

# CHRISTIANITY AND THE RELIGIONS: A ZERO-SUM GAME? RECLAIMING "THE PATH NOT TAKEN" AND THE LEGACY OF KRISTER STENDAHL\*

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## PRECIS

Robert Wright, in his recent book, *The Evolution of God*, posed a sobering challenge for all religions: In our economically and geopolitically globalized world, religions, together with nations, are being challenged to move from a "zero-sum" (win-lose) to a "non-zero-sum" (win-win) relationship. For Christians, that means that they must lay aside past claims to be the one religion meant to replace or fulfill all others. To lay out his case that Christians are able to take up Wright's challenge, the author draws from the legacy of Krister Stendahl (d. 2008), New Testament scholar, former dean of Harvard Divinity School, and Lutheran bishop of Stockholm. This essay unfolds in three steps: (1) a summary of Wright's challenge to all religions; (2) Stendahl's refocusing of that challenge as an opportunity to take a path that Christian churches could have taken but did not in the first century of their existence—the path beyond supersessionism; and (3) an unpacking of the ecclesiological, missiological, and christological components of Stendahl's path toward a non-zero-sum (or a nonsupersessionist) theology of religions.

### *1. Non-Zero: The Logic of Human Destiny*

Acclaimed journalist and scholar of natural science, anthropology, and religious history, Robert Wright, in his richly awarded book, *Nonzero: The Logic of*

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*Human Destiny*,<sup>1</sup> and in his sequential, recently released *The Evolution of God*,<sup>2</sup> has been making a rather simple argument that he supports with a broad array of biological, anthropological, and historical data. In the early pages of *Nonzero*, he summarized 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."<sup>3</sup> Or in an op-ed piece in the Sunday *New York Times* of August 23, 2009, he stated crisply: ". . . non-zero-sum dynamics . . . are part of our universe."<sup>4</sup>

Through a broad and wary analysis of both cultural and biological evolution, Wright has made an engaging and persuasive case that the evident movement that we call evolution—"[f]rom alpha to omega, from the first primordial chromosome on up to the first human beings"<sup>5</sup>—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 has 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 put it, "interdependence is just another name for non-zero-sumness."<sup>6</sup> He marveled, almost like a theologian: "That's the magical thing about non-zero-sumness; it translates rational selfishness into the welfare of others."<sup>7</sup> He called this dynamic, on the human level, a natural "moral sense." "[E]volutionary 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."<sup>8</sup>

### A. A Threshold

At the end of his two books, Wright somewhat apologetically removed his journalist's or scientist's hat and uncomfortably donned 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 interde-

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\*The original form of this essay was given as the first of the "Krister Stendahl Memorial Lectures" in Stockholm, Sweden, on October 13, 2009.

<sup>1</sup>Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2009).

<sup>3</sup>Wright, *Nonzero*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Wright, "A Grand Bargain over Evolution," *New York Times*, August 23, 2009.

<sup>5</sup>Wright, *Nonzero*, p. 252.

<sup>6</sup>Wright, *Evolution of God*, p. 411.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 428.

<sup>8</sup>Wright, "Grand Bargain."

pendence 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."<sup>9</sup>

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 its ultimate source."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it *has to thrive* without zero-sumness. Collaboration *must* replace conflict. If it does not, it is not going to be a matter of one tribe's 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 do not go forward. Wright has posed 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."<sup>11</sup> On the very last page of *Nonzero*, 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."<sup>12</sup>

## B. 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 *The Evolution of God*, he focused on the three Abrahamic religions, showing 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 Deity who calls God's followers to a universal compassion not just for their other 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 it does not go unabated. This expansion is religion at its best."<sup>13</sup>

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 really 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."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Wright, *Evolution of God*, p. 427.

<sup>10</sup>Wright, *Nonzero*, p. 326.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>13</sup>Wright, *Evolution of God*, p. 427.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.; see also p. 430.

But, Wright has suggested—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, which so easily becomes violence. As Wright trenchantly observed: “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.”<sup>15</sup>

This assertion of 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; 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, then the Abrahamic religions are in a sorry state, for as Wright has also accurately observed, “Among the things Muslims, Christians, and Jews have had in common over the years is a tendency to exaggerate their past specialness.”<sup>16</sup>

## *II. Can Christianity Move to a Non-Zero-Sum Understanding of Itself and Other Religions?*

So, the question we face today—and the question that, amazingly, Stendahl already posed back in the 1960’s and 1970’s—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? Or, Stendahl formulated the question for his times this way: Is it possible for Christians to abandon their *supersessionist* claims and affirm the ongoing validity not only of the Jewish religion but also of other religions?

### A. The Impossibility of Superseding Supersessionism

A large number of Christians would respond that such a move beyond supersessionism and zero-sum is fundamentally impossible. In my book, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*,<sup>17</sup> I tried 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

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 129; see also p. 159.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 431.

<sup>17</sup>Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

all the Christians of the world had to vote which theological party they adhered to, the majority, I reluctantly pointed out, would cast their ballots for either the Replacement (Exclusivist) or the Fulfillment (Inclusivist) parties. For Catholics, any theologian who tries to move beyond the Fulfillment Model is going to have problems with either pope or bishops.<sup>18</sup>

For both of 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. It is 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. 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 Americans to give up baseball. It is 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*.<sup>19</sup> 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.

## B. Stendahl: Christianity Needs a New Departure Point

What I am calling the legacy of Stendahl would challenge these declared nonnegotiables of Christianity. 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 Wright, as the global and life-threatening dangers of zero-sum religious claims of final superiority.

For Stendahl the dangers, indeed the evils, of supersessionist or non-zero claims have been 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.”<sup>20</sup> “. . . [T]he supersessionist drive,” Stendahl reminded his fellow believers, has led religious people “into adversarial patterns where the younger had to trump and trounce the older.”<sup>21</sup> He

<sup>18</sup>Examples include: Roger Haight, S.J.; Jacques Dupuis, S.J.; Michael Amaladoss, S.J.; Jon Sobrino, S.J.; Peter Phan; Tisa Balasuriya, O.M.I.; and Jacob Kavunkel, S.V.D. The Vatican has moved against only priests or religious, over whom it has juridical power.

<sup>19</sup>John V. Taylor, “The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue,” in Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, eds., *Mission Trends No. 5: Faith Meets Faith* (New York: Paulist Press; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 128–154.

<sup>20</sup>Kristen Stendahl, “Qumran and Supersessionism—and the Road Not Taken,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, N.S. vol. 19, no. 2 (1998), p. 134.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 136.

provided examples of the workings of supersessionism that expand its dangers well beyond the perils 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 both 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.*<sup>22</sup>

Stendahl described 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.”<sup>23</sup> This, according to Stendahl, is what so upset St. Paul among the first Christians of Rome—“their attitude of superiority”<sup>24</sup> 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 gave 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.”<sup>25</sup>

Stendahl summarized the problem of supersessionism: “The road taken, the road of supersessionism, has proven to be a dead end, even a road to death.”<sup>26</sup> Further, “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?”<sup>27</sup>

Note that Stendahl defined supersessionism not just as an ethical issue but as a “serious theological problem.” If we are going to avoid “negating” or “demonizing” others, we are going to have to do some serious, difficult, unsettling theological reconstruction. Such reconstruction, he continued, may have to do with items we thought were “nonnegotiables.” Stendahl was adamant that we cannot blame our mistreatment of Jews on a few bad Christian apples. Rather, there may be some bad *theological or doctrinal* 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

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 137; my emphasis.

<sup>23</sup>Krister Stendahl, “From God’s Perspective We Are All Minorities,” *The Journal of Religious Pluralism*, vol. 2 (1993); available at <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=783>.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>Krister Stendahl, *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 243.

<sup>26</sup>Stendahl, “Qumran,” p. 142.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 138.

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.<sup>28</sup>

He concluded, tersely but pointedly: “It is clear to me that Christian theology needs a new departure.”<sup>29</sup> Since Jesus Christ is the point of departure, the starting point, for all Christian theology, Stendahl was 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.”<sup>30</sup>

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 that I think will enable us to sing along with him. The title of his song is “The Path Not Taken.” The three verses deal with ecclesiology, missiology, and Christology.

### *III. Stendahl's New Song: "The Path Not Taken"*

#### **A. The Path Not Taken Then Can Be Taken Now**

In his 1967 article “Judaism and Christianity,” Stendahl announced 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.<sup>31</sup>

What is this “lost alternative” that we can now try to reclaim? Stendahl described it as a “benevolent typology”<sup>32</sup> that 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

<sup>28</sup>Stendahl, *Meanings*, pp. 219–220.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>32</sup>Stendahl, “Qumran,” p. 136.

what was broken, even restoring the *imago dei* in which humanity had been created."<sup>33</sup>

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 suggested that the early church could have looked upon itself as a "Judaism for Gentiles."<sup>34</sup> Why was this nonsupersessionist road not taken? That, as they say, is a long story, one that has since been investigated and described more extensively than 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 stated that the conversation with Judaism that Paul was working out in Rom. 9–11 "was broken off mainly by Christian expansion and superiority feelings."<sup>35</sup>

If Stendahl is especially known as a pioneer pointing to and exploring this path not taken toward 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 led to the denigration and exploitation of Judaism by Christians has also been extended throughout church history, with equally negative effects, to other religions. He boldly contended, at a time when such contentions were rare, "that we have valid reasons to extend . . . the Jewish-Christian . . . model of Paul's *toward interreligious attitudes in general*."<sup>36</sup> 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."<sup>37</sup> 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.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 37. Recent scholarship has confirmed Stendahl'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 A. Cunningham and Didier Pollefeyt, "The Triune One, the Incarnate *Logos*, and Israel's Covenantal Life," paper given at the "Jesus and the Jewish People" Conference 4 at the Swedish Theological Institute, Jerusalem, June 9–12, 2009). John Pawlikowski, echoing Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, spoke of an unnecessary "schism" between Christianity and Judaism that now confronts us with "a certain mandate to heal the rupture" (John Pawlikowski, "*Nostra Aetate* at Forty: Where Has It Brought Us in Catholic-Jewish Relations?" paper given at the International Conference, "*Nostra Aetate* Today," Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, September 26, 2005). 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, "*Nostra Aetate* at Forty").

<sup>36</sup>Stendahl, "From God's Perspective"; my emphasis.

<sup>37</sup>Krister Stendahl, *Energy for Life: Reflections on a Theme, "Come, Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation"* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), p. 50



This is the theological challenge of Stendahl that, at the beginning of my research for this essay, I wanted to compare with 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 beaten me to it. In making his appeal that Christians supersede supersessionism not just toward Jews but also toward Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus, Stendahl himself described 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."<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

So, 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.

For many Christians, then and still today, questions remain: Just how did 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 am calling three key stanzas of Stendahl's song. In them, I believe, he suggested a theology that can combine full commitment to Jesus with a full openness to others. In each of these three areas, Stendahl has offered 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 to be re-taken.

## B. 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*.<sup>40</sup> 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 has reminded us, the *Basileia tou Theou*. "Of all the some hundred themes that [Jesus] could have lifted up from the Jewish tradition . . . and of all the infinite number of themes available to him in his divine fulness, he chose this one: the kingdom."<sup>41</sup> Stendahl went on to note the dangers, the grave dan-

<sup>38</sup>Stendahl, "From God's Perspective"; my emphasis.

<sup>39</sup>Stendahl, *Energy for Life*, p. 50; my emphasis.

<sup>40</sup>Jacques Dupuis, "The Church, the Reign of God, and the 'Others,'" *Federation of Asian Bishops Conference Papers*, no. 67 (1993), pp. 1-30.

<sup>41</sup>Stendahl, *Meanings*, p. 235.

gers, of forgetting this: “[I]t 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.”<sup>42</sup>

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.”<sup>43</sup> With his typical imaginative humor, Stendahl described 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 toward the Kingdom and, by the way, what has the role of the Christians been in that?”<sup>44</sup>

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 *Basileia* as they are open to what they have to learn from other religions about achieving a world of greater compassion and justice.<sup>45</sup>

### C. 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 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.<sup>46</sup> Stendahl, however, has drawn 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 second, 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:

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>43</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., “Commonwealth and Empire,” in David Ray Griffin, John B. Cobb, Jr., Richard A. Falk, and Catherine Keller, *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: A Political, Economic, Religious Statement* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 137–150.

<sup>44</sup>Stendahl, “From God’s Perspective.”

<sup>45</sup>I have tried to describe the nature and implications of such a *Basileia*-centered or “globally responsible” dialogue in Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

<sup>46</sup>Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), chap. 9.

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 a humility . . .<sup>47</sup>

Drawing out the implications of this image, Stendahl concluded that not only is the church a minority but also 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.<sup>48</sup>

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."<sup>49</sup>

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*."<sup>50</sup>

So again, we see how Stendahl, in calling on Christians to make place for other religions, was 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—to how Stendahl's work both reflects and provokes contemporary efforts to work out what can be called a "dialogical Christology."

<sup>47</sup>Krister Stendahl, "Why I Love the Bible," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35 (Winter, 2007): 6.

<sup>48</sup>Stendahl, "From God's Perspective"; emphasis in original.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Stendahl, *Meanings*, p. 242; idem, *Energy for Life*, p. 48.

## D. Christology: The Uniqueness of Christ Calls Us to "Faithful Particularity"

### 1. Christ: A Particularity that Is Universal but Not Absolute

I cannot suggest that Stendahl developed a clearly packaged Christology. He did not. But I am suggesting that he has provided 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 understood the relation between *particularity* and *universality*.

What I am 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 held 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."<sup>51</sup> 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 warned against universals or universalizing the Christian message. What he meant with these admonitions was not to deny the universal relevance of Christ and the gospel; indeed, he endorsed a "Witness Model" that calls the church to witness to the ends of the earth. What he saw as dangerous was a "universal message," or a universal savior, that 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.<sup>52</sup>

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 of what is not absolute.<sup>53</sup>

I think that Stendahl would be very comfortable with the way John Hick de-

<sup>51</sup>Stendahl, "From God's Perspective."

<sup>52</sup>Krister Stendahl, "Towards World Community," in *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Six Years of Christian-Jewish Consultations—The Quest for World Community, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations and the World Council of Churches' Sub-unit on Dialogue with Peoples of Living Faiths and Ideologies) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), pp. 60–61.

<sup>53</sup>Krister Stendahl, "In No Other Name," in Arne Sovik, ed., *Christian Witness and the Jewish People: The Report of a Consultation Held under the Auspices of the Lutheran World Federation Department of Studies, Oslo, 1975* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1976), pp. 51–52.

scribes the divinity of Jesus: He is “*totus Deus*” but not “*totum Dei*”—totally divine but not the totality of Divinity.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> In fact, Stendahl suggested that he expected and welcomed other messengers with other saving messages, in other religions. Again he told 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.”<sup>56</sup>

## 2. *Reinterpreting Our Exclusivist Language: It Calls Us to a “Faithful Particularity”*

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 Second Testament. Two of the top contenders are Acts 4:12: “There is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved”; and Jn. 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 Stendahl delivered his “Notes for Three Biblical Studies” on these exclusivist texts. I have been quoting him ever since. The hermeneutical lens through which he approached 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.”<sup>57</sup>

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 pointed out the obvious: “Nowhere 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.”<sup>58</sup> 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

<sup>54</sup>John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), p. 159.

<sup>55</sup>I tried to expand on this kind of a dialogical Christology in Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

<sup>56</sup>Stendahl, *Meanings*, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup>Stendahl, “From God’s Perspective”; idem, *Meanings*, p. 239.

<sup>58</sup>Stendahl, *Meanings*, p. 238; see also idem, “In No Other Name,” p. 49.

faith, growing out of the experience of gratitude. . . . Here is a confession, not a proposition. It is a witness, . . . not . . . an argument."<sup>59</sup>

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."<sup>60</sup> 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. 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 Second Testament that sound so exclusive of others are really calls to what Stendahl terms "faithful particularity."<sup>61</sup> 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.

### 3. *Relating the Particularity of Jesus to the Universality of the Spirit*

There is another aspect of what I am calling Stendahl's germinal 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 am referring to what is being called a "pneumatological theology of religions" that is based on a "Spirit Christology."<sup>62</sup>

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 World Council of Churches Assembly in Canberra (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 W.C.C. but also the "wider ecumenism." 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."<sup>63</sup> The Spirit, as the Gospel of John also warns, "blows where she will." We cannot predict or control her.

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<sup>59</sup>Stendahl, *Meanings*, p. 240. Stendahl's judges as "just not apropos" the way Christians have used Jn. 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" (Stendahl, "From God's Perspective").

<sup>60</sup>Stendahl, "From God's Perspective."

<sup>61</sup>Stendahl, "Qumran," p. 140.

<sup>62</sup>For a coherent proposal for a Spirit Christology, see Roger Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 455–464. One of the most prolific proponents of a Spirit-based theology of religions is Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong's *Discerning the Spirits: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001).

<sup>63</sup>Stendahl, *Energy for Life*, p. 49.

Stendahl went on to remind us implicitly that we cannot 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 reminded 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. Stendahl concluded that “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.”<sup>64</sup>

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 musings 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 enlighten us all.

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

#### 4. Reclaiming the Distinctive Particularity of Jesus: A Voice for the Voiceless

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 nonbelievers). Here, in our final reflections, we take up this question: 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 is a question, of course, that can never be given a once-and-for-all, one-and-only answer. Rather, it is 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, 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 con-

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., pp. vii–viii.

tribution that Christians must bring to the table of dialogue? Please note, when I ask about a “distinctive contribution,” I am not asking for what will make Christianity better than or superior to other religions. Rather, I am asking about what Christians have to bear witness to in order to be faithful to Jesus’ message in our day and age. I am asking not about what elevates Christians above others, but what distinguishes them among others.

Again, I believe that Stendahl’s work 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 Reign of God. With them, he affirmed that this reign 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 with people and things—a social, economic, ecological reality.”<sup>65</sup>

But, Stendahl did not 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, continued: “The kingdom with its justice is for the wronged and the oppressed; the little people who hunger and thirst for bread and for justice; the peacemakers who are so easily liquidated.”<sup>66</sup> Stendahl located the distinctiveness of Jesus and of the Christian contribution to the interreligious dialogue in what liberation theologians have called—and what the W.C.C. 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 as well as 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 nonnegotiables, 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: If anyone claims to have experienced God, or enlightenment, or Truth and it does not 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 nonviolently, but it must be delivered. Otherwise, Christians are not Christians.

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<sup>65</sup>Stendahl, *Meanings*, p. 235.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*



*IV. Conclusion*

So, I do believe, along with and with a lot of help from Stendahl (may he rest in peace), that Christians, with help from Christian theologians, can respond positively to the challenge posed by Wright—really, a challenge that is being posed by our present globalized and threatened world to all religions. For understandable reasons, a zero-sum theology of religions and manner of relating to other believers has characterized Christian belief and practice. But, the Christian Bible and tradition, as Stendahl tried to make clear, do provide the resources to retake the path that they missed in the first centuries of its existence.

It is a path that will lead us Christians beyond supersessionism and zero-sum games not only regarding Judaism but also regarding the other great religious traditions of humanity. It is also a path on which we Christians will understand ourselves more deeply and follow Jesus more faithfully—and so cooperate with other believers and nonbelievers in moving closer to the non-zero-sum Reign of God.