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Teaching is not Instruction: A Jewish Perspective on Teaching Religion in the Light of Krister Stendahl's Three Rules of Religious Understanding

Dow Marmur¹

Teaching as Celebration

Religion when caught is usually more effective and lasting than when it's only taught. Few if any of us are committed to our religious tradition because of what we've read and studied. More likely we became women and men of faith because of the way we were brought up; most imbibe religion, literally, with their mothers' milk. We affirm God by emulating those who believe in God and try to follow God's bidding, especially parents, teachers, and other dominant figures; the grandmother is often a strong influence.

Only rarely, if ever, are people religious as a result of an intellectual process. More often, we've become religious as a result of personal experiences or personal encounters, either positive and overwhelming or, less frequently but not that unusually, so negative that we sought the opposite. Religious people who have not been shaped by a religious tradition may have got there as a protest against the aridity of their earlier life. I'm one of them.

Only after the initial experience did instruction become important to me. It strengthened me in my resolve and provided the theoretical and practical wherewithal to enable me to express myself as a believer in words and, even more important, in deeds. But even then, role models mattered more than books, teachers more than teachings.

By all accounts, academic teaching on its own does little, if anything, for religious experience or religious practice. At best it's only teaching *about* religion or aspects of it, like history or philosophy – not instruction *in* religion.

So where does interfaith education stand in this scheme of things? Instruction about how to better express and practise our religious commitment rarely seems to bring individuals to include concern for and interest in other faith traditions. Rather, it often feeds our exclusivity by persuading us, whether explicitly or implicitly, of the superiority of our own faith when compared to others. And it's not often that an academic understanding of religion moves us to engage in active participation in interfaith work.

For that something else is needed. I'd like to call it celebration of the other and hope that I can explain what I mean. Which brings me to Krister Stendahl.

Religious Pluralism

The late Krister Stendahl (1921–2008), former Dean of Divinity at Harvard and for a time Church of Sweden (Lutheran) Bishop of Stockholm, is one of the most persuasive influences on those who seek to understand themselves when reaching out beyond their own

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religious tradition while at the same time strengthening and enriching their commitment to that tradition. Like other liberal religionists, in the Jewish world and elsewhere, his testimony has helped me in my interfaith work. As someone brought up in Stendahl's native Sweden I've an added interest in his life and work. I even had the privilege once to share a platform with him.

By all accounts, Stendahl didn't get his religion from home. His obituary in the *New York Times* quoted his widow as saying that "the family didn't attend church, because, his father explained, the building was 'very drafty.'" She added that part of his teenage rebellion was to go to church and that his faith "grew out of extremely painful arthritis in his spine that started when he was 16 or 17."²

It's Stendahl's chronic pain that is said to have informed his religious readings. According to the same obituary, it helped him to understand not only the pain of Jesus but also how to argue with God out of his own suffering, which he found was an important component of Jewish tradition in general and biblical tradition in particular.

The classical text about arguing with God is, of course, Genesis 18 where Abraham, the father of the three monotheistic – Abrahamic – faiths, argues with God and pleads on behalf of the pagan and sinful citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah whom God intended to punish by destruction. The passage is familiar, yet worthy of repetition in this context because it reminds us that, even as we challenge God's decrees, commitment to God demands caring and protection of all God's creatures. Thus Abraham asks God almost impertinently,

Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that the innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?³

Perhaps it's this kind of relationship to God that helped Stendahl not only in his personal faith but also in developing his theology of religious pluralism. I'd like to refer to one of his essays as a starting point for my suggestion about how he's still our mentor when it comes to imparting interfaith understanding that goes beyond both conventional teaching and denominational instruction.

In an essay published in 1993 in the *Journal of Religious Pluralism*, he wrote that once Christians discover that they're not the self-evident majority, they should turn 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?"⁴ It's a question that many exponents of Christianity have asked Jews, including me. On one occasion, for example, the then-Anglican archbishop of Toronto invited me to speak to his clergy on how to survive as a diaspora. Trying to make a case for particularism I could have cited Stendahl, which alas I didn't then: "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."

Stendahl seems to regard appreciation of being a minority a necessary starting point for interfaith understanding and finds the roots of it in his reading of the Bible, the New

² Douglas Martin, "Krister Stendahl, 86, Ecumenical Bishop, Is Dead," *New York Times*, April 16, 1986, retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/16/us/16stendahl.html>

³ Genesis 18:23–25.

⁴ Krister Stendahl, "From God's Perspective We Are All Minorities," *Journal of Religious Pluralism* 2 (1993).

Testament no less than the Hebrew Scriptures. Hence this, the opening sentence of his essay: “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 relations among religions has usually been defined in terms of differences – one’s identity being defined by that which is different from the other.”

This prompted Stendahl to argue that universalist claims, as the opposite of particularist self-understanding, makes interfaith dialogue impossible. He wrote that “universalism is the ultimate arrogance in the realm of religion” because “it is by definition and unavoidably spiritual colonialism, spiritual imperialism.” And tolerance, according to Stendahl, won’t do. I quote again: “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.” For Stendahl, “universalism comes with power, Constantinian or otherwise.”

I understand him to be saying that the abstract and unrealistic idea that we are all the same is inimical to interfaith work. Our aim should rather be to recognize our particularity and with it our limitation and, therefore, reach out to the other. Hence pluralism, rather than unity. Those who speak of unity usually advocate the domination of their way over others; those who speak of pluralism recognize the legitimacy of others.

Not long ago I heard a young Indian Jewish woman whose family has strong links to a synagogue in Mumbai speak about her religious background. She told the audience that when she was growing up, members of many of the religions of India lived side by side and celebrated one another’s festivals. Thus Jews would mark Christmas, Christians would mark Passover and all would celebrate Diwali and other such occasions. She remembers no prejudice and no attempts by one group to try to convert the other. Each community would attend their own places of worship and identify with their particular religious tradition. It made for harmony, mutual understanding, and respect; it’s pluralism in action.

Stendahl’s Three Rules of Religious Understanding

These considerations bring us, I believe, to applying Stendahl’s oft-cited three rules for religious understanding to the education of young and old in religious pluralism that should be at the centre of all interfaith activity.

The first rule: *When you are trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.* Because religion is very much more testimony than analysis, only an adherent can honestly testify to it. If I’m to describe another religion I’m bound to do it from the point of view of my own and, therefore, invariably run the risk of misrepresenting my subject. You just have to look at the books on comparative religion written by an adherent of one religion to know what is meant.

One of my own most rewarding experiences has been teaching contemporary Jewish thought to Christian theology students. My aim was to help them understand the subject from inside, as it were – not to judge or evaluate, only to explain. I’ve also been fortunate to have been asked on several occasions to be the Jewish resource person accompanying groups of Christians visiting sites of religious relevance in Israel. Again, my aim is to help visitors to understand things from the inside.

The reward of both these activities has been the testimony of participants that their own faith and commitment to their own tradition have been deepened as a result of encounters with the other. Indeed, this seems to me the most lasting outcome of religious

pluralism as described here: my own faith is strengthened because of the testimony of the other. With this comes the observation that many of those who denigrate the religion of others usually have strong doubts about their own.

A man who had no doubts about his own was Rabbi Menachem Froman, who died in 2013. He was perhaps unique among rabbis for his efforts to establish contacts with Muslims. As a kind of obituary, his friend the journalist Yossi Klein Halevi wrote about him *inter alia*:

He taught me that, to make peace with the Muslim world, one needs not only to honor Islam but to love it – cherish its fearless heart, the power of its surrender, the wisdom of its frank confrontation with human transience.⁵

This brings me directly to Stendahl's second rule: *Don't compare your best to their worst*. One of several problems with letting an adherent of one religion describe the other is the temptation to break this rule. Too often people tend to stress only the best aspects of their own tradition while emphasizing the less attractive ones of the other. Even if it's not possible to get the adherent of the other to present her or his religion, according to Stendahl's first rule, it's still incumbent upon whoever presents a religion to compare like with like. By all accounts, Rabbi Froman did precisely that.

The alternative is a caricature of the other that often amounts to slander. Enmity between religions is often fueled by this kind of misrepresentation. I'll refrain from giving examples because, alas, we're all too familiar with them.

Stendahl's third rule is probably the most cited and the most difficult: *Leave room for "holy envy."* In his essay on religious pluralism from which I quoted earlier, Stendahl wrote that he likes to speak about "the Holy Envy: when we recognize something in the other tradition that is beautiful but is not ours, nor should we grab it or claim it." He concluded, "Holy envy rejoices in the beauty of the others."

The tendency to "grab it," as Stendahl put it, is, alas, all-pervasive. Even when we recognize something we like and accept in the other, our first impulse is to assume that it must come from us, never the other way around. In the days when I would welcome Christian groups to synagogues where I served I would usually open a Torah Scroll to show the visitors what it looked like. According to Stendahl's second rule, the scroll would be open on the passage in the book of Leviticus, *v'ahavta l're'acha kamocho*, "Love your neighbour – he is like you."⁶ Many a visitor had to be persuaded that I hadn't inserted the passage from the New Testament in order to claim this teaching for my own tradition.

Conclusion

Even if we aren't in a position to apply Stendahl's first rule to let the adherent of each religion teach adherents of the other about it, we can still apply the two others and thus make religious pluralism a reality that in no way diminishes my own faith but strengthens it. To give up the claim of universalism doesn't reduce the claim to the truth of my religion but asserts that the Truth (capital *T*) is larger than that of any one tradition.

⁵ *Jerusalem Post*, March 8, 2013.

⁶ Leviticus 19:18.

My own tradition accepts that this Truth is only God's. God's seal, so a Jewish teaching has it, consists of the first, the middle, and the final letter of the Hebrew alphabet: *aleph*, *mem*, and *tav*. Together they form the word *emet*, truth. All we can do is to approximate that Truth as best we can. Affirming one another as equals and learning from the best each of us has to offer is the best way I know of doing precisely that.