

Krister Stendahl
Theologian, Former Hartman Institute Director, Dies at 86
Alan D. Abbey, Shalom Hartman Institute, April 16, 2008

Krister Stendahl, Mellon Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Harvard Divinity School, noted Protestant theologian, former Bishop of Stockholm, and former director of Shalom Hartman Institute's Bernard and Barbro Osher Center for Religious Pluralism, died in Boston, Tuesday, April 15. He was 86.

According to his entry in Wikipedia and other sources, Stendahl was one of the 20th century's pioneers of Jewish-Christian dialogue, and was perhaps most famous for his article, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," and subsequent book, "Paul Among Jews and Gentiles," which changed the way many theologians viewed Paul.

Stendahl's work suggested that scholarship dating all the way back to Augustine may have missed the context and thesis of Paul. The thrust of Stendahl's argument focused on early tension in Christianity between Jewish Christians and Gentile converts.

He was a beloved figure and well known to many at Shalom Hartman Institute. Institute Co-Director David Hartman had this to say about Krister Stendahl:

"The passing of Krister Stendahl is a sad moment for all human beings who celebrate diversity and appreciate the significance and dignity of the other. Teddy Kollek called me many years ago and told me it was important I meet a great religious Christian spirit who worked with Teddy to promote tolerance in Jerusalem – not an easy task.

"I met him and was overwhelmed by his passion and his keen mind in thinking about contemporary theological issues. He was moved by my concept of the covenant in which God limits him/herself in order to make room for human responsibility. The self limitation of God became a central motif in my own theological thinking and in our shared spiritual language together

"He together with the late Paul van Buren, first director of the Institute's Center for Contemporary Theology (Editor: later renamed the Bernard and Barbro Osher Center for Religious Pluralism), was committed to enriching and giving a new spirit to Jewish-Christian relations in the modern world. His profound friendship with Barbro and Bernie Osher helped launch the Osher Center for Religious

Pluralism. Barbro Osher knew of Krister when he was bishop in Sweden and was deeply moved by his humanity and his love for all human beings.

“Since its inception, the Osher Center has welcomed hundreds of Christian and Islamic theologians, as well as Jewish thinkers, to participate in a unique program of learning from and thinking about the other. There is no spirit of triumphalism in these sessions, but rather a desire to expose one's traditions to the critical reflections of others. This is a genuine celebration of the best kind of religious pluralism one can think of. Each of us study the respective faith texts of our different traditions - Koran, Bible, Talmud - and engage in serious self expression and exposure. One is not embarrassed by the critical responses of others to our cherished faith traditions, because all criticism grows from a sense of love rather than triumph.

“I recall Krister inviting me to London to speak to representatives of the World Council of Churches. He was dedicated to bringing about a change in the council, so they would give up their platform of proselytization of the Jews. He invited me to give a lecture before all the bishops and leading authorities of the council. After I spoke – Krister got up and said, ‘Do you think we need a mission to the Jews?’ He challenged and provoked them into new thinking and to not thinking about Jews in the abstract, but to meet living Jews deeply committed to Judaism and to a life of faith

“Krister was a great scholar and served as dean of the Harvard Divinity School, where he exerted enormous influence on the theologians and religious thinkers involved with the school. He was universally respected. There was a profound charm and humor in the way he dealt with serious theological issues. When Krister Stendahl spoke everyone there listened with great attention.

“The world is poorer, now that Krister is gone. However, his spirit and legacy must continue inspiring all those dedicated to his spiritual legacy. We live now in a profound void. My prayer is that Krister's memory and life's work should serve as an inspiration for new Krister Stendahls to emerge in the modern world.”

Krister Stendahl received his doctorate in New Testament studies from Uppsala University and was later professor and dean at the Harvard Divinity School before being elected bishop of Stockholm in 1984. After retiring in 1989, he returned to the United States.

Here is an excerpt from Stendahl's essay, "Why I Love the Bible":

It is usual when one is describing love to describe it in positive and glowing terms. But my friendship with the Bible gave me the joy, and the courage, to express my love in five statements of "not." The first is the one I have pointed at: It is not primarily about me. Second, it is not always as deep as we think. Third, even Paul isn't always totally sure. Fourth, don't be so uptight. And fifth, it is probably not as universal as we think.

It is perhaps odd to express my love in such negative terms. But it is also perhaps in the line of that wonderful word of Jesus in chapter 15 of the Gospel of John: I do not call you any longer servants, but I call you friends. Somehow I became friends with the Bible. In the biblical tradition, and in the Jewish tradition, to be called the friend of God, you had to be one who argued with God. Abraham, arguing about Sodom and Gomorrah, was called a friend of God.