



From God's Perspective we are all Minorities

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**by Krister
Stendahl**

I have found from experience that there is something special about multilateral dialogue, one in which we are all minorities, for the simple reason that in so much of religious history the relation among religions has usually been defined in terms of differences one's identity being defined by that which is different from the other. This is so natural to our whole habit of thinking it is hard for us to conceive a way of defining our

identity by that which makes us glad. Multilateral dialogue nurtures that vision: that in the eyes of God we are all minorities. In this plural and diverse situation and the increased consciousness of that being so, the attempt at a common denominator approach has proved increasingly hard to work. When it has succeeded, it has just created one new religion as if we needed another one. Nor is tolerance quite the solution. It usually has an elitist lining; either an elitist lining in the sense that you can be tolerant because for you it is not that important, or an elitist lining of noblesse oblige I know, but I cannot expect the other to know as much as I do.

These approaches do not work very well, once one wakes up to radical pluralism. Nor does the model in which one anticipates the victory of one over the many, work either. Many of

you have heard me use as symbolic of this attitude the fact that ninety years ago in the United States, we got a journal called The Christian Century. It's a very enlightened journal. It even switched from Gothic print to Latin letters in its masthead some twenty years ago. But it is sort of cute to think that at the beginning of this century Americans really believed that with American know-how and a little help from God we would end up by the year 2000 in a christianized world. What actually happened was an enormous renewal of the major religions of the world: great meetings, in Rangoon I think, in the 30s and 40s revivifying the Buddhist canon; the end of the classical form of Jewish assimilation after the Shoah and the establishment of the state of Israel; Hinduism in its various shapes and forms becoming a reality in practically all parts of the Western world. And the number of Muslims

outnumbering the Jews in many parts of the West. That's what happened- what happened was that Gandhi became the rejuvenator of the social consciousness of Martin Luther King. What happened was quite different from what was expected. So the only alternative is a plural alternative, and so I ask myself: how to sing my song to Jesus with abandon without telling negative stories about others! Or, if you want to sound more academic: "Towards a Christian theology of religions."

And I want to deal with that subject very seriously tonight, and I want to do it as a biblical scholar or at least as a reader of the Bible that I love. I want to deal with questions of how one, as a Bible-tutored Christian, can come to think about God's whole menagerie and the place of the Christian Church and the Christian religion in the midst of it. How, in the wider missio

dei, are we to define the missio christi and the missio ecclesiae, to use terms which Catholic theologians have used to cope with this problem. How to define the wider mission of God, the specific mission of Christ and the way in which the mission of the Church fits into God's total plan? That's a risky subject and I have decided to forget that some of you must have heard me say similar things for some time. But I think I have some new thoughts towards the end, so bear with me.

It seems that there are clear words against any such enterprise of radical pluralism. I will start by lifting up three famous scriptural passages which seem to close the matter before we have opened it:

(1) Acts 4:12: ... for there is no other name under heaven given among human beings whereby we must be saved.

(2) John 14:6: ... I

am the way the
truth and the life.
no one comes to
the Father except
through me.

(3) Matthew
28:19: ... Go
therefore and
make disciples of
all the nations
baptizing them in
the name of the
Father and of the
Son and of the
Holy Spirit.

1. I have an old
exegetical rule
which says that
when you apply
the right answer to
the wrong
question, it will
always be wrong,
even if—or
especially if the
answer is God's
word. Now what
was the question
to which Peter
gave that answer in
Acts?

The question was
the accusation, the
accusation that
Peter had
performed the
miracle of a
magician in his
own name and he
answers by the
exclamation:
"Heavens no, in no
other name is
there salvation but
Jesus." This does
not relate to the
problem of

Christianity and Buddhism at least not on the conscious level. But words like that grow legs and walk out of their context. And even when that is legitimate we must also remind ourselves of the very nature of confessional language. As Eastern Christianity has always known better than the West, confessional language is doxological. It is a way of praising God. It is the primary language of faith. The home language of the Church is the language of prayer, worship and doxology, giving praise out of the fullness of one's heart. Actually, confessional and liturgical and doxological language is a kind of caressing language by which we express our devotion with abandon and joy. Raymond Brown, the outstanding Roman Catholic exegete, in writing about the development of Biblical studies in the Roman Catholic Church, hails Pius the XII's encyclical of 1943, long before Vatican

II, as the milestone in setting Biblical scholarship free in Catholic studies. This the encyclical did when it admitted or even hailed the fact that in studying scriptures you have to study the genre, the style, the nature of the language it has, so that you don't read it in the wrong key. I think this is apropos to Acts 4:12. I can preach wonderful sermons on this but I have to restrict myself.

2. The Johannine passage is found in the beginning of what is called the farewell speech of Jesus. The setting is this: "Do not be upset in your hearts, believe in God, believe also in me. I'm going to leave you, but in this world there are many ways-many ways for you to stay. If there were not I would take you with me right now, but you can stay here. Don't worry ... And you know the way to where I am going." Then Thomas asks: "But we don't know where you are going. How can we

then know the way?" Thomas is always pretty smart, good questions, good logic. Jesus said to him: "I am the way, the truth and the life. Nobody comes to the Father except through me."

It strikes me very odd to take a passage from the most intimate and tender conversation with the most intimate and closest circle of disciples, from a context in which their hearts are full of foreboding with the imminent fear of relations about to be severed, to lift a word from that conversation, and use it in answering the question of Christianity's relation to other religions. It is just not apropos. It is odd that one of the few passages that are used by those who have closed the doors on a theology of religions in Christianity, should be a passage which is dealing not with the question of the periphery or the margins or exclusion, but which, on the

contrary, lies at the very heart of the mystery of what came to be the Trinity: the relation between the Father and the Son.

3. Anyone who reads Matthew's gospel finds this a rather stunning statement towards the end, because Matthew's gospel is totally built on the theory that during the ministry of Jesus, neither Jesus nor the disciples were to move outside Israel. Matthew has rather striking statements: "Do not go to any Gentiles ... You will not lack cities in Israel before the Son of Man appears" (10:5 and 23). This concentration on the mission to Israel has its contrast in the announcement of the Gentile mission in the last verses of the Gospel "all the nations" refers to "all the Gentiles". But what kind of a mission is this? How did Matthew if we start on that level think of this mission? Did he think of it as a saturation mission, did he think of it as

the christianization
of the world, the
cosmos?

I think we can be
very clear that
Matthew thinks of
the mission of the
Church on a
minority model, as
did Paul. You will
remember that in
Romans 15 Paul
says, "I have a
principle: never
run a mission
where anybody
else has preached
the gospel before.
And now I have
run out of space,
there is no place
for me to go in the
East. So I have to
go to Spain, I have
to go West." That's
an odd way of
looking at things.
What matters to
Paul seems to be
establishing a
presence, a small
minority in these
centers of the East.
It is a minority
image, it is the
establishment, as I
like to say, of
Laboratory II. Israel
was Laboratory I,
and when God felt
that some good
things had been
achieved in
Laboratory I God
said "Let's now try
it out on a
somewhat broader
basis ... on a
Gentile basis"; but
still a laboratory
with Christians as

the guinea pigs,
Christians as
another "peculiar
people."

The images in the
gospel of Matthew
are minority
images: "You are
the salt of the
earth." Nobody
wants the world to
be a salt mine.
"You are the light
of the world and
let your light so
shine before the
people that they
see your good
deeds and become
Christians." That's
not what it says.. It
says: that they see
your good deeds
and praise your
Father who is in
Heaven, have
some reason
for joy, that's what
it says. And think
of the magithe
Ayatullahs from
Iran. They did not
start the church
when they got
home. We might in
retrospect think
that was sad;
anyway they
didn't, and it
doesn't seem to
bother Matthew.
Because for
Matthew they got
the experience of
their life and they
had touched the
holiness of God's
kingdom.
Matthew's
perspective is
centered in what

we refer to as the Kingdom. I'll come back to that.

So these three pivotal passages from Acts, John and Matthew are not as simple as one might think. They are opening up perspectives. Let us take the special case of Matthew.

Matthew operates with what I call the Biblical model, the Jewish model (of Isaiah 49 and many other texts), the understanding that Israel is to be a light to the Gentiles, a theme Luke picks up in the Song of Simeon and recited in large parts of Christendom every evening, "a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel" (Luke 2:32). This is a peculiar view. Judaism is a revelatory religion, a religion of the book, a religion of salvation a revelatory religion, however, that at the same time doesn't think that everybody has to be a Jew in order to be acceptable to God. Now once that structure of religion came into the hands of

Christianity and Islam, it was coupled with universalism in such a manner that no one could be acceptable to God who did not think and believe as Christians and Muslims think and believe.

That is why, in the world of pluralism, it is not so strange that Christians who wake up to the fact that they are not any more a self-evident majority should find their way to the Jews and ask them: "You have lived for a pretty long time as a minority, do you have a secret to share with us?" And the secret is quite simply this, that universalism is the ultimate arrogance in the realm of religion. It is by definition and unavoidably spiritual colonialism, spiritual imperialism. The Crusades can be more civilized but they will still be Crusades, by definition. And the insight of a revelatory non-universalism is this: to be a particular, even a peculiar people,

somehow
needed by God as
a witness, faithful,
doing what God
has told them to
do, but not
claiming to be the
whole.

But particularism
has been so
ridiculed, especially
after the
Enlightenment.
Have you ever
read Voltaire's anti-
Jewish statements?
They are all based
on the alleged
tribal
primitiveness and
particularity of
Judaism. But I
would suggest
revelatory religion
without such a
particularism
instead of a
universalism is
lethal. That's my
lesson and I am
very intrigued as a
student of the
gospel of Matthew
that Matthean
thinking
constructed that
same model: the
church being
another peculiar
people, willed by
God to have a
function (what I
earlier called
Laboratory II), now
built on a Gentile
base, *panta ta*
ethne, disciples of
all the Gentile
nations, yet still a
minority. This is
beautifully

expressed in the sublime eschatological vision of Micah 4:5: Thus God will judge among the many peoples and arbitrate for the multitude of nations, however distant, and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not take up sword against nation, they shall never again know war or learn war. But every man shall sit under his grapevine and/or fig tree with no one to disturb him. For it was the Lord of Hosts who spoke: for all people will walk, each in the names of their Gods, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever. Its quite a stunning vision. I have used a Rabbinic scholar E.E. Urbach's translation with an and rather than a but in the last sentence: and we will walk ... Urbach, in his discussion about similar matters in one of the famous volumes on Jewish and Christian self-definition, E.P. Sanders et al.

(eds.), Jewish and Christian Self-Definition, Vol II (1981), p. 298 says: "In their relations with other nations, most of the sages (i.e. Rabbis) would have satisfied themselves with the declaration of Micah 4:5."

Matthew suggests to me that he thought of the church as a church of such a peculiar people in a new key. Universalism comes with power, Constantinian or otherwise. I think there are two alternatives to thinking what it is all about from a Christian perspective; and if I want to use drastic images I would say: What is the first thing that God asks when God comes to the oval office in the morning? Is it for a printout of the latest salvation statistics of the Christian churches? Or is it a question like: Has there been any progress towards the Kingdom and, by the way, what has the role of the Christians been in that? Or is it totally an accident that in

the very last vision
on the very last
pages of the
Christian Bible
there is, for us
theologians, priests
and ministers, that
shocking
statement: "And I
saw no temple in
that city." There is
something rather
striking about a
religious tradition
which envisions
the consummation
not as the
cathedral of
cathedrals, but as a
city in which there
was no temple.

Now I have to
speed up. I want to
lift up two other
texts, "model texts"
as I call them.
These are
intimations,
models of attitude,
which I find
important towards
building theology,
which I cannot do. I
am not a
systematic
theologian. I am
just a Bible scholar-
providing a little
Biblical
encouragement to
the theologians"
models. One would
of course expect
that the first
person, the first
theologian the first
Christian
theologian who saw
the spectre of
Christian
antisemitism and

anti-Judaism coming, was the apostle Paul. He detected, in his Gentile followers, an attitude of superiority towards Israel, not only towards Judaism but towards Israel, the people, the Jews. And his missionary strategy is contained in Romans, Chapters 9-11. The Calvinists thought it was a tractate on predestination because they were interested in that, but it's actually Paul's ruminations on how his mission to the Gentiles fits into God's plans and how it relates to the people of Israel. Paul ends with a scathing critique of Gentile Christians and their attitude of superiority towards Israel (11: 11ff). He uses a lot of images of olive trees and things and grafting and he gets so upset he mixes up what grafting actually does to a tree and so forth. But we have to ascribe that to his intensity of feeling- or to his lack of knowledge about horticulture. He was a city boy. I feel for him. He is trying to come to

grips with this fact that there is this feeling of superiority and he doesn't like it. And he ultimately says: I'll tell you a mystery, lest you be conceited. And that is that the whole of Israel will in due time be saved, and that's none of your business because God won't go back on His promises. And he doesn't actually say this is going to happen because they are going to accept Jesus as the Messiah. And the doxology he ends with is the only one he wrote in straight God-language without any pleistological twist.

When I speak about this, theologians get very upset and they say "You teach two ways to salvation: one for Israel and one for the rest of humankind." And I say "No, I say with Paul that it is a mystery if I taught two ways it would be a traffic plan." But Paul is trying to set in various ways a kind of limit to missionary zeal. And why? I know why: He had been

burnt once. It was out of religious zeal that he committed the only thing that he ever confesses as a sin: having persecuted the Church of Jesus Christ. So he was aware of the risk of such zeal.

The other text is of another nature. It is Paul's reflection on pluralism when he is up against it in Corinth, in First Corinthians. Paul was not a great ecumenist through most of his ministry. And in Galatians it seems that he really thought that if he stamped his foot enough they would really go with him. And he says: "Even if an angel from heaven comes and teaches otherwise than I taught you, let that angel be accursed!" That's Chutzpah! But in Corinth he is low on the totem pole and he is almost going to be read out of the Church so he has to settle for ecumenism. He is in minority status and that's perhaps why it is in that Epistle that his basic thinking about love, as the

elasticity which makes it possible to have diversity, is born. The ode to love in First Corinthians is not speaking about love in general but is Paul's solution to the problem of how diversity can be an asset instead of a liability. Now, what is so interesting to me in this context is how Paul presents the problem, and the ensuing insight. To deal with different theologies as if they were competing philosophies on the model of Stoicism and Epicureanism, etc. is wrong and shows no understanding of the nature of the Church. Paul gropes for other metaphors. He speaks about the garden, he speaks about the house, he speaks about the temple. The diversity of theologies are not like philosophical schools arguing with one another; that's a fleshly way of thinking or, as we would say, it is a secularized way of thinking about religious diversity (1 Cor. 3).

Matters of religion do not represent a zero-sum problem. That's Paul's message. It is not a zero-sum proposition where adding to the other means deducting from the one. That's his vision, and I think, it is valid and important for us as another way of thinking about religious coexistence. Of course, people who speak like me are accused of, "So anything goes, eh?" No. Paul certainly knows he was right. "I know that I am right but I am not thereby justified, it is God who judges" (1 Cor. 4:4). So he is not backing down from his conviction. But since religion has to do with God, any doctrinal insight expressed by the human mind and grasped by a human will cannot claim ultimacy. Anything goes? No. Let's argue. I've just read a brilliant book review by Jon D. Levenson in *Journal of Religion* 71 (1991), 558-67. He is writing about a book by David Novak on Jewish-Christian dialogue. He is saying that if anyone in dialogue

has to presuppose that you are not allowed to witness to your conviction, then it is better just to go with Soloveitchik's position that we should discuss only matters of common interest and not theology. Now Levenson doesn't quite say that it has to be so, but he is sort of teasing Novak for making it too easy to say that somehow you bracket your convictions when you enter into dialogue. That's a caricature of dialogue. For dialogue slowly creates a climate in which you can both speak and listen and find out what the real issue is. And ultimately perhaps reach what I love to speak about, but will not speak about tonight the Holy Envy: when we recognize something in another tradition that is beautiful but is not in ours, nor should we grab it or claim it. We Americans in our imperialism think that if we like something we just incorporate it and we think that we honour others by doing so. But that

is not the way. Holy envy rejoices in the beauty of the others.

To me "the Corinthian model" is the solution. Another point I have borrowed from Levenson is that if one wants to move toward dialogue, one has to give reasons for breaking with the tradition. For it is obvious that the Christian tradition, in general, in relation to other religions has not been dialogical. Sometimes it has been more dialogical on the mission station than we have been given to believe, as Kenneth Cracknell of Wesley House in Cambridge has always pointed out. If you read the diaries of the missionaries, you see how much there is of "presence" and "dialogue," but when they wrote home often the jargon of the home office won out. Levenson says that Novak has not demonstrated that dialogue is so essential that it justifies changes of that magnitude;

namely, bracketing both, the witness and the critique of one another.

I happen to think that dialogue is essential in a world where religion is often part of the problem rather than part of the solution in the relations between people. It is of much importance that we make our hermeneutical moves honestly and openly. I have lifted up Paul's warning in Romans 11 and Paul's idea in First Corinthians of a coexistence which is not a zero-sum order that to him is totally secular. Actually, in both cases he is referring to something which is different because it has to do with God and not with philosophy, not with defined thinking systems, for any thinking system which claims ultimacy is a form of idolatry. "I think I am right but I am not thereby justified" is Paul's wonderful safeguard.

deals with Jewish-Christian relations and the second model deals with intra-Christian relations, based on the fact that Christ is the foundation on which the house is being built. I would like to suggest a modern typology in which one says that these spiritual models of attitudes, these awarenesses of the fact that under God we are not locked in a zero-sum society, can be extended, and that we have valid reasons to extend both the Jewish-Christian and the intra-Christian model of Paul's toward interreligious attitudes in general. We are thereby making a deliberate move; we are not smuggling it in, we should know what we are doing. But I want to do it openly and give the reason for it as a valid way of utilizing the model.

The book by David Novak which Levenson critiques strikes me as unattractive in one way because it really sees the task of Jewish-Christian

dialogue as one of banding together in an alliance against all the others and I don't think that we are much helped in this world, in which we are all minorities from God's perspective, by alliances among sub-groups. This doesn't seem to be what the situation calls for. But as has often happened in Christian history, coming back to my beloved image of the laboratory, I would say that somehow when we Christians have found a model which works for us, it might be ready for export, to try these things out.

Now my final point is this. It is a well-known one and I don't know why it has dawned on me so slowly. I have referred to texts. These are our texts. Each minority has its texts; what its history has recorded, what God has recorded in the hearts of the people. Their writing is shaped by their experiences.

These are our texts. Out of our perspectives we interpret them. When a child is born I guess women can talk better about this- but I would guess that the child's, the baby's, world does not consist of much more than itself and the mother's breast. That's the whole world and one of the things that happens as we grow up is that it dawns upon us that other children have sucked other breasts. The process of sorting out such facts is called maturation. That's what maturation is. Now one of the most intriguing texts on the universal and the particular that I know of in my beloved Bible is the passage in First Corinthians 15. (This is just an attempt to help those who love the Bible to think about these things, although others are allowed to listen in!) Let me tell it in the form of a Jewish-style midrash.

It is the day of consummation and

the whole world is gathered and there we are, we Christians. Now as we look up there is God and Christ on God's right hand exactly as we have been told. So we turn around and see that there are also all the others. We see a sort of pan-religious and ecumenical representation and we turn around with a Christian smile which says: "You see, it is just as we said and isn't it wonderful that our God is so generous that you can all be here!" When we turn back towards God there is no Christ to be seen on God's right side because Christ will never be present to feed into the smugness of his believers; or, as the text says: "And so when the end comes, Christ will lay it all down before the Father and God will become panta en pasin, all in all." That is another way of witnessing to the mystery — lest I be conceited.

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