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Review of *The Cost of Ambition: How Striving to Be Better Than Others Makes Us Worse*

The Cost of Ambition: How Striving to Be Better Than Others Makes Us Worse. By Miroslav Volf. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025; xii + 194 pages, $18.91 USD.

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Few forces shape our world as powerfully as ambition. From patterns of populist politics to the competitive logic of corporate advancement and the curated personas of social media, contemporary culture often operates on the assumption that life is measured by relative position—by how far ahead we appear to stand of others. These projections—framed, filtered, and narrated to appear greater than they are—fuel rivalry and "restless comparisons" (33–34),[1] deepen our sense of inadequacy, and train us to measure worth by "superiority" rather than by truth or grace. Beneath this lie the deeper patterns of our age—individualism, materialism, and consumerism—which turn the self into a project to be maximized, possessions into markers of worth, and endless consumption into proof of success. Social media accelerates these dynamics, magnifying comparisons and driving the restless pursuit of superiority to an almost unbearable degree.

The stark economic and social disparities only intensify this atmosphere. As the gap between the lives most of us lead and the unmerited fortunes of corporate elites or public figures widens, our culture has yet to form a meaningful consensus on how to address them. Attempts at redress, managed by institutional gatekeepers through preferential recognition tied to degrees of marginalization, often generate new hierarchies and shifting power dynamics—elevating a select few into an elite class while leaving deeper structural inequities untouched. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of equality is increasingly instrumentalized in political discourse, more a tool of advantage than a genuine commitment to justice. Ambition thrives in such soil, both symptom and

1 Volf draws the phrase "restless comparisons" from Søren Kierkegaard's analysis of the "restless mentality of comparison."

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cause: it fuels the restless pursuit of superiority while reinforcing the very divisions it claims to overcome.

Into this cultural moment Miroslav Volf introduces *The Cost of Ambition*, a theological reflection on ambition—not the healthy pursuit of excellence, which he affirms and sees embodied in following Christ's example, but the drive to outdo others for the sake of glory and superiority—and asks what such ambition costs our souls, communities, and world. Miroslav Volf, a Croatian-American theologian at Yale Divinity School, is widely regarded as one of the most significant Protestant voices in contemporary Christian theology. While his influence has been limited within popular American evangelicalism, his work has profoundly shaped theological discussions on identity, reconciliation, and public life. Volf's theology has been formed not only through academic training but also through lived experience. Growing up amid the social pressures placed on religious communities in communist Yugoslavia and later witnessing the Balkan wars, he became acutely aware of the corrosive effects of exclusion and enmity. These experiences inform his best-known book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, which has become a landmark study of identity and reconciliation.

In recent years, Volf has written for a wider readership, with his work at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, which he founded, oriented toward the mission of human flourishing. This framing is not without merit: it aims to make Christian theology more relevant within the secular cultural environment of the university, while also alerting students to its viability and, perhaps, to Christ and the life-altering truth that he embodies. Recurring motifs run through his recent work: What is a life truly worth living? How can the world be embraced as God-given home where Godself desires to dwell? And how might meaning be conceived in holistic terms that weave together purpose, identity, and belonging? Consistent with this trajectory, *The Cost of Ambition* is both accessible and serious, weaving together philosophy, scripture, and poetry through close readings and thoughtful commentary—drawing on Kierkegaard's diagnosis of "restless comparisons," Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and Paul's vision of life in Christ. The book is written for attentive and thoughtful readers, serving as an intelligent interlocutor for anyone seeking to reflect seriously on ambition and its costs in light of faith.

At the heart of Volf's book lies a key distinction between *excellence* and *superiority*. Excellence is the pursuit of doing something well in itself, for the sake of the good it achieves. Superiority, by contrast, is the striving to be *better than another*—to measure *self-worth* through comparison (6, 161). This ambition, Volf argues, produces not only moments of rivalry that can sometimes benefit society but, more significantly, a pervasive social script that corrodes both the self and the community (161–162). It entangles us in cycles of pride and envy, oscillating between feelings of superiority and inferiority. Self-worth secured through superiority is fragile, always exposed to reversal, lasting only until someone inevitably surpasses us. In this respect, Volf's diagnosis carries the feel of Ecclesiastes: ambition driven by envy is fragile and fleeting, a chasing after wind.

Volf turns to Kierkegaard, who described comparison as the seed of despair and a restless dynamic that never lets the self come to peace. Comparisons are constant, woven into the most ordinary matters of life—food, clothing, shelter—each charged with social meaning under the evaluative gaze of others (30). The result is worry in both directions: inferiority breeds envy, superiority breeds arrogance, and identity is corroded. For Kierkegaard, the problem is not human diversity itself but the attitude that turns differences into measures of worth. In a society stratified by ranks and classes, comparison easily erases what we share in common and makes us forget what it is to be human. Against this, Kierkegaard insists—and Volf follows—that every person is distinct, yet all alike possess a glory far greater than any distinction they could struggle into (39). True selfhood is found not against the neighbor but before God, whose love affirms both our identity and shared humanity.

Volf then turns to Milton, whose Satan exemplifies ambition as rivalry with God. Satan's desire "to reign in Hell rather than serve in Heaven" epitomizes superiority-seeking ambition: unjust in its defiance, futile in its aim, and destructive in its consequences (65). Ambition here is inseparable from deception. To justify revolt, Satan must distort reality for himself and his followers, posing as a victim of injustice and cloaking his quest for domination in grievance. Volf emphasizes that this is not honest error but willful self-deception, a forgetfulness of what Satan knows to be true—that God is his Creator and superior (59–60, 70, 86). The same dynamic plays out in his temptation of Eve. Exploiting inequality with Adam, Satan twists Eve's rightful claim to equality into striving for superiority, planting rivalry in the human pair. Ambition so defined is never neutral; it thrives on deception, corrodes trust, and culminates in violence that tears creation into conflict. Milton's Satan exposes the theological depth of ambition's futility: rivalry against God and neighbor consumes the one who strives. The portrait is not without contemporary resonance, hinting at how charismatic leaders can mobilize followers through narratives of grievance and victimhood while pursuing their own quest for dominance.

Paul provides Volf with his most sustained biblical anchor, beginning in Philippians. Here, Christ's self-emptying becomes the antithesis of selfish ambition: he does not seize status but takes the form of a servant, reorienting desire toward love and service. For Volf, the theological foundation lies in justification by faith, echoing Luther's language of *alien righteousness* (117). Identity and worth are not earned achievements but gifts of grace, which dismantle ambition's drive to secure superiority. This logic continues in Paul's confrontation with the Corinthians, fractured by "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos." Paul does not simply invert hierarchies but dismantles the entire "structure of bragging" (125–126). All that we have is received, leaving no ground for superiority; the only legitimate boasting is boasting in the Lord.

Volf's final substantive chapter broadens the critique across the sweep of Scripture. Jesus rebukes the disciples' jockeying for status by teaching that true greatness

is found in service: "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."[2] Revelation envisions all who conquer seated together on Christ's throne, undoing the logic of exclusive status (148). The Hebrew Bible likewise resists identifying chosenness with superiority: Abraham is chosen not for merit but out of sheer grace, and Israel is loved "not because you were more numerous" but because God freely chose them.[3] Even Adam is created alone, rabbinic tradition observes, so that no one can claim a superior lineage (154–155). Yet the stories of Jacob and Joseph illustrate the destructive persistence of superiority-striving: Jacob's deception breeds enmity, while Joseph's youthful arrogance hardens into a ruthless ambition that consolidates land and people under Pharaoh, preparing the conditions for Israel's later enslavement (158–159). Volf insists that God writes straight with crooked lines, but this never justifies the crookedness itself (160). Ambition may sometimes yield apparent benefits, but it remains corrosive to human flourishing.

Drawing these threads together, Volf insists that ambition as superiority is both symptom and cause of rivalry, violence, and exclusion. It hollows out the self and fragments community, while contemporary life—consumerism manufacturing desire, social media amplifying comparison, markets and politics rewarding rivalry—only intensifies its corrosive power. Yet against this Volf offers an alternative vision: worth is not comparative but received as gift; excellence, detached from rivalry, can be pursued as service to God and neighbor; human dignity rests not in distinction but in the shared glory of being creatures loved by God. The costs of ambition, then, are not only personal—envy, depression, futility—but communal and systemic, embedding rivalry into structures of life. Here lies both the strength and the limitation of the book: it offers a Christ-centered, biblically rich re-visioning of ambition, and its idealism is fitting, for following Christ demands nothing less. Yet the limitation remains: Volf stops short of showing how such a vision might confront entrenched inequalities, structural injustices, or the violence ambition sustains on national and global scales. His response is theological and Christological, aimed at reorienting the individual in Christ, with the conviction that such reorientation, multiplied across communities, becomes the catalyst for broader transformation. Volf's constructive contribution is significant: he recasts ambition in theological terms, offering the church—and a wider culture restless with striving—a vision of excellence freed from rivalry and reoriented toward gratitude, service, and love of neighbor.

The Cost of Ambition is theological at its core, offering academic theologians rich engagement with scripture, philosophy, and poetry, yet it also fits comfortably within the genre of Christian spiritual formation. More theologically attentive than much popular devotional literature, it speaks both to scholars discerning the spirit of the age and to ordinary Christians seeking to follow Christ and grow in discipleship. It is a timely book—one that deserves to be read closely, reflected on deeply, and adopted

2 Mark 10:45. *NRSV.*

3 Deuteronomy 7:6–8. *NRSV.*

into practice in the ordinary patterns of daily life. In the end, it calls us to nothing less than following Christ more faithfully.

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