

# A PUBLIC FAITH

How Followers of Christ  
Should Serve the Common Good

MIROSLAV VOLF



**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2011 by Miroslav Volf

Published by Brazos Press  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Volf, Miroslav.

A public faith : how followers of Christ should serve the common good /  
Miroslav Volf.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 978-1-58743-298-9 (cloth)

1. Christian sociology. 2. Common good—Religious aspects—Christianity.

I. Title.

BT738.V66 2011

261.7—dc22

2011010734

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



To Skip



# Contents

Introduction ix

## **Part I Countering Faith's Malfunctions**

1. Malfunctions of Faith 3
2. Idleness 23
3. Coerciveness 37
4. Human Flourishing 55

## **Part II Engaged Faith**

5. Identity and Difference 77
6. Sharing Wisdom 99
7. Public Engagement 119

Conclusion 139

Acknowledgments 147

Notes 149

Index 169



## Introduction

Debates are raging today about the role of religions in public life, and it is not difficult to see why. First, religions—Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on—are growing numerically, and their members worldwide are increasingly unwilling to keep their convictions and practices limited to the private sphere of family or religious community. Instead, they want these convictions and practices to shape public life. They may engage in electoral politics and seek to influence legislative processes (as the Religious Right has done in the United States since the Reagan presidency), or they may concentrate on transforming the moral fabric of society through religious awakening (as the Religious Right seems to be doing during the Obama presidency). Either way, many religious people aim to shape public life according to their own vision of the good life.

Second, in today's globalized world, religions cannot be neatly sequestered into separate geographic areas. As the world shrinks and the interdependence of people increases, ardent proponents of different religions come to inhabit the same space. But how do such people live together, especially when all of them want

to shape the public realm according to the dictates of their own sacred texts and traditions?

When it comes to the public role of religions, the main fear is that of imposition—one faith imposing aspects of its own way of life on others. Religious people fear imposition—Muslims fear Christians, Christians fear Muslims, Jews fear both, Muslims fear Jews, Hindus fear Muslims, Christians fear Hindus, and so on. Secularists, those who subscribe to no traditional religious faith at all, fear imposition as well—imposition by any faith—since they tend to deem all of them irrational and dangerous.

The fear of imposition of religious views often elicits demands for the suppression of religious voices from the public square. The people espousing that view argue that politics, one major public sphere, should “remain unilluminated by the light of revelation” and should be guided by human reason alone, as Mark Lilla has put it recently.<sup>1</sup> This is the idea of a secular state, forged over the last few centuries in the West.

## **Religious Totalitarianism**

Unlike those who think religion should stay out of politics, I will argue in this book that religious people ought to be free to bring their visions of the good life into the public sphere—into politics as well as other aspects of public life. What’s more, I believe that it would be oppressive to prohibit them from doing so. But as soon as one starts making such an argument, some people raise the threat of religious totalitarianism.<sup>2</sup>

For many secularists today, militant Islam, represented by a figure like Sayyid Qutb, shows how religions, if allowed free reign, would behave in the public realm. This represents a massive misunderstanding of religions, but it is the ghost that haunts discussions of the public role of religion. To get this “ghost” clearly into view, I will sketch briefly Qutb’s position

as articulated in *Milestones*, a short and revolutionary book he wrote in prison (1954–64), which earned him a death sentence in 1966. Qutb has been described as “the godfather of radical Islam”; what Marx was to Communism, it is said, Qutb has been to radical Islam. This is an exaggeration. It is true, however, that he has been “the major influence on the worldview of radical movements across the Muslim world.”<sup>3</sup> To me, he is the most compelling and presently most influential representative of what I would describe as religious totalitarianism—more intellectually rigorous than contemporary Christian representatives of religious totalitarianism, such as the so called “dominion theologians.”<sup>4</sup> The position that I myself will advocate in this book will be an alternative both to the secular total exclusion of all religions from public life and to Qutb’s total saturation of public life with a single religion.

I am a Christian and Qutb is a Muslim. But the contrast I am drawing is *not* between Christian and Islamic positions. For a great majority of Muslims, Qutb’s position is completely unacceptable, faithful neither to the authoritative sources of Islam nor to the centuries-long experience of Muslims with a variety of political arrangements in many parts of the world. The contrast is rather between religious political pluralism and religious totalitarianism. The position I designate here as “religious political pluralism” emerged within Christianity, but it is not *the* Christian position. Not all Christians embrace it, and some in the last few centuries have strenuously objected to it. Inversely, among people of faith, it is not Christians alone who today embrace religious political pluralism. Many Jews, Buddhists, and Muslims, among others, embrace it as well.<sup>5</sup>

Here is the bare-bones sketch of Qutb’s argument:

1. Since there is “no god but God”—*the* basic Muslim conviction—God has absolute sovereignty on earth. For

traditional Jews and Christians no less than for Muslims, this is an uncontested claim. But many followers of Abrahamic religions consider the implications Qutb draws from it deeply problematic.

2. That God alone is God means for Qutb that all authority of human beings—whether priests, politicians, or ordinary people—over others is illicit. *Every* human authority (except that of prophet Muhammad as the mouthpiece of God) is an idol, and compromises God’s oneness and sovereignty.
3. Guidance as to how to lead one’s personal life and how to organize social life comes from God alone (as revealed through the prophet Muhammad). Just as the one God “does not forgive any association [of another divinity] with His person,” so God does “not accept any association with His revealed way of life.”<sup>6</sup> Obeying the commands from some other source than God is as much idolatry as is worshipping another deity.
4. Islam is not a set of beliefs, but a way of life in total submission to the rule of the one God. The Muslim community is “the name of a group of people whose manners, ideas and concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria, are all derived from the Islamic source.”<sup>7</sup>

Qutb sums up the internal constitution of the Muslim community in the following way: “No god but God” means “no sovereignty except God’s, no law except from God, and no authority of one man over another, as the authority in all respects belongs to God.”<sup>8</sup> A community that embraces these principles as a way of life is a Muslim community. It is exclusive and its rules regulate all aspects of its members’ lives. This is its internal constitution. What about its external relations?

1. Muslims are called to cut themselves off completely from communities that exhibit ignorance of the guidance of God.

2. Since God is one and the Creator, the law of God that regulates human personal and social life, as formulated by the prophet Muhammad, is no less universal than the so-called laws of nature; both laws apply always and everywhere.
3. “The foremost duty of Islam in this world is to depose *Jahiliyyah* [ignorance of the divine guidance] from the leadership of man, and to take the leadership into its own hands and enforce the particular way of life which is its permanent feature.”<sup>9</sup>
4. Muslims are called to embrace the faith that there is “no god but God”—a faith that must be embraced freely, since there is no compulsion in religion.

Imposition of the rule of one God, as interpreted by the prophet Muhammad, on the whole world—this is the mission of political Islam as interpreted by Qutb. There can be religious freedom properly understood only within a political order that embodies the Muslim way of life. Political Islam is religious at its basis, and, unlike the mainstream of Islam, it is aggressively totalitarian in its character.<sup>10</sup> “There is only one place on earth which can be called the home of Islam (Dar-ul-Islam),” he writes in summary of his position,

and it is that place where the Islamic state is established and Shariah is the authority and God’s limits are observed and where all the Muslims administer the affairs of the state with mutual consultation. The rest of the world is the home of hostility (Dar-ul-Harb).<sup>11</sup>

A reminder one more time: this is not *the* Islamic position. The great majority of Muslims—including the most influential religious and secular scholars—disagree with it. This is an *extremist version* of the Islamic position, whose author is not a

trained Islamic scholar. For me here, it functions as an example of the kind of religious totalitarianism that members of various faiths, including Christianity, have advocated in the past and still continue to advocate today.<sup>12</sup>

## Toward an Alternative

In this small volume I offer a sketch of an alternative to totalitarian saturation of public life with a single religion as well as to secular exclusion of all religions from public life. I am writing as a Christian theologian to followers of Christ. I am not writing as a generic religious person to adherents of all religions, a project that would fail from the start. To stay with the example of Qutb, it is a task of Muslim scholars to elaborate distinctly Islamic alternatives to Qutb. My task is to offer a vision of the role of the followers of Jesus Christ in public life, a role that stays clear of the dangers of both “exclusion” and “saturation.”

One of the most widely discussed Christian texts about the relation between religion and culture, including politics, is H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*.<sup>13</sup> Writing in the mid-1950s, he analyzed five Christian stances toward culture: Christ against Culture, the Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ Transforming Culture. If we used Niebuhr’s categories, we could say that Qutb’s position is a combination of sectarian “religion against culture” and politically activist “religion transforming culture” with the goal of achieving identity between religion and culture.

As Niebuhr’s typology suggests, in the Christian tradition—and something similar is true of other religions—there is more than one way to relate religion to culture. And even Niebuhr’s various types are broad and abstract, as is appropriate for the

ideal types he intends them to be. The actual representatives of these five stances toward culture are less clear-cut and tend to combine elements from more than one category.

My contention in this book is that there is no single way in which Christian faith relates and ought to relate to culture as a whole (see chapter 5). The relation between faith and culture is too complex for that. Faith stands in opposition to some elements of culture and is detached from others. In some aspects faith is identical with elements of culture, and it seeks to transform in diverse ways yet many more. Moreover, faith's stance toward culture changes over time as culture changes. How, then, is the stance of faith toward culture defined? It is—or it ought to be—defined by the center of the faith itself, by its relation to Christ as the divine Word incarnate and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The center of the Christian faith suggests a relation to the broader culture that can be roughly described in the following six points:

1. Christ is God's Word and God's Lamb, come into the world for the good of all people, who are all God's creatures and loved by God. Christian faith is therefore a "prophetic" faith that seeks to mend the world. An idle or redundant faith—a faith that does not seek to mend the world—is a seriously malfunctioning faith (see chapters 1 and 2). Faith should be active in all spheres of life: education and arts, business and politics, communication and entertainment, and more.
2. Christ came to redeem the world by preaching, actively helping people, and dying a criminal's death on behalf of the ungodly. In all aspects of his work, he was a bringer of grace. A coercive faith—a faith that seeks to impose itself and its way of life on others through any form of

- coercion—is also a seriously malfunctioning faith (see chapters 1 and 3).
3. When it comes to life in the world, to follow Christ means to care for others (as well as for oneself) and work toward their flourishing, so that life would go well for all and so that all would learn how to lead their lives well (see chapter 4). A vision of human flourishing and the common good is the main thing the Christian faith brings into the public debate.
  4. Since the world is God’s creation and since the Word came to his own even if his own did not accept him (John 1:11), the proper stance of Christians toward the larger culture cannot be that of unmitigated opposition or whole-scale transformation. A much more complex attitude is required—that of accepting, rejecting, learning from, transforming, and subverting or putting to better uses various elements of an internally differentiated and rapidly changing culture (see chapter 5).
  5. Jesus Christ is described in the New Testament as a “faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5) and his followers understood themselves as witnesses (e.g., Acts 5:32). The way Christians work toward human flourishing is not by imposing on others their vision of human flourishing and the common good but by bearing witness to Christ, who embodies the good life (see chapter 6).
  6. Christ has not come with a blueprint for political arrangements; many kinds of political arrangements are compatible with the Christian faith, from monarchy to democracy. But in a pluralistic context, Christ’s command “in everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12) entails that Christians grant to other religious communities the same religious and political freedoms that they claim for themselves. Put differently,

Christians, even those who in their own religious views are exclusivists, ought to embrace pluralism as a political project (see chapter 7).<sup>14</sup>

This is, in broad strokes, the alternative that I propose to religious totalitarianism, and it sums up the main content of the book.

I explore three simple questions in the following pages:

1. In what ways does the Christian faith malfunction in the contemporary world, and how should we counter these malfunctions (chapters 1–3)?
2. What should be the main concern of Christ’s followers when it comes to living well in the world today (chapter 4)?
3. How should Christ’s followers go about realizing their vision of living well in today’s world in relation to other faiths and together with diverse people with whom they live under the roof of a single state (chapters 5–7)?

In trying to answer these simple questions, my goal is to offer an alternative both to secular exclusion of religion from the public sphere and to all forms of “religious totalitarianism”—an alternative predicated not on attenuating Christian convictions but on affirming them robustly and living them out joyously.



P A R T I

---

COUNTERING  
FAITH'S  
MALFUNCTIONS

---



# 1

---

## Malfunctions of Faith

When I introduce the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, which I direct, to an audience for the first time, I often show the seal of the Center, depicting an open book with a white page and a green leaf. I ask the audience what they see.

“New life springing out of a book?” someone may suggest.

“The book is the book of learning,” another person might offer.

“No, it’s the Word of God,” somebody else may explain, to bring the symbol closer to the substance of faith.

“Why not both?” another will chime in while pointing out that symbols may have multiple meanings and that the Center’s name includes both faith and culture.

“And what about the green leaf?” I inquire.

“It stands for a thriving culture growing out of the Scriptures, out of faith,” says someone else, trying to connect all the dots.

“Yes,” I respond, and continue, “the image of the leaf was inspired by the tree mentioned at the end of the book of Revelation, whose leaves are for the ‘healing of the nations.’” That’s

what we at the Center are all about—promoting the practice of Christian faith in all spheres of life so that what is broken in our individual lives and cultures can be mended, and we all can flourish as God's creatures—finite, fragile, flawed, and in all this glorious. More important, that's also what the Christian faith as a prophetic religion is about.

## Malfunctions

In the course of Christianity's long history—full of remarkable achievements by its saints and thinkers, artists and builders, reformers and ordinary folks—the Christian faith has sometimes failed to live up to its own standards as a prophetic religion. Too often, it neither mends the world nor helps human beings thrive. To the contrary, it seems to shatter things into pieces, to choke up what is new and beautiful before it has a chance to take root, to trample underfoot what is good and true. When this happens, faith is no longer a spring of fresh water helping good life to grow lushly, but a poisoned well, more harmful to those who drink its waters than any single vice could possibly be—as Friedrich Nietzsche, a fierce critic of Christianity, put it in his last and angrily prophetic book, *The Anti-Christ*.<sup>1</sup>

True, some of faith's damaging effects can be attributed largely to differences of perspective. Nietzsche, for example, valued power highly and hence derided Christianity for its "active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak."<sup>2</sup> But in the face-off between Nietzsche's power and Christ's pity, faith ends up deleterious only if you share the values of Nietzsche's anti-faith.

Or take a concrete issue such as abortion. If you think that an unborn life is human and therefore sacred, then a faith that puts a mother's choice above respect for unborn life will seem

self-centered, oppressive, violent, and even murderous when human life is most vulnerable.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, if you think that an unborn life is not yet a human being, then a faith that seeks to protect that life while sacrificing the well-being of its mother and against her choices will seem disrespectful, oppressive, and sometimes even violent toward the mother.<sup>4</sup>

Not all of Christianity's failures are merely a matter of perspective, however. As we reflect on how followers of Christ can serve the common good, it is important to keep these ill effects in mind. I call them "malfunctions." In this chapter and the following two, I will explore some of these malfunctions of Christian faith. I won't address the concerns of those who believe that religion itself, and the Christian faith specifically, is just one massive malfunction of the human spirit and culture—people who draw their lineage from the great continental critics of religion such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Sigmund Freud. For them, there are no heavens through which to ascend and no God to encounter; there is only the world, this immeasurably vast and cold universe. Moreover, what's worse than believing that there is an Ultimate One when in fact there is no such One, is insisting with unshakeable stubbornness, born of the belief in the absolute, on shaping the world according to the precepts of a nonexistent God. From the perspective of such critics, religion appears as the very pinnacle of oppressive irrationality. But I won't deal here with religion as a malfunction; I'll deal with malfunctions of religion, and of the Christian faith in particular.

In part 2 of the book I will argue that in order to counter malfunctions of faith, it is important for Christians to keep focused on God and on the proper understanding of human flourishing. For this, in the end, is what the Christian faith as a prophetic religion is all about—being an instrument of God for the sake of human flourishing, in this life and the next.

## Prophetic Religions

In order to understand the Christian faith's malfunctions properly, it may be helpful to recall the old distinction between prophetic and mystical types of religion. The first advocates active transformation of the world, and the second encourages flights of the soul to God.<sup>5</sup>

Commenting on a widely held Muslim belief that from the place where the Dome of the Rock now stands in Jerusalem the prophet Muhammad ascended through the seven heavens to the very presence of God, a great Sufi mystic, Abdul Quddus of Gangoh, said, "Muhammad of Arabia ascended the highest Heaven and returned. I swear by God that if I had reached that point, I should never have returned." Quddus's statement reveals a basic difference between the prophetic and the mystical types of religion. In the words of Pakistani Muslim philosopher and statesman Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), from whose book *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* I have taken the quote,

The mystic does not wish to return from the repose of "unitary experience"; and even when he does return as he must, his return does not mean much for mankind at large. The prophet's return is creative. He returns to insert himself into the sweep of time with a view to control the forces of history, and thereby create a fresh world of ideals. . . . The desire to see his religious experience transformed into a living world-force is supreme in the prophet. Thus his return amounts to a kind of pragmatic test of the value of his religious experience.<sup>6</sup>

If we apply Iqbal's comment generally to prophetic religions rather than specifically to Muhammad, we may quibble with him about whether prophets ought to have the ambition to "control the forces of history," about the strict supremacy in the life of prophets of the desire to transform religious experience into "a

living world-force,” or about the “pragmatic test of the value of his religious experience.” Nevertheless, Iqbal’s basic point is compelling, and applicable beyond Islam: prophetic religions aim to transform the world in God’s name rather than to flee from the world into God’s arms as do mystical religions.

Like mainstream Islam and Judaism, Christianity is a prophetic type of religion. These three great Abrahamic faiths, as they are sometimes called, differ slightly about the substance of the prophetic vision and about the appropriate modalities of prophets’ insertion into the world in order to realize that vision. They agree, however, that an authentic religious experience should be a world-shaping force. “Unitary experiences,” even when highly prized, are not an end in themselves; their purpose is at least in part the prophet’s sending into the world. “Ascents,” though essential, must be followed by “returns.”

According to the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses ascended Mount Sinai and returned with the tables of the law (Exod. 24:12–13; 32:15–16). According to the hadith—authentic stories about the founder of Islam—Muhammad ascended to the very presence of God and returned to continue his world-altering mission. A similar pattern applies, in a qualified sense, to Jesus Christ, who for Christians is not only a prophet but the Word made flesh (John 1:14): he ascended the Mount of Transfiguration and returned to mend a world plagued by evil (Matt. 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–9; Luke 9:28–37); more fundamentally, Jesus came “from above” to bring healing and redemption (John 8:23) and, having ascended into heaven at the end of his earthly sojourn, will return once more to judge and transform the world (e.g., Matt. 25:31–46; 1 Thess. 4:15–17; Rev. 21:1–8).

The Christian faith malfunctions when it is practiced as a mystical religion in which ascent is followed by a *barren* rather than creative return, a return that has no positive purpose for the world but is merely an inevitable result of the inability of a

flesh-and-blood human being to sustain unitive experience over time. But mystical malfunctions of faith are not a problem today. Though mystical faiths continue to exist, even some traditionally mystical faiths are acquiring a prophetic dimension, as the example of “engaged Buddhism” shows.<sup>7</sup> As to the Christian faith, its mystical malfunction is rare these days and is relatively inconsequential. We can leave it aside without risking much harm and concentrate on other more momentous malfunctions.

### Ascent and Return

As the examples of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad illustrate, for prophetic religions, both “ascent” and “return” are crucial. “Ascent” is the point at which, in the encounter with the divine, representatives of prophetic religions 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.

I have described ascent as receptive and return as creative. The descriptions are appropriate in that they zero in on the main thrust of what happens in ascent and return. And yet “ascent” is not *merely* receptive. In receiving, the prophets themselves are transformed—they acquire new insight; their character is changed. So ascent is very much creative—a case of creative receptivity. Similarly, the “return” need not be merely creative—the prophets unilaterally shaping social realities. They themselves may be shaped in the process, return then being a case of receptive creativity.

Keeping in mind this more complex understanding of prophetic receptivity and creativity, we can say that without the

“receptive ascent,” there is no transforming message from God; without the “creative return,” there is no engagement in the transformation of the world. Leave out either one, and you no longer have prophetic religion. Together, “ascent” and “return” form the pulsating heart of prophetic religion—showing that though “prophetic” and “mystical” are contrasting types of religion, religious experiences and engagement with the world are both essential components of the prophetic type of religion.

So far I have spoken mainly about the founding figures of the Abrahamic faiths and the general character of these faiths as prophetic religions; I have not mentioned ordinary believers and their leaders. And yet, they too are involved. For a religion to maintain its prophetic character, ordinary believers and their leaders must replicate in their own way both the “ascent” and the “return” of the great founding figures. Indeed, the abiding character of these faiths as prophetic religions will primarily depend on the ascents and returns of these ordinary people. The founding figures establish the proper function of a religion (defined internally and independently of whether outsiders see that religion as true and its proper function as salutary); ordinary believers and their leaders either carry on this function creatively through history or make a religion malfunction—and mostly they do both of these things at the same time.

As two moments of prophetic religion, “ascent” and “return” are also the points at which the prophetic religions most seriously malfunction. Correspondingly, one can identify two categories of malfunctions: “ascent malfunctions” and “return malfunctions.”

## **Ascent Malfunctions**

Ascent malfunctions result from a breakdown in the prophet’s encounter with the divine and reception of the message. There are two such malfunctions.

### *Functional Reduction*

The first ascent malfunction consists in *functional reduction* of faith. It happens when practitioners of prophetic religions lose faith in the significance of the encounter with God *as* God and employ religious language to promote perspectives and practices whose content and driving force do not come from or are not integrally related to the core of the faith. No ascent has happened; instead, a *pretense* of ascent and of speaking and acting in the name of God is employed to promote preset desirable ends. Such “prophets” exploit the authority for their audiences of a god who has lost all authority for the prophets themselves. They have reduced the living God to a function of the prophets’ religious language.

In the majority of situations, functional reduction is not a case of bad faith; rarely are the representatives of prophetic religion cynically out to manipulate people by using religious symbols they believe to be vacuous. Something subtler is happening. Gradually the language about God is hollowed out from within, maybe by lack of trust and inconsequential use, until only a shell remains. And then that shell is put to what are deemed good uses. The prophets preach, but trust in their own insight—maybe informed by a nugget of psychological wisdom (Dr. Phil!) or a piece of social analysis (Noam Chomsky!)—without even expecting that the faith might have anything distinct to say about the matter. Wittingly or unwittingly, a serious malfunction has occurred—provided we understand the Christian faith not just as a version of some generic moral teaching, but as a prophetic *faith* in the Creator, Redeemer, and Consummator of the world.

In the famous passage in *The Gay Science* about the murder of God—not the death of God, but the *murder* of God!—Nietzsche describes churches unforgettably as “tombs and sepulchers of God.”<sup>8</sup> In an important sense (though not the one Nietzsche had in mind), that is what churches and religious language become

when the pretense of ascent—functional reduction—occurs: with the prophets having abandoned the living God, churches and religious language morph into locations where God may have once been active, shaping people and their social realities, but in which God now lies dead, no longer a transformative reality, alive only as a topographic memory.

### *Idolatric Substitution*

The second ascent malfunction is *idolatric substitution*.<sup>9</sup> Much in the Christian faith depends on properly identifying and discerning the will of the One in whose name the prophets are speaking and acting. But God dwells in unapproachable light, as the New Testament says (1 Tim. 6:16), and the sacred texts are notoriously difficult to interpret. Needing to engage the world in God's name and yet finding it difficult, uncomfortable, or even contrary to their deep-seated convictions to properly identify God and discern God's will, prophets sometimes transform God in their imagination into a caricature of the true divinity. The prophet's image of God occludes the reality of God and insinuates itself in its place. The error of idolatric substitution has occurred, and faith is poised to malfunction seriously.

Recall the paradigmatic case of idolatry in the Hebrew Scriptures, the story of the golden calf: Moses has ascended the mountain to be with God and receive from God "tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment" for the instruction of the people (Exod. 24:12). The Israelites find it hard to wait for Moses to return, so they push Aaron to make for them gods "who shall go before us" (Exod. 32:1). Aaron collects gold from the Israelites to "cast an image of a calf" as their god (Exod. 32:4). As Moses comes down the mountain, carrying the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God, he becomes furious at the betrayal. The Israelites have substituted the golden calf for Yahweh, who delivered them from Egypt.

Imagine now a different scene. Aaron and the Israelites are patiently and faithfully waiting for Moses to return. Finally, they see him coming down. But rather than tablets of stone, he carries the golden calf. And then they hear him speak: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Exod. 32:4). The prophet himself would have now engaged in idolatric substitution. He ascended the mountain to meet with God, but he has returned with an idol. Impossible? It happens every day, and to the best of ordinary prophets, even if it does not happen in such a crass way: the prophets may carry down from the mountain the tablets of stone, but at least some of the writing on them can be traced to the golden calf rather than to the true God of Israel. For instance, sometimes, by some strange alchemy, "Take up your cross and follow me" morphs into "I'll bring out the champion in you,"<sup>10</sup> or the cross itself becomes a symbol of destruction and violence rather than of creative love that overcomes enmity.

## Return Malfunctions

Every ascent malfunction is at the same time a return malfunction. Whether prophets pretend ascent to the mountain of God or descend from the mountain with what looks like God's word but is in fact a message from the golden calf, the *return* too has been compromised. The prophets may be transforming the world, but God is not involved in the transformation; they are transforming it in their own name or in the name of some alien god.

There are, however, other malfunctions of faith that don't primarily concern ascent but still threaten the integrity of the return. These "return malfunctions" come primarily in two forms: idleness of faith and coerciveness of faith, and they correspond roughly to the two kinds of sins categorized in Christian

tradition: sins of omission, in which we fail to do what we should do, and sins of commission, in which we do what we should not do.<sup>11</sup> In this book I am concerned primarily with idleness and oppressiveness of faith, which I will discuss in chapters 2 and 3, respectively. I present these concepts here in order to introduce them and situate them within the larger framework of malfunctions of the Christian faith as a prophetic religion.

### *Idleness of Faith*

The first return malfunction is *idleness of faith*. A major purpose of the Christian faith is to shape the lives of persons and communities. Yet faith often idles in many spheres of life, spinning in one place like the wheel of a car stuck in the snow. Granted, faith's idleness is never total—if it were total, faith would soon be discarded, for the faith that does nothing means nothing.

Sometimes faith idles because of the *lure of temptation*. Even people committed to high moral standards succumb to temptation: fraud in business, infidelity in marriage, plagiarism in scholarly work, abuse of priestly authority, or a host of other wrongs. Faith requires Christians to live lives of integrity, but we find ourselves powerless against the lure of evil. Finite, fragile, and fallible as we are, we easily succumb to the seductions of power, possessions, or glory.

Giving in is as old as humanity—but so is victory over temptation. To live with integrity, it is important to know what's right and what's wrong, to be educated morally. However, merely *knowing* is not enough. Virtuous character matters more than moral knowledge. The reason is simple: like the self-confessing apostle Paul in Romans 7, most of those who do wrong know what's right but find themselves irresistibly attracted to its opposite. Faith idles when character shrivels.

Perhaps even more often in our modern world, faith idles as a result of the *power of systems*. The lure of temptation is

amplified by the power of the systems that surround us and in which we play a part. So it is in most spheres of life, but maybe most of all in the nearly ubiquitous market, whether that be the market of ideas, goods and services, political influence, or mass communication.

More than a century ago, Max Weber ended his classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by speaking of the modern market as an “iron cage.”<sup>12</sup> What he had in mind is roughly something like this: if you play the game, you’ve got to play it by preset rules, which in the case of the market means that you must maximize profit; these rules, and not moral considerations, determine how the game is played. The market traps you, compelling you to act in accordance with its rules. Others have suggested that large-scale bureaucratic arrangements function similarly.<sup>13</sup> A soldier in a unit, for example, is often willing to do what he would never do as a private person. He is simply obeying orders, or he assumes a role ascribed to him by the system.<sup>14</sup>

In such situations, faith may not completely fail to shape the lives of people and their social realities. Instead, its work might get restricted to a narrow sphere—to the life of the soul, to private morality, to family matters, or to church life. As a result, faith becomes idle in important domains in which it, as a prophetic faith, should be active.

That faith’s sphere of operation often gets restricted is not surprising, especially under the conditions of modernity. The modern world, differentiated as it is into multiple and relatively autonomous spheres, is a world of many gods.<sup>15</sup> Each sphere—be it politics, law, business, media, or whatever—imposes its own rules upon those who wish to participate in it. In this new polytheism, we follow the voice of one god at work, another at home, and maybe yet another at church. Each sphere resists the claims of the one God to shape all of life.<sup>16</sup>

Most people of faith living in the modern world have experienced this pull of divided loyalties. Though many have given in, many others have also resisted. Those who resist have refused to play the game when the rules conflict with their deeply held religious convictions. They have tried to transform their places of work from within, endeavored to create more just rules of engagement, and sometimes even worked to set up alternative institutions so that the demands of their work can stay in sync with the claims of their faith. Why? Because they know they must be people of faith not only in the inner sanctuary of their souls, in their private lives, or when gathered with like-minded folks in the church, but also in their everyday activities, in the various places in which they do their daily work.

Idleness of faith might also arise from a *misconstrual of faith*. A misunderstanding of how our faith should function can provide fertile ground both for the lure of temptation and the power of systems. In some such situations, faith fails to shape realities at all but instead provides some other benefit to the worshiper. In his early text, somewhat clumsily titled “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” the young Karl Marx famously noted that religion—the Christian faith, he meant primarily—is “the opiate of the people.”<sup>17</sup> It’s a drug, and it’s a “downer” or “depressant” insulating people from the pain of oppressive social realities and consoling them with a dream world of heavenly bliss. Alternatively, religion can function as an “upper,” a “stimulant” energizing people for the tasks at hand—a function of religion Marx failed to grasp.

But the most important point Marx missed is that when Christian faith functions only as a soothing or performance-enhancing drug, faith is in fact *malfunctioning*. This mistake is not unique to Marx or to Christianity’s critics more generally. Many of those who have embraced faith have missed that all-important point too, from at least the time of the Old Testament

prophets to today. Such people have themselves used faith more or less as a drug. Faith thus construed is, in a crucial sense, idling and can effect no transformation of personal or social lives.

Notice that I write that faith malfunctions when it serves *only* to soothe—or maybe more broadly, to heal—and to energize. In the Christian Bible there are two great traditions that very roughly cover these two functions of faith. These are the traditions of “deliverance” and of “blessing.” Faith helps repair broken bodies and souls, including healing the wounds and disappointments inflicted on us in the rough and tumble of the everyday world. Faith also helps energize us so we can perform our tasks excellently, with requisite power, concentration, and creativity (see chapter 2).

So why speak of faith’s malfunctioning in this regard? Let me put it this way: if faith *only* heals and energizes, then it is merely a crutch to use at will, not a way of life. But the Christian faith, as a prophetic religion, is either a way of life or a parody of itself. Put starkly and with echoes of the Epistle of James, an idle faith is no Christian faith at all.

Faith does its most proper work when it (1) sets us on a journey, (2) guides us along the way, and (3) gives meaning to each step we take. When we embrace faith—when *God* embraces *us*—we become new creatures constituted and called to be part of the people of God. That is the beginning of a journey: our insertion into the story of God’s engagement with humanity. As we embark upon it, faith guides us by offering itself as a way of life that indicates paths to be taken and dark alleys or dead-end streets to be avoided, and that tells us what our specific tasks are in the great story of which we are a part. Finally, that story itself gives meaning to all we do, from the smallest act to the weightiest. Is what we do in concord with that story? Then it is meaningful and will remain, glistening as corrosion-resistant gold. Does it clash with the story? Then it is ultimately

meaningless and will burn like straw, even if we find it the most thrilling and fulfilling activity in which we've ever engaged.

For Christian faith not to be idle in the world, the work of medical doctors and garbage collectors, business executives and artists, stay-at-home parents and scientists needs to be inserted into God's story of the world. That story needs to provide the most basic rules by which the "game" in all these spheres is played. And that story needs to shape the character of the players.

### *Coerciveness of Faith*

The second return malfunction is *coerciveness of faith*. In this case, faith is not idle but active—hyperactive, in fact—imposing itself oppressively upon the unwilling. Often in the modern world Christian traditions oscillate between the two return malfunctions. Wanting to overcome idleness, faith becomes coercive; wanting to avoid coerciveness, faith becomes idle.

Sometimes a prophetic faith will be experienced as oppressive even when it may not be oppressive. Those who affirm contemporary social "polytheism" will deem oppressive any faith that claims that God is the God of all reality, and they will do so no matter how that faith tries to bring God to bear on all aspects of life. For instance, they may want religious folks to leave their religious garb—their sacred texts and reasoning based on religious convictions—at home or in the church and put on secular attire at the workplace or in the public square. If they refuse to wear the attire proper to the occasion, they are perceived as shoving religion down people's throats. From the perspective of people who believe that faith should shape their vision of human flourishing and of the common good, speaking in a religious voice is not oppressive but salutary; they would betray themselves and make their faith malfunction if they were silent or did not give religious reasons for their positions.<sup>18</sup> And advocates of a

prophetic faith will view attempts to prevent them from living out their faith in private and public as secularism being shoved down their throats.

While the mere fact of speaking in a religious voice in the public arena is not oppressive, the *way* religious people bring faith to bear on issues of common concern can be, and often is, oppressive. The adherents of prophetic religion might set goals for themselves (say, a preemptive military strike), and then use faith to legitimize ignoble means to achieve them (say, by claiming the enemies believe in an evil God and are therefore evil people).<sup>19</sup> More frequently, the adherents of prophetic religion will let faith dictate the ends to be achieved (say, protecting unborn life or abolishing the death penalty), but fail to allow faith to determine the means to achieve those ends (opponents are not even respected, let alone treated with benevolence and beneficence). In all such cases—and many more—faith malfunctions by becoming an instrument of oppression.

Mostly it's Christians who worry about the idleness of their own faith. For them faith is a precious good, the most valuable personal and social resource. When it's left untapped, human beings cannot properly flourish, and the common good—not just the particular interests of Christians—suffers. In contrast, many non-Christians today would consider the idleness of faith a minor blessing. *Active* faith is dangerous, they believe, and inherently poisonous. As a recent critic, Sam Harris, puts it in *The End of Faith*, the Bible contains “mountains of life-destroying gibberish.”<sup>20</sup> When Christians take the Bible as their final authority, Harris claims, they act in violent, oppressive, life-destroying ways that undermine the common good.

Take, for instance, a Serbian soldier riding on a tank and triumphantly flashing three fingers in the air—a symbol of the most holy Trinity, a sign that he belongs to a group that believes rightly about God. Clearly he has employed faith, in some sense,

to give legitimacy to his triumphant ride on that killing machine. And he is not alone in draping the wild-eyed god of war or the fierce goddess of nationhood with the legitimizing mantle of religious faith. Some of his Croatian enemies have done the same, as have many Americans who have eagerly merged the cross and the flag; and they all follow in the footsteps of Christians over the centuries who, in the name of faith, have left behind them a trail of blood and tears.

Some critics (as well as some seekers!) ask pointedly, however, “Isn’t this simply what the Christian faith does?” Along with many in the highbrow culture of the post-Enlightenment West, they seek to eliminate faith as a factor in social life, possibly even to eradicate it fully. How should Christians respond? Certainly not by trying to deny the obvious—a long and deeply troubling history of the complicity of their faith in violence (even if such complicity is by no means the greater part of the Christian story)!

Instead, Christians should show how faith, though prone to misuse, is a salutary way of life and inculcate its vision of lives well lived in all spheres. But even if we accept that Christianity is at heart nonviolent and that, properly practiced, it contributes to rather than detracts from human flourishing, we may still ask ourselves: why have *Christians* so often been oppressive and violent? There are three main reasons, and they partly correspond to the three reasons for faith’s idleness: thinned out faith (which corresponds to misconstrual of faith), seemingly irrelevant faith (which corresponds, roughly, to the power of the systems), and unwillingness to walk the narrow path (which corresponds to the lure of temptation).

First, a *thinned out faith*. I have already mentioned how a person might take faith as a source of energy or healing for the body and soul, but not as a guide for shaping a vision of human flourishing. Or a person might embrace the ends mandated by

his or her faith (for some, for instance, maintaining the sanctity of unborn life or just social arrangements) but not the means by which faith demands that these ends be reached (persuasion rather than violence, since two wrongs don't make a right, as Socrates notes in the *Crito*).<sup>21</sup> This results in a thinned-out faith: faith is not allowed full sway in shaping the way Christians live, but is either employed to achieve goals set by values unrelated to faith or allowed to define goals but not the means of achieving them. If this is correct, then the cure for religiously induced violence is not less faith but *more* faith—faith in its full scope, faith enacted with integrity and courage by its holy men and women, faith pondered responsibly by its great theologians.

Second, a *seemingly irrelevant faith*. Why would those who embrace the Christian faith not want to embody its vision fully? Sometimes the original faith seems outdated, unworkable, irrelevant. Can a faith originally embraced by a minority—a sometimes persecuted minority, at that—tell us anything useful about governing, running a large business, or defending a nation from enemies? Can a faith born two thousand years ago have any relevance to democracies struggling with how to use their vast technological potential for the good of humanity rather than its self-destruction? Deep down, we fear that our faith may indeed be irrelevant; we sense a tension, so we bracket faith's moral vision and use faith merely to bless what we think is right to do in any case. It takes hard intellectual and spiritual work to understand and live faith authentically under changed circumstances. And it is the kind of work that cannot be placed only on the shoulders of theologians, but an endeavor in which academics engaged in a variety of scholarly disciplines and faithful people from all walks of life must be involved.

Third, an *unwillingness to walk the narrow path*. When someone has violated us or our community, we feel the urge for revenge—and we set aside the explicit command to love our

enemies, to be benevolent and beneficent toward them. Or we believe that our culture is going down a perilous road and want to change its self-destructive course—but we forget that the ends that Christian faith holds high do not justify setting aside its strictures about appropriate means. Or we see immense potential for healing debilitating and painful maladies in embryonic stem cell research—and we don't quite know how to think about the destruction of embryos that seems required if research should proceed successfully, so we bracket faith's demands in regard to this issue. We first deem the moral tug that our faith exerts on us to be impractical, then impractical slides into "overly demanding"—and eventually we reject what we once thought to be right as a course of action that is no longer viable. In these and many other ways, we mold faith to fit our own desires and our capacity to live in a given situation.

And so we are back to the question of character. In addition to applying an authentically understood faith to various spheres of life, we need properly formed persons who resist misusing faith in oppressive ways. For the Christian, faith produces devastating results when it devolves into a mere personal or cultural resource for people whose lives are guided by anything but that faith.