The Legacy of Nathan Söderblom

Eric J. Sharpe

Among the 370 students present at Dwight L. Moody's Northfield Summer School in June-July 1890 were two who later would be acknowledged as world Christian leaders. Slightly the older of the two was John R. Mott, then in his second year as assistant secretary of the YMCA College Department. The younger was one of a handful of overseas visitors to the Summer School, a slightly built, fair-haired student from Sweden, twenty-four years old and in the midst of his first intoxicating venture outside his own country. His name was Nathan Söderblom. Both became recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize, Söderblom in 1930 and Mott in 1946. But they were by no means identical or even similar personalities. Coming as they did from different countries, educated differently, moving in different spheres and nurtured in different theological traditions, it would be a mistake to judge either in terms of the other. Söderblom was a Lutheran and not a Methodist, Swedish and not American or British. Most of all, perhaps, he was a scholar—not in parentheses, but fundamentally. Unlike Mott, he was never really a world traveler; apart from two visits to the United States and one to Turkey, he never left Europe. Almost a century on from Northfield 1890, Söderblom remains relatively little known, other than in silhouette, outside his own country. No complete biography of Söderblom has ever been written, even in Swedish, let alone in any world language. He does, however, have two entirely separate reputations: one as a scholar, chiefly in what is variously called comparative religion, the history of religions, or Religionswissenschaft: the other as an ecumenical pioneer. His missionary thought, on the other hand, has attracted relatively little attention. Söderblom was never a missionary in the commonly accepted sense of the word. However, the missionary component may be seen as throwing a bridge between comparative religion and ecumenical theology in his own work. There is therefore ample reason to recall his heritage as a missionary theologian.

Lars Olof Jonathan (Nathan) Söderblom was born on January 15, 1866, in the Swedish country parish of Trönö, the eldest son of the Rev. Jonas Söderblom (1823-1901) and his Danish wife, Sophie (née Blume). Jonas Söderblom came from a long line of independent farmers, his wife from a family of Copenhagen burghers (her father was a medical doctor). From his father, Nathan inherited a high—indeed at times almost a superhuman—level of discipline and a capacity for sustained hard work. From his mother came an expansiveness, a love of company, a highly developed sense of humor and considerable musical talents. In the 1840s the province of Hälsingland had been swept by a wave of Pietist revivalism, and Jonas Söderblom had been deeply affected by its message, emerging from a severe crisis of faith with a profound sense of the one thing needful in life, the proclamation of the Christian message in the strictest and most uncompromising terms. Jonas was in no sense a liberal, and in later years was profoundly disturbed that his eldest son might be on the way to becoming a "freethinker."

The facts of Nathan Söderblom's career may be rapidly summarized. After secondary education in the coastal town of Hudiksvall, he entered the University of Uppsala in 1883, graduating in Arts in 1886 and in Theology in 1892. Ordained into the ministry of the Church of Sweden in 1893, he served for a year as a hospital chaplain in Uppsala before being appointed in 1894 as pastor to the Swedish Legation in Paris, with subsidiary duties as pastor to seamen in the ports of Calais and Dunkirk. Also in 1894 he married Anna Forsell (1870-1955). Between 1896 and 1914 they had twelve children, four daughters (one of whom died in infancy) and eight sons. All three daughters, incidentally, married future bishops in the Church of Sweden: only one of the sons entered the ministry, and then only in later life.

While in Paris, Söderblom studied under Auguste Sabatier in the Protestant Faculty of the Sorbonne, obtaining his doctorate
in 1901 with a dissertation in the field of comparative eschatology. As a student in Uppsala in the 1890s he had become a sincere, though not an uncritical disciple of Albrecht Ritschl, at a time when, in the eyes of the orthodox, “Ritschlian” and “heretic” were practically synonymous terms. In later years he was to leave Ritschl behind, but the reputation he had acquired was to plague him for the remainder of his career, as a professor in Uppsala from 1901 to 1914 (from 1912 to 1914 he worked chiefly in Leipzig, while retaining his Uppsala chair), and as archbishop of Uppsala from 1914 to his death at the relatively early age of sixty-five on July 12, 1931.

Söderblom attended many conferences, chiefly in connection with the “scientific” study of religion (Stockholm 1897, Paris 1900, Basel 1904, Oxford 1908), the international student move-

ment (Northfield 1890, Amsterdam 1891, Constantinople 1911), and the emergent ecumenical enterprise (Stockholm 1925, Language and the emergent ecumenical enterprise (Stockholm 1925, Lausanne 1927). Only once was he on the point of attending an international missionary conference—Jerusalem 1928—but poor health prevented his traveling, though he submitted a paper, printed in the report. In 1910 he was formally outside the missionary circle, and therefore could not attend the Edinburgh conference.

Returning now to Söderblom’s early years, his Pietist home had received many missionaries “on deputation,” and overseas missions was a matter of great concern in the circles in which his father moved. In his first year as a student he was enthused by a public lecture given in Uppsala by the Norwegian missionary Lars Skrefsrud, on the subject of “Heathenism and Christianity”—a subject that in later years was never far from Söderblom’s concerns. A few months later, in February 1884, there was founded in Uppsala the Student Missionary Association (Studentmissionsföreningen), of which he very soon became a member, and which did a great deal to determine the course of his later career. The association brought together two complementary impulses: evangelistic enthusiasm in the style of the Student Volunteer Movement, and assiduous study of world religions and cultures on the pattern of German Missionswissenschaft, with the latter, perhaps, holding the upper hand. It was in the pages of the association’s journal that Söderblom first appeared in print. From 1888 to 1892 he served as its editor.

In the summer of 1890 Söderblom received an invitation to represent Sweden at the Northfield Student Conference of which we have previously spoken, and was thrown headlong into the expansive world of the international student missionary movement. At this time he began to sense that mission and Christian unity were to be the great concerns of his life, writing in his diary: “Lord, give me humility and wisdom to serve the great cause of the free unity of Thy Church.” The word “free” was important: neither then nor later did Söderblom have any feeling for any manner of unity among Christians other than that which is determined by an act of free will in obedience to that which is divinely revealed.

Over the next few years, though his faith remained soldly evangelical (indeed, surprisingly orthodox), Söderblom’s intellectual position moved more and more in a liberal direction. He and his closest friends were devouring the writings of Wellhausen, Harnack, Ritschl, and other “liberal Protestants” of the period, and entering more and more into conflict with the powerful conservative element in the Swedish theological and ecclesiastical establishment. Of his contemporaries, Samuel Fries—a brilliant Old Testament scholar—suffered more than Söderblom from the odium theologum that resulted. But Söderblom was not unaffected. Although Söderblom won a position that Fries was never to achieve, there was always an element in Scandinavia that was never able fully to trust him.

At no point in his career would Söderblom seem ever to have contemplated becoming an overseas missionary; of the members of the Student Missionary Association in the Uppsala of the 1880s, only two served overseas: Erik Folke in China and Ernst Heuman in India. His contribution was to be that of the scholar and pastor. The techniques of historical investigation he learned from Harnack, and from the no less erudite but less well known Harald Hjärne in Uppsala, and it was to a historical problem—that of the influence of Iran on the thought-world of the Bible—that he initially devoted himself. But comparative religion is a limitless field, and in the 1890s, at first in Uppsala and later in Paris, he became drawn into first one, and then another, of its interconnected mansions.

What had this to do with his view of the Christian mission? On the face of it, little enough. But in a period in which the claims of Christianity to uniqueness in the world of religion were being challenged in an altogether new way, and in which “history” was being called to the witness stand both for and against the Christian claims, a vast exercise in ground-clearing was necessary, an exercise that few were qualified to undertake. Partly it was a historical question: Had the Judeo-Christian tradition always been unique as a revelation of God? Partly it was contemporary: What had Christianity to offer to Asia and Africa that Asia and Africa did not already possess? Were religions in bondage to cultures, or were they not? Was the answer to be found in a boundless relativism, or in a dogmatic exclusivism? That we are still struggling with these questions today is at the very least a sign of their importance. But to Söderblom’s generation they were very largely new questions: On the answers given to them depended much more than scholarly reputation and academic prefferment.

Söderblom’s contention was that without a knowledge of, and a feeling for history, the theologian is reduced to bare and unsupported assertion. The science of religion does not so much provide new answers to old questions, as recognizable answers underpinned by altogether new bodies of evidence. In the person of Jesus Christ, and in his message of the kingdom of God, there is something altogether new and unique in the world of religion, and that “something” could be demonstrated through the findings of “scientific” history, without recourse to dogmatic special pleading.

The missionary implications of this were, he believed, obvious. His own task he saw as being primarily that of the historian.

However, he was enough of a Hegelian to see world history as one history, one progressive record, in which earlier and later phases were organically connected. In the manner of his time, he drew a distinction between “general” and “special” revelation (the former brought to completion in the latter), and between “natural” and “prophetic” types of religion.
Throughout his career, he was notably disinclined to superimpose theory upon fact. A key word in all his writing is verklighet, "reality," not in a metaphysical but in a phenomenological sense. The scholar's calling and duty is first of all to investigate what is actually there, observably there in the world of religion, past and present; only then can interpretations be attempted and conclusions drawn.

Söderblom never wrote, nor did he ever contemplate writing, a large work on the theology or the praxis of the Christian mission. He did, on the other hand, publish a number of essays and lectures on missionary subjects in a sequence extending over a period of more than forty years. The first of these, dating back to 1889, was on the life and work of Ansgar, the first known missionary to Sweden, and the second on the missionary revival among American students; during his student years Söderblom also contributed surveys of modern missionary literature to the Student Missionary Association's Communications. In the 1890s and early 1900s he was for the most part engaged with historical and social issues, and published little in the overseas missionary area. But after his return to Uppsala from Paris in 1901 he became a regular contributor to the Swedish missionary debate.

On February 28, 1904, for instance, Söderblom delivered the closing address to the twentieth-anniversary gathering of the Student Missionary Association, pointing out that, the world over, peoples and cultures were on the move and that a struggle for spiritual supremacy was developing between a "Christian" and a "Buddhist" set of principles (Marxist influence had not yet made its presence felt). New qualities were called for.

One condition of mastering the situation is a deep, genuine insight. Whoever would help people must possess as the most important condition, alongside profound and sincere love for them, true insight. As far as is humanly possible, we must understand them. . . . We need people who know Eastern culture in depth.

The point seems a fairly obvious one. But in 1904 it was not obvious at all—at least not among pious but superficially informed "friends of missions." Zeal is one thing. Zeal without understanding is dangerous. Söderblom was in effect pleading for an alliance and a sharing of expertise between mission and comparative religion, or rather (for a sharing of expertise there had always been), for a more conscious and deliberate pooling of resources between the two. Two years later, in an address on "Mission and the History of Civilization," he was making the same point;9 and again in a 1915 article, in which he wrote that "the future will show a closer connexion between missions and the now more generally recognized science of religion."17 Probably the science of religion would be able to stand on its own feet, but mission would have "an increasingly imperative need" of the expertise that only comparative religion could provide.18

Söderblom's 1906 lecture was very much a programmatical statement, containing most of the points on which his mature missionary theology was based.19 Missions do not exist merely in order to transmit the habits and values of a certain type of culture, nor merely to secure numerical accessions to Christianity. There have been heroic missionaries, but it is wrong to concentrate only on missionary heroism. Mission involves a certain measure of compassion, but while not altogether bad, the compassion motive may lead to the painting of the non-Christian world as altogether corrupt, which it certainly is not. What, then, has the Christian world to give? "The gift is not our dogmatics or our church organization—they can make those up for themselves—but the gift is Christ."20

At present, we simply do not know what a Japanese or Chinese character-formation, church formation and Christian formation or Indian or African Christianity will look like: "We can scarcely discern even the most general outlines of these edifices."21 But we must not force non-European Christians into European-style churches: to do so would be to render them homeless.22

Söderblom was too honest not to acknowledge a certain overlap and community of interest between Protestant missions and colonial politics. However, he thought Sweden fortunately free of such entanglements, for which reason Swedish missions were in a position to concentrate on the essential issues, that of helping to bring about "a free acceptance of Christ in the lives of individuals and communities, inward re-creation, independent
Board, and thus responsible for many missionary practicalities.  
Symbolically, his first official duty as archbishop—later on the very 
day of his consecration—was to commission a missionary. His 
appointment had coincided with the outbreak of World War I, 
and while it lasted, he saw his chief international concern as being 
to mediate between the Christians of the belligerent nations—a 
virtually impossible task, theologians and church leaders being 
among their respective countries’ most energetic propagandists.  
It would be useless to deny that Söderblom’s own natural symp­ 
thies lay very much on the German side in the conflict. But much 
as he admired Germany, he detested war even more passionately.  
Söderblom’s peace initiatives were to culminate in the Stock­ 
holm Life and Work Conference of 1925—the end of hostilities had 
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needed—but not union at any price, not a careless sinking of differences brought about as much by theological sloth as by commitment to a larger vision. Söderblom frequently used the term "evangelical Catholicity" to describe that vision—of a concentration on a common source of revelation, strength, and inspiration, and not a tacit agreement to eliminate everything in the tradition that might give offense: "It would be ungodly to sacrifice anything essential in our faith and our divine heritage for the cause of unity." And what better way to distinguish essentials from nonessentials than through the missionary outlook?

To Nathan Söderblom, as to many of the pioneers of the ecumenical movement, the cause of unity and the cause of mission were not two causes, but one. His intellectual liberalism notwithstanding, in all theological essentials he was solidly Lutheran and could be deeply suspicious of ecumenical experiments (for instance, those of his contemporary Rudolf Otto) that passed beyond the revelation of God in Christ into the regions of a vague theology. But his heart proved too weak to withstand the strain, and he died on July 12, 1931, at the age of sixty-five. By royal permission he was buried in Uppsala Cathedral. The text on his grave was one he had often quoted:

So likewise ye, when ye shall have done well those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done [in Swedish, only done] that which was our duty to do [Luke 17:10, K.J.V.].

In the course of the 1906 address from which we have previously quoted, Söderblom said: "Mission means that the struggle between the great types of human civilization, between the great powers of spiritual culture, must be as deep, as concerned with [matters of] principle, as many-sided as possible." In his own case, he brought together precisely that combination of qualities needed to analyze that "struggle" as it presented itself in his day. One may have profound commitment without analytical expertise, and of course vice versa—and that is in large measure the situation in which we find ourselves today. One fears that the legacy of Söderblom and his generation, and his capacity to hold together the study of religion on the highest level of professional competence and the deepest sense of having been laid hold on by the living God, is one that today is, while not unknown, at least uncommon. But that surely is ample reason why it should be recalled. Much has happened since 1931 to alter the terms of the struggle: the "great powers" of our day are by no means what they were in his. But that we are in increasing need of his type of mission—analytical and devoted—would seem to go without saying.

The final word, however, I give to Söderblom's disciple and only recent biographer, Bengt Sundkler:

Nathan Söderblom points the way. He was an archbishop—and thus a representative, responsible church leader. At the same time he was a free spirit and therefore creative. In this regard there is a striking resemblance between him and [Pope] John XXIII. The example of both points to a fundamental problem for the Church and ecumenism: to combine free creativity with responsibility for institutions. But of course this is not only a problem for church leaders. It is a responsibility for all of us.

Notes

References are to works by Söderblom, unless otherwise stated.

1. Incomparably the best account in English is Bengt Sundkler, Nathan Söderblom: His Life and Work (London: Lutterworth, 1968).


4. La Vie future d'après le Mazdeisme (Paris: Leroux, 1901).

5. See below, notes 38-43.


8. For Söderblom's personal account, see Anna Söderblom, ed., Sommarminnen (Stockholm: SKDB, 1941), pp. 10-103.


10. Fried never obtained a permanent academic post, and died early, in 1914, the vicar of a Stockholm city church.

11. Mimmi Folke, Erik Folke (Stockholm: Svenska Missionens i Kina För­lag, 1941); Gunnar Brundin, Ernst Heuman: Biskop av Tranquebar (Stock­holm: SKDB, 1926).

12. Stated most clearly in Uppenbarelsereligion (Uppsala: Schultz, 1903, and later editions).


15. Ibid., p. 79.

16. "Missionen och odlingens historia," in Söderblom and others,
18. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 5.
21. Ibid., p. 5f.
22. Ibid., p. 6.
23. Ibid., p. 16.
25. See the essay by Dahlquist, cited in note 2, above.
26. The Soderblom library in Uppsala contains a large uncatalogued collection of this wartime literature. From the German side, most would seem to have been supplied by Soderblom’s close friend Adolf Deissmann of Berlin, publisher of Evangelischer Wochenbrief (in English, Protestant Weekly Letter). The English edition was discontinued on America’s entry into the war in April 1917.
27. See C. Howard Hopkins, John R. Mott 1865–1955: A Biography (Geneva: World Council of Churches, and Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979). Mott’s address to a “Cossack Congress” on June 27, 1917, in which he was reputed to have insulted Germany (a charge he always denied), “temporarily cooled the affection of some Swedes, including his intimate friend Nathan Soderblom” (ibid., p. 501).
28. The various accounts in Swedish, the best is by Sigfrid Estborn, Från Taberg till Tranquebar: Biskop David Bexell (Stockholm: SKDB, 1940), pp. 100ff.
29. Heuman had been a fellow member with Soderblom of the Student Missionary Association in Uppsala. See note 11, above.
31. Sundar Singh’s budskap, pp. 244ff.
32. See Sharpe, “Nathan Soderblom, Sadhu Sundar Singh and Emanuel Swedenborg,” in Sharpe and Hultgard, eds., Nathan Soderblom and His Contribution to the Study of Religion (1984), pp. 68–95. The whole Sundar Singh episode is greatly in need of fresh investigation in the light of what has been learned since the 1920s about the nature of visionary and ecstatic experience.
33. See Sharpe, Karl Ludwig Reichelt: Missionary, Scholar and Pilgrim (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan, 1984), pp. 68ff.
34. On Westman, see Sundkler, Nathan Soderblom och hans möten (1975), pp. 110–34.
36. Ibid., p. 58.
37. Ibid., p. 64.
38. Ibid., p. 58.
40. Ibid., p. 136.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., p. 139.
43. Ibid., p. 150.
44. Ibid., p. 151.
45. Ibid., p. 153.
46. See Sundkler, Nathan Soderblom (1968), pp. 422f.
47. This aspect has seldom been recorded in print. But see Sundkler, “Nathan Soderblom—A Complex Personality,” in Sharpe and Hultgard, eds., Nathan Soderblom (1984), p. 10.
49. The Living God: Basal Forms of Personal Religion (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933; reprinted 1939). A later paper back reprint (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962) on the front cover replaces “Basal” with “Basic,” and adds the absurd words: “Ten faces of religion—from witchcraft to revelation.” However, the remainder of the book actually is a reprint. The planned second series of lectures was of course never delivered, though part exists in note form.

Bibliography

Works by Söderblom in English Having Reference to Mission

Söderblom wrote relatively little in English. There is a full, though still incomplete bibliography of his vast output in Nils Karlström, ed., Nathan Soderblom in Memoriam (Stockholm: SKDB, 1931), pp. 391–451.


1933a The Living God: Basal Forms of Personal Religion London: Oxford Univ. Press.

Works about Söderblom in English

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