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SPECIAL REPORT

The Future of Religion And Religion Of The Future

Arthur Krentz

Dr. Krister Stendahl, a distinguished New Testament scholar and Dean of the Harvard University Divinity School, delivered the 1979 Luther Lecture at Luther University College in Regina. The lecture series sponsored by Luther University College of the University of Regina with the generous assistance of the Lutheran Life Insurance Society of Canada, attempts to provide a stimulating contribution to the life of the church, the university and the general community. His probing and provocative topic was "The Future of Religion and Religion of the Future," and the following is an account of his timely address.

"Religion is here to stay," declared Dr. Stendahl. Religion has a future, although there was a time when some thought that it did not — that it would disappear or be forgotten. Today thoughtful people no longer worry about whether religion has a future but rather about what kind of future it will have; whether it will be a beneficial force rather than a detrimental one.

People often think, especially about their own religious tradition, that religion is a power which is only for good, failing to recognize that religion and each religious tradition has "terrible things on its conscience." Religion is a force that has potential for good as well as evil and is likened by Dr. Stendahl to atomic power, a comparison which draws attention to the danger of "fallout" as well as the potential of atomic energy for peaceful purposes. In considering a religion and any religious tradition one must have regard for its potential for dangerous "fallout" or evil as well as the potential for positive benefit or good.

Religion has a future as a powerful force. The challenge posed by Dr. Stendahl asks how human beings can best learn to live with the power of religious faith in their own life and in community? Without emasculating the power of religion, how it is possible to have it remain a force that is able to renew, redeem and restore the lives of people together?

In speaking about religion and any religious tradition, Dr. Stendahl pointed out that one must be prepared to think of religion as changing and not as a fixed identity. There is identity and continuity in religion, but this is grasped most significantly in terms of the people of a religious community and not primarily in terms of

the continuity of a set of ideas. For example, "Christianity," a designation that does not occur in the Bible, best describes, not an "ism" or set of abstractions, but the church or the faithful people. Thus the Scriptures or the traditions of a religion such as Christianity or Judaism are what remain of the more fundamental "reflection and experience of revelation, of insight, and wisdom of a people."

Dr. Stendahl compares the consideration of religion as an "ism", a set of abstractions, or a system, rather than the people of a religious tradition, to examining the lifeless skin shed by a snake, rather than the living thing, the snake itself, that leaves its skin behind and merrily crawls on its way. The heartland of religion is to be found in the living community and that is the reason that religions that are alive are changing, because living religions are committed, not to a system, but to a people and, in the case of Christianity, to the person of Jesus as God's Son.

If we think of religion as "symbol systems, models, images of reality to relate to the world in which we find ourselves," this does not mean that religious traditions are fixed and changeless. According to Dr. Stendahl the genuine mark of a religious person is the recognition that everything is possible for God, which means that the symbol systems of the religious person must remain "open," since God can never be completely "caught" or "boxed in" by the language or symbol system that we use to speak of God. The radical monotheism that has been inherited from Israel and reflected in other religions proclaims that God alone is Absolute. This means that our ideas and descriptions of God are not in themselves absolute and to treat them as such would be to accept idols given by the mind rather than the hand.

But what of religion in the future? For Dr. Stendahl the decisive issue for the future of religion is how faith and belief are related to power. Historically religions have often been joined to the values of a particular society or state. Christianity, for example, was joined to the power of the state under the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 3rd century A.D. In this way Christianity was a source of the social "glue" and the moral sanctions for western society. This type of majority religion wedded to the power of the state will not continue in the future, particularly since Christianity, which is rapidly becoming a minority religion in the world, can no longer continue to provide the moral sanctions and spiritual authority to political states. Christianity must disassociate itself from the exercise of power over others and being powerful.

To understand religion properly in the future means that we can no longer be naive about power. Out of its roots in Israel, Christianity must be seen as a movement which liberates, but which liberates the powerless and not the powerful. The primary paradigm of this liberation is the Exodus of Israel and for the Christian this reaches its highest expression in the festival of Easter. Liberation represents God's throwing in His lot with those in trouble and tipping the scales in favor of the oppressed and powerless.

In different parts of our world today and among different groups of people we discover different time-tables regarding the future role and function of religion. This is particularly true in countries outside of Europe and North America in which religion will emerge as a political force. The founding of Islamic states and the recent developments in Iran expresses an impulse in which religion is a power for the "so-called oppressed." Such developments are fraught with dangers, but there is no reason to expect that each religion will carry out its experiment with power on the

same time-table.

For many in North America the task and challenge will be to divest ourselves of power, whether in the form of living standards or feelings of superiority. The task of religion in the future will be to find a way to live with other people and with other faiths. Perhaps the best way to accomplish this is by returning to the spirit of the Old Testament command which declares, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour." This commandment is particularly relevant for religious persons, since, according to Dr. Stendahl, about 95% of what one person says about another person's religion involves a breach of that commandment.

The religious person tends to defend his own faith in God, as though God needed defending, by attacking the religion or faith of another. This is done by picturing the faith or religion of another person in ways that the other person would not recognize as true. Or he tends to picture his own religion in an ideal form and contrast this ideal with the actual manifestations of the religion of another person. Thus, a Christian may be led to think that he is honouring God by giving a negative picture of Judaism, Islam, or some other religion. The challenge for religion in the future will be to find ways of living together with people of other faiths without falsifying the faith they hold. This means divesting oneself of the power of "self-serving superiority."

Religion in the future must become a sensitizing and prompting power rather than a provider of security. It must be open to possibility like an Abraham who ventures out, not knowing where he is going. In Christianity the figure of this sensitizing power is the Holy Spirit who is a prompter and not a lackey for the secure.

In the future religion will be very varied, within Canada and the United States, and from land to land. The many varieties of religious manifestations in the world does not mean that they will all be good or operating on the same time-tables. The key to understanding religious manifestations, however, will be found in the issue of power. For Christians confessing the centrality of Jesus Christ, and open to the sensitizing power of religion, will not entail that they be negative about other religions. Christians need to think through what it means to exist side by side with people of other religions. That will be one of the hardest lessons for Christians to learn in the near future.