

In Memory of Krister Stendahl on his Idea of “Holy Envy”

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It is always an honour to be invited to the Shalom Hartman Institute, but tonight, it is even greater a pleasure and privilege to be on this panel, the topic of which is Krister Stendahl. Krister was a person who meant so much to me, and since the beginning of this month I serve as the first Krister Stendahl Professor at the Swedish Theological Institute here in Jerusalem, an institution which, in turn, meant so much to Krister.

When preparing this speech, I found his first letter, sent to me from Jerusalem only a few weeks before my ordination – addressed to “Sacri Ministerii Candidatus” –, and his very last letter sent from Nantucket, the windswept island outside Boston, a letter which he sent after having read my latest book.

In letters and conversations, in books and speeches, Krister taught me how necessary it is for religious studies scholars to be members of, what he called, the Public Health Department. You have to know, so to speak, “the rough neighbourhoods” of your own religious tradition. Christians need to know more about how religion has been used against people: against women, against African-Americans, and against the Jewish people, just to take a few examples.

In order to oppose religious triumphalism, he pleaded for the concept of “Holy Envy”, which I would like to define as the willingness to discern, to recognize and to celebrate what is good, beautiful and attractive in other religious traditions – and to let it remain what it is, i.e., something which is holy but which wholly belongs to the other. “Holy envy rejoices in the beauty of the others”. He said: “We will never have good [i.e., interreligious] relations without an element of holy envy. Find something in the Other that is beautiful and meaningful and that tells you something about God. You are not called upon to absorb it or to pass judgment on it.”

Tonight, I would like to go two steps further. First, Krister was a person who not only talked about holy envy but also someone who created Holy Envy within us who met him, who listened to him, and who worked with him. He was a person who generated trust.

I was deeply, deeply moved when I heard what Susannah Heschel said at Krister's Memorial Service. After having described the mayhem, the agony and the suffering of the Jewish people during the *Shoah*, she said "and after the war God send us Krister Stendahl."

So Krister not only spoke about the concept of "Holy Envy", he also had a most remarkable gift to help other people see what he meant by this, to such an extent that a member of the Heschel family, stemming from the European continent, could say such a thing about this Christian clergyman, who was a Lutheran and a European New Testament scholar: "and after the war God send us Krister Stendahl."

Indeed, in the beginning he was a New Testament scholar, but more and more he moved in the direction of Theology of Religions. I am reminded of what Job says: *ba-chuts lo-jalinger, delataj la-orach eftach* ("The stranger did not lodge outside, I opened my doors to the guest"; Job 31:32). More and more, he addressed the issue of theological hospitality to those who are "outside" his own theological tradition, a hospitality which should be no lesser than Job's hospitality. I guess all of us who met him heard him repeating his favourite question: "how can I [i.e., as a Christian] sing my song to Jesus without telling negative stories about others?" Two observations: First, religious conviction for Krister was not a zero-sum game, in which your loss is my gain. He always emphasized that religion must not be at other peoples' expense. Christians should not seek to find a dichotomy between a Christian type of unique love which is better than other people's love. Secondly, his expression "sing my song" highlights to what kind of genre religion actually belongs. It is not doctrinal fencing but devotion. Is it not a Eurovision Song Contest, with a complicated procedure of voting, but it is a song of praise. If someone exclaims "there is no woman on earth who is as beautiful as my wife", there is no man on this planet who is as wonderful as my husband", the appropriate reaction is not "How do you know that?" "Have you been knocking all the doors in every city, in every country?"

I have already mentioned that he began as a biblical scholar – and, indeed, he remained a biblical interpreter, throughout his life. Indeed, his last article was called "Why I Love the Bible: Beyond Distinctions of Intellect and Spirit, an Ever-Transforming Affair of the Heart". But by and by, he was exploring new angles of religious pluralism. He often returned to the thirteenth chapter in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians: *hê agapê ... ou zêtei ta heautês*, which is sometimes translated as "love is not selfish". But Krister wanted to understand it more literally: "love does not seek its own", i.e., love yearns for what is *different*, it longs for *pluralism*. He called this understanding "the Corinthian Model": a Christian theology of religion which recognizes and integrates pluralism and difference. That is another way to

express what he meant by “holy envy”. Love – which Paul, by the way, says is greater than knowledge, hope and faith – yearns for what is different. Holiness is envious of the beauty of the other – but still lets the other remain what he is, remain what she is. Religious curiosity must not become the servant of religious arrogance.

Secondly, “holy envy” is what you experience when you meet “the Other”. But you have to transform this experience into theological discourse. In other words, how do we provide theological space for the Other? How is my faith influenced by this encounter? Of all the texts he wrote there is one which has meant more than the other books and articles. This text is to me even more important than his *tour de force* article on Paul and the introspective conscience, which was a most influential text focusing on the individualistic and problematic reading of Paul’s epistles in the West, in spite of the importance of this article and in spite of the fact that his – and my – Lutheran heritage of sin and grace has governed so much of Pauline exegesis.

The text of which I am thinking is more important than his article on women and ordination, published as early as in 1958; it is more important than his article on contemporary biblical theology in the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, published in 1962, in which he underlined that we have to separate what biblical texts “meant” (his time as a scholar at Uppsala University in Sweden) from what they “mean” (his focus at Harvard). The text is more important than his rich book on pneumatology called *Energy for Life: Reflections on a Theme. “Come, Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation”*, on the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit, which was written for the World Council of Churches.

All these texts are, no doubt, paradigmatic, but tonight I am thinking of another text. It is a short article which was discussed fiercely in Sweden in the beginning of the 1980’s, when I was still a pupil at a Swedish *Gymnasium*, i.e., still at high school. It was my very first encounter with Krister’s theology and his discourse. I am afraid that some Swedes never really understood what the bishop of Stockholm wanted to convey in his article, but I trust that you are more open-minded than we were in those days. In an interview, many years later, he said: “It was my Waterloo!” The title of the article is “Immortality Is Too Much and Too Little”, and it was published in his volume *Meanings: The Bible as a Document and as Guide*. In this article he pointed out that, according to the biblical texts, immortality is not in inherent quality of human beings. When the word *athanasia* (“immortality”) is used in the New Testament, it is when an author states that “God alone is immortal” (1 Tim. 6.16). Krister wanted to emphasize that, according to the biblical perspective, human beings are mortal, and

that belief in resurrection is – and should be – a theocentric notion. It is not a matter of humans being immortal *per se*, but of a powerful God who resurrects people.

A cantata sung at Krister’s memorial service reminded those present that people are like grass. Anna Langenfeld, Krister’s daughter, said in her speech: “And, yes, father was like grass—very tall grass. He was tall and graceful, even though his body tried to bend him to be otherwise.”

We are all like grass; not as tall and not as graceful, but we are all like grass. We live for a short time on Earth, and when our days are over, we are no more (See Ps. 103.15f.). And when I now quote the concluding paragraph, I am convinced that all of you who had the privilege to meet Krister and hear him speak will recognize his way of expressing himself, always emphasising God’s greatness, human humbleness, and also the limits of our epistemology:

Sisters and brothers, we are very small but we are small in the hands of God. [...] To me it seems that if God is God, I neither care for nor worry about the hereafter; I celebrate the coming of the kingdom by singing hymns and by caressing with words the heaven with angels and saints and the messianic banquet with light and joy and glory. And I know that I paint, but I like to paint and I paint out of love and hope and faith. But when all is said and done I pray that the evil I have put into the world will not cause others to suffer too much, and that my little life will fit somehow into God’s plan for the kingdom. The rest I leave. May his kingdom come.

Vila i frid, Krister; rest in peace!