Christianity and the Religions: A Zero-sum Game?
Reclaiming "The Path Not Taken" and the Legacy of Krister Stendahl

Paul F. Knitter
Union Theological Seminary

I've come all this way, from New York to Stockholm, basically to tell you something that you already know: that Krister Stendahl was a prophet.

In so many ways, in so many different areas of theology and church life, he saw what were the pressing, usually unsettling, issues of the day; and he prodded and persuaded his fellow Christians – always with rigor and humor – to respond to them. – You know that.

What I would like to do today is describe a particular area in which Krister Stendahl sounded his prophetic voice – at a time when his was a rather isolated voice both in describing what he saw and in urging how Christians should respond to it.

I'm talking about the persistent reality of religious pluralism, the challenge of religious diversity, the urgency of interreligious dialogue. Already back in the 60s, Stendahl realized that Christians have to take other religions more seriously and more engagingly than they had done in the past, and that in order to do so, they would have to face some deep-reaching changes in how they understand and live their own religious identities.

As the title of these reflections puts it, Stendahl realized that Christianity was being called from a zero-sum to a non-zero-sum engagement with other religions. And to carry out such a shift, he further realized, would call for the unsettling but invigorating theological effort of reclaiming "the path not taken." – There you have the content of my presentation today.

Let me first explain the nature and challenge of a shift from a zero-sum to a non-zero-sum theology of religions.

NON-ZERO: THE LOGIC OF HUMAN DESTINY

To describe the present context, for which I believe the legacy of Krister Stendahl has an important meaning, I turn to an acclaimed journalist and scholar of natural science, anthropology, and religious history. Robert Wright, in his richly awarded book, *Non-Zero: The Logic of Human Destiny,*[i] and in his sequential, just-released *The Evolution of God*[ii], makes a rather simple argument that he supports with a broad array of biological, anthropological, and historical data: In the early pages of *Non-Zero*, he summarizes his central claim:

> "My hope is to illuminate a kind of force – the non-zero-sum dynamic – that has crucially shaped the unfolding of life on earth so far."[iii]

Or in a lengthy op-ed piece in the Sunday *New York Times* of August 23, 2009: "… non-zero-sum dynamics … are part of our universe."[iv]

Through what to me is a brilliant and wary analysis of both cultural and biological evolution, Wright makes a revelatory and convincing case that the evident movement that we call evolution – "from alpha to omega, from the first primordial chromosome on up to the first human beings"[v] – has been animated or oriented by conflicts that become the occasions for cooperation. Entities, whether molecules or humans or cultures, clash in zero-sum relationships in which "for me to win you have to lose"; but these very clashes can lead to the recognition – not always but often enough – that "for me to win and survive, you have to win and survive as well." Of course, on the pre-human level, this is not a conscious dynamic, but it is a dynamic.

In other words, there's been a widespread misunderstanding of Darwin's "survival of the fittest"; the *fittest* are really not the strongest and the meanest, but, rather, the smartest and the most cooperative. As Wright puts it, "…interdependence is just another name for non-zero-sumness." And he marvels, almost like a theologian: "That's the magical thing about non-zero-sumness; it translates rational selfishness into the welfare of others."[vi]

He calls this dynamic, on the human level, a natural "moral sense" or a "moral imagination." "… evolutionary psychologists have developed a plausible account of the moral sense. They say it is in large part natural selection's way of equipping people to play non-zero-sum games — games that can be win-win if the players cooperate or lose-lose if they don't."[vii]

A Threshold

At the end of his two books, Wright somewhat apologetically removes his journalist's or scientist's hat and uncomfortably dons that of the preacher. He believes that the data clearly shows that evolution, in the human species, has reached a point at which we either consciously assume a non-zero-sum relationship with each other and with the world, or evolution may have to start all over again.

Mainly because of the level of technology we have attained, our interdependence is tighter, and more delicate, than ever before. If up to this point, we were all in our separate boats on the same ocean, now we are in one big boat on the same ocean. "That's what happens when the zone of non-zero-sumness reaches planetary breadth; once everybody is in the same boat, either they learn how to get along or very bad things happen." [viii]

In other words, we have reached a point where we no longer need, nor can we actually bear, zero sum energies to propel us toward non-zero-sum

relations: “More than before, non-zero-sumness can thrive without zero-sumness as it ultimate source.”[ix] Indeed, it *has to thrive* without zero-sumness. Collaboration *must* replace conflict. If it doesn’t, it’s not going to be a matter of one tribe being bloodied by another, but of all the tribes destroying each other, or destroying the earth that sustains them.

So we do stand at a point in history where we either go forward with a non-zero-sum morality, or we don’t go forward. Wright poses the possibility “… that we are passing through a true threshold, a change as basic as the transitions from hunter-gatherer village to chiefdom, from chiefdom to ancient state?”[x] On the very last page of his *Non-Zero* book, Wright is a fully garbed preacher: “More than ever, there is the real chance of either good or evil actually prevailing on a global scale.”[xi]

The Role of Religion

For Wright, what is the role of religion in this sweeping picture of evolution animated by the dynamic of non-zero-sumness? He sees the religions as both another expression of this dynamic as well as a decisive generator of it.

In his latest book, *The Evolution of God,* he focuses on the three Abrahamic religions and shows how God, or the human concept and symbol of God, has evolved and is still evolving from God’s dominant role of a zero-sum jealous and often violent God to a non-zero-sum God who calls his/her followers to a universal compassion not just for their own fellow-believers and citizens but for all humans, in all religions. The role of religion, therefore, is that “…of expanding the moral imagination, carrying it to a place where it doesn’t go unabetted. This expansion is religion at its best.”[xii]

But for Wright, this evolution of God and religion, this vital contribution of religion to pushing our moral imagination to an embrace of radical interdependence, which is radical compassion for all beings, has not yet sufficiently taken place! Religion, too, stands on a threshold. Will it make the step from a zero-sum religious mentality to one of non-zero-sum? The consequences are global: "If the Abrahamic religions [we can say, all religions] don't respond to this ultimatum adaptively, if they don't expand their moral imaginations, there is a chance of chaos on an unprecedented scale."[xiii]

But Wright suggests – here he is more modest and cautious – that for religions to play this role and to make this shift from a zero-sum jealous God to a non-zero-sum embracing God, they are going to have to get off their high horses! Claims to be "the only true religion," or the superior religion meant to absorb all the others, are inherently generators of zero-sum relations: for my religion to be true, yours must be false. Or: for my religion to be true it must be superior to yours. Such religious claims all too easily promote non-zero sum conflict. And conflict so easily becomes violence. As Wright trenchantly observes: "A premise shared by all who commit violence in the name of the Abrahamic god is that this god is special – the one true god."[xiv]

This assertion of Robert Wright is grave; we have to understand it accurately. He is not saying that the belief that mine is the only true God leads *necessarily* to violence; but he is saying that when religious violence is carried out, it is usually sustained by the belief that my God, or my religion, is the only true one.

If that statement is true, than the Abrahamic religions are in a sorry state, for as Wright also accurately observes: "Among the things Muslims,

Christians, and Jews have had in common over the years is a tendency to exaggerate their past specialness."[xv]

CAN CHRISTIANITY MOVE TO A NON-ZERO-SUM ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHER RELIGIONS?

So the question we face today – and the question that Stendahl already posed back in the 60s and 70s – is: Can the Abrahamic religions – more specifically for our context – can Christian churches overcome "this tendency to exaggerate their specialness"?

In Wright's terms: Can Christians move from a zero-sum competition with other religions to that of a non-zero sum engagement? Can the Christian church engage other religions in a game in which every religion, by and large, wins and preserves its identity, rather than a game in which Christianity has to win by proving its superiority?

To pose this question in Stendahl's more theological terms: is it possible for Christians to abandon their *supersessionist* claims and affirm the ongoing validity not only of the Jewish religion but of other religions? Can Christians envision a world in which no religion supersedes the others – in which no religion must, or can, prove itself the only or the superior or the final manifestation of truth?

Wright would say that Christianity, as well as all religions, *must* make this move in order to overcome the zero-sum theology of supersessionism. Otherwise, it won't be able to play its necessary role in moving the world toward the peace of non-zero-sum relationships.

The Impossibility of Superseding Supersessionism

But a large number of Christians, perhaps some of you in this assembly today, would respond that such a move beyond supersessionism and zero-sum is fundamentally impossible.

In my book, *Introducing Theologies of Religions,*[xvi] I try to sort and sift the different Christian approaches to other religions into four distinctive models: Replacement, Fulfillment, Acceptance, and Mutuality. (This is an expansion of, and an addition to, the older line-up of these models as Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism.) If all the Christians of the world had to vote which theological party they adhered to, the majority, I reluctantly point out, would cast their ballots for either the Replacement (Exclusivist) or the Fulfillment (Inclusivist) parties.

For both these dominant theological parties, the call to abandon Christianity's zero-sum view of other religions and to shift to a non-zero-sum approach – to what is called the Mutualist or Pluralist party – is simply impossible.

And it's impossible for one thundering reason: it would amount to abandoning a belief that is absolutely essential to what it means to be a Christian. From the very first decades of the early church, these Christians point out, and throughout the meanderings of church history, Christians have believed and announced that Jesus Christ is the unique, the one, the final, the absolute savior of all humanity.

The Replacement model insists that this salvation won by Jesus is available only in the Christian church and therefore other religions are to be replaced.

The Fulfillment perspective allows the salvation given in Jesus to operate, less effectively but actually, in other religions, and so they can be fulfilled in the Christian church.

The Acceptance or Particularist model reminds us, in true postmodern fashion, that every socially-constructed view of the world that calls itself religious will hold itself up as superior over all the others. That's what religions do. So let them do it. Let them all engage in a kind of holy competition and see which one wins.

In all three cases, as St. Paul puts it, there is "one Mediator" between God and humanity. "One" means "only." (I Tim: 2:5)

So if I might make the point inappropriately but clearly: to ask Christians to give up their belief that Jesus is the only savior is like asking Italians to give up pasta. It's part of who they are. It maintains their doctrinal continuity with past generations and it provides the energy to be a disciple of Jesus and to follow him.

Therefore, most Christians would insist that the assertion that Jesus is the only savior (based on the belief that he is the only Son of God) is, as John Taylor has trenchantly phrased it: *a non-negotiable.*[xvii] Christians, in the engagement with other believers, *cannot* negotiate whether Jesus is the only savior. If they did, they would lose their Christian identities and the Christian contribution to the interreligious dialogue.

STENDAHL'S LEGACY

What I am calling the legacy of Krister Stendahl would challenge these traditional Christians assertions. He would smile kindly and ask his fellow disciples of Jesus to sit down and take another, a more careful, look. Such a look would be motivated by what he identified, along with Robert Wright, as the global and life-threatening dangers of zero-sum religious claims of final superiority. And it would be guided by what his biblical studies convinced him was a "path not taken" *then* but able to be taken *now*.

The Dangers of Supersessionism

For Stendahl the dangers, indeed the evils, of supersessionist or non-zero claims, were illustrated most blatantly and horrendously in the relations of Christians to Jews. This relationship in his words has been "marked and marred by supersessionism and its replacement mechanisms."[xviii] "…"the supersessionist drive," Stendahl reminded his fellow believers, leads religious people "into adversarial patterns where the younger has to trump and trounce the older."[xix] He provides examples of the workings of supersessionism that expand its dangers well beyond those for Judaism:

> "There is Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his older brothers, Israel over Canaan – and the pattern continues, not only Church over Synagogue, but Islam over Judaism and Christianity, and Protestants over Catholics in the Reformation. [and we could add: Christianity over all other religions] *In no case is complementarity or coexistence an option chosen; there is always the claim to exclusive legitimacy*."[xx]

Stendahl describes such supersessionist, non-zero claims to "exclusive legitimacy" in rather uncharacteristically harsh language, as "the ultimate arrogance in the realm of religion…unavoidably [leading to] spiritual colonialism, spiritual imperialism."[xxi] This, according to Stendahl, is what so upset St. Paul among the first Christians of Rome – "their attitude of superiority and conceit" toward their Jewish brothers and sisters. This is what stirred Paul to write chapters 9 to 11 in Romans, dealing with "the mystery" of the abiding election of Israel. Stendahl wryly gives his own description of what Paul was doing in these chapters: "It is as if Paul did not

want them to have the Christ-flag to wave, since it might fan their conceit."[xxii]

Stendahl summaries the problem of supersessionism:

> "The road taken, the road of supersessionism, has proven to be a dead end, even a road to death." [xxiii]
>
> "…we are heirs to traditions that have – it seems – in their very structure the negation if not the demonization of the Other. So the serious theological question is: What to do? How do we counteract the undesirable effects of the supersessionist instinct?"[xxiv]

Note that Stendahl defines supersessionism not just as an ethical issue, but as a "serious theological problem." If we're going to avoid "negating" or "demonizing" others, we're going to have to do some serious, difficult, unsettling theological reconstruction.

Negotiable Non-negotiables

Such reconstruction, he goes on, may have to do with items we thought were "non-negotiables." Stendahl is adamant that we cannot blame our mistreatment of Jews on a few bad Christian apples. Rather, there may be some bad theological apples, some of them lying at the center of the Christian table:

> "We must rather ask openly and with trembling whether there are elements in the Christian tradition – at its very center – that lead Christians to an attitude toward Judaism which we now must judge and overcome. It is an odd form of anti-intellectualism to believe that the theology is all right but the practice and sentiments of individuals

> are to blame. It may well be that we should be more responsible for our thoughts and our theology than for our actions. To trust in 'men of good will' and to leave the theological structures unattended is bad strategy."[xxv]

He concludes, tersely but pointedly: "It is clear to me that Christian theology needs a new departure."[xxvi] A new departure!

Since Jesus Christ is the point of departure, the starting point, for all Christian theology, Stendahl is suggesting a new Christology. With a beautiful image that sparkles frequently in his different writings, he describes the goal of this new Christology: "How can I sing my song to Jesus fully and with abandon without feeling it necessary to belittle the faith of others? I believe that question to be crucial for the health and vitality of Christian theology in the years ahead."[xxvii]

In the remainder of these reflections, I would like to rehearse and comment on what Stendahl called his "song to Jesus" – a song he could sing fully without denigrating the songs of others. After describing what I believe he would find to be an appropriate title for his song, I'd like to run through three stanzas which I think will enable us to sing along with him.

The title of his song: "The Path Not Taken."

The three verses deal with ecclesiology, missiology, and Christology.

STENDAHL'S NEW SONG: THE PATH NOT TAKEN

In his 1967 article "Judaism and Christianity," Stendahl announces that something "went wrong" at the very beginning of the relationship between the new Christian community and its parent Judaism:

> "Something went wrong in the beginning. I say 'went wrong,' for I am not convinced that what happened in the severing of the relations

> between Judaism and Christianity was the good and positive will of God. Is it not possible for us to recognize that we parted ways not according to but against the will of God? … But if it be true that 'something went wrong' in their parting of ways, we should not elevate the past to an irrevocable will of God, but search for the lost alternative."[xxviii]

What is this "lost alternative" that we can now try to reclaim? Stendahl describes it as a "benevolent typology" which regards both Judaism and Christianity as two different ways of carrying on God's broader project of "mending the world." Stendahl's description of this shared project: "There is a familiar shape to God's ways with the world, God's ever repeated attempts at the mending of what was broken, even restoring the *imago Dei* in which humanity had been created."[xxix]

God's covenant with Judaism was an expression of God's determination to "mend the world" (*tikkun olam).* The Gentile Christian community *could have* viewed itself (I would add, and for a while *did*) as another form of that same effort, that same covenant. Stendahl suggests that the early church could have looked upon itself as a "Judaism for Gentiles."[xxx]

Why was this non-supersessionist road not taken? That, as they say, is a long story, one that has since been investigated and described more extensively than what Stendahl did, or could do, at his time. His own assessment of why this path was not taken is as accurate in its succinctness as it is in need of further elaboration. He states that the conversation with Judaism that Paul was working out in Rom 9-11 "was broken off mainly by Christian expansion and superiority feelings…"[xxxi]

A New Song Also for the Religions

If Krister Stendahl is especially known as a pioneer pointing to and exploring this path not taken towards Judaism, he should also be recognized as a pioneer who went even further. He realized – well before other theologians realized -- that the supersessionism that has lead to the denigration and exploitation of Judaism by Christians has also been extended throughout church history, with equally negative effects, to other religions. So he boldly contended, at a time when such contentions were rare, that "we have valid reasons to extend the Jewish-Christian … model of Paul *toward interreligious attitudes in general*."[xxxii]

He urged the Christian churches "to apply Paul's principle of *agape*, of mutual esteem [between Christians and Jews] also to the whole oikoumene, to the wider ecumenism which under the guidance of the Spirit will increasingly call for our attention."[xxxiii] This is about as explicit a call as one can find in Stendahl's writings to what came to be called a *pluralistic* or *mutualistic* theology of religions.

This is the theological challenge of Krister Stendahl that, at the beginning of my research for this lecture, I wanted to compare with Robert Wright's call for a non-zero-sum understanding of religious diversity. But in my research, I was amazed (and reassured) to discover that Stendahl had beat me to it! In making his appeal that Christians supersede supersessionism not just towards Jews but also toward Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus, Stendahl himself describes this as a move to non-zero-sumness:

> "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."xxxiv

> "For it is simply not true that our faith and our devotion would be weakened by recognizing the insights and the beauty and the truth of other faiths….The spiritual perception is *not bound by that 'zero-sum' reasoning* where a plus for the one is a minus for the other. I do not need to hate all other women to prove that I love my wife. Quite the contrary. The very attitude of hate or condescension or negativism towards others pollutes the love of one's own."[xxxv]

So Krister Stendahl's "path-not-taken-then-but-to-be-taken-now" is a superseding of supersessionism; it is a non-zero-sum theology of religions. But for many Christians, then and still today, questions remain: Just how does Stendahl manage, theologically and practically, to "sing about Jesus fully" and at the same time not "belittle" but be fully open to other religions?

Here I would like to comment on what I'm calling three key stanzas of Stendahl's song. In them, I believe, he suggests a theology that can combine full commitment to Jesus with a full openness to others. In each of these three areas, Stendahl is offering theological building materials that contemporary theologians have been using, or need to use more extensively, in order to expand and to pave this path, once abandoned, but now re-taken.

Ecclesiology: A Church in Service of the Basileia

In the area of ecclesiology, Stendahl previewed a revisionary image of the church (revisionary especially for us Roman Catholics) that is calling upon Christians, laity but especially dignitaries, to get their ecclesial priorities straight. The Asian Catholic bishops have called it a *regnocentric ecclesiology.*[xxxvi]

It is based on what scripture scholars tell us were the priorities of Jesus: the core, the central concern, the organizing principle, of his preaching was

not his community that came to call itself an ecclesia, nor was it even himself. It was, Stendahl reminds us, the *Basileia tou Theou.* "Of all the some hundred themes that he [Jesus] could have lifted up from the Jewish tradition …, and of all the infinite number of themes available to him in his divine fullness, he chose this one: the kingdom."[xxxvii]

And Stendahl goes on to note the dangers, the grave dangers, of forgetting this: "It remains a fact worth pondering that Jesus had preached the kingdom, while the church preached Jesus. And thus we are faced with a danger: we may so preach Jesus that we lose the vision of the kingdom, the mended creation."[xxxviii]

The primary motivation and energy that should guide the Christian church in its dealing with the world, and especially with other religions, is not to promote itself through conversions; it is not even to bring others to experience Jesus as their Lord and Savior (though these are commendable concerns). Rather, it is to work with others, and with other religions, in promoting the Basileia – in John Cobb's translation: "the Commonwealth of God."[xxxix]

With his typical imaginative humor, Stendahl describes how such a regnocentric ecclesiology will clarify Christians' priorities:

> "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?"[xl]

Such a "Basileia-centered" understanding of the church, which affirms the building of God's Commonwealth on earth as the primary purpose of the Church, will allow – indeed it will require – that Christians are as committed

to Jesus' vision of the Kingdom as they are open to what they have to learn from other religions about achieving a world of greater compassion and justice.[xli]

Missiology: A Particular Mission within the Universal "Missio Dei"

An ecclesiology that holds the *Basileia* to be the primary goal of the church provides the foundation for a missiology (an understanding of missionary work) that places "the mission of the Church" within the much broader "*missio Dei*" (the mission of God).

The image of the *missio Dei* is broadly embraced in both Protestant and Catholic missiology.[xlii] Stendahl, however, draws out the sobering but assuring effects of such an embrace: To understand and carry out the mission of the church as part of, rather than the entirety of, the *missio Dei* means that the church is to consider itself, first, a *minority* among the peoples and religions of the world, and secondly, Christians should consider themselves as part of a *laboratory* in which they are "guinea pigs" that God uses to experiment with what the *Basileia* requires of us.

In calling the Christian religion a minority, Stendahl reminds us that all religions, before God, are minorities. What this means, he feels, can best be learned from our Jewish parents:

> "We are born as a minority religion, as a religion among religions. And we are heirs to the Jewish perspective on these things: that's what I learned from the scriptures. It says to Israel, that Israel is meant to be a light to the nations. That's what Jesus speaks about: a light to the nations. The Jews have never thought that God's hottest dream was that everybody become a Jew. They rather thought that they were

called upon to be faithful and that God somehow needed that people in the total cosmos. What humility…"[xliii]

Drawing out the implications of this image, Stendahl concludes that not only is the church a minority but God intends it to remain a minority:

"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."[xliv]

As a minority, the Church, however, is a *necessary* minority. Stendahl's notion of the church as a minority religion in which God carries on "experiments" for mending the world is both humbling and affirming.

"I think we can be very clear that Matthew thinks of the mission of the Church on a minority model, as did Paul. … 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'."[xlv]

We Christians are "only" guinea pigs for the reign of God. But we are necessary guinea pigs: "The church is a new witnessing community, a minority whose witness somehow God 'needs' in his total mission, the *missio Dei*."[xlvi] So again, we see how Stendahl, in calling on Christians to

make place for other religions, is at the same time affirming the necessary place that Christianity holds.

To further grasp this balancing act of viewing the church as a minority but at the same time as a necessity, we have to turn to Christology.

Christology: The uniqueness of Christ Calls Us to "Faithful Particularity"

I can't suggest that Stendahl developed a clearly packaged Christology. He didn't. But I am suggesting that he provides the pieces out of which systematic theologians can assemble what I would like to call a "dialogical Christology" – an understanding of the person and work of Jesus the Christ that does not exclude but actually requires a dialogue with other religions. Such a dialogical understanding of Jesus is implied in how Stendahl understands the relation between *particularity* and *universality.*

What I'm trying to get at is contained in a simple but weighty statement from his 1993 article, "From God's Perspective We Are All Minorities." He holds up as an ideal for Christians: "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."[xlvii]

These very words can be applied to Jesus and so become a foundation for a dialogical Christology: "Jesus was a particular, a peculiar Jew, needed by God as a witness, faithful, doing what God told him to do, but not claiming to be the whole."

To put this in a little more precise, but somewhat technical language: Jesus was a "concrete universal" – a particular presence of God with a message that was universally necessary for all humankind, but still not all of God's universal presence and message. Throughout his writings, Stendahl warns against universals or universalizing the Christian message. What he

means with these admonitions is not to deny the universal relevance of Christ and the Gospel; indeed, he endorses a "Witness Model" that calls the church to witness to the ends of the earth. What he sees as dangerous is a "universal message," or a universal savior, which forgets that it remains a *particular* message and a *particular* savior. No particular message can contain the whole message of God. No savior can bring all the salvation that God offers to humanity.[xlviii]

This, according to Stendahl, is the real, the deeper meaning of monotheism. "The meaning of monotheism and the point of the first commandment are not that there is one God, but really that there is nothing worth calling God but God. … It is not a question that 'one' is better than 'many'. .. monotheism is an undercutting of all kinds of divine claims for less than divine things… a suspicion against all absolutifying [sic] of what is not absolute…"[xlix]

So I think that Stendahl would be very comfortable with the way John Hick describes the divinity of Jesus: He is "*totus Deus*" but not "*totum Dei*" – totally divine but not the totality of Divinity.[l] He is *truly* Son of God and savior, and therefore bears a message that is universally urgent for all peoples; but he is not the *only Son or Daughter of God or only Savior,* thus allowing space for others who may also bear universally urgent messages.[li]

In fact, Stendahl suggests that he expects and welcomes other messengers with other saving messages, in other religions. Again he tells us this with a twist of humor: "The longer I have lived, the more I have come to like plurals. I have grown increasingly suspicious of singulars. I have come to question the incessant theological urge toward oneness."[lii]

The "No-other" Language of the New Testament

Such a dialogical Christology, fully committed to the following of and witnessing to Jesus the Christ and yet open to what others may have to witness to us, is evident in Stendahl's well-known exegesis of what we might call the "no-other zingers" in the New Testament. Two of the top contenders are Act. 4:12: "There is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved,' and John 14:6: "No one comes to the Father except through me."

I had the privilege of being in the chapel of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, in October, 1979 when Dr. Stendahl delivered his "Notes for Three Biblical Studies" on these exclusivist texts. I've been quoting him every since.[liii]

The hermeneutical lens through which he approaches these exclusive-sounding, one and only pronouncements is to understand them *not* as "dogmatic" or "propositional" or philosophical language intending to give us "absolute" knowledge about the nature of Jesus or the structures of the universe. Rather, these texts are to be felt and dealt with as beautiful and powerful examples of "… confessional and liturgical and doxological language … a kind of caressing language by which we express our devotion with abandon and joy."[liv]

The intent of this caressing or love language is to say something positive about Jesus and about the way he had transformed the lives of his disciples and could transform the lives of others. The intent of this language was not to say something negative about Buddha, or any other religious leader or religion. Stendahl points out the obvious: "No where in these chapters [Acts 2-4) enter any questions about gentile gods, gentile cults, or gentile religion. Thus there is no way of knowing whether Luke, who wrote this, would

consider this saying relevant to a discussion on Buddhism – if he knew anything about Buddhism, which is most doubtful."[lv]

Therefore, "…Acts 4:12 is not a good basis for an absolute claim in an absolute sense, but … it is a natural confession growing out of the faith, growing out of the experience of gratitude …Here is a confession, not a proposition. It is a witness,… not…an argument..."[lvi]

Stendahl is therefore urging us not to discard such "one and only" confessional language but to use it as "*home language*" – within our own communities as "the language of prayer, worship, and doxology." It is not language to be used in our relationships with friends whose confessional or love language is directed to Muhammad or Buddha or Krishna.[lvii] The language that I use at a candlelight dinner at home when I tell my wife she is the most beautiful woman in the world, I would not use at a social dinner with friends and their partners.

These passages from the New Testament which sound so exclusive of others are really calls to what Stendahl terms "faithful particularity."[lviii] They summon us to be faithful to the particular Jesus and his message, to live it out in our lives and let others know about it. But such faithful particularity in no way excludes, indeed it welcomes, the example and witness of "faithful particularities" in other religions.

The particularity of Jesus and the Universality of the Spirit

There is another aspect of what I'm calling Stendahl's seminal dialogical Christology that, as far as I can tell, was one of the smallest of seeds that he planted. Today, however, it is fast growing into one of the most fecund new developments in the theology of religions. I'm referring to what is being

called a "pneumatological theology of religions" that is based on a "Spirit Christology."[lix]

In his little book *Energy for Life: Reflections on the Theme 'Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation*, which he wrote in preparation for the WCC Assembly in Canbera (1992), Stendahl foresaw the promising possibilities of taking the Holy Spirit more seriously in our efforts to understand and engage other religions.

He calls the Spirit the *energy* that animates not only the ecumenical churches of the WCC but also the "wider ecumenism." But in doing so, he happily warned, we are dealing with an "energy" that is active in other religions "in ways which cannot be controlled or manipulated by us."[lx] The Spirit, as the Gospel of John also warns, "blows where she will." We can't predict it. And we can't control it.

Stendahl goes on to implicitly remind us that we can't control this work of the Spirit in other religions even with our Christological categories. The Spirit may be up to things that, while they will not contradict what we know through Jesus, may well go beyond what we know in Jesus.

Insightfully and rather courageously, he reminds the churches of the West of the negative consequences that have resulted from the Latin church's insistence on the *Filioque* – that is, the West's insistence that the activity of the Spirit must proceed not only from the Father but also from the Son. Such a channeling of the Spirit, Stendahl confessed, has led him and many Western Christians "to believe that the Holy Spirit was 'only' conveyor and communicator of the gospel and its blessings." There was nothing more to convey and communicate outside of the gospel. So Stendahl concludes: "…the so-called *filioque*, added to the creed in the West in the Middle Ages .. far from being a case of theological hair-

splitting, became for me a reminder of how the church at times tends to be over-anxious not to allow the Spirit its free range."[lxi]

Again, suggestively and ahead of his times, Stendahl was urging Christians to "allow the Spirit her free range" as they engage other religions. If we do so, if we allow ourselves to be surprised by this free-ranging Spirit, we may discover aspects about what God is up to in creation, or how God is mending the world, that we do not know about in Christ and the gospel.

With such a Spirit-based approach to other religions, the rather esoteric and abstract theological musing about the inner life of the Trinity can become real for us in the interreligious dialogue: the Spirit who surprises us in what she is doing in other religions will "dance with" (the Greek Fathers called it *perichoresis)* what we know through the Word incarnate in Jesus. And this dialogical dance will challenge and enliven us all.

These seeds of a pneumatological theology of religions that Stendahl planted are being watered by contemporary theologians – and they are growing.

The Distinctive Particularity of Jesus

But although we must be ready for surprises from the universally free-ranging Spirit in other religions, we need to say more about what the Word incarnate in the particular Jesus has to offer in the meeting with other religious believers (and of course, also with non-believers). Here, in our final reflections, we take up this question: well, if God reveals God's self in particularities, what is the particular revelation in Jesus of Nazareth?

The biblical version of this question is: "Who do you say I am?" It's a question, of course, that can never be given a once-and-for-all, one-and-only answer. Rather, it's a question that will receive differing answers as it prods

and enriches the Christian community down through the ages and within differing cultures.

We must ask, then, what is the particular, the distinctive, message that we believe God is delivering in and through the Risen Christ, alive in his new body the Church? Or in our context of religious pluralism: what is the distinctive contribution that Christians must bring to the table of dialogue?

Please note, when I ask about a "distinctive contribution," I'm not asking for what will make Christianity better than or superior to other religions. No, I'm asking about what Christians have to bear witness to in order to be faithful to Jesus' message in our day and age. I'm asking not about what elevates Christians above others, but what distinguishes them among others.

Again, I believe that Krister Stendahl helps us answer that question. His was one of the earliest voices in North America and Europe to hear, and to corroborate with his scriptural expertise, the message coming from the liberation theologians of Latin America. With them, he recognized that the message and mission of Jesus were "distinguished" by his central concern for the Basileia, the Kingdom of God. With them, he affirmed that this kingdom was not just for the life to come in the next world or only for the spiritual needs in this world. Rather, "The kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, stands for a mended creation and people and things – a social, economic, ecological reality."

But Stendahl doesn't stop there. We are not yet touching the further distinguishing quality of Jesus' message and of his understanding of how God is mending the world. Stendahl, in this same passage, continues: "The kingdom with its justice is for the wronged and the oppressed; the little people who hunger and thirst for bread and justice; the peacemakers who are so easily liquidated."[lxii] Stendahl is locating the distinctiveness of Jesus and

of the Christian contribution to the interreligious dialogue in what liberation theologians have called – and what the WCC and the Vatican have echoed as – *the preferential option for the poor and marginalized.*

Here we have an understanding of the particularity of Jesus and of the Christian message that is based both on recent biblical scholarship about the historical Jesus and on the needs of a globalized world wracked by dehumanizing poverty due to economic disparity. Jesus, in his efforts to promote the Commonwealth of God, proclaimed God's love for all people, but also God's immediate love for those people who are being exploited by other people. This preferential love led him not only to take the side of "little people," but also to be executed and removed – "desaparacido" as Latin American campesinos put it – as one of them.

This, then, is the particular message of Jesus and his followers – a message that has universal urgency. If we want to talk about non-negotiables, maybe it would apply here. While Christians have much to learn about God and about spiritual practice from other religions, this is what they have to contribute to the conversation: that if anyone claims to have experienced God, or enlightenment, or Truth and it doesn't call them to work for justice, especially for those who have been marginalized, then something is missing in their religious experience. Such a strong claim can be, and must be, delivered humbly, sensitively, always non-violently. But it must be delivered. Otherwise, Christians aren't Christians.

I trust that we can conclude that what you knew at the start of these reflections you have been able to affirm even more appreciatively at their conclusion: Krister Stendahl was indeed a prophet – especially in his call for Christians to return to the path not taken in the early years of the churches.

It’s a path that will lead us beyond supersessionism and zero-sum games not only regarding Judaism but also regarding the other great religious traditions of humanity. But it is also a path on which we Christians will understand ourselves more deeply and follow the Way, the Truth, and the Life of Jesus more faithfully.

- ENDNOTES

[i] New York: Pantheon Books, 2000.
[ii]
[iii] Non Zero, 5
[iv] Wright NYT 8.23
[v] NZ 252
[vi] Evolution of God 411, 428.
[vii] Wright, NYT Aug 23
[viii] Wright EG 427
[ix] NZ 326
[x] NZ 207
[xi] Wright NZ 334
[xii] EG 427
[xiii] EG, 427; see also 430
[xiv] EG 129, see also 159.
[xv] EG 431
[xvi] Orbis, 2005.
[xvii] John V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue," in *Mission Trends No. 5: Faith Meets Faith.* Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky, eds. NY: Paulist, 1981, 128-54.
[xviii] Qumran 134
[xix] Ibid 136
[xx] Ibid 137 (Emphasis mine)
[xxi] "God's Minorities"
[xxii] Lordship 243; See also God's Minorities
[xxiii] Qumran, 142
[xxiv] Qumran 138
[xxv] Judaism and Xtnty II, 219-20.
[xxvi] Judaism & Xtnty II, 224
[xxvii] Christ's Lordship, 233. I wish to thank my good friend Steven Weiss, who with his wife Abby was a good friend of Krister Stendahl, for pointing out this reference to me.
[xxviii] Judaism and Xtnty II, 224
[xxix] Qumran, 136
[xxx] Loc cit.
[xxxi] Paul among Jews and G, 37. Recent scholarship has confirmed Standahl's image of a road not taken. "We would argue that for social and historical reasons, and not for any theological inevitability, the possibility of two covenantal modalities was an option that was not pursued." (Philip Cunningham, 79 In MS of Jesus and the Jewish People, 40) John Pawlikowski, echoing Cardinal Martini, speaks of an unnecessary "schism" between Christianity and Judaism that now confronts us with "a certain mandate to heal the rupture." (Nostra Aetate at 40, 12) These scholars actually offer a confirming correction to Stendahl's assertion that the path was not taken. It was taken, at least for a while. For a number of centuries, the early Christian church self-consciously existed "together with Judaism." "This sense of a separate Christian identity apart from Judaism only emerged gradually well after his [Jesus'] death. We now are aware as a result of the research of scholars such as Robert

Wilken, Wayne Meeks, Alan Segal and Anthony Saldarini that this development took several centuries to mature. Evidence now exists for regular Christian participation in Jewish worship, particularly in the East, during the second and third centuries and, in a few places, even into the fourth and fifth centuries." Pawlikowski, NA at 40, p. 11

[xxxii] All Minorities (emphasis mine)
[xxxiii] Energy 50
[xxxiv] All Minorities (emphasis mine)
[xxxv] Energy 50 (emphasis mine)
[xxxvi] References from the FABC
[xxxvii] Lordship 235
[xxxviii] Ibid 236
[xxxix] Reference to Cobb
[xl] All Minorities
[xli] I've tried to describe the nature and implications of such a Kingdom-centered or "globally responsible" dialogue in *One Earth Many Religions.*
[xlii] Reference to Bosch and to Bevans.
[xliii] Why I love the Bible, 6

[xliv] All Minorities
[xlv] Ibid.
[xlvi] Lordship 242; Energy 48
[xlvii] All Minorities 5
[xlviii] World Community 60-61
[xlix] Christian Witness and the Jewish People, 52
[l] Reference for Hick
[li] I try to expand on this kind of a dialogical Christology in *Jesus and the Other Names.*
[lii] Meanings, 1
[liii] Originally in *No Other Name?*
[liv] All Minorities 2; Lordship 239
[lv] Lordship 238; see also "in No Other Name," in *Christian Witneess and the Jewish People,* 49
[lvi] Lordship 240. Stendahl's judges as "just not apropos" the way Christians have used John 14:6 to denigrate and reject other religions: "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." All Minorities 3
[lvii] All Minorities 2
[lviii] Qumran 140-41
[lix] A good example of such a proposed Spirit Christology is Roger Haight….. One of the most prolific proponents of a Spirit-based theology of religions is the Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong in ……
[lx] Energy 49

[lxi] Ibid. vii-viii.
[lxii] Lordship 235