

Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

EMINENT PAULINE SCHOLAR
BISHOP KRISTER STENDAHL
1921 — 2008

Tributes

Helmut Koester, Harvard School of Divinity

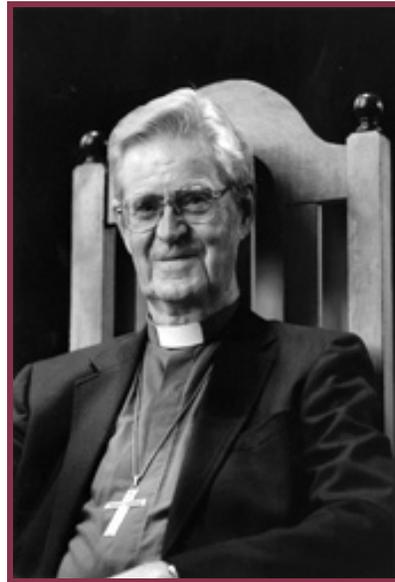
Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

Volume 4 (2009)

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol4>

BISHOP KRISTER STENDAHL

1921 - 2008



THIS EMINENT PAULINE SCHOLAR PROFOUNDLY INFLUENCED MANY THROUGH
HIS HOSPITALITY, HIS LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH, AND HIS ADVOCACY OF TOLERANCE.

AS A SCHOLAR AND A PASTOR HE WAS A LEADER
IN REDEFINING RELATIONS BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND JEWS.

THE COUNCIL OF CENTERS ON CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS AND THE EDITORIAL STAFF OF *STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS*
ARE GRATEFUL FOR AND DEEPLY INDEBTED TO THE PIONEERING EFFORTS OF
THIS DISTINGUISHED SCHOLAR AND INSPIRING CHURCH LEADER.

The March 15-16, 2009 Boston College conference, *Paul of Tarsus: The Apostle to the Gentiles in His Jewish Context*, honored the memory and the contributions of the Pauline scholar, Krister Stendahl. The following tributes by Professor Helmut Koester, Harvard School of Divinity, and Professor Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, were among several tributes paid to Bishop Stendahl on this occasion.

Helmut Koester, Harvard School of Divinity

We met Krister Stendahl for the first time on the pier in New York City. My family and I had just arrived on the “Berlin,” the first post-World War II German passenger ship—in fact formerly a Swedish steamer. Here we were on the pier with two small children, the younger one only three months old. We had to wait there for hours until we finally got our customs and immigration clearance, dirty and hungry and less than comfortable. And there appeared Krister Stendahl like a saving angel. He packed us into his large Buick, and drove off to the nearest Howard Johnson restaurant. There we washed up and enjoyed our first American meal. Then it was on to Cambridge and to the Stendahl residence, the carriage house behind Jewett House, where we were welcomed warmly by Brita, and where we relaxed and enjoyed a good dinner.

In the following days Krister Stendahl was our guide in getting a Social Security number, opening a bank account, familiarizing us with Andover Hall, introducing us to the Dean of Harvard Divinity School, Douglas Horton, and last but not least in directing us to a church. It was, in fact, Brita who told us that the only church to go to was University Lutheran Church in Cambridge where we have now been members for half a century.

But the beginning of the new academic year was not far away, and that was to be become for me a most significant experience.

Krister Stendahl, born in 1921 and five years my senior, who also had many years of experience in pastoral ministry in country parishes and student chaplaincy, had been educated at the University of Upsala in Sweden under his teacher Anton Friedrichsen. To be sure, that was a superb education in historical-critical New Testament interpretation, but it emphasized grammar, factual data, sober historical assessment. In Upsala Krister Stendahl had learned that the primary task of New Testament scholarship was to find out, in the words of the famous ancient historian Leopold von Ranke, “Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist,”—what actually was done and said in the past—which implied rigorous and critical investigation and scrutiny of the available sources.

I, on the other hand, had grown up in Marburg under Rudolf Bultmann and then in Heidelberg under the guidance of Bultmann’s student Günther Bornkamm. Although ordained, with only a brief period of ministerial service, I was still full of ideas of hermeneutics and demythologizing, which was the most hotly debated subject during the years of my study. But now it fell to us to direct jointly the New Testament seminar for doctoral students. Our senior colleague Amos Wilder was on sabbatical that year. For me this joint ten-year work with doctoral students opened a new world of historical scholarship. With respect to any wild ideas I may have had, Krister listened patiently and asked critical questions—and I learned to listen. We got along with each other well for a blessed ten-year period until Krister became Dean of Harvard Divinity School. I once asked Krister Stendahl why we were getting along with each other so well. He answered, “Because both of us are pretty arrogant!”

After ten years of cooperation our paths went in different directions, but our friendship, however stressed, never failed thanks to Krister's graciousness. Krister had become the godfather of our older son, Ulrich Christoph, and he remained faithful to him with care and signs of love into the last year of his life.

Faculties and deans usually engage in battle, and so we did. But Krister had to face very difficult situations, beginning on the first day in his new office. These were the years of student revolution: A red flag raised over Andover Hall, an a-wall marine chained to the altar of Andover Hall chapel, mail deliveries hidden away, padlocks put onto the entrance door of the Andover Harvard library—some new problem almost every day. Krister remained true to himself. Nothing illegal was tolerated, but also peaceful protests were not disturbed, however crazy—and the president of the Divinity School's student association had a lot of crazy ideas! Krister demonstrated his wisdom when radical students occupied University Hall, the administrative center of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. All deans of the university were asked by the president whether the Cambridge police should be called in to assist in driving students out of the building. Only Krister Stendahl, the dean of the Law School Derek Bok (later president of Harvard University), and the dean of the School of Education voted against it. But with the majority of the deans voting in favor, the city police moved in to cruelly expel these radical students—and the president eventually was forced to resign. In such conflicts Krister was always on the side of the angels. His sense of justice and toleration never failed him.

During his time as Dean of Harvard Divinity School one of his lasting and most influential achievements was the establishment of the program of Women's Studies at the Divinity School. Still today this program brings accomplished

female scholars to Harvard for a year of research in this field.

In 1984, after his eleven-year tenure as dean and a few additional years of teaching at Harvard Divinity School, Krister accepted the appointment of Bishop of the Diocese of Stockholm of the Lutheran Church of Sweden. He served in that office four years until his mandatory retirement. He is still remembered in Sweden for his energetic leadership, thoughtful public witness, and pastoral concern. After the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986, Krister eloquently ministered to the shock and grief of the nation. Within his diocese he advanced the cause of women in the priesthood and greater gender equality, bringing the number of ordained women from just a very few to a third of all ordained clergy. Already in the 1950s he was known for his support of the ordination of women, suffering the loss of several collegial friendships because of his more open hermeneutic on this issue. Now as bishop he was able, in spite of resistance, not only to advance the cause of women in the church but also to open it up to the fresh challenges of a new time.

Returning to Harvard in 1988 he resumed contributing to the life of the Divinity School, teaching the art of preaching and functioning as chaplain to the students. He continued to offer courses and remained as a senior scholar and advisor at the school after his official retirement. In 1991 he accepted an appointment from Brandeis University to serve as the inaugural professor in a newly endowed chair in Christian Studies, a position he held until retiring, yet again, in 1993.

He traveled extensively, teaching, preaching, and conferring with international scholars and leaders even in his later years despite the serious challenges to his health, which he bore with patience and determination. He was courageous and persistent in his advocacy not only for women but also

for gay and lesbian people in the church. For his students, colleagues, and friends he was always present as an advisor, counselor, source of encouragement and as a pillar of faith in his participation and occasionally as a preacher in the services of his beloved University Lutheran Church in Cambridge.

Krister Stendahl, was a man of all seasons: scholar, preacher, academic leader, bishop, editor, unwavering advocate for the cause of women in the church and the academic world, reconciler of Jews and Christians. At heart a biblical scholar, he published his influential *The School of St. Matthew* early in his career and edited a significant volume on the New Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls, which brought the investigation of these newly discovered materials to the forefront of Biblical studies. Later came some extremely important and groundbreaking articles that appeared during the long years of his activities. Most important is his essay on "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West." This much debated article argues with foresight that the apostle Paul's insistence upon justification by faith is completely alien to the modern western preoccupation with personal and introspective feelings of inadequacies and sinfulness but is rather concerned with the sinfulness of the human race as a whole and its need for divine justification as a general fact.

I remember a lively debate many decades ago between Krister and the German New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann in the Braun Room of Andover Hall. Käsemann, who was then working on a commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, had been invited to give a lecture at the Divinity School and had chosen as his topic "Justification by Faith Alone," which he used as a frontal attack on Krister Stendahl's recently published article, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West." Is it thinkable that Paul, when he speaks of justification by faith alone, is not

talking about the salvation of individuals, who are constantly burdened by their conscience, telling them that they are unable to fulfill the law and do the will of God? I have to confess that it took me years before I fully realized the consequences of this brilliant article, both for the understanding of Paul and for the rethinking of much of Christian piety today. Paul is not talking about individuals but about people and nations, about actions of the God of Israel, who is the God of all nations and who wants freedom and justice and reconciliation.

This insight was also at the core of Krister Stendahl's increasing concern and active involvement in the question of the reconciliation of Jews and Christians. Thanks to Krister Stendahl I have learned that as a Christian I belong to a people that is burdened with the guilt of a long history of the persecution of Jewish people, culminating in the Holocaust. His interpretation of Paul's letters has opened the door to a fresh understanding of Jews and Christians as people who both possess the promises of a God who is faithful to his promises and wants peace and justice for all.

Krister Stendahl was once invited to write a commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Had he done so he would have left a major and most insightful work to us. But he is not the first New Testament scholar who despaired of accomplishing this task. In any case, Krister was not the person to devote his scholarly efforts to the painstaking task of producing a commentary on one of the most difficult books of the New Testament. He wanted to stimulate, to ask questions, to break down barriers, to reconcile. I think that this is his legacy and it is attested to in a large number of smaller contributions. His essay on "New Testament Theology" in the supplement volume of the *Dictionary of the Interpreters' Bible* insists on a descriptive biblical theology which presents the facts of theological thinking at the time of the production of biblical writings. This essay intends to put a

stop to fanciful hermeneutical speculations. He seems to say—and I heard him say this more than once: “This is what I read in my text, and this is what Paul says here.” Other publications followed, especially his volume of essays, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, and his collection of insightful discussions of ethical and theological interpretations entitled *Meanings*. There are also a number of publications dealing with pastoral and ecumenical questions, bearing witness to Krister Stendahl’s engagement in numerous areas of religious, ecclesiastical, and spiritual concerns.

Krister Stendahl was my close colleague on the faculty of Harvard Divinity School for many years. Those years were exciting, challenging, and rewarding experiences of congenial cooperation in theological inquiry, biblical studies, and formation of academic policies. During almost all of the last half century we were also fellow worshipers and occasionally preachers and leaders of worship at University Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During all these years I learned that Krister was an open-minded, warm, and caring human being with a deep sense of humor. Magisterial perhaps—he was an authority on many things, but never overpowering, always seeking understanding and agreement, listening carefully and honoring different perspectives. But he never wavered when it came to questions of reconciling. Here he did not acknowledge any conventions and restraints. When a lesbian female theologian living in a committed relationship was elected as a pastor of a Lutheran church, Krister, a former Lutheran bishop, traveled to Minnesota to participate in her ordination, which lost him many friends among conservative circles of the church. He knew that this would happen but he simply could not accept discrimination of any kind. He always searched for a way to make peace between Jews and Christians, homosexuals and heterosexuals, women and men. He was a pioneer in the exploration of Christian

integrity as a basis for, rather than a contradiction of, pluralism. He never accepted that any human being could be considered as inferior because of nationality, religious commitment, social class, or sexual orientation.

I mourn the death of this great friend, which came after several decades of surviving serious challenges to his health. I delight that his mind remained clear to the very end and that he knew that his life and death were in the hands of a God who was greater than all human understanding—a God of all people, no matter what their national, social, sexual or religious commitment.

Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

The best description of Paul the Apostle that I know is “pastoral theologian.” Paul was not a professor or a philosopher. Rather he was a founder of Christian communities, and his letters were part of his ongoing pastoral care. They were originally intended to provide theological and practical enlightenment regarding the pastoral problems facing early Christian communities.

This afternoon I want to reflect briefly on Krister Stendahl as a pastoral theologian after the pattern set by his hero, Paul. I want to explain what I mean by recalling three personal experiences that illustrate Krister’s pastoral sensitivity on the intellectual, ecclesial, and personal levels.

First, on the intellectual level. We all have had communal and personal moments when the world seemed to change for us. We know where we were and how we felt at the time. I can recall vividly my own first reading of Krister Stendahl’s famous article on “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West” while sitting in the library of Harvard Divinity School in the summer of 1965. It changed my outlook on

Paul, Augustine, and Luther. It was a thrilling intellectual experience that has stayed with me through the years. So much so, that whenever I teach or write about Paul I recall that moment. Through his lectures and publications Krister Stendahl opened up for many of us new intellectual and theological horizons. Through his scholarship, Krister Stendahl was a pastoral theologian after the pattern set by Paul.

Second, on the ecclesial level. We all know that one of Krister's great concerns was Christian-Jewish relations. But he was not content merely to write about that relationship in ancient texts. He also wanted to know what his Christian students and colleagues were thinking and doing about Jews and Judaism. In the early 1980s the National workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations was to meet in Boston in the spring. I had participated in some of their sessions before, and in the fall a friend mentioned to me that I was on the program to conduct a workshop with Krister Stendahl on the attitudes of Christian theological students and their professors toward Judaism. That was the first I had heard of it. So I contacted Krister, and after an apology for forgetting to tell me, we set to work on the project. It consisted mainly of interviews with Boston Theological Institute students and professors. I reported on the results at the national meeting. On the ecclesial level, Krister Stendahl was pastoral theologian after the pattern set by Paul.

Third, on the personal level. In the late 1960s I did my doctoral research at Harvard under the direction of John Strugnell. In fact, Krister (then the dean) was instrumental in bringing John to Harvard, and I was one of John's first doctoral students. John was a brilliant scholar. Krister once told me, "I have been around many smart people in my life, but John Strugnell is one of the very smartest of all." But John was afflicted with manic-depression, and had many ups

and downs throughout his life. When John was recovering from a devastating and tragic episode of manic depression in the early 1990s, I received a phone call from Krister. His message was simple and concise, "John needs a friend." John did recover and did some of his best scholarly work on the Dead Sea scrolls then, and I was privileged to be part of it. John Strugnell died in late November of 2007. A few days later Krister invited John's family, former students, and friends to his own home for a time of reflection and prayer. In February of 2008 Krister presided at the memorial service held for John Strugnell at Harvard Divinity School. This was about two months before Krister's own death, and he was obviously in poor health. He knew that it would perhaps be his own last public event, but it was something that he really wanted to do. Through all of this, I marveled once more at Krister's pastoral sensitivity. On the personal level, Krister Stendahl was a pastoral theologian after the pattern set by Paul.

One of Paul's pieces of advice to the early Christians at Corinth was this, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). As a pastoral theologian on many levels, Krister Stendahl fulfilled Paul's directive magnificently.