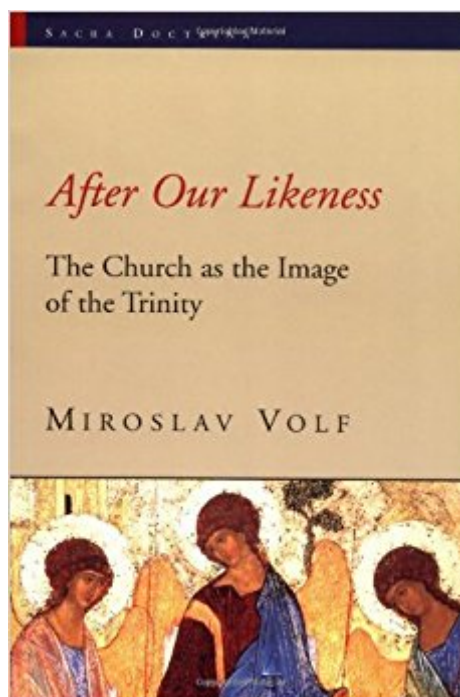




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# After Our Likeness: The Church As The Image Of The Trinity (Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology For A Postmodern Age)



## Synopsis

In *After Our Likeness*, the inaugural volume in the *Sacra Doctrina* series, Miroslav Volf explores the relationship between persons and community in Christian theology. The focus is the community of grace, the Christian church. The point of departure is the thought of the first Baptist, John Smyth, and the notion of church as "gathered community" that he shared with Radical Reformers. Volf seeks to counter the tendencies toward individualism in Protestant ecclesiology and to suggest a viable understanding of the church in which both person and community are given their proper due. In the process he engages in a sustained and critical ecumenical dialogue with the Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiologies of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and the metropolitan John Zizioulas. The result is a brilliant ecumenical study that spells out a vision of the church as an image of the triune God.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Interpretation" In this substantial volume, Volf explores the relationship between trinitarian theologies and their corresponding ecclesiologies. His thesis is that a Free Church trinitarian ecclesiology is not only dogmatically defensible but in certain social situations may prove to be superior to other ecclesiologies. . . . A careful theology with broad ecumenical interests, Volf's exposition of Ratzinger and Zizioulas is exemplary, and his own constructive arguments make a significant contribution to contemporary theology." *Modern Theology* "This book richly deserves to be read beyond purely academic circles. By reformulating Free Church ecclesiology, Volf offers anyone interested in ecumenical dialogue a new touchstone for understanding many of those traditions that continue to

be excluded (and to exclude themselves) from ecumenical discussions."Theological Studies"Creative, original, and compelling in its organization and logic. Volf's study deals with a number of areas that still need further critical reflection not only in Orthodox and Catholic ecclesiologies, but also in those of the Free Churches."Anglican Theological Review"One of the most important contributions made to the study of ecclesiology, not only within Protestant theology where good ecclesiology is often scarce, but also in the field of the ecumenical study of the Church."Journal of Ecumenical Studies"Volf offers a significant contribution to the debate from a free-church point of view, grounded in biblical and patristic research, but taking account of the ecumenical studies and contemporary systematic contributions of Moltmann and Pannenberg, especially their eschatological orientations. The author's own background, in both the Croatian context where Catholic and Orthodox churches dominate and working within the evangelical scholarly community, gives his research and ecumenical breadth and uniqueness of point of view that makes its contribution to the discussion particularly important."Currents in Theology and Mission"The doctrine of the church has recently been gaining momentum due to the ecumenical movement and the church's attempt to understand her role in a secular society. Volf's book is a welcome contribution to the discussion. It is highly readable and should be studied by pastors, professors, and seminary students."

Miroslav Volf is Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture and Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale Divinity School. His other books include *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*.

To use the analogy of water, some books are like pouring water into your head, drinking it in, other books are like jumping into a body of water and swimming around. "After our Likeness" is the latter. Volf's edited dissertation on ecclesiology is a dense read, as most dissertations are. In it, he attempts to discuss how the Western (and largely American) model of the "Free Church" of congregationalism might gain something from their Eastern and European brethren in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The first half of the book is dedicated to exploring the ecclesiological ideas of Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) and Metropolitan bishop John Zizioulas of the Greek Orthodox church. Throughout the discovery of Ratzinger and Zizioulas, we find the writings of John Smyth, a foundational leader in the Baptist tradition, countering and giving a foil to the more episcopal polities of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox. The second half the book is where Volf begins to attempt to synthesize all of these points of view together. There is quite a bit to

understand as Volf tries to see a sort of "third way" of ecclesiology through discussions about who comprises the church, what the roles in the church are, what the gifts of the church mean for the function of the church, how faith and the church interact, and the universal or "Body of Christ" nature of the church. Each of these subjects could be a book unto itself, so Volf does an excellent job of sparking an idea, but does not go as far as making specific prescriptions or prophecies for the Church and how it may begin to look more like the Trinity, each person comprising a larger and mysteriously unified whole. I would not recommend this book for the uninitiated. The jargon and sheer amount of Latin in the book make it difficult for someone with a theology degree to fully wrap their minds around it, but for those who can understand such things - I wholeheartedly recommend the book as it gives us a picture of how we might continue to think about the composition of the church as it gathers before the return of Christ.

too liberal

I have to say that the previous reviews are about as thorough as I could be, so I only want to add a few general cents here about the text. First, his desire to have the Congregationalist/Free Church recognized as legitimate ecumenical partners for dialogue is very welcome. Since they represent one of the fastest growing segments in modern Christianity, it makes sense that they should have a voice. But a common voice would be helpful. Congregationalists are a little like talking to Hydra - who is the voice? Volf offers a defense or vision of his ecclesiology, but in the end I believe it remains just that, "his" defense of "his" ecclesiology. In my own dialogue with "Free Churchers" there always remains the but-we-don't-see-it-that-way factor that is hard to go beyond, when the next one can totally agree. I certainly believe that Volf's ideas will find resonance with many readers/prayers/hopers, but in the end, it still lacks the unifying force that remains in the mainline traditions of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy (although some would argue that Orthodox are not unified in any real sense, but that's another story...) which leads them to lack a real, unified alternative to modern society. In chapter 3, Volf argues that it is the Holy Spirit that actualizes the Church. Of course, but that is also the problem with Free Church theology. Its theological identity is always playing second fiddle to its non-conformist, non-structured ecclesial identity, leading to a least common denominator "denomination". What is most essential is then the question. But since when is the Tradition or scripture minimalist? Volf doesn't help there. Although chapter 6 tries to define what it means to be "catholic" (according to the whole), it really doesn't ring true. Second, his ecclesiology and trinitarianism tend towards individualism, since he still fails to deal substantially

with the Eucharist and Baptism and traditional Trinitarian theology (the heart of traditional ecclesiology). Since his ecclesiology is essentially individualistic (Enlightenment?), it makes sense for him to do this, but it totally misses the point. Even while he claims trinitarian models for his approach, I found them lacking in substance. God is more than three roles, three persons united in love or a common substance. (He follows Moltmann's lead in seeing the three Persons of God as individuals united in self-giving. There is certainly precedent for this in the past, starting with St. Gregory Nazianzus' Christology, but it still doesn't go far enough, or perhaps it goes too far!). What unites "God" is the Father- God proper. The Son and Spirit are not the head. What really defines Christian theology is that God exists not as three individuals with relations to each other, but as three who are relations. There is a monarchical order, even if it is beyond our understanding. And this, too, Volf criticizes in Zizioulas, since faith for Volf is rationalization, not the faith of children. Z argues for a suprarational approach/experience of the Church in the context of liturgical realities, not cognitive reflections. And this is the real heart of the issue. If we are to image the Trinity, our imaging is in what we are. I am not really me unless I am united to you. Perichoresis as Volf and Moltmann use it must move beyond united individuals in freedom (Congregationalist ecclesiology). An individual, or the isolated, self-defined Church, is not a person or church in the traditional theological sense. This book would have been much more useful had it used the sacraments/mysteries as touchstones of ecclesiology. I would suggest reading Zizioulas' "Being as Communion" or "Eucharist Church and Bishop", McPartlan's "Eucharist Makes the Church" and "Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries" by Werner Elert for a more comprehensive understanding of these topics that Volf ignores outright.

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