



## BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

### **Religious Exclusivism and Pluralism as a Political Project**

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*In conversation with **Brenna Strauss**, Graduate Research Assistant  
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STRAUSS: How did growing up in Yugoslavia frame what you do as a theologian and how you understand your work as an academic?

VOLF: I grew up as a son of a Pentecostal minister, which was kind of a triple minority situation. Communism was the dominant ideology at that time; Catholic and Orthodox churches were culturally dominant, and even mainline Protestants were much more acceptable. And then, totally on the margins, were tiny groups, like Baptists and Pentecostals. So I've always understood what it means to be on the margins. I've suffered marginality, but over the years I've come to appreciate the position of marginality of faith, not as something that insulates one from the society at large, but as something that gives a different vantage point on it. You see from margins what you cannot see from the center.

I'm actually writing about the lives of my parents and nanny, true saints, because they were so potent in my development. Faith, in a sense, becomes possible when it is lived. For them, God's love, even for the "enemy," even for the "enemy" at the center of the power, was crucial.

If you put together the extraordinary lives of these people and the situation of marginality, I think that explains a good chunk of what I do and how I do it. A friend of mine has called me "a theologian of the bridge." I think that this is an apt description. I owe it my formative years as a child.

STRAUSS: Speaking of living faith, I was struck by how much your works address practical political concerns. How do you understand your role as a theologian?

VOLF: The Christian faith is a way of life before God with responsibility. Theology for me is a discipline that critically accompanies a particular way of life (or a particular range of ways of life). Once you put it in those terms, immediately you see how theology is not self-contained but needs conversations with multiple disciplines that are concerned with ways of life in the world. This leads also to my interest in human flourishing. What does it mean to lead one's life well and for that life to go well for us in whatever context we find ourselves? As I see it, addressing this question is the primary responsibility of theology.

To the extent that theology, broadly construed, concerns itself with ways of living, it will continue to be a relevant discipline. To the extent that it removes itself from the ways in which people live and ought to live today, it is going to paint itself into a corner of irrelevance.

STRAUSS: Can you say more about what the term "human flourishing" means and how you use it?

VOLF: The concept of flourishing implies a course of development and contains two essential components: life that is led well and life that goes well. When we speak about living well, we thematize the agent side of our lives: we lead our lives well. But I think for human beings to flourish, the side of our experiences which we as individuals cannot control is also important—health, talent, temperament, cultural, economic, and political circumstances and so forth. The term "flourishing" has the capacity to include both of these dimensions. I borrow this account of the formal features of human flourishing from Nicholas Wolterstorff.

STRAUSS: It reminds me of Aristotle's treatment of happiness, which contains two components: virtue and your circumstances.

VOLF: Yes. But also from Jesus, who preached repentance and who healed the sick and fed the hungry.

STRAUSS: Can you say a little about the argument in your book *Allah: A Christian Response* and why you wrote it?

VOLF: To the extent that monotheists take their convictions about God seriously, their fundamental values are embodied and enshrined in their convictions about God. If you have two radically incompatible notions of God, you will have radically incompatible accounts of what is good and what is a good life. In regards to Christians and Muslims, between whom tensions run high, it is very important for us to address the question, to what extent do Muslims and Christians have the same God? To what degree do these two religions have significantly overlapping fundamental values?

If Muslims and Christians have the same God, then they share fundamental values and meaningful conversations about deep issues that divide both religious

communities are possible. If not, then one or another form of “war” is the alternative (a point that Ronald Dworkin has made in *Is Democracy Possible Here?* about deep political divisions in the United States). I’m not saying that if we say we worship the same God, everything is resolved. Obviously, people who worship the same God are often terribly at odds with one another. But there is a common moral foundation for attending to and adjudicating differences and tensions, rather than a clash of perspectives about which we cannot argue and deliberated.

It is no accident that the question whether Muslims and Christians have the same God became significant in public discussions in this country after 9/11. We were at war with a Muslim majority state, and some thought that we were at war with Islam. We wanted to accentuate differences in fundamental values to easier justify the war.

My theological argument is that if you look at historical accounts of the relationship between Muslims and Christians, prominent Christians (like Nicholas of Cusa) have argued that the two groups have the same God, though, of course, they understand that same God in different ways. You can put the argument very simply and succinctly: since Muslims and Christians are both monotheists, if they were to point to God (which, of course, one cannot do), they would point to the same “object”—the One who created everything that is not God and who is different from it. And then, if you look at the sacred texts of both groups, you find that God has similar traits, such as concern for justice and mercy. They also contain similar moral commands. For example, all Ten Commandments minus the one regarding the Sabbath are found in Quran.

STRAUSS: Your claim that Muslims and Christians worship the same God is a very controversial one. What are the strongest arguments against your claim and how do you respond?

VOLF: I think the strongest argument against it is that for Christians, Jesus Christ is God incarnate. And since Christians are monotheists, Jesus Christ belongs to the identity of the one God, and therefore if you do not worship Jesus Christ and contest the idea that Jesus Christ belongs to the identity of God, you are talking about a fundamentally different God.

In response, I like to remind critics of the way in which Christians relate to the God of the Jews. They contest as strenuously as do Muslims the Christian claim that Jesus Christ was God incarnate. Traditionally, the Jewish community has said that Christians, just on account of worshipping Jesus Christ, cannot be worshipping the same God as they do. Yet Christians have never claimed to worship a different God than the Jews. If you ask any informed Christians through the centuries, “What God do you worship?” they would reply: the God of Abraham, the God of Moses. The issue, from the Christian perspective, was not that the Jews worship the wrong God, but rather that they don’t have a complete

understanding of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. I think a similar argument can be made in regard to the God Muslims worship.

STRAUSS: In one of your articles, you state that Christians argue more vigorously than Muslims against the notion that the two religions share the same God. What is the reason for that?

VOLF: Muslims contest less than Christians that they have the same God because of the explicit statement in the Qu'ran: "Your God and our God is one." But if you look at the history of Christian theology, you'll find often claims that the two have the same God. As I mentioned earlier, Nicola of Cusa argued that the two worshiped the same God. Even Luther, a feisty reformer and clearly not a friend of Muslims, didn't think that Muslims and Christians have a different God. He thought that the relevant difference in the accounts of God lay between Lutherans on one side and Anabaptists, Catholics, Jews and Muslims on the other.

For those Christians who contest the claim that Muslims and Christians have the same God, the motive is, I suspect, more political than strictly theological. These political interests that bleed into theology are shaped by an interpretation of what Islam is. If you identify Islam with Muslim extremists, and identify what Muslim extremists do with what is legitimized by the Muslim account of God, then you can see the incompatibility with the Christian account of God.

It would be interesting for contemporary American Christians who criticize Islam for worshipping a God that commands barbaric punishments for sins to recall the Puritan New England: death for adulterers, death for idolaters, death for blasphemers; for lesser crimes, cutting off of ears, cutting off of tongues, branding. All this was done, they claimed, in obedience to the God they worshiped. I strongly disagree that we should inflict such punishments on adulterers and idolaters. Do I then worship a different God than they?

STRAUSS: Regarding this blurring of the religious and the political, you argue that understanding the similarities of the Muslim and the Christian God paves the way for pluralism as a political project. What is pluralism and how does it work in practice? How do Muslims and Christians come together and bring their visions of the good life to the public sphere?

VOLF: By pluralism as a political project, I mean that the state is neutral in regard to overarching interpretations of life—religious and non-religious—and that all citizens irrespective of such interpretations of life have equal voice. This is, roughly, the political philosophy enshrined in the U.S. political institutions and culture. If we accept the Jon Shield's argument in *The Democratic Virtues of the Christian Right*, even the Christian Right in the United States seems to embrace pluralistic democracy, despite what critics say. I see no reason why a Muslim interest group or movement might not do something similar in the context of the United States.

STRAUSS: Would you say that American democracy is a healthy pluralistic society? Is contemporary public debate healthy?

VOLF: We should distinguish between American political vision and American political realities. Vision is that of a pluralistic democracy, in which all can participate in public debates about the common good. But in reality it is a very dysfunctional democracy. Dworkin's criticisms in the book I mentioned earlier are exactly right. Political pluralism in America is in many ways limping.

STRAUSS: There is a lot of concern on the part of religious conservatives in America today that they can't bring their religious opinions into the public sphere using religious rhetoric. Is there a way for religious people to engage in debate about where the country should go, what direction public life should take or what the vision of human flourishing for America should be?

VOLF: I think that there should be place for religious voices in public debates (to the extent that such debates are in fact taking place in today's America rather than being supplanted by a war of pithy half-truths and sound-bites). Anybody, including religious people, ought to be able to participate and use any reasons they deem appropriate (or they can use no reasons at all, though that would be clearly less than an ideal situation). No one should be excluded.

But religious people have to ask themselves to what extent will the strictly theological and religious reasons be publicly effective. If you need to persuade Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and secularists, they may not find Christian theological reasons particularly persuasive. You may then want to express your concerns in different terms. As you translate the message, you will, of course, want to consider what you are losing and what you are gaining by translations. In a pluralistic setting, people will inescapably make prudential judgments regarding what language or reasoning to employ in the public debates.

STRAUSS: And you argue that the ways in which Christians and Muslims share the same God can help bring Christians and Muslims together into a common dialogue.

VOLF: For Muslims and Christians, having the same God means having the same fundamental values. You can argue profitably only if you share fundamental values; if not, some form of "war" is inescapable, as I have noted earlier. I think it is central for Muslims and Christians to discuss their accounts of human flourishing, how to lead one's life well, or what it means to succeed, not in one or another endeavor, but succeed as a human being. These kinds of debates are absolutely essential for the health of human communities. But I think we are in a situation today where it's not easy to know how to conduct such debates, so much so that even in educational institutions these debates aren't really happening. We don't know how to teach about meaning of life, because the issue seems to be not just a matter for individual to decide, but a matter of his or her unreflective desire.

If how I lead my life is not a matter of truth about the character of human beings, but a matter of my mere preference, then there is as little room for reasoned debate about the issue.

STRAUSS: Thank you.