

Jesper Svartvik's decision to vacate the Krister Stendahl Chair at Lund University and the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem

As of January 1, 2019, I shall no longer occupy the Krister Stendahl Chair in Theology of Religions at Lund University and the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem, a position I have held since 2009. Questions have arisen as to how this came about. The process that led to the change has unfortunately not been characterized by transparency, and therefore, although I have devoted considerable time and effort to investigating the matter, I still have difficulty understanding what has transpired over the past year. At any rate, this much is clear:

Lund University: At the beginning of the fall term in 2018, the university informed me that my services no longer would be needed. The explanation was that, for “strategic” reasons, the Center for Theology and Religious Studies, of which I am a faculty member, had decided to de-emphasize the study of theology of religions (meaning interreligious relations). Because of this, the courses I had planned for the coming academic year had been canceled. I was deeply dismayed by this decision. In a time of increasing antisemitism and xenophobia, theology of religions has only gained in importance. I have made this argument to my employer, but since the university has held its ground in this matter, initiating a process that would lead to the termination of my employment for lack of work, I have decided to take the initiative and leave my chair on December 31 of this year.

The Church of Sweden: The Stendahl Chair has been funded primarily from external sources. The so-called Professor's Fund, administered by Church of Sweden, with an endowment of fifteen million kronor, has for some time provided 75% of the cost of the position (originally 100%). Remarkably (and questionably) when the chair was inaugurated the university administration did not request that the full endowment be transferred at once, as is customary, but agreed instead to receive periodic payments from the church. This partnership between the church and the university was governed by a signed agreement. However, the secretary-general of the church, in a letter to the university dated January 29, 2018, served twelve months' notice that the agreement was to be terminated. In other words, church funding was to be provided only until January 31, 2019. In conversations and

correspondence (most recently in an e-mail dated October 5, 2018), the secretary-general has repeatedly assured me that the purpose was only to *renegotiate* the agreement, with a new one to take effect February 1, 2019. Moreover, the archbishop of the Church of Sweden, who has been informed all along about the course of events, has been supportive of me in a difficult situation, for which I am grateful. She has, for example, written that she has “respect for [my] research and great appreciation for [me] as a lecturer.” In addition, she has written of “the collective appreciation of the [other] bishops for [my] work.”

The Swedish Theological Institute: Recent hirings for the senior administrative positions at this respected institution for interreligious dialogue have had significantly negative consequences. There is no longer any professional competence in the area of theology of religions there. What is more, in various ways the current director and manager have actually acted to hinder my work. Their actions have seriously undermined the trust the institute has enjoyed. The institute is currently being led by two people who do not have the church at heart.

In the face of this situation, I prefer to seek new challenges and responsibilities elsewhere, rather than lingering at a university and an institute that do not give priority to what matters to me: theology of religions. In the words of William Ernest Henley, in his poem “Invictus,”

I am the master of my destiny,
I am the captain of my soul.

I will miss all my good colleagues and dear friends in Jerusalem, the “port city on the shores of eternity.”

Jesper Svartvik

Lund, October 21, 2018

Appendix:

Decennial Report (2008–2018)