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# Embracing Refugees: Miroslav Volf's 'Embrace' Theology and the Church's Cross-Cultural Ministry to Refugees and Migrants

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***Abstract***
*Migrants, particularly refugees, are often perceived as 'strangers' who pose a potential threat, while the church has yet to establish a concrete theological framework for responding to them. Acceptance therefore tends to remain philanthropic rather than a binding calling of faith. This study reconstructs a theological understanding of the relationship with the marginalized through Miroslav Volf's concept of 'embrace' and formulates its concrete expression in the church's cross-cultural ministry to refugees. It uses a qualitative literature review with a constructive theological approach, involving contextual issues, critical dialogue with migration studies and the philosophy of otherness, and the retrieval of biblical and theological sources. The findings show that Volf's four stages of 'embrace' (opening the arms, waiting, embracing, and letting go) can be rearticulated into a ministry model of openness, respect for cultural autonomy, diaconal and advocacy engagement, and preservation of identity without forced assimilation.*

*Keywords: Embrace, Migrant Refugees, Cross-Cultural Services, Constructive Analysis*

## Introduction

Tensions between social groups arising from differences in identity have become a nearly universal reality. Groups with distinct identities often struggle to build equal relationships with the majority group, and one of the worst manifestations of this is the exclusion of migrants, especially those who have been forced to flee their homes. According to the United Nations definition, a migrant is a person who lives outside his or her country for at least one year; in 2005 alone, there were approximately 200 million international migrants, including 9 million refugees who fled the threat of persecution or death, not merely poverty.[1] Their vulnerability is aggravated by the failure of their countries of origin to provide security,[2] so that their layered identities, which contrast with those of the receiving society, make them easily regarded as "strangers" (*stranger*) who are powerless (*powerlessness*) and at the same time objects of suspicion.

Such suspicion often develops into xenophobia. In the United States, for example, Muslim migrants from conflict-prone countries face high levels of discrimination despite the

[1]Khalid Koser, *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 5, 12.

[2]Alexander Betts dan Paul Collier, *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System* (Penguin Random House UK, 2017), 27.

issuance of various government memoranda;[3] a similar pattern appeared when the COVID-19 pandemic made migrants the target of collective panic over threat, uncertainty, and loss of control, which in reality had no direct connection to them.[4] Legal-institutional approaches have likewise proved inadequate to address the root of this problem: the global refugee regime places them before bleak choices among camps, urban poverty, or dangerous journeys, while translating their experiences solely into the administrative categories of legal/illegal, which reduce them to objects of regulation.[5] This situation calls for a theological approach that reaches the very nature of human relations with "the other" and does not stop at the framework of law or philanthropy.

To date, much research has been conducted on Miroslav Volf, especially on the concept of embrace as a model of reconciliation amid identity conflict. Volf himself developed the idea of *embrace* in the post-conflict context of the Balkans, emphasizing the importance of opening oneself to "the other" without losing one's own identity. Previous studies have generally focused on: (1) a philosophical-theological exposition of the meaning of *embrace* as a metaphor for national reconciliation,[6] as well as a model of inclusive and humanistic Christian education in Indonesia;[7] (2) the application of *embrace* in the context of communal conflict between religious communities;[8] and (3) criticism of *embrace* as a model that is overly optimistic about the possibility of reconciliation without addressing the structural aspects of injustice.[9] However, these studies have not specifically linked the concept of *embrace* to the issue of migrant refugees as a group experiencing the rejection of their double identity, nor have they developed it into an operational model of cross-cultural ministry for the church at the local level.

This study specifically uses the term "migrant refugees" to refer to migrants who have been forced to leave their countries because of the threat of violence, persecution, or the failure of the state to protect them, and does not refer to economic migrant workers who move

[3]Zaitun Mukaromah dkk., "Kebijakan Pemerintah Amerika Serikat terhadap Migran (Muslim)," *Jurnal Mercatoria* 15, no. 2 (2022): 80–82, https://doi.org/doi.org/10.31289/mercatoria.v15i2.7362.

[4]Victoria M. Esses dan Leah K. Hamilton, "Xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes in the time of COVID-19," *GPIR: Group Processes Intergroup Relations* 24, no. 2 (2021): 254.

[5]Betts dan Collier, *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*, 62.

[6]Joseph Useni, "Miroslav Volf's Theology of Memory in Relation to Zimbabwean Social Narratives," *Religions* 16, no. 131 (January 2025): 1–13.

[7]Frans Pantan, "Humanistic and Inclusive Christian Education: A Framework for Learning Transformation," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (May 2025): a10488, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10488.

[8]Jee Yun Kwon, "The Understandingof the Issue of Yemenirefugees in Korea," *Muslim-Christian Encounter* 11, no. 2 (September 2018): 81–112, https://doi.org/10.30532/mce.2018.11.2.81.

[9]C. A. Strine, "Embracing Asylum Seekers and Refugees: Jeremiah 29 as Foundation for a Christian Theology of Migration and Integration," *Political Theology* 19, no. 6 (August 2018): 478–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2018.1504730.

voluntarily for the sake of their livelihood, nor to asylum seekers whose legal status is still in administrative process. Using Miroslav Volf's concept of *embrace*, this study aims to answer three questions: how the concept of embrace is understood from Volf's perspective; how migrant refugees are socially constructed as "strangers"; and how the concept of *embrace* can be rearticulated into a concrete model of the church as an *embrace* community that is realized in cross-cultural ministry to migrant refugees. The novelty of this study therefore lies in its proposed reinterpretation of the four stages of *embrace* – namely the opening of space (*opening*), delay (*waiting*), reception (*receiving*), and reopening (*re-opening*) – which have hitherto been read as a model of interpersonal or communal reconciliation, and then redirecting them into a concrete framework for the church's cross-cultural ministry to migrant refugees. This study rearticulates each stage of *embrace* into pastoral practices that are responsive to the vulnerability of the migrant refugees' double identity, while also offering a way out of the limitations of the legal and philanthropic approaches that have long been dominant.

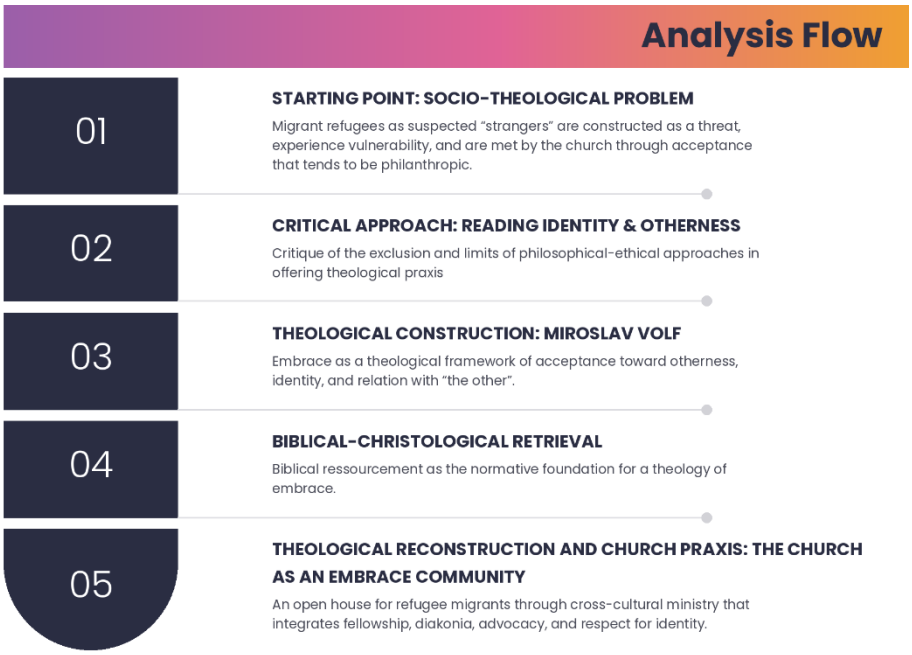
**Method**

This study applies a qualitative method through a library research (*library research*) design, by gathering, examining, and analyzing various sources in the form of books, journal articles, and relevant ecclesial documents.[10] Constructive theology is used as the primary approach, which positions non-theological sources as a starting point in the process of forming and developing theological thought. This approach proceeds from the imagination of faith and society in order to formulate a theological construction capable of building a house of faith for the world around it. Within this framework, constructive theology also pays particular attention to the aesthetic dimension of theology, which distinguishes it from systematic theology, which is more oriented toward the systematic arrangement and ordering of the structure of theological thought.[11] With this approach, the concept of embrace developed by Miroslav Volf is positioned as a space of imaginary dialogue as well as a constructive instrument for formulating a contextual and relevant theological understanding in building relationships with "strangers." This process of construction continues to take into account the background, challenges, motives, and various other factors that shape the existence and experience of the parties involved, thereby making possible a meaningful space of dialogue between the two.

In order to answer the research questions systematically, data analysis was carried out through six procedural stages arranged in sequence. Each stage is interrelated with the others and contributes to building a coherent line of analysis, from the identification of the problem to the formulation of the ministry model. The entire research process is presented schematically in the following chart:

[10]Albi Anggito dan Johan Setiawan, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (CV Jejak, 2018), 8.

[11]Joas Adiprasetya, *Berteologi dalam Iman: Dasar-Dasar Teologi Sistematika-Konstruktif* (BPK Gunung Mulia, 2023), 24–25.




## Findings and Discussion

### *Introduction to the Concept of Embrace*

*Embrace* contains a deeper dimension than mere tolerance or hospitality, because such acceptance demands an openness that at the same time places the subject in a vulnerable condition. One who embraces must be ready to declare acceptance and also be willing to face the relational consequences of that openness. Such a principle resonates with the idea of hospitality, particularly in the responsibility of receiving and caring for strangers. Fong connects the practice of welcoming strangers with Christian identity and mission through the concept of *shamar*, which emphasizes the acts of guarding, keeping, and caring for.[12] In the experience of ancient Israel, which regarded the experience of being strangers and sojourners as part of their collective identity, this was at the same time a moral reason for granting protection and care to strangers.[13] *Embrace* can therefore become a theological framework for understanding the relationship between the self and the other.

The term *"embrace"* itself carries a meaning of acceptance broader than a mere physical gesture. In its linguistic history, the word is traced to the Old French *embracier*, which refers to the act of hugging or receiving wholeheartedly, with the Latin roots *im-* meaning "in" and

[12]Paul C. Fong, "An Understanding of Christians' Roles in Human Migration through the Biblical Theme of Shamar: From Genesis to the Good Samaritan," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 6–8, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050600.

[13]Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 5.

*bracchium* meaning "arm." As it developed, embrace in English also came to be used to describe an attitude of welcoming, accepting, and opening oneself to something or someone."[14] This expansion of meaning can be read philosophically through the thought of Kearney, who positions the acceptance of the other as a process of going beyond the dominance of the ego. A person is required not to make oneself the primary measure. Instead, one is expected to make room for the presence of the other, including experiences or possibilities that were previously not taken into account.[15]

***Embrace through the Lens of Miroslav Volf***

Volf understands that the root of evil, hatred, and bloodshed is the problem of otherness (*otherness*) that fails to be responded to in a healthy way, which led him to categorize two paradigmatic responses, exclusion and embrace.[16] This is hardly surprising, since the idea itself was formed out of his experience of the violence of war in the former Yugoslavia. Miroslav Volf, a Croatian-American theologian who now serves as the Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale University,[17] grounds this concept in his reading of Galatians 2:19-20, that the human self has a center, but that center is mistaken and needs to be "crucified with Christ" so that it is replaced by a new center that is not centered on the self.[18] At this point the author sees both the strength and the vulnerability of Volf's argument: its strength lies in the firm rejection of self-centeredness as the root of exclusion, but its vulnerability is the risk of romanticizing self-crucifixion without considering that those who have long been sacrificed (migrants, refugees) precisely need the affirmation of the self rather than further self-annihilation. Volf himself seems to recognize this risk when he asserts that embrace cannot occur before the truth is spoken and justice is done; grace does not negate the demand for justice, even though it still places grace in the primary position.[19]

Volf argues that distancing oneself from one's ethnic, cultural, or national roots opens a hybrid space that allows for the inclusion of otherness while also providing a horizon from which to judge injustice.[20] Kristiawan reads this approach of Volf as a model of porous identity,

[14]Raymond J. Gibbs, *Methapor Wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 23–24.

[15]Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (Routledge, 2003), 77.

[16]Huen Wai Yan, "Miroslav Volf's Theology of Embrace, Vernacular Cosmopolitanism, and the Disappearance of Hong Kong Identity," *Practical Theology* 15, no. 3 (2022): 222, https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2021.2009623.

[17]Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identify, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 2019), 43.

[18]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63–65.

[19]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 20.

[20]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 8, 43–44.

one that makes room for the other and is willing to be corrected and enriched.[21] Nevertheless, the author holds that the limits of the term "porous" need to be made more explicit so that it does not fall into an identity relativism that would harm minority groups such as refugees, whose identities are already fragile as a result of forced displacement. It is important to see that refugees are not an abstract group who enjoy the luxury of a fluid identity; they struggle precisely to obtain recognition of the legal, cultural, and human identities that have been taken from them. If "porosity" is understood as limitless, refugees may lose the footing from which to demand justice, since there is no longer a "center" that can serve as a reference point for defending their most basic rights. Volf's framework therefore cannot rely solely on unconditional openness. It requires an ethical commitment that continues to recognize the need for a provisional "wall" to protect the weak, together with a "door" that always remains open for encounter. Without this tension, *embrace* risks becoming an empty rhetoric of inclusion that disregards the concrete suffering of refugees who need certainty and protection. For this reason, Volf continues to insist that Christian identity requires distance, which means that boundaries and a center remain, so long as they all work for the sake of embrace.[22] Volf's chosen interpersonal-individual approach starts from the fact that human identity is always contextual and layered, so that his primary focus does not lie in which social order is ideal. It is a question of how each individual is formed to be open to the other.[23] This starting point is the reason the author chooses *embrace* over a theory of social justice as the primary framework: because the issue of refugee migrants, as will be shown, is ultimately a question of how "we" are willing to recognize "them" as whole persons.

***Identity and the Estrangement of Refugee-Migrants as "Strangers"***

Identity cannot be viewed as an entity that has been fully formed and is free from change. According to Stuart Hall, identity is not understood as something permanently attached to an individual or group. He understands it instead as the result of a formative process that unfolds dynamically through practices of representation. Hall, however, does not entirely reject essentialist identity, since such identity can still serve as a basis for mobilization in anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles, provided it is not positioned as an absolute and unquestionable category.[24] A similar concern can be found in Levinas's thought, particularly where he rejects attempts to make the existence of the other fully comprehensible through the categories of the self. For Levinas, *the Other* has an existence that exceeds the understanding and mastery of subjectivity. Efforts to assimilate difference into a uniform identity risk erasing the uniqueness

[21]Danang Kristiawan, "Merengkuh Yang Lain: Dialog Interreligius Dan Transformasi Diri Terhadap Yang Lain," *Mitra sriwijaya: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 1, no. 1 (2020): 69.

[22]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 11, 61.

[23]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 22.

[24]Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 1990), 222–23.

of the other and giving rise to mechanisms of exclusion.[25] These two lines of thought provide a critical basis for understanding the dangers of an identity that claims itself as the center and measure of the existence of others. Nevertheless, for the researcher, a critique of closed identity does not by itself explain how difference can be received, accommodated, and realized in concrete relationships. An approach is needed that offers a theological orientation for forming inclusive relations. It is here that Miroslav Volf's thought on *embrace* finds its place.

Socially, refugee migrants generally differ from the host population in language, religion, and cultural practices, often have the legal status of "foreigners" or non-citizens, and are frequently made scapegoats for economic problems that actually originate in state policy, even though no empirical data support this accusation.[26] Ahmed explains that "strangers" are not those whom we have not yet met. They are, rather, those who have already been recognized as "not belonging," as having "crossed the boundary" and come too close, a process of recognition that is not neutral because it distinguishes who is legitimately entitled to dwell and who is suspected.[27] In Hall's framework, migrants are represented as an economic threat or a cultural danger; in Levinas's framework, the face of the stranger, which should present an ethical demand, is often reduced to a mere threat.[28] This vulnerability becomes more acute for the undocumented, as seen in the exploitation of migrant workers who are policed with violence, have their wages unilaterally cut, or are forced to work beyond reasonable limits.[29] This confirms that the structural vulnerability arising from the status of "stranger" cuts across categories, so that the theological argument developed for refugee migrants has a broader ethical reach.

Fassin adds that acceptance based on a "protocol of compassion," for example residence permits granted only to migrants with serious health conditions, ultimately reduces migrants to suffering bodies, and the legitimacy of their presence becomes conditional on that very suffering.[30] The researcher judges that Fassin's scheme sharply exposes the fundamental weakness of the philanthropic approach, which appears compassionate but in fact maintains the same power structure, since acceptance is still determined unilaterally by the host community on the basis of eligibility criteria that it sets for itself. Bauman states that the presence of

[25]Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, terj. Alphonso Lingis (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 36, 79.

[26]Stephen Castles dkk., *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 18–19.

[27]Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Routledge, 2000), 21, 23–25.

[28]Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 25; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

[29]Jeremy S. Norwood, "Labor Exploitation of Migrant Farmworkers: Risks for Human Trafficking," *Journal of Human Trafficking* 6, no. 2 (2020): 8.

[30]Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, terj. Rachel Gomme (University of California Press, 2012), 21, 85.

migrants is often perceived as that of "bearers of bad news," a representation of the collapse of a stable order, so that structural anger at globalization is vented on those who are in fact also its victims.[31] This ambivalent situation, as Bauman insists, cannot be resolved by the simple solution of love or hatred alone, but demands a willingness to reduce harm through "double vision" (*double vision*), which views the problem from two sides at once.[32]

***Christ as Refugee and the Call to Embrace***

The theological construction in this study rests first of all on the fact that Jesus himself was a refugee-migrant. Matthew 2:13-18 recounts the journey of Jesus's family to Egypt as an act of escaping the threat of violence ordered by Herod, so that the event is better understood as an experience of displacement caused by a life-threatening situation than as a movement based on free choice. This narrative does not merely describe a historical event but also carries theological meaning through its citation of Hosea 11:1, "*out of Egypt I called my son*" (Matt. 2:15). By linking Jesus's journey with the history of Israel, Matthew presents the experience of the Messiah in continuity with the journey of a people who had experienced oppression, estrangement, and liberation. This narrative connection shows that God's saving action is not separate from the realities of life of those who are threatened and driven out. This perspective becomes significant when read through Volf's theology of embrace, because the experience of displacement in the life of Christ provides a basis for reconsidering how Christians view contemporary refugees. They are not merely positioned as a vulnerable group in need of help, but as fellow human beings whose presence opens a space for encounter, acceptance, and the recognition of Christ.

This argument is reinforced by Matthew 25:31-46, where Christ identifies himself with the "stranger" (*xenos*) who is welcomed or rejected: "*I was a stranger and you took me in.*" The Greek term ξένος (xenos) in the context of the first-century Greco-Roman world had a broader meaning than "stranger" in a geographical sense. The term denotes someone who stands outside the network of social protection (patron-client) and has lost access to the polis (city) and the legal system that protected its citizens. This is a vulnerable figure, without status and without a voice. The Matthean community itself most likely lived in a context of conflict with the Jerusalem authorities and the dominant Jewish society after 70 CE, so that they understood very well the experience of being a xenos and being marginalized. This historical awareness shaped their theology of hospitality: welcoming the stranger is not charity but the embodiment of the identity of a community that had also once been "strange." Reading the text is therefore no longer limited to the view that it is merely an ethical exhortation to do good to strangers. There is a far more radical christological claim within it; the welcome of refugee migrants becomes itself the criterion of eschatological judgment, not merely one among many pious works.

[31]Zygmunt Bauman, *Stranger at Our Door* (Polity Press, 2016), 17.

[32]Bauman, *Stranger at Our Door*, 19–20.

Brunsdon and Magezi affirm that this text, together with Hebrews 13:1-2 ("*do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it*"), shows that the church, as the community of God, is essentially called to embrace, include, and integrate migrants, even when fear of crime and social risk is present.[33]

Nadella reads the Gospel of Matthew more broadly as a movement that crosses and disrupts boundaries, from merely receiving strangers to regarding them as a divine manifestation (*theoxenia*), a theological basis for welcoming strangers while also alleviating xenophobia.[34] Fidelity to a Messiah who is a refugee demands the welcome of those who have no home, resources, or friends in a foreign land;[35] Christians are called not only to welcome Christ as a stranger but also to emulate him as one who welcomes, just as God himself continues to welcome with open arms human beings who have estranged themselves from him.[36] This biblical argument goes beyond Volf's approach, which rests primarily on personal experience and the philosophy of otherness. It provides a biblical foundation that gives *embrace* a christological-eschatological anchor, becomes a measure of the faithfulness of faith itself, and cannot be reduced to an optional ethical choice for the church.

***Embrace as a Theological Framework for Refugee Migrants***

In facing the realities of displacement and migration, the identity of the church should not be built through boundaries that separate its own community from those who arrive as strangers. Miroslav Volf's thought on *embrace* offers a theological perspective that enables the church to understand the reception of refugee-migrants not merely as an act of compassion or humanitarian aid, but as a relational praxis that demands a willingness to open oneself to the presence, experience, and difference of others. Volf's concept of embrace articulates the process of acceptance through four movements, namely opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and opening them again, which theologically reflect openness, respect for freedom, acceptance of difference, and recognition of the autonomy of the one embraced.[37] In cross-cultural ministry to refugee-migrants, these four movements can serve as a basis for both evaluating and building ecclesial praxis that regards the neighbor as one who possesses identity, experience, dignity,

[33]Alfred R. Brunsdon dan Christopher Magezi, "Fostering Embracement, Inclusion and Integration of Migrants in Complex Migration Situations: A Perspective from Matthew 25:31–46 and Hebrews 13:1–2," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020): 7–8, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5966.

[34]Silas W. Allard dkk., *Christianity and the Law of Migration*, with Emory University, Law and Religion (Routledge, 2022), 165–67.

[35]Miroslav Volf dan Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Public Faith in Action: How to Engage with Commitment, Conviction, and Courage* (Brazos Press, 2016), 125.

[36]Volf dan McAnnally-Linz, *Public Faith in Action*, 125, 128.

[37]Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identify, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 143.

and agency. *Embrace* becomes a theological framework for urging the church to move beyond patterns of ministry oriented merely toward giving aid and toward relationships that are dialogical, inclusive, and respectful of difference in cross-cultural encounter.

Openness to receiving the presence of refugees (*opening the arms*) is the starting point for the church to develop a ministry that is not limited by uniformity of identity, culture, or community membership. According to Miroslav Volf, acceptance of the other begins from a willingness to make space for the other's presence, without turning one's own identity into a mechanism that limits the relationship.[38] This principle becomes relevant when the church faces refugees, whose existence is often marked by uncertainty, estrangement, and limited access to a new social environment. Their presence should not first be assessed on the basis of shared religion, nationality, language, or the social contribution they might offer, but acknowledged as the existence of human beings who possess intrinsic dignity. A theology of *embrace* demands a radical shift from blind suspicion toward a logic of openness. Migrants must be understood within a paradigm of active subjects, who can be both guests and hosts at once.[39]

Willingness to make room for the process of encounter (*waiting*) underscores that ministry to refugees cannot be built through an approach that is hasty, paternalistic, or oriented toward one-sided adjustment. Volf places waiting as part of the dynamics of acceptance, which presupposes that the party who opens themselves cannot unilaterally determine how the other party must respond to the encounter.[40] Experiences of displacement, loss, insecurity, and disconnection from one's place of origin can affect how a person builds trust toward a new community. The church, therefore, needs to avoid ministry that requires refugees to adapt immediately to the habits, norms, or expectations of the host community. Accompaniment should proceed with attention to the needs, experiences, and choices of the refugees themselves, including by giving them the opportunity to voice their aspirations and to determine the form of involvement they desire. Waiting in cross-cultural ministry is thus a practice of relational patience that places the freedom, voice, and experience of refugees as an important part of the process of building relationships. It is not a postponement of loving action.

The embodiment of acceptance in concrete relationships (*closing the arms*) shows that an open attitude needs to be translated into involvement that goes beyond symbols of hospitality or momentary assistance. Volf's *embrace* proposes an embracing that includes a willingness to bring the other into relationship without erasing the differences inherent in them.[41] This is

[38]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identify, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 143.

[39]Anna Rebecca Solevåg and Leonardo Marcondes Alves, "Hospitality: A Migrant Reading of the Parable of the Returning Son," *Religions* 16, no. 2 (January 2025): 4, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020125.

[40]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identify, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 144–45.

[41]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identify, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 145–46.

ministry that enables refugees to participate in the life of the community as individuals who possess knowledge, abilities, experiences, and aspirations. Ministry can be directed toward developing spaces for dialogue, shared activities, social accompaniment, capacity building, and forms of involvement that enable refugees to contribute within both the ecclesial community and the wider social environment. Embrace takes place by enfolding them in the same embrace as God's embrace.[42] This stage involves decentering the ego and allowing oneself to be shaped by the presence of the stranger.[43] It makes room for different persons without swallowing up those differences.

Respect for the freedom and continuity of refugees' identity (*opening the arms again*) affirms that the church's ministry must not make acceptance a means of binding, controlling, or shaping the other according to the interests of the host community. Volf reminds us that the dynamics of *embrace* do not stop at relational union. They also contain room for preserving otherness, so that the one who is received does not lose the freedom to remain themselves.[44] The "gap" between host and guest must be kept in balance, in order to preserve alterity so that it is not dissolved. The church is present and does not measure the success of its accompaniment by the extent to which refugees follow the patterns of life, culture, or identity of the local community. Instead, ministry needs to support their ability to maintain their cultural identity, language, traditions, and life choices, while at the same time building relationships with the new society. Such respect also includes recognition that refugees have the capacity to determine their own needs, manage their own lives, build relationships, and shape their own future.

Although a theology of *embrace* offers a foundation for developing church ministry that is open to refugees and migrants, its application needs to be situated within a reading broader than interpersonal relationships alone. Acceptance of refugees cannot be fully realized through hospitality, solidarity, or individual accompaniment if various social and institutional mechanisms continue to maintain their marginalization. The appreciative, critical, and transformative approach proposed by Kristiawan[45] can serve as a perspective for developing church ministry that not only responds to refugees' immediate needs but also examines the conditions that affect their access to protection, life opportunities, and social recognition. At the same time, a theology of *embrace* does not promise that openness will always lead to harmonious relationships or reciprocal acceptance. The process of embrace involves

[42]Huen Wai Yan, "Miroslav Volf's Theology of Embrace, Vernacular Cosmopolitanism, and the Disappearance of Hong Kong Identity," *Practical Theology* 15, no. 3 (May 2022): 220–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2021.2009623.

[43]Richard Kearney, "A Game of Jacks: Review Essay of John D. Caputo's Recent Works," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47, no. 5 (June 2021): 578–79, https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537211017168.

[44]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identify, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 147.

[45]Danang Kristiawan, "Merengkuh Yang Lain: Dialog Interreligius Dan Transformasi Diri Terhadap Yang Lain," *Mitra Sriwijaya: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen* 1, no. 1 (July 2020): 62.

uncertainty, because the party offering acceptance does not have full control over the response of the party invited into the relationship. The element of waiting shows that an encounter cannot be forced, and that the success of a relationship cannot be determined solely by the will of the party who first opens themselves.[46] This uncertainty becomes significant in ministry to refugees, because the church may face rejection, distrust, conflicts of interest, and situations that demand sacrifice from those who serve. Acceptance also does not automatically produce predictable change, either for the refugees or for the ecclesial community involved. Cross-cultural encounter can in fact change the understanding, position, and experience of both parties through a process that is not always easy or comfortable. Such openness is rooted in the pattern of Christ's life of self-giving and in the relationship of love within the life of the triune God, so that embrace is not understood as an action free from risk. A church that embraces refugees and migrants must confront not only those who need help or wish to build friendship, but also the experience of difference, tension, and the possibility of conflict. Indeed, acceptance can bring the church into a vulnerable position when the solidarity it enacts meets social pressure, institutional interests, or rejection from the wider environment. Ministry of *embrace* is not a practice that guarantees ideal outcomes. Honestly, it is a theological commitment to continue building relationships that respect human dignity amid risk, uncertainty, and limitation.

### *The Church as an Embrace Community: Cross-Cultural Ministry for Refugees and Migrants*

In response to the structural objections above, the author proposes that Volf's four stages of *embrace* need to be rearticulated concretely into a model of cross-cultural church ministry for refugees and migrants, so that they do not remain merely an abstract relational ethic. Cross-cultural ministry is chosen as the applicative direction because it encompasses both the dimension of fellowship and the diaconal-advocacy dimension, and thus answers the two objections raised earlier: the objection concerning the personal limitations of *embrace* is answered through the diaconal-structural dimension, while the objection concerning the uncertainty of outcomes is answered through the church's institutional commitment, which does not depend solely on the spontaneous willingness of individuals.

At the stage of opening the arms, cross-cultural ministry means that the church deliberately opens its spaces of worship and fellowship to refugees and migrants, provides liturgy that is accessible across languages, and welcomes them not as occasional guests but as those who should be seen as rightful members of the body of Christ. At the stage of waiting, the church refrains from demanding that refugees and migrants immediately abandon their worship practices and culture of origin in order to conform to the majority's style of worship, and instead provides space for dialogue to negotiate the form of shared fellowship on equal terms. At the stage of embracing, the church translates acceptance into concrete diaconal-

[46]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identify, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 148.

advocacy action: legal assistance regarding residency status, access to health care and education, cross-cultural job training, and advocacy for public policies that are more just toward refugees, rather than seasonal charitable aid. At the stage of release, the church is present and ensures that the integration that occurs does not erase the cultural identity and spirituality of the refugees' and migrants' origin, for example by giving space for their mother tongue, music, and distinctive forms of devotion in church life. It does so by attending carefully so as not to make full assimilation the measure of ministry's success.

Activities such as legal assistance, access to health care and education, job training, and policy advocacy, although in form they appear similar to conventional philanthropy, are not ordinary philanthropy. They are the embodiment of authentic *embrace*. The difference lies in three fundamental matters: (1) power relations: classical philanthropy operates from the position of an active giver and a passive recipient, whereas *embrace* demands that the church decenter itself and open the possibility of being changed by the refugees and migrants themselves; (2) mutuality: in *embrace*, acceptance is not one-sided but dialogical and equal, as seen in the stages of waiting and release, which give space for the agency and cultural identity of migrants; (3) ultimate aim: philanthropy often stops at meeting short-term material needs, whereas *embrace* aims at the restoration of relationship and recognition of the full dignity of "the other" as a partner, not an object of charity. For this reason, these four forms of ministry become an institutionalized *embrace*, in which every concrete action is always framed by existential openness toward one's fellow human beings.

This model requires the church to develop ministry that is courageous even though full of risk, yet remains full of compassion,[47] with a consistent attitude of embracing the vulnerable across ethnic, religious, and legal-status differences, without falling into a paradoxical stance that sometimes accepts and sometimes rejects.[48] Through such embrace, the church is called to be present as an "open house" for those seeking refuge, while also cultivating awareness of its own identity as an "uprooted" and pilgrim community,[49] an awareness that displaces the church from the position of a fully sovereign host and instead places it as a fellow wayfarer who is likewise called out of itself toward "the other." Migrants are then no longer regarded merely as recipients of solidarity or as a social problem that needs to be "overcome." Theological agency will become the status of migrants, exposing the limitations and exclusivity of the socio-religious structures of the host community, while also making them partners in realizing cross-

[47]Darren Cronshaw dkk., "Mission as Hospitality with Refugees and Other Migrants: Exploring Ross Langmead's 'Guests and Hosts' in Australian Churches," *Mission Studies* 40, no. 1 (2023): 151–53, https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341890.

[48]Amy Casteel, "Setting a New Course? A Practical Discussion about Migration and the Bible," *Open Theology* 7, no. 1 (2021): 600–601, https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0182.

[49]Ezequiel Silva, "The 'foreigner-host'. Revisiting Cacciari's 'the common' in the Context of Migration," *Scriptura* 124, no. 1 (2025): 7, https://doi.org/10.7833/124-1-2290.

cultural ministry as a concrete form of the church's faithfulness to Christ, who is himself a refugee.

## Conclusion

This study affirms the relevance of Miroslav Volf's theology of *embrace* as a foundation for developing church ministry to refugees and migrants through four relational dynamics, namely openness, waiting, embrace, and release. These four dynamics are developed as a theological orientation for forming a cross-cultural ministry rooted in respect for human dignity, mutuality, participation, and recognition of the diversity of identities. Within this framework, the presence of refugees and migrants also becomes a space of theological reflection for the church to review its understanding of solidarity, *hospitality*, the community of faith, and social responsibility in facing the reality of human displacement. The contribution of this study lies in developing a theology of migration through a constructive approach that integrates Volf's thought with the context of church ministry in Indonesia, while also broadening the discussion of public theology from a relational and cross-cultural perspective. Further development is needed through empirical research on church responses to refugees and migrants, ethnographic exploration of the experiences of refugee communities, implementation of an accompaniment model grounded in embrace, interdenominational studies of the church's practice of hospitality, and the preparation of formation curricula for ministers and church leaders in cross-cultural ministry. This series of studies is expected to strengthen the contextual validity of the theological framework developed while encouraging its application in church praxis that is responsive, inclusive, and oriented toward human relationships amid the dynamics of global migration.

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