God and Statelessness

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My father never referred to anything religious. “Oh, please,” he would say when someone brought God into the conversation, “please, leave God out of this.” It was almost as if he felt sorry for God and understood the danger if God were to be brought into any reflection or conversation on matters of real concern. “Lasst doch den lieben Gott allein!” he would say. Leave the poor God out of this; he won’t be able to handle it! If we can’t deal with it, how can we expect God to cope or manage our wretched reality? And if the talk was on the Holocaust, he was precise about it. Leave God out of it! What did God do for anyone of us who survived the Holocaust? He was silent about those who died in the Holocaust. He never mentioned the dead. Not even his mother. I asked questions all the time about the last months or days of the victims. How was their last hour and where was God? He never asked that question.

And he never answered my questions. I looked in his photo album and saw people and knew without asking that there were many who had succumbed, who were no more, relatives, friends and acquaintances. I knew some by name. I looked at the photo of his mother. She was my grandmother, although to me it was as if she had never lived. She was only someone who was transported away, in some kind of unending transport. My father was alone. He had been left to survive. Going from country to country looking for a country that would accept the refugee that he now was; maybe he was thinking of his mother as you would think about a mother, with love and longing.

The country that finally received him remained as alien to him as he was to it. It was never to be his. It was strange from the beginning; and even 40 years later, when he had become a national of this country, they hadn’t really met. It wasn’t just settling in a new
country, whether they opened wide the gates or just left the gates ajar. As much as I could see it, the present and the future clouded his days. Since he never talked about the past, I often wondered who gave him the impulse to leave his country, to flee and leave it all behind, to save his life. How did he know when to leave and where to go? He wasn’t much of an analyst, one who would sit down and calculate pros and cons. And he was above all German. Wilhelm was his name, like the Kaiser.

Maybe my father had a dream in early 1938 and in that dream an angel appeared to him and told him to leave Germany. It had happened before: “Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him” (Matt. 2:13).

Icons and paintings portray Mary and Joseph in the middle of their flight as remarkably composed. There is no fear in their eyes. Maybe because of the angel. I will always remember my father having fear in his eyes. There was a Herod in his life, although his name was Hitler. I wonder whether there ever was an angel in his dreams. I think his mother told him: “Dear Helmi, you must leave Germany; your Vaterland is about to destroy you. It will be dangerous for you to stay. I’m too old but you at least must flee that you may live.” A couple of years later she was transported away into the night of destruction at Treblinka. And from those days, fear was always in his eyes.

Because of Herod, Mary and Joseph became refugees and reached Egypt. They look so calm. Was there a Jewish community receiving them, making their life in Egypt almost like their previous life in the country they had had to leave? The flight to Egypt was a popular subject in art. Paintings show the holy family protected by all during their time as refugees. In the Apocrypha, palm trees bow before the infant Jesus, the beasts of the desert
pay him homage. A spring gushes up from the desert and a date palm tree bends down to allow them to pluck its fruit. Trees and fields shield them from enemies. Their time as refugees was not long and the angel told them when they could return. Neither the biblical text nor the Apocrypha has anything to say about the plight of really being a refugee. We will not read about the panic, the fear of being caught; there will be no mention of the worry, of asking over and over again where it will be possible to end the running away and to find a place to stay.

My father “was a wandering Aramean” (Deut. 26:5); he was a refugee from Germany and there was no angel to whisper in his ear when to leave or when to return. Hell broke loose in Germany and he went to Sweden and lived there as an alien and he couldn’t cry to the Lord, the God of his ancestors, because he had understood that the Lord didn’t hear his voice or see his affliction, toil, and oppression and that his mother was not allowed to enter Sweden but was taken away to the concentration camp.

My father never found his way in Sweden. He carried with him the passport of the stateless – the Nansen passport – an international substitute for a passport that allowed stateless persons or those deprived of their national passports to enter other countries. But he was not allowed to define himself. His identity as German was strictly downgraded and the identity as stateless took over the whole. Others defined him and said who he was: a stateless refugee by the name of Wilhelm Israel. He tried to protest saying that Israel was not at all his name. It was the name Hitler had given all German male Jews. But the Nansen passport didn’t see a German man holding the passport at all. Next to the photo in the Nansen passport it simply stated that which was now his sole identity: a Jewish refugee by the name of Wilhelm Israel. And he was stateless.
He now had a residence permit and he didn’t have to flee anymore. But a stateless person doesn’t legally exist; the state system doesn’t see him. He’s invisible, marginalized, forgotten, as if hidden, although living visibly among those who were the people of the land, nationals, those who belonged. He was now to begin the long process of trying to become visible again, but as someone who could no longer refer to his origins as who he really was. It was a long journey, which begins with eyes full of fears and which has many obstacles, as he was about to shed the vulnerability and defencelessness of being stateless.

“By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion” (Ps. 137). At the shores of the strait of Öresund, my father was weeping, because he was homesick for Germany. He was free, he had found refuge, he had even found a job, although not as the photographer he was, because Sweden feared that he might use the camera for espionage; he was given a job as a menial worker. He was not alone; he now had a wife and a child. He had begun to learn the new language. It went very slowly because he was weeping, as he was often remembering Germany. This was the country that had murdered his mother and many relatives and friends. This was the country that had made him a second-class citizen, that had made him flee the country, running from country to country. And yet this was the country he was longing for: its people, its language, its history, its culture.

Now he was living in freedom, he had a job, he had a family – and yet, he was weeping. Every Sunday morning he put me on his lap and we tried to find the German broadcast station on the radio and he would explain Mozart and Beethoven as he hummed along. There were those among our relatives and friends who had also survived the Holocaust, who had pledged never to go to Germany, and to even avoid travelling through Germany. But my father would take me as a young boy and travel by train around in
Germany, from place to place, and we would take photos outside castles and in front of monuments. He would order food specific to different regions: from Kartoffelklöße to Königsberger Klopse and from Mohnkuchen to Streußelkuchen. He would sing along with all the Germans on the boat, as we were traveling down the river and passed the Lorelei, the high, steep slate rock on the right bank of the River Rhine:

<POE>Ich weiß nicht was soll es bedeuten,
Dass ich so traurig bin;
Ein Märchen aus uralten Zeiten,
Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn

I know not if there is a reason
Why I am so sad at heart.
A legend of bygone ages
Haunts me and will not depart.</POE>

Maybe the song communicated that deep sadness of never being able to forget his country, despite its Nazi past. This is the insidious burden of being rejected by your country and unable to stop loving it. He carried his country with him every day. There was a veil over his eyes. It was as if he was in a haze, and he couldn’t see what was plainly there in the new country: possibility and a future. He was tied to his country, and the older he grew, the more he returned in his mind to those days in Germany when there was no Hitler or Gestapo but only his mother and siblings and their little photo atelier. You could take the Jew out of Germany, but you couldn’t take Germany out of the Jew!

A doctor examined him and asked him about his sadness and the fear in his eyes and said, “You suffer from “uprootedness”-depression.” As a stateless person, who ultimately was granted citizenship in the new country, he had to embark upon a daily struggle to construct a new identity. It was not a given. Constructing a new identity, he had to put aside the identity that had been one with his country of origin – its culture, language, and history – but that also had perpetrated a crime against his family. And in the construction of a new
identity, one experiences inferiority, racism, loneliness, marginalization, and the depression that is evoked by the feeling of being constantly "in-between." Some can embrace the hybridity or the mixing of different cultures. He couldn’t. And because he couldn’t divorce himself from his real identity, the new identity was never solid enough to withstand the feelings of uprootedness. Hence, you sit there by the rivers of Babylon, where you are imprisoned and long for Zion; or you are at the straits of Öresund, which has offered you a place to stay as a refuge from the ravages of Nazism and anti-Semitism; or you cruise along the Rhine by Lorelei, back in the old country, realizing how much part of it you are despite the gruesome killings. And the memories come rushing in over you and you understand that statelessness will follow you long into your new identity and nationality, and it will never let go of the hold it has on you.

Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you. (Ps. 26)

There’s an affinity with statelessness in my own personality. There is a sense of uncertainty that reverberates in me, a memory of that which cannot be remembered and yet remains as a sentiment. Not only because of a more or less conscious empathy and affinity with that part of my father’s history, but because I was, remarkably or strangely enough, also registered as stateless at the time of my birth. According to the law, I should have been registered as a Swedish citizen, because a child acquires Swedish citizenship at birth if the child's mother is a Swedish citizen. But the young pastor recording the birth of the child put me together with my father in the registry books, and the two of us were stateless. It was only at the age of four that I, together with my father, acquired Swedish citizenship.
Some 50 years later, my father and I were again facing common citizenship, but now in relation to the only country of my father, Germany. Following the passing of my father, his home town emerged from the darkness of his forced departure. Together with my children, I obtained German citizenship and we were reconnected with the place that had seen him flee the Nazi regime as a stateless person. Germany's constitution, the Basic Law, stated that anyone who had had their German citizenship revoked during the Nazi regime for "political, racist, or religious reasons" could re-obtain citizenship, and it also applied to the descendants of Nazi victims. It was in the spirit of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, the process of coming to terms with the past, that Germany remembered my father and in an act of reparation gave me German citizenship.

Other more or less similar circumstances around the world call for such a spirit and such intentional action. Throughout the world we see similar needs for restitution. In my father’s case, it was an act of reparation, albeit posthumously. It is in German called Wiedergutmachung, literally, an act of making well again. Historically, the original term signified that the German state, in an act of reparation, declared itself prepared to compensate victims of Nazism. Posthumously, my father was now, through us, restituted as a German citizen and reconnected to the place he was born. The act had deep symbolic meaning and recognition. The stateless one was again recognized as a citizen. It is significant when a government tries to restore the dignity and hope of stateless people. It is never too late. It can change the lives of the stateless. It is about recognition, about restoring belongingness, recognizing the personhood of those who were once made invisible, who were non-persons.
Stateless people are ontologically harmed when they are deprived of their fundamental human qualities, such as their rights and responsibilities. A stateless person’s limited agency or ability to act reduces their potential as a human being. The plight of stateless people – insecurity, fear, uncertainty, the risk of exploitation – is a concern for everyone: people of different religions as well as people of no religion. It’s a global concern; more than ten million people around the world live without any nationality: they are stateless people. It’s a question of ethics. Statelessness destroys on several levels. Loss of citizenship has legal and political consequences, not only for the one who is stateless but also for society and the human community. Every sector of society needs to ask itself whether it can avoid its obligation toward people who are living more or less permanently outside the nation-state system and for whose well-being no state acknowledges political or moral responsibility. Society must ask itself about the moral obligation to admit refugees, and also ask whether we can morally justify closing our borders. Society in its various manifestations must ask whether the discourse can be limited to the question of admission. Is it enough to discuss whether stateless people are eligible for admission to the new country? Hasn’t society failed to consider the obligations it may have to people who remain outside of society and its communities for prolonged periods of time?

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

Religion mustn’t fail to create believers or followers who care for their fellow neighbour. My father’s concern to leave God out of it was probably based on seeing religion fail. Religion must emerge from the reductive view that sees it either as the major source of conflict and war in the world or, as per the apologists, as whitewashed from the violence perpetrated in its name.
Religions are designed to confront ethical indifference among believers. A religious person is not supposed to stand idly by while another is in pain or distress – and yet something about religion itself seems to be a catalyst, under certain circumstances, for creating the very indifference it seeks to banish. Believing in a perfectly good and transcendent God can lead a person to ignore the needs of lesser, mortal, terrestrial beings. Religion mustn’t shut down our moral instincts to such an extent that we no longer see things as they are but only see that which we think must be offensive to God.

There is in religion also the temptation to claim the all-powerful transcendent God for petty human disputes and institutions. This is when religious people cloak themselves in the grace of God, defining God as being with us regardless of what we do or deserve, attributing pious motivation and religious value to all of our behaviour. Once we can no longer see who we have become, we will have lost the ability to self-correct and to repent. There are those who have lost their moral compass completely.

Recognizing that members of a religious community are something like God’s ambassadors on earth – and in order to make God’s name great on earth – we have to be good ambassadors who live lives of moral rectitude that put the needs of others first. In other words, in order to put God first, we have to put God second. By putting people first, irrespective of their beliefs or practices, as ambassadors of God we make God’s name great.

My father was not a religious person and his “Lasst doch den lieben Gott allein” was a way of saying that being human is sufficient and is hard enough in itself to live up to. Shoulder your responsibility as a human being and don’t hide or take refuge in God-talk. The letters “G,” “O” and “D” need to be carefully detached from one another to enable us to see beyond them and to realize that letters put together in a given order easily become something you can hide behind. It is in the nature of things that expressions of ultimate
concern vanish and may be replaced. Symbols, which formerly expressed the truth of faith for some, now remind us more of the faith of the past. They have lost their truth. The most important symbol that has lost its ultimate truth is perhaps the primordial symbol of God, which, after Hitler, was irrevocably undermined for those who had to live through those times and particularly for people who had lost their loved ones in the Holocaust.

These survivors had to walk a difficult path because there was no light along the way. Everything was dark night. There was no quick fix, no immediate comfort zone. They really had to walk “through the darkest valleys” (Ps. 23), and only there, if you were careful, might you become aware that you are not walking alone. You might, on your way, walk alongside and pass the huddled masses, every one of them yearning to breathe free. And you begin to see that they, in strange ways, each carry a letter of the name of the ultimate or divine.

So many letters, so many possibilities created through so many people putting them together in constantly shifting order and sequences!