

Response to Jonas Jonson Presentation

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Thank you for this fine presentation on Archbishop Söderblom, and particularly your comments about his relationship to the Augustana Synod. You have shown us how much Augustana meant to him, and what he did to embrace and encourage Augustana in the early part of the twentieth century.

I have had the opportunity to read your new book already. I received the page proofs from the publisher in February. It's an outstanding book. It is full of information, but it is written in a style that communicates well. I recommend it highly for all of us here.

And we are all in debt to the translator of the book, Norman Hjelm. Translating over 400 pages of a Swedish text into fluent English is no small accomplishment. So, on behalf of us all, thanks Norman.

My remarks are related, and actually limited, to the Augustana connection. That connection is only one part of the archbishop's stunning career, but it's of prime importance to us who are gathered here.

I will mention some persons in the Augustana Church who were influenced by Nathan Söderblom as a theologian and ecumenical leader. These are persons who picked up the baton. They took him more seriously than we 'youngsters' realize in our time. In turn they had an impact on the Augustana Church.

The first to mention is Eric Wahlstrom. Anna Söderblom mentions him in her book called *En Amerikabok* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1925), which recounts the journey of the Söderbloms in America. Wahlstrom was a senior student at Augustana Seminary when the archbishop was there for the dedication of the new seminary complex and the installation of G. A. Brandelle as the first full-time President of the Synod. (As a side issue, on the question of whether Söderblom participated in the laying on of hands during the installation, the answer is yes; Anna tells us so.) Wahlstrom was chosen to make a speech on

behalf of the students. In that speech, according to Anna Söderblom, he gave a glowing appreciation for the archbishop. Wahlstrom was to go on and become Professor of New Testament at the seminary. He did a lot to introduce Swedish theology to the Seminary and the church. He and a colleague translated the well-known book by Gustaf Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, which was published in Sweden, coincidentally, in 1923. Wahlstrom wrote many articles and reviews of Swedish and continental scholarship in the *Augustana Quarterly*. The doors were opening to the wider world in the 1920s, and surely Söderblom nudged the doors to open so that others could continue the process in Rock Island.

Another person to mention is A. D. Mattson, Professor at the seminary from 1931 to 1967. According to his nephew, Karl J. Mattson, who wrote an essay on A. D. that is on the AHA website, A. D. Mattson admired Söderblom for his social teachings, his ecumenism, and his interest in religions of the world.

Another to mention is Karl E. Mattson, Professor and President of the seminary from 1948 to 1964. He was writing a doctoral dissertation at Union Seminary, New York, at the time of his death. The topic: Nathan Söderblom as Preacher.

Another to mention is Edgar M. Carlson, longtime President of Gustavus Adolphus College (1944-1968). He wrote a lengthy Introduction to the American edition of the book by Nathan Söderblom, *The Nature of Revelation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), which can serve as a helpful introduction to Söderblom's thought. Carlson had obviously read widely in the works of Söderblom.

The last person that I will mention is Conrad Bergendoff. Here I am indebted to the doctoral dissertation on him at Princeton Seminary by Byron Swanson (*Conrad Bergendoff: The Making of an Ecumenist*, 1970). Bergendoff was ordained in 1921. He became enamored with Nathan Söderblom as archbishop and theologian. In fact, Bergendoff read one of Söderblom's books, called *Humor och Melankoli*, on his honeymoon in 1922. Then in 1923 he had the *chutzpah* to send a telegram to Archbishop Söderblom after the archbishop had already arrived in America, and his schedule had been set. Bergendoff invited him to visit his parish church, Salem in Chicago. The archbishop came. He planted a tree in the churchyard, speeches were made, and the two visited over coffee. Söderblom was impressed with this young Augustana pastor,

whom he called an answer to prayer. He invited Bergendoff to come to Uppsala to work on his University of Chicago dissertation. He even suggested a topic for his dissertation, which was published later as a book, *Olavus Petri and the Ecclesiastical Transformation in Sweden* (New York: Macmillan, 1928). In order to do that scholarly work Bergendoff took a parish leave in 1926-27. Söderblom invited the Bergendoff family to live in the archbishop's residence in Uppsala, which the Bergendoffs declined. But Dr. Bergendoff saw the archbishop almost daily, and served as his private secretary on a trip to a Life and Work committee meeting in Berne, Switzerland. The rest is better known. Bergendoff became a dominating force in Augustana as President of the college and seminary in Rock Island, and then of the college alone. He became a major theological leader of Augustana and certainly one of the major forces in shaping the ecumenical outlook of the church. Bergendoff considered Archbishop Söderblom to be one of the most important figures in his life.

Now I shall develop a question for you, Bishop Jonson.

The archbishop, as you say, regarded Augustana as the “daughter church” of the Church of Sweden. Many on this side of the Atlantic have had the same view and feelings. In fact, it has been a point of pride. But sometimes I wonder about that metaphor—the daughter church. I have come to think that by the time that Archbishop Söderblom arrived in the United States in 1923 that daughter was like many daughters we have known. There comes a time when a daughter wants to move out of the house, have her own apartment, and have a life with a circle of friends of her own choosing.

Why would I say that? World War I was a watershed for Lutheran churches in this country. The process of Americanization was accelerated by the war. Prior to WWI over 800 pastors of Augustana had been born in Sweden, about 150 were born in the US, meaning that slightly more than 80% were born in Sweden. But in 1923 those ordained were mostly American born—15 of the 25. President Brandelle was already the second President to be born in the US. English became the official language of the Synod. Augustana had been a member of the General Council since 1870; in fact, it was the largest synod of that constellation. It was expected by some that Augustana would join the merger of 1918 forming the United Lutheran Church in America, thereby losing its identity as a separate church body. In fact, President

Brandelle favored joining in 1918. But the vote at the Augustana national assembly that year in Minneapolis was almost unanimous against it. Augustana felt that its ministry was still primarily with Swedish-Americans. So the grown-up daughter was certainly not a wayward one. Family was still very important. But at the same time, Augustana was well on its way to be a confident and forward-looking church planted in America.

So I raise a question. I wonder how fully Archbishop Söderblom understood the situation. There are times in his career as archbishop that he continued to look upon Augustana not only as a daughter, but actually as an extension of the Church of Sweden in America. That's a nice sentiment, but already since the 19th century, the people of Augustana knew that their primary destiny would be in relationship to other Lutheran churches in North America.

Did he make a clear distinction in his own mind and in his practice as archbishop? There could be a spiritual bond, and a shared heritage, and so an extension of the Church of Sweden in that sense, but an extension in any formal and organic sense was impossible. Augustana understood itself by 1923 as a robust member of the wider Lutheran Church in America.

Within the career of the famous archbishop and Nobel laureate, as seen from the point of view of modern church history, or the history of the ecumenical movement, it would be easy to miss his connection to that relatively small Swedish church in America. But when we see the man up close, as you have shown us, Augustana was dear to him. And those of us on this side of the Atlantic are deeply in debt to him.

Postscript

Bishop Jonson responded to the question posed. He reiterated the fond affection of Archbishop Nathan Söderblom for the people and church of the Augustana Synod, as well as for Swedish people in general in the US and in other parts of the world.

Having said that, Bishop Jonson said that Archbishop Söderblom respected the integrity of all churches, including the Augustana Church. He realized that Augustana had an integrity of its own.

Jonas Jonson is the author of *Nathan Söderblom: Called to Serve*, translated by Norman A. Hjelm (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016).