USA
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Nathan Söderblom's Pilgrimage to Unity and Peace

Jonas Jonson, Bishop of Strängnäs, em.

In the history of the Augustana Synod, the visit by the Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom and his wife Anna, in the fall of 1923 has a prominent place. As you know, Söderblom was a most important church leader, the best known Swede in the world, a great scholar, and a truly spiritual per-sonaity. I will now use this opportunity to reflect on Söderblom´s remarkable pilgrimage, seen in the wider context of his ecumenical ministry. Since childhood, he had heard of America, and since his student days when in 1890 he visited New York and New England, he admired the United States more than any other nation for its idealism, pragmatism, universalism, patriotism and individualism. Söderblom certainly was a great European, fluent in four languages and known far beyond the borders of Sweden, but he also was an American at heart, envious of those who had gotten the privilege to live in this dynamic, liberal, and multicultural nation with its – in his time – Protestant ethos.

As a young university professor of the history of religion Nathan Söderblom had at the age of 48 been elected Archbishop of Uppsala in 1914. He had earlier on developed a taste for modernity with its confidence that religion and culture, science and technology would bring a bright future to humanity. But now Europe was torn apart by the First World War. In no time an unprecedented hatred had turned *la belle époque* into ruthless enmity, destruction and death.

Becoming archbishop, his life took a new turn. The war and the

iniquitous peace agreement that followed were to determine his ministry. It was his firm conviction that Sweden – in case it was spared – had a God-given obligation to promote peace with justice. He instantly set his ecumenical agenda which he followed through 17 years as Archbishop.

Söderblom was not much supported by his fellow bishops. They found him unpredictable and often too radical on social matters, and they looked upon his ecumenical and international projects for unity and peace as his own personal enterprise. He was a liberal theologian in the line of Ritschl, Harnack and Sabatier, but a man of profound spirituality and deeply committed to social justice. His opponents looked at him not only as liturgically theatrical, theologically contradictory, and as compromising "classical" Christianity, but also as a kind of fake socialist using the church for advocacy and social reform.

He lived at a time when world Christendom was thoroughly transformed by external and internal forces. Empires disintegrated, monarchies gave way to republics, German state churches became independent, and Russian Orthodoxy faced severe persecution. At the same time Christianity expanded rapidly on other continents, and American denominationalism had become an ecclesiological novelty.

When he took on leadership in the emerging ecumenical movement, he was well prepared. As a student he had travelled to the USA in 1890 where he met with confident and cultured New England Christian leaders who had a generous ecumenical outlook. He had lived in France for seven years, visited Britain, and taught in Germany. He had already in 1909 negotiated an agreement with the Church of England on Eucharistic communion, and also published a major study of Catholic modernism. He had visited Rome, Athens, and Constantinople where he encountered Roman and Orthodox spirituality.

Having experienced at first hand the disruption of Christian culture and

seen the war turn sisters and brothers into enemies, Söderblom felt compelled to act. After his consecration as archbishop he instantly sent an appeal for peace to church leaders all over the Western world with the hope that they would sign. The text flowed out of his troubled heart: “The War is causing untold distress, Christ’s Body, the Church, suffers and mourns. Mankind in its need cries out: O Lord, how long?” He reminded “especially our Christian brethren of various nations that war cannot sunder the bond of internal union that Christ holds in us” and called upon God that “he may destroy hate and enmity, and in mercy ordain peace for us”. He secured the signatures of some leading Americans, and a few bishops and theologians in the neutral countries, but to his disappointment not a single churchman in the belligerent nations was willing to put his or her their name to the document. The international war frenzy, to which preachers had made no small contribution from pulpit and rostrum, ruled out any ecumenical cooperation for peace.

Others would have given up, but Söderblom from now on mobilized all his perseverance, diplomatic skill, and social competence to make Christians rebuild mutual confidence for common action. He was profoundly convinced that reconciliation with God and the unity of the church were conditions for lasting peace. While fulfilling his episcopal duties in the large Uppsala diocese and in the Church of Sweden as a whole, he therefore pursued his attempts to make European Christians defy hostility and seek unity. But only when the war was over did he get started the process leading to the Life and Work Conference in Stockholm 1925. His nine weeks in the United States in 1923 was an important part of the preparation for Stockholm.

Söderblom arrived in New York on September 28. Three months later he returned to Sweden, having travelled by train from New York to San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles, Pasadena, Chicago, Evanston, Rockford, Duluth,

Minneapolis, Jamestown, Rock Island, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Boston, Yale, Hartford, Princeton and Washington, not to list a number of smaller communities in the mid-west. He had given 120 sermons, major talks, and academic lectures, "two months with voice intact, one without" as he put it. He attended conferences, met with church leaders, politicians and finally with President Calvin Coolidge. His program was packed, but he was burning with curiosity and his energy seemed inexhaustible. He certainly made an impact even on skeptical Lutherans with his personal charm, far-reaching experience, and commitment to the gospel and to the visible unity of the church.

What was it that brought him to America? First of all: he wanted to see for himself where all the Swedish emigrants had gone. From his own home province of Hälsingland alone, no fewer than 42,000 left for the United States between 1851-1925, most of them young, healthy, industrious men and women. This had created close links. Mentally, the United states was Sweden's neighbor, said Söderblom, closer than Norway or Denmark, because almost every family was in contact with relatives over there.

He also desperately wanted to see his own son Sven, who had emigrated after an unfortunate military career in Germany and Sweden, his own brother Svante, who had settled in San Francisco already in the 1880's, and also in San Francisco his old uncle who had participated in the civil war, and now was 87, and in Rockford he met his own godfather who was now 80. There were many more, including a son of his father's cousin, who had been the leader of the Bishop's Hill settlement in Illinois. But first and foremost he wanted to meet with Swedish immigrants who had joined the Augustana Synod, which for him was an extension of the church in Sweden.

Söderblom sometimes described his ministry in concentric circles: His primary responsibility was, of course, the Archdiocese of Uppsala and the Church

of Sweden, but then followed Swedish Lutherans overseas, in Finland, Estonia, Russia and particularly in the USA, other Lutherans in Germany and around the world, other churches of the Reformation including the Anglicans, and finally world Christendom as a whole. For him the office of the bishop symbolized historic continuity and cross-cultural communion. He was eager to improve and strengthen relations with the Augustana Synod – by now the largest Swedish community in the world outside Sweden – and to secure its participation in the emerging ecumenical movement. Its relations with the Church of Sweden had been somewhat problematic over the years, and it did not always view Swedish bishops as men true to the Word of God. This especially applied to Söderblom who was not welcomed by all. The conservative professor Adolf Hult, teaching at Augustana Seminary, warned of the threat to the Synod posed by the liberal Söderblom, "the most dangerous Lutheran in the world". The Archbishop's visit with Augustana caused conflict and concern.

But whatever people said of Söderblom, he had always been a reliable supporter of the Augustana Synod. When the Church of Sweden and the Church of England in 1909 met for the first ever official inter-con-
fessional talks on inter-communion, there were also representatives of the American Episcopal Church present, Bishop G. Mott Williams of Marquette, Illinois, and his chaplain Gustaf Hammarskjöld. This posed a real problem for Söderblom. In the paper *Augustana* nervousness and dismay had been voiced at the Swedish-Anglican contacts. The talks had also been opposed by the Swedish bishop Knut von Scheele, who had visited Augustana three times and was the Synod's trusted friend among Swedish bishops. He was a strong proponent for furthering international Lutheran relations, and he viewed the conversations with Anglicans with "disgust", fearing that a Swedish-Anglican rapprochement would strengthen episcopalian efforts to enlist Swedish immigrants in America.

Söderblom saw to it that Hammarskjöld was excluded from the discussion, and when Bishop Mott Williams made a plea that the care of Swedish immigrants be entrusted to the Episcopalians, Söderblom firmly defended Augustana's interests and integrity. He said that

> "Augustana is our natural and nearest ecclesiastical relation in the United States. Founded by Swedish ministers ordained by Swedish bishops Augustana is the Swedish Church of America which derives directly from our Church…she is flesh of our flesh."

In Augustana he saw the future of the Swedish Church in the USA, "our daughter, although she has not finished her ecclesiastical education".

When Söderblom was consecrated as Archbishop in 1914, Lars Abrahamson, the editor of the paper *Augustana*, was not only present, he was asked by Söderblom to participate in the laying-on-of-hands, and also to give a public lecture on the history and life of the Augustana Synod. In his invitation to the Synod, Söderblom had declared: "We are of the same language and blood, and have a common history behind us". He gratefully declined a suggestion from the Episcopal Church that they also send a representative. After the consecration the Augustana Synod thanked the new archbishop in writing:

> "Never before has our dear and beloved mother church expressed so powerfully to us its solidarity, so spontaneously its recognition, so freely and unrestrainedly its love. Doctor and Archbishop! You have captured the Augustana Synod. You have turned the children's heart to the fathers."

Abrahamson continued publishing frequent reports on the Church of Sweden in *Augustana*, and eventually he convinced Söderblom to visit the United States, made all the arrangements, and travelled with him all those nine weeks.

Söderblom's visit also had another purpose. He had already established close

working relations with the Federal Council of Churches and with the Church Peace Union, which was the American branch of the Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches, founded in 1914. These organizations stood firmly behind Söderblom's plans to organize an ecumenical conference in Stockholm. Therefore the two leaders Charles Mcfarland and Henry Atkinson had also invited Söderblom. With his usual overestimation of his own time and capacity, he had accepted both invitations as it was urgent that he met with the leading American denominations supporting his course. Mcfarland and Atkinson expected Söderblom to spend his time on their joint ecumenical project rather than with reluctant, insular and even anti-ecumenical Lutherans. Therefore Söderblom attended a number of ecumenical conferences, and he agreed to lecture at several leading universities in order to strengthen academic connections. He went to the US also to plead with to the Americans not to withdraw from European affairs, but to play a constructive role promoting peace with justice.

Calvin Coolidge had just succeeded Warren Harding as president. The economy was booming, though somewhat shaky, and European immigrants continued to arrive. The Wall Street crash and the great depression were not yet on the horizon. The Augustana Synod, like other ethnically and doctrinally defined denominations, was establishing itself not least in the field of education, and in 1923 it officially changed its language of worship and administration into English.

Söderblom brought with him to America a vision he had bred since 1914: to gather a world conference of Christian leaders to deal with the burning social ethical problems of the time and particularly to promote peace, and to form an ecumenical council that would speak the common voice of the churches in world affairs. He had been successful rallying support for this vision both among Anglicans, mainline Protestant churches and the Orthodox, while the Roman Catholic church had turned his invitations down.

His real problem rested with the Lutherans. The German churches especially were divided among themselves and hesitant to join his ecumenical movement. A combination of confessional consciousness, opposition to unionism and liberal Protestantism, pietism, and particularly the classical Lutheran distinction between the two kingdoms made it hard for the Germans to cooperate with other denominations and to involve themselves in matters bordering politics and social justice. Söderblom involved himself heavily in the reconstruction of German Lutheranism in the defeated, crushed, starved, divided, and now republican Germany, and he could never accept the unjust treaty of Versailles dictated by President Woodrow Wilson. It could not but lead to a new war, was Söderblom's prophetic prediction. He was often accused of being pro-German during and after the war, and there is no doubt that he had a particular love for Germany, the home of Luther, the motherland of the Reformation, the battleground where Gustavus Adolphus defended evangelical freedom, and the nation of culture and learning. He organized an extensive relief program and brought hundreds of starving German children to Sweden. He made it certain that Haus Hainstein, between Eisenach and Wartburg, would remain in Lutheran hands, and he condemned the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923.

It was his profound conviction that Luther's re-discovery of justification by grace alone was a gift to all humanity. Söderblom always expressed his gratitude for Martin Luther, one of the greatest among saints. This gave him credibility, even if his application of the two kingdoms-theology and his call for more activist social involvement by the churches were questioned. With a growing network of supporters, especially Bishop Ludwig Ihmels, he eventually got the German churches involved. By 1923, when Söderblom went on his American pilgrimage, he had secured German participation in his ecumenical project.

To get the American Lutherans involved was no less of a challenge. Lutheranism here was at the time marked by strongly conservative movements, a vigorous opposition to liberal interpretations of the creeds, and hesitancy regarding ecumenical fellowship. Söderblom had the mainline denominations with him through the Federal Council, but the Lutheran churches – deeply divided among themselves – remained outside that council and were not ready for any ecumenical ventures.

Söderblom personally shared much of the Augustana ethos. His father was a rural pastor, a revivalist with a reputation as an incessant preacher of salvation through the blood of Jesus. Söderblom had grown up in a low church, evangelical, and fundamentalist environment where Luther's small catechism was known by heart. He himself had a genuine born-again experience and he felt an affinity with Augustana spirituality. It was his vocation to encourage Augustana's cooperation with other Lutherans and to open the Synod for a broader spectrum of Christian life, while at the same time maintaining its Swedish heritage, and possibly also to introduce the office of bishop.

This was a sensitive matter, which he did not press. Instead, as he did in Germany, he lectured on the great personality of Luther and the universal significance of the doctrine of justification. This may have helped to overcome among the American Lutherans some of the resistance towards Söderblom and his ecumenism. In the United Lutheran Church, the change of attitude could be studied in its official periodical, *The Lutheran*. It published a series of articles on Söderblom, which shifted from a certain reserve to a whole-hearted acceptance of the archbishop. His success was ascribed to his 'genial manner, his broad scholarship and his courageous defense of his own convictions.' The United Lutheran Church sent no fewer than four appointed delegates and six observers to the Stockholm conference in 1925. In the Augustana Synod, the personal encounter

with the charismatic Söderblom also paved the way for an active involvement in ecumenical affairs, even if there was some lasting resistance. President G.A. Brandelle attended the Stockholm conference as a guest of Söderblom. He was also asked to deliver a talk on church cooperation.

With the participation of most of the significant Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Orthodox churches of the time, Stockholm 1925 was a remarkable achievement. It was one of the first major international convocations after the war and had more than 600 officially appointed delegates from Europe and the USA, and a few from Asia and the Middle East. It became *the* event of the year not only in Scandinavia, but acknowledged by leaders of the world, and widely reported in European and North American media. Far too many themes were dealt with in the conference, and the official report was disappointingly meagre especially when it addressed the peace issue. In fact there was only one sentence concerning peace:

> We summon the Churches to share with us our sense of the horror of war and of its futility as a means of settling international disputes, and to pray and work for the fulfilment of the promise that under the sceptre of the Prince of Peace goodness and trust shall meet, righteousness and peace shall kiss each other.

The assembly was therefore considered a failure by people who had expected world-shaking results, but for Söderblom the very fact that against all odds it had even taken place was good enough. After his long years of persistent struggle, to him it was almost a miracle that the former enemies at last had met, talked, shared meals with each other, worshipped and even participated in Holy Communion together.

For Söderblom the Stockholm conference was primarily a spiritual event. From the very beginning he had defined ecumenism as *the* revival movement of the 20th Century, not limited to proclaiming the salvation of

individual souls, but calling for Christian unity and promoting peace with justice for the salvation of the world. At Stockholm he spelled out two fundamental principles. First: the inner life is essential. Institutions and organizations, laws and decrees, however good and necessary they are, will remain impotent like empty shells and dead bodies if they are not given soul and life. They must be animated by a spirit of prayer and faith, love and hope. Only a change of hearts could bring peace and renewal to humanity. And second: love must conquer the world. Spirituality must never retreat to a cozy corner, but should be mobilized, not for its own sake, but for the life of the world. This was what his conference was all about: a call on God's life-giving and guiding Spirit in order to overcome war, greed and self-assertive nationalism.

The Stockholm conference established the Life and Work movement, and in the following years the foundation was laid for what we know now as the World Council of Churches. The ecumenical movement, with its many expressions, shaped church history in the 20th Century more than anything else. For Söderblom ecumenism was not a matter of organization and human effort, even if he admitted that it "had been necessary to contribute every drop of will and blood and to strain the powers of the soul and body and spirit to the uttermost" to gather the conference. For him it was the work of the Holy Spirit.

The key to understanding Söderblom is that for him God was a *living* God, continuously creating and renewing life, and guiding world history towards its fulfilment. God reveals himself, not only through the Scriptures but also through the creative work of the genius, processes of history, and regeneration of individuals. He emphasized the role of extraordinary personalities – intellectuals, artists, heroes, and saints – in creating history and thereby serving God's purposes. Söderblom was humbly convinced that the living God had chosen *him* as an instrument and a servant, and that he himself was making history. For him "a saint

is he who reveals God's might. Saints are those who show clearly and plainly in their lives and deeds and in their very being that God lives". He did not refer to saints as particularly religious, ethical or pious people; in his own provisional canon, saints often were contemporary men and women of struggle and action, gripped by the living God. The great mystics in human history were not persons who denied themselves and withdrew from the world in timeless contemplation and union with the Divine, but rather personalities who confidently affirmed Gods' presence in their lives, and served him in obedient self-sacrifice.

He rejected any idea that Jesus himself had founded the church and given instructions as to how it should be organized, but at the same time he attributed great significance to institutional history symbolized by the office of the bishop, ancient church buildings, and traditional rites. He distinguished between body and soul, institution and spirit. The visible church, the "body," was molded by history and culture and as a result it had taken on different forms. This individuality of a church or a denomination should be respected, and there must be no confusion between unity and uniformity. Söderblom never sought a united organization, nor uniformity of ministry, liturgy, or even confession. True unity would only be found in diversity. One and the same invisible Spirit of God permeats every Christian community. They had the "soul" in common, one and the same through all ages and in every gathering of the faithful. Wherever there was authentic Christian devotion to be found, there was the life-giving Spirit of God. Though critical of hierarchical – and therefore by definition oppressive – institutional structures, Söderblom had no problem recognizing authentic spirituality and in affirming a true faith among Catholic and Orthodox believers.

His ecclesiology served him well to enable cooperation between churches entrenched in overheated nationalism and confessional self-esteem. By referring to the common "soul" he was able to mobilize churches of very different

traditions for common action. By respecting the integrity of each church or denomination and differentiating between their structure and their faith, he even succeeded in getting mutually hostile churches join the movement. But Lutherans remained skeptical, determined rather to develop an international structure of their own. Söderblom eventually convinced most of them also to participate in his wider movement for Life and Work and to share the treasures of the Lutheran heritage with others. Ecumenical structures remained weak and vulnerable, but Söderblom's understanding of the church opened the possibility for negotiated cooperation. He left the hard work of doctrinal agreement and ecclesiological convergence with the other ecumenical movement of the time, Faith and Order.

Many of his guiding perspectives and convictions remain relevant even today. There is still need to highlight the universality and catholicity of the church, and to reject racism, anti-Semitism, and ethnocentrism in favor of cultural and religious diversity. Söderblom's emphasis on spiritual ecumenism and his affirmation of Christian unity in the midst of cultural diversity are as relevant today as ever. Recognizing God's revelation outside Christian tradition and affirming that there is truth in all world religions, he took a more audacious public stand than most churches dare to do even today. His promotion of binding international law and arbitration as a means of conflict-resolution must remain a challenge for organized ecumenism. Söderblom's all-embracing approach to religion and culture, humanities and art, and his generous attitude toward people of other faiths, in combination with his unshakable commitment to the Christian course, made him prophetic. As Swedish bishops assisted by Lars Abrahamson ordained him archbishop in the magnificent Uppsala cathedral one hundred years ago, they could not foresee the full significance of his service. But when in 1930, half-a-year before he died, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for Peace, even his adversaries unanimously affirmed: he was a worthy laureate.