



From God's Perspective we are all Minorities

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**by Krister
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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* 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 ecclesia, 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 magi the Ayatollahs 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).

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" (I 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
Soleveitchik'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.

The first model 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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