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## How Can Religion Heal Rather Than Divide? | Dr. Miroslav Volf

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### The Veritas Forum

Theologian Dr. Miroslav Volf, Yale University, discusses how religion ought to be a healing force in our world rather than a divisive one. Please like, share, subscribe to and review this podcast. Thank you!

### Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God. In this episode, we hear from theologian Miroslav Volf of Yale University, speaking on the stage at Pepperdine University, asking the question, "How can religion heal rather than divide?" I was talking about ways in which Christian faith can heal, ways in which it contributes to the public good ways in which it contributes to personal good of people.

But the backdrop is a critique that religion somehow fosters violence, that in fact it has over the centuries fostered violence. My own experience with religion, in a sense, went both ways. I had experience of violence and religion, and I had the experience of most beautiful human character shaped by religious commitments.

Just to give you an illustration of this, I'll tell you about the place in which I was born. I was born at home. I was born at home in a place that we, I was born in the town of Ocea, called Tverger, which means fortress.

It doesn't look as fortress right now when you come at it from one side, because the wall has been torn down in the meantime. In fact, if you come to the river and look at it from

the riverside, you see that it is, and it was, a fortress. Now, I was built within the walls of that fortress, which was built when at the end of 17th century the Turk has Turks, Muslim Turks, have experienced defeat at the gate of Vienna, and were we drawing slowly toward east or being pushed to the gate of Vienna? Or being pushed back toward the east? And then in the trail of them being pushed at various places, fortresses were built so that they would not be able to return.

Now, I was born in one of those fortresses. When I was ten years old, I played in other fortresses of similar kinds, only a little bit larger. It had the four layers of tunnels, underground tunnels, and big modes, and for my tenured imagination, you couldn't imagine anything better.

We would sneak into those tunnels and explore, you know, when imagination went wild. But it was a testimony that at certain period of time there was this intense conflict that was going on, not exclusively, maybe even not primarily, fueled by religion, but definitely religion played a significant role in that conflict. Here we were in a Christian heartland, and in the fortress, a testimony of previous bloody, bloody conflict, which lasted in many parts of my country for 400 years of occupation by Muslim forces.

In that same fortress, in the little street to the side, in a building at the back of a courtyard, which used to be before stable for horses, which was transformed into relatively primitive dwellings, in that place I was born. It was an uneventful thing that happened, except that there was a little short woman who was at that time about 50. During the war, also partly fueled by religious intolerance, she was a Serbian woman living in Croatia.

She was left without a husband during the war and didn't have a place to live, so we received her into this home, or those stable, turned into a home. And there she greeted me when I was born with this immense jubilation and became the angel of my life. She was as deeply and profoundly committed to following the way of Christ as I have met anybody in my life.

A beautiful character never raised her voice but had this immensely powerful spiritual presence, impractical to no end. She was no help to my mother, except that she was a great with kids. Right? And so right there in this place where I was born, I could see signs of religion being extremely violent.

I can see feel on my own flesh a beauty of faith. And my life has been, if you want, lived in this tension between faith that is as beautiful as anything in the world can be in faith that can become as ugly as anything can become. The main reasons why religion turns violent is when a particular religion sees itself as expressing the moral consensus ethos of a particular group and then aligns itself with the guardians, political guardians, rulers of that order.

And when in other words there's a close proximity between state and religion. Once that merger happens, it's almost impossible to prevent religion from being sucked in into the dynamics of power that it is that states, governments, existence often is. And I think one of the most significant things we can do in order to disentangle religion from violence is to emphasize so strongly the freedom of conscience as well as the separation of the church and state.

And you can see that in what I'm saying that in the big debate in this country, in the early years of this country, in Massachusetts Bay between John Winthrop and Roger Williams, I am squarely on the Roger Williams side of things, right? The whole thing has no business in kind of regulating the entire life of the polity should be politically engaged but not political religion. And once it is functioning this way, once it's functioning in certain sense from a cultural, if you want, or power related margins, it can influence in a salutary way that we lead. I'm not advocating anything like we draw on faith from public engagement, but rather we draw on faith from exercise of power.

I think that's probably the most significant thing that religions can do in order to protect themselves from being instrumentalized as the tools of power. Many people try to figure out whether only some religions are capable of doing that rather than all different religions. I want to make an argument that actually all great religions have internal resources to affirm freedom of conscience, including Islam, freedom of conscience, and also in some ways separation of church and state.

Now, I couldn't go on for quite a long time talking about the place of religion in contemporary society, what needs to happen, and how religion can contribute. As a matter of fact, I can put it this way, just very briefly, Roger Williams' vision was the first and most radical articulation of political vision inspired by tolerance for all faiths. Much more tolerant, for instance, than John Locke was.

Extraordinary, he was just about as adamant and as exclusive and as committed in his religion as anybody was, but just because of these commitments. Just because he thought that forced worship stinks in God's nostrils. He advocated an alternative vision of political arrangements.

So, in a sense, kind of liberal political structures are owed to deeply committed Christians who have out of the deep resource of the faith, striven to articulate what kind of bearing faith has to the way in which we, with different persuasions that we have, can live together. Instead of taking most of my time attending to some of these very important issues, I want to highlight this evening a way in which Christian faith can function in a healing way, in a transformative way, a way that we often do not, in which we often do not think that it can or that it does. And often Christians themselves, we as Christians, ourselves, are not quite fully aware of it.

We know, and there are many instances we can show in which various faiths, certainly

Christian faith, has contributed to the improvement of the world. Works of charity, kind of a care for others. We can tell a long story of that, whether that's in education, whether it's in the alleviation of poverty, from the history stories, and also from today.

What often doesn't get emphasized, which is what I want to talk about more tonight, is the importance of the Christian faith for the enjoyment of the world. Now you might think that we don't need too much talk about, pep talk about enjoyment of the world. But let me tell you that notwithstanding all the incredible energy that we place into enjoyment, somehow enjoyment, true enjoyment, deeper enjoyment escapes us.

I tend to differentiate between joy and fun. Now you will now, I will immediately opt for joy, and I will poo poo the fun. And you will say, well, there's this grumpy theologian talking how fun isn't really fun, right? And we shouldn't be having fun, but should have something elusive like joy.

Now genuine and deep joy is a joy about something good that is actually happening to us. That's what joy is. Or it is kind of effective appreciation of something that we truly consider to be good.

So joy always have what philosophers call intentional objects. Now it's different with fun. You can just have fun.

As a matter of fact, you can take a fun pill, right? I've never smoked weed, but for some people, I never inhale. No. But that may be example, right? It kind of alters the state of your feelings without changing anything about the world.

You are not having fun with regard to something. You just feeling chill, feeling good, right? On the whole, I don't have much against feeling good. But the kind of pleasure is as the ancient philosopher Seneca has put his, is a thin pleasure laid on as a coating.

And that's exactly what happens, right? It's kind of a very surface pleasure in which you are pulled to forget what's going on underneath, but whatever is going underneath stays always, and your relation to it stays the same. Fun simply takes you out of it for the moment, lets you forget it. Joy is very different.

Joy is rejoicing over something, enjoying properly something that is actually there and appreciating something that is actually there. Now, I want to say that Christian faith is a religion of joy. Now, you wouldn't maybe know that if you looked at some of the practitioners of that religion.

But most profoundly, if you look at carefully at the faith, we see it as a religion of joy. So let me now give you a little bit of an explanation, but I mean by that, in order to get to the explanation of that, I have to give a sketch of how we tend to organize our societies today, and what's wrong with that, and how we can do much better. How we can recover in some ways a proper enjoyment of the world.

Now, John, you said I'm not going to do altar call? I don't know. It may be, come enjoy the world, right? What's wrong with that altar call? Now, so let me run you first, before we come to the altar call, let me narrate the world. Let me narrate kind of a story of our troubles.

Now, one of the great temptations of our time, I think in some ways of any time, an attempt at that's equally hard to resist whether we live in abundance or we live in poverty is to believe and to act as if we human beings lived by bread alone. As if our entire lives should revolve around the creation, the improvement, the distribution, the securitization of worldly goods. Now, I want to say succumb to this temptation, and the best you'll get is fun, and the true joy will elude you.

Now, this is if you think about it almost as revolutionary of a statement as they come, but it comes out of the very heart of both Jewish and Christian faith. You remember the temptations of Jesus. First temptation, Jesus has not eaten for some 40 days, and the tempter comes to him and says, "Turn these stones into bread." And the response of famished Jesus is, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Now, Jesus was quoting the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, he was quoting Moses, and Moses said those words to the children of Israel after for 40 years they have wandered through the wilderness and they needed to learn a lesson during those 40 years.

What was the lesson? That the man that human beings do not live by bread alone. Now, for God's sake, they were in the wilderness. Bread is what they needed in the wilderness.

But that much, they knew, and that much, we know, that kind of demand for bread is as insistent as the growling of our stomachs. We know we are material beings, we need material things. Bread here stands as a symbol of everything material that we need.

We need those things. I think lesson that we need to learn is that we need more than bread to live truly human lives, that we need more than bread to truly enjoy bread. And that's the point that I want to make later in my talk.

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 economy, science and technology, education, also. Somebody has said that a German philosopher has said that modernity is an age in which only the world can be the case.

Nothing else except the world. Now, I'm not sure that that's true of modernity, right? Because we live in the modern world, right? And I see religion thriving, right? Most people don't believe that only the world is the case. Actually, religions are growing in both absolute terms and in relative terms.

So it's not quite right to say that modernity is an age in which only the world can be the

case. But modernity is an age, I think that's true. Modernity is an age in which people act as if only the world were the case.

And they act whether they're religious or not. In other words, we've made our greatest temptation into the chief goal of our existence. Most of our energy and imagination revolves around turning stones into bread.

And yet we both rich and poor were still in the wilderness, plagued by hunger, plagued by thirst. In the flourishing book, some of you have read, I have the following lines. When we 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 better the taste.

When we live by bread alone, we always want more and better. Bread as if the bitterness and insufficiency of that bread was in the bread itself and not from our living by bread alone. Put very differently, living by mundane realities alone.

And for them alone, we remain insatiable restless. And if you can describe the energy that drives much of modern life, is this insatiable movement towards satisfying the desire and never quite getting there. It's kind of like hamster wheel in which we find there.

So it's not just hamster wheel of work, but hamster wheel of satisfaction of desire, that always eludes us. And of course it's driven by competitiveness. Not just by some kind of physical desire, we just have to, in this, there's a kind of economy of recognition.

We've got to be up just slightly in some regards up from our neighbor, right? And so we go and the wheel continues going and going faster and faster. But why is it that bread alone cannot satisfy us? Now, one can respond to this question by saying, well, because we human beings aren't just material beings, which is what we also are. We are kind of stretched between two worlds, transcendent world and mundane world.

And our existence is led between these two worlds and not just on the flat plane of ordinary existence. And that's why the flat plane of ordinary existence can never fully satisfy it, because we aren't just of this world. Different way to put it, and that's what I try to do also, toward the end of the flourishing book, is to say that for us, we cannot be satisfied by bread alone, because meaning and pleasure belong together.

Bread alone is things in themselves, but things in themselves are not meaningful, profound, deeply meaningful. And that's why they cannot satisfy it. I have put it this way.

I was invited recently in November. I was invited to Holland. There is a nexus institute, an institution called Nexus Institute.

They put up this extraordinary conversation of public intellectuals in an opera house. And there are 1,500 people in complete darkness. They sit and watch five or six intellectuals having a conversation about significant issue.

Two such conversations happen along with other things. Very interesting experience. I was invited to be part of one.

And the title of that event was, "What will save the world?" Small topic, huh? And so I was supposed to talk about what is the main defect of modern civilization, which is to know what will save the world. You have to know what the world needs to be saved from. And so my argument was, well, I won't tell you the whole argument.

It has to do, it has to do something with Christians profoundly believe, and nobody else does these days. And that is something like original sin. You mention original sin and you are too doubt.

You mention sin and nobody wants to hear about it. And then you slap on the sin something original. And then you say, no way am I going to go that direction.

And partly I think because modernity has also bequeathed to us a very optimistic account of who we are as human beings so that we don't quite see. Not only that we are people who are stretched between two worlds, mundane and transcendent, but that we are also people through whom the fissure runs straight through each of our hearts. In fact, fissure runs straight through each of our deeds.

If you want, that is the major defect of our lives. But it isn't necessarily specifically major defect of our civilization. The major defect of our civilization is I think the separation between meaning and pleasure.

Thinking as if bread alone can give us meaningful life and pleasurable life for that matter. Maybe it's tied to our stubborn, perhaps addiction-induced insistence on living by bread alone. You know, this kind of living of bread alone that we experience has something addictive about it.

Almost science of addiction. We can't, we have to do more and more of it. We have to up the ante in order to get what we are seeking for from things.

So let me say a few words about this. Why it is that things in themselves as such do not satisfy. Why it is to have a satisfying experience, you have to have an entirety of the world's set right.

And your relationship also to God, I would argue, is set. That would enhance the pleasure in the individual things and in the world. Okay, so I am preaching religion as enhancement of pleasure of experiencing the world.

It's supposed to be a joke. Almost something like that. Here's what I want to say.

I'll give you two scenes. And they are partly true, partly concocted by me. They are autobiographical.

Scene one. I'm at home. And night before I made a cake.

Following my mother's recipe and using baking and decorating skills, I have learned from my confectioner father. He was also a confectioner. All true.

There is such a recipe. I learned how to decorate cakes for my dad. It's mid-afternoon and I'm sitting at the old family table with my sister who came for a visit.

When we were growing up on festive occasions, we used to sit around that same table with our parents. And we ate. The cake made, according to that very recipe that I had just used, flourless chocolate cake.

It's great. It's the only thing I know how to bake. The table is set.

The candles is lit. The delicacies on the plate. And I take a bite.

I feel pleasure. Of sight, of smell, of sound, of taste, of texture, of hunger being satisfied. But the very material act of eating, including those sensations, evokes an entire world, bringing a flood of explicit and implicit mental and bodily memories of a happy childhood with a sister that I adore.

That's true too. In enjoying the cake, I am actually relating to my sister, to my parents, to our common customs in our past, to a sense who I am and hope to remain. The pleasure of these memories and anticipations merges with the pleasure of the physical tasting of that cake.

They overlap, and I can kind of distinguish them, but they have merged into one and become one single pleasure. To enjoy that cake and enjoy it in the way is to have these memories and anticipation put differently. This cake is then a sacrament.

It's an act of eating is saturated with meaning beyond keeping my soul embodied together and giving me physical pleasure. It's an extraordinary pleasurable thing, but it's there simply because of the cake, but because of everything surrounding it. I'm in a rented luxury home alone.

That's not true. I go to the kitchen, and to my surprise, find in the fridge a piece of flourless chocolate cake. As soon as I see it, I know that it was prepared with more culinary skill than I could ever hope to master, and an expert food taster would certainly rate it much higher than my own similar concoction.

I take a bite, and I feel pleasure. Of sight, of smell, of taste, of texture, of hunger being



satisfied, of tasting something uncommonly good, and yet the culinary masterpiece notwithstanding the pleasure in the second scene is flat, compared to the pleasure in the first. You might compare it to a pleasure of a single tone of a very finely tuned instrument by an excellent exquisite player, like a tone played by Yo-Yo Ma on his cello.

It's amazing. A lot of cello is my favorite, bassoon and cello are my favorite instrument. You can compare this flourless chocolate cake in the second scene to that exquisite sound.

But the pleasure in the first scene is not monotone. It's orchestral. It's almost like a movement in Bach, St. John's Passion, that's being performed as part of a worship service.

Have you listened to St. John's Passion? Bach's amazing piece of music. Amazing. Scene one is pleasure with deeper meaning.

The scene two is pleasure without it. Now, third scene. And third scene is needed because it isn't just a deeper human meaning, absence of deeper human meaning, spoils our pleasures.

Twisted meaning, spoil pleasure as well. So third scene. The same as the first one.

Except that my larger family is gathered around the same old family table, and I dislike the quarrelsome bunch, especially my sister. Because in most things, including culinary arts, she's clearly better than I am. I'm plagued by quiet envy, making a superior cake according to this ailed room recipe is my attempt to demonstrate to everyone gathered that I'm better than she, or at least as good as she is.

Now, depending on the outcome of the contest, into which I have drawn my entire unsuspecting family, even if the cake tasted exactly as well as in the first scene, the pleasure of eating it would have been overlaid by what? By bitterness of a humiliating defeat, or by some saccharine sweetness of a pointless victory. The pleasure is not monotonal, it's orchestral. Only the players are incompetent and instruments are out of tune.

Pleasure has diminished, even turned into mild pain, not because the cake itself has undergone a chemical change, but because social discord made it hardly palatable. To enjoy individual things. Our entire world, social world, has to be properly in place and our orientation to all around, people around, and to that object have to be properly in place.

All our pleasures are part of a larger structure of meaning, and they derive their ability to satisfy us. Indeed, they revive and part of their very pleasure. Pleasure can't pronounce the word.

Pleasure, Labren. This is great. Their ability to be pleasurable to us.

The very pleasure of those things is derived from that structure of meaning. To desire to pursue things as in themselves sufficient sources of pleasure, to multiply bread or keep creating with greater culinary sophistication, better bread, is to set ourselves on a futile and often addictive search. To derive pleasure from things placed in twisted framework of meaning is to twist those pleasures themselves, to rob ourselves of the best of them.

In either case, we lose the pleasure of the world, of very material objects. Now this rushing stream of new goods and services, the rushing stream that modern economies provide keeps many of us captive to pleasures that are not worthy of us. A substitute for richer pleasures derived from deeper meaning that eludes us.

We long, I think, for orchestral harmony. For pleasure of orchestral harmony. Now if you add into this framework also a reference to God, the pleasures are going to be stabilized and also increased.

I think for Christians the ultimate framework of meaning in which to situate properly every single one of our pleasure. Pleasure even of breathing the air in and breathing it out. Pleasure of letting your body sink in the bed and relax.

Every single pleasure has to be situated in the perception of the world as God's gift. When we talk about creation, some people think that we talk simply about how it is that the world came to be. And then contrast ends up being, or is it a big bang or is it six days that God creates? Most important thing about creation, the act of creation that God created the world is the fact that abidingly the world entirety that is, including ourselves, is a gift.

Is an expression of God's love to each one of us. Now here's a really bold claim. I'll put it this way.

An abiding experience of the world as a gift, abiding experience of it, right? Abiding experience of the world as a gift of God, of love, would be or is a single incomparable pleasure identical with our living itself. Life itself can be one large pleasure. This is what Christians, of course, can't experience in this world because we're broken, living broken.

But this is the eschatological hope for which we are striving. Now to think of it in this way of the world as a gift, as a source of relationship and therefore deeper pleasure, you have to keep in mind that gifts are not things. Contrary to what people think, when you go to a gift shop, what you see in the gift shop are not gifts.

What you see in the gift shop are things that when you buy them will become gifts. There is no thing that simply sits there is a gift. A gift is a thing that somebody gives to somebody else.

A gift is a form of relation between one person and another person, and that's why a gift is significant. That's why lovers give gifts. That's why parents give gifts to their children

because it's a bond of a relationship in the thing itself is the giveer present to you.

And so it is, I think, with the world as a gift. All the relationships that are and everything that is in the world is a gift and therefore can be experienced even in a greater way. And as a deeper pleasure.

[Applause] If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, subscribe, and review this podcast. And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

[Music] [ Silence ]