religions equally embraced by God and unconditionally deserving of our open arms, ears, and respect. Second, in its discussion of “waiting,” Volf’s framework lays out the danger of oppression inculturation may devolve into, which *Ecclesia in Asia* may be guilty of. It shows that the adaptation of cultural elements (or even interreligious dialogue in general) is defined not by coercion but by freedom and mutual appreciation through the grace of the Spirit on His perfect time. Third, in its discussion of “closing of arms,” Volf’s framework highlights that assimilation or Christianization is not the primary motive for a dialogue with Asia, which *Ecclesia in Asia* may seem to insinuate. It rather insists on the common mission of religions to walk arm in arm towards authentic human flourishing that is characterized by justice and peace. And fourth, in its discussion of “opening of arms again,” Volf’s framework features that the role of the Holy Spirit does in no way compete with the proclamation of Jesus Christ as one and only Savior. “*Ecclesia in Asia* suffers from the preoccupation of saving Christ from the other saviors of Asian religions,”¹⁰⁴ while Volf’s framework lets Christ do the saving and have everybody appreciate it through the power of the Spirit.

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104 Kavunkal, SVD, “Church and Mission in Asia.”