Nathan Söderblom
as a pioneer of religious studies,
as a theologian and
as an archbishop of the Church of Sweden

by Edgar Almén

His life

Nathan Söderblom was born in 1866 in Trönö in rural Hälsingland (some 300 km to the north of Stockholm) as a son to a minister of the Church of Sweden, who himself descended from a respected family of farmers in that area, and to his wife, whose relatives mostly were academics in Denmark.

He studied theology at the university of Uppsala in the 1880s and was ordained in 1893. 1890 he visited a student missionary conference in Northfield in the US, where he met among others John R Mott and Wilfred Monot, who also came to be ecumenical pioneers. He started to work on a doctoral thesis, became pastor at the Swedish embassy in Paris and won 1901 the only doctorate ever awarded by the Protestant faculty of the Sorbonne to a foreigner on a thesis titled "La vie future d'après le Mazdéisme". The same year he was appointed professor in "theological propaedeutics and theological encyclopaedia". This chair originally focused on apologetics, that is arguments for (Lutheran) Christianity and against everything else, and was later developed into a general introductory subject within the theological faculty. Söderblom changed it practically into a chair in History of religions, even if the chair kept its old, complicated name up in the 1920s.

Nathan Söderblom was a pioneer in Sweden for the scientific study of Non-Christian religions, and as such he had an enormous impact on Swedish theology and on religious education in Swedish schools, and so even on the Swedish discourse on religion. But he was also internationally one of the most well-known professors of History of religion, which now flourished especially in the Netherlands and in Scandinavia. Söderblom was responsible for the revision of the international standard handbook, Tiele's Kompendium der Religionsgeschichte, and when the German universities wanted to introduce the new subject, they called for him. He did not accept the call from Berlin (the most prestigious university of that time) but accepted the call from Leipzig, so 1912-1914 he was professor in Leipzig as well as in Uppsala.

A professor of theology in Sweden at that time was not only an academician but also had responsibilities within the Church of Sweden. Through the 1920s the professors of theology were also vicars in parishes around Uppsala and Lund and constituted the chapters of the dioceses of Uppsala and Lund. Nathan Söderblom was as professor also vicar not in the cathedral parish of Uppsala but in the second parish of that city, Holy Trinity, and as such he had his home in the vicarage of that parish. So, when he was not in Leipzig or on one of his other international journeys, he was very much involved in the life of the Church of Sweden. As professor he educated future ministers. As member of the chapter he was co-responsible for the whole archdiocese, and as vicar he lived with his parishioners.

1914 a new archbishop was elected. Söderblom was still young, 48 years, and well-known for his energy and enthusiasm, for his theological radicalism and for his contacts with authors, artists and other creative minds, thought to be dangerous by more conservative-minded persons. The government should appoint one of three candidates elected by representatives of the Church. Söderblom was elected as the third candidate, clearly behind two older bishops. But he was appointed. He started to work with a lot of energy and enthusiasm, driven by visions which many came to share with him, and his 17 years as archbishop in many aspects changed the Church of Sweden. And he influenced the world-wide Christian Church as one of the pioneers of the
ecumenical movement with the great ecumenical conference for Life and Work in Stockholm 1925 as a peak event followed by him being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 1930.

He died in 1931, still extremely active. The same year he held his Gifford lectures in Edinburgh, using all his scholarship within the History of religions, but also, as he always did, interpreting other religions in relation to Christian faith and to all aspects of human culture. And his work has continued to influence the Church of Sweden in astonishingly many ways. He composed tunes to hymns, some of them to be found in the new hymnbook 1937. The special relations between the Church of Sweden and the Church of England which he initiated when a professor and fostered as an archbishop has continued into the Porvoo agreement 1992 between Anglicans of Great Britain and Ireland and Lutherans of the Nordic and Baltic Lands. And to the Archbishop's house two of his daughters returned as wives to new archbishops, so you can talk of a kind of Söderblom dynasty reigning the Church of Sweden from 1914 up in the 1960s.

I am very glad that you in Malawi want to hear about Nathan Söderblom and that I am invited to speak on that topic to you. I am brought up with stories about him and with a lot of allusions to him and his thoughts, what to some extent depends on my mother being baptized by him and on my grandfather, Edgar Reuterskiöld, being a pupil and friend to Söderblom, later his successor as professor in Uppsala and ordained by him as bishop of Växjö.

I want to make this presentation in three steps and I will rely heavily on the book Nathan Söderblom in memoriam (here quoted as NSIM), published in 1931, the same year as he died. Especially I will use three essays written by three of the most eminent Swedish theological scholars of this century, then all three professors and later all three bishops in the Church of Sweden. The authors are

* Tor Andræ, who learnt History of religion from Söderblom, became professor in Stockholm and the perhaps best Swedish expert on Islam, later bishop in the diocese of Linköping

* Gustaf Aulén, once docent with Söderblom, later professor of Systematic theology in Lund with international reputation as author to Christus Victor and many other books, and bishop in Strängnäs

* Yngve Brilioth, one of our most distinguished professors of historical theology, actually married to one of Söderblom's daughters, and later archbishop himself.

**His perspective in studying religions**

You often report the last words of important persons. In his last hour Nathan Söderblom is reported to have said:

I know that God lives. I can prove it with help of the History of religions. (NSIM, 27)

For him it is a scientific task to study all religions as thoroughly as possibly, but this scientific task is also important for him as a Christian. Religion, with its differences and contrasts, must be interpreted from its own assumptions and presuppositions - and that is important for Christian faith, because "only to the extent that Christianity does full and unconditional justice to the other religions, it can generally claim to satisfy the religious needs of mankind" (Söderblom 1914, 82f) Or, with Tor Andræ: There are two distinct features in Söderblom's research: (1) He wants to have a concrete picture of the history of religion, a lively, total, just picture of the total history of religion, and (2) his research is apologetically directed (NSIM 28).
For Söderblom the History of religion replaces the natural theology (natürliche Theologie) (Söderblom 1914, chapter V). After Schleiermacher's critique against the idea of an abstract, general natural religion, Söderblom searches for the specific religions (NSIM 33) and studies them historically as a preparatory work for "a philosophy of the History of religion" (Söderblom 1914, 70).

It is not only part of his theoretical programme but also in line with his personality to give consent to and to try to share. "He had a beaming, never tiring and benevolent interest for everything and for everybody. In front of the world of history he felt that cosmic joy filling the author of Psalm 104" (NSIM 29).

He wants to learn from all people who have met the holy, who take their religion seriously. Andræ: "The exact observation serves the understanding. Outward characteristics are signs for and express the inward man. The piety is for him much more interesting than the rite or the conception. His strength is the psychological intuition." He is interested not so much in the shape of the faith in God as in the true feeling of the divine, in how the mind is impressed by the holy. (NSIM 41)

Hence his well-known words from the article on holiness:

Holiness is the great word in religion; it is even more essential than the notion of God. Real religion may exist without a definite conception of deity, but there is no real religion without a distinction between holy and profane ... Religious is the man to whom something is holy.

(Encyclopedia for Religion and Ethics, Vol vi, p 731 from Sharpe, 160)

In this sense an aborigine in Australia can be much more pious - and interesting - than a luke Christian from Europe. (NSIM 31)

But Söderblom is not interested in an abstract holiness, but in the piety of specific individuals within specific religious traditions. His programme stresses the History of religion, but it does so in quite another way than die religionsgeschichtliche Schule did. That school stressed historical dependencies and similarities. Söderblom stresses uniqueness and individuality. (cf NSIM 42f, 72)

With Andræ: "In his thought historical comparison does not aim at determining dependencies. On the contrary: The comparison aims in the end to show that the individuality is incomparable and absolutely independent." (NSIM 35)

Or, with Sharpe: "Söderblom's distinctive contribution to comparative religion is perhaps to be seen in the attitude with which he approached his material: taking all religions seriously, not merely as objects of scientific study, but as religions... In his concern for the sui generis character, not only of religion as such, but also of separate religions, he anticipated the attitude which we know today as the phenomenological approach." (Sharpe, 159)

And Söderblom is not interested in a piety neglecting this world. For him the strength of a religion is "its deeper experience of sin, suffering and death" (Söderblom 1903 from NSIM 81):

The strength of a religion is not measured from its hymns of praise but from its experience of the misery and darkness of life. (Söderblom 1903 from NSIM 94f)

This interest for everything and for everybody is, however, distinguishing, critical and evaluating. In an article from 1903 he makes the distinction between two types of religion, between "religions of (nature and) culture" and "religions of revelation", thus arguing against all theories which tried to organize history into one development ending with its fulfilment, Christianity:
In reality the evolution shows a double line. On one side the religions of culture with their deities, which, as the culture develops, become more and more unpersonal and abstract and more and more disappear into the great force, the great essence, the One, into the light-darkness of the Brahman-Atman, where the mysticism of infinity becomes the highest form of personal religion. On the other side the religions of revelation in the prophetic religions of Zarathustra (Zoroaster) and Mose and in Christianity, where faith is directed towards the one, living, spiritual God, acting and revealed in history. (Söderblom 1903 from NSIM 55)

As indicated in the quotation, this first distinction is accompanied by another, that between two types of mysticism, between "mysticism of infinity" and "mysticism of personality", the former the former related to religions of culture, the latter to religions of revelation (NSIM, 40, 82). Söderblom later creates new concepts for (about) the same phenomena, as he distinguishes between "mysticism of training" and "mysticism of confidence (or forgiveness)" or "religion of grace". He never comes to a definite terminology, but his intention is obvious: He finds that the critique of all mysticism by the then dominant theology (Ritschl and others) makes it too narrow for true inwardness and mysticism, and he wants to defend not all mysticism, but some. (NSIM 82f)

Along the same lines Söderblom wants to distinguish between two types of dualism, between the metaphysical dualism of religions of culture "between spirit and substance, unity and plurality, the undifferentiated essence and the world" and the dualism of the prophetic religions "between God and devil, divine conquering will of love and the radical, unexplainable evil, life and death, confidence and despair, the struggle between good and evil in which we live in this world (Eph 6:11ff)" (Söderblom 1903 from NSIM 80f).

These distinctions are not only describing but also evaluating. Söderblom wants to view "all religion and not only a part of it under the perspective of revelation" (Söderblom 1914, 70), but he obviously values "religions of revelation" higher than "religions of culture". There the peculiarity of religion becomes obvious, and religion becomes something independent, which can both be influential as against a high and rich culture and be linked to such a culture (NSIM 79).

From such a perspective his special interest for Avesta and the religion of Zarathustra/Zoroaster is understandable. In Söderblom's perspective this religion is a kind of key to the religions of revelation, and he also in his two first (and most thoroughly academic) monographs deal try to discern the specific type of eschatology and dualism of this old religion.

Also the way a specific religion deals with human experiences of sin, suffering and death can not only be described but also be evaluated:

The strength of a religion is not measured from its hymns of praise but from its experience of the misery and darkness of life. Only one religion has entered the abyss as deeply as the Indian religion of weariness of life, or deeper than that. It is Christianity. In the former the message of salvation is pessimistic: true life is the tranquillity of death. In the latter, however, the message of salvation is optimistic, in spite of the abysses: An eternal yes is set up against every no. (Söderblom 1903 from NSIM 94f)

This evaluation also to some extent influences his interest for different movements within the different religions. It is obvious that for instance his special interest for the bhakti-piety in Hinduism and for the amida-piety in (Japanese) Buddhism are effects of the evaluative components in these distinctions.
What about Söderblom's interest for African traditional religions? As far as I can see, he has no special interest in Africa. African traditional religions are included in the more general view. As already mentioned Söderblom wants to view "all religion and not only a part of it under the perspective of revelation" (Söderblom 1914, 70). And, as important, "within the general concept of religion you can find deep, even fundamental differences: degeneration and progress, lower and higher forms, spiritual poverty and creativity, salvation and rejection, truth and untruth" Söderblom 1914, 84).

But he has a kind of missionary inculturation interest. He is convinced that also "primitive heathenism" presents "points of contact for missionary work" (article in International Review of Missions, Vol 4, 1915), and I think that this an important motive behind his writing not only the part "General" but also the part "Primitive" of the article "Holiness" in ERE.

We must remember: Söderblom's project is a project arguing for the discipline History of religion as an necessary ingredient within a (Christian) theological faculty. He argues that it is important for the over all task of the faculty and, especially, for its task to describe and understand Christian faith:

> Theology must have cognizance of the other religions in order to get a clearer view of the essence of Christianity. As a matter of fact the peculiarity of Evangelical Christianity has been discerned more exactly than before with help of the comparison with other kinds of piety. (Söderblom 1914, 79)

Let us then turn to Söderblom's interpretation of Christian faith.

**His corresponding interpretation of Christian faith**

You can argue that it was the theology of Ritschl which helped Söderblom to understand the Bible as a witness to God's revelation in history and to read Luther in a new way (so Andre, NSIM 50f). If so, you should stress that this way to understand the Bible and to study Luther for Söderblom was something dynamic which in the long run could not be kept within the Ritsclian frames. And to Söderblom the igniting questions were those of origins of the Pentateuch and the Gospels. Looking back in the 1920s he remembers:

> For us it was not a matter of an inherited or easily gained insight but of a revelation from God himself, when the question of the truth of Christianity was moved from the infallibility of the very book and the very letter to God's living revelation in history, fulfilled in Jesus Christ and perpetuated in every human soul endowed with grace. It threw a new light on the Scriptures. The study was inspired by devotion. We began to understand something of the continuity of God's work through the ages. The scientific freedom and severity became a religious task for us, something we owed as an honour to the God of truth and to the testimonies to Him in the Holy Scriptures. (Söderblom 1926)

This new understanding of the Bible is the first key to his understanding of Christian faith (and, as we have seen, of all religion).

The second key is his new understanding of Luther. He came from the 19th Century revival tradition of Sweden, where Luther was an undisputed authority, and his father could in his sermons go on quoting Luther for at least 20 minutes. And also for Ritschl was Luther important, but he read Luther in quite another way. Already in a small book in 1893 Söderblom tried to harmonize these two interpretations of Luther. (NSIM 51f)

But Söderblom continued to study Luther, and many (most?) of his concepts and distinctions derive
from his Luther reading. One of his best books is a Luther study of 1919 with the same title as a lecture which you can find in the Kachere Institute together with other as yet unpublished lectures read in the US 1923, *Humour and Melancholy in Martin Luther*.

Luther is the one who helps Söderblom to see the revelation character of Christian faith and how it follows human sin and suffering into the abyss, into the terrores conscientiae. He is the key example of "mysticism of personality". And he is the one who helps Söderblom to discern the specific type of dualism in the "religions of revelation".

For Söderblom Luther is the great personality par preference, he is disappointed when he discovers that people within other denominational traditions know so little about Luther "as if he was just a dignity of the third class and not the greatest religious genius of Christianity" (NSIM 92), and he on all his international tours again and again tries to teach about Luther to help people from other traditions to understand how important he is - in Christian history and, for Söderblom, as a guide to the understanding of Christian faith.

For me it seems plausible that Luther is also the inspiration behind Söderblom's concentration on the cross of Christ, perhaps even more during his time as archbishop, culminating in his passion book of 1928, *The history of the suffering of Christ* (NSIM 94ff). Aulén: "The history of the suffering of Christ is in many respects a very remarkable book, full of the broad and deep knowledge of the author, with outlooks in all directions within the world of religion, and at the same time in the full sense of the word a book of devotion, which penetrating and in a classically simple way speaks about the innermost mysterium of Christian faith, enlightening this mysterium from the most different viewpoints but still letting it remain just a mysterium, a secret. Among the many passion books of Christianity it is, of its kind, unique." (NSIM 98)

But this concentration on the cross of Christ if perhaps not so surprising, when you consider that Söderblom measured the strength of a religion from its experience of the misery and darkness of life!?

This concentration on Luther could, of course, not confine Söderblom to the Lutheran tradition, for "to Söderblom what was important in Luther's work was his deep insight into what is truly and classically Christian" (NSIM 101).

Christianity could then neither be confined to the interpretations already given. From his youth through all his life Söderblom reflected on the task of the Christian missions, and his work on the history of religions could probably also be read as a preparation for what we today label "inculturation":

Christian mission must in every moment establish relations to what is given. Perhaps it then finds, that the divine love of Southern India, bhakti, has some friendship to the doctrine of salvation through faith and so has some possibilities to acquire that religious and moral strength of Luther's confidence which it misses and desperately needs. Perhaps it finds, that Kant ought to be included in Chinese ethics. By the way the writings of Eucken, the philosopher of will, have been translated into Japanese. But the work I here think of can only be done by natives... Only those who own a share in their own culture can in such a way give needed expressions and forms to the religion of revelation... In doing so Christian faith joins to what is already there both as organic perfection and as needed improvement. (Söderblom 1914, 74-76)

That process which expels elements from the culture or accepts them for mutual penetration continues with an inner necessity, brings itself its justice and needs no busy lawyers. As the
most noble mediator of spiritual values in the present stage of world history the Western mission most sincerely has to involve into the indigenous way of thinking of that particular people. (Söderblom 1914, 73)

It would be to deny the universality of Christian faith to suppose that the specific content of the gospel, its fundamental strength and ethical holiness could not be as rich in the new junctions which now appear in India or East Asia as in its hellenistic-roman-germanic dress. The relation between Christian faith and what is already there is dialectic. The old man must die, there is no easier way for the new to grow. But within Christian faith natural predispositions and possibilities get a richer use than before. (Söderblom 1914, 77)

His ecumenical vision

As there for Söderblom is no general religion, only specific religions, there is for him no general Christianity, only specific historical churches or denominations. They can learn from each other, but not by forgetting their specific heritages and tasks. Söderblom's ecumenical vision is not that the denominations should disappear into some kind of super-church:

Since the proud - but for the purity of religion somewhat dangerous - idea of one single church organization for the whole world has for ever perished, the universality of Christianity is realized by the separate denominations thinking of themselves as unanimous or competing collaborators. Your feeling for the totality will then be strengthened to the same extent as the given tasks of the own denomination are done without awe. If there will be a new corpus evangelicorum, not as a political entity but as a true catholicity without any sectarian self-satisfaction, it cannot be created through mixing or through neglecting the real and characteristic differences. What we need for a effective catholicity is a sharper sight for the true spiritual gift of each denomination. Fidelity to one's own heritage is combined with respect for others' ideals. (Söderblom 1916 from NSIM 89f)

To Söderblom ecumenism should not be directed towards the peripheral differences but towards what is essentially Christian - just as his study of religions was directed towards what is essentially religious, and just as he had learnt from Luther to concentrate on what is "classically and monumentally Christian" (NSIM 104).

The history of religion shows two roads to universalism. You can try to win in by being broadsighted, searching for knowledge far away, trying to do justice in all directions and to absorb what is valuable, wherever you find it. Such an enlightened eclecticism has undoubtedly a task in our world. But universalism can also result from the observer - without having universalism as part of his programme - not stopping with any contingencies, how important they may be, but searching for the essence itself. Luther followed the second road. Especially in the discussion with Erasmus he showed an unchangeable, for en eclectic broadsightedness offensive, stubbornness by insisting on the principle of salvation, as he demanded it for his certitude and blessedness. But you be more sure to find universalism if you search for and complete what is essential than if you try to comprise all varieties. (Söderblom 1916 from NSIM 100)

Why, then, was the unity so urgent for Söderblom? I am not quite clear about the answer.

Obviously it was urgent for him to try to stop the war. The churches seemed to become more and more involved as instruments and as legitimations. This challenged Söderblom's understanding of religion and of Christian faith.
And the war was a tragedy for all those involved. Söderblom had lived both in France and in Germany. But also if he had not, the faith asked for responsible action - from every man and woman, but especially from those with special responsibilities within the churches. Söderblom felt obliged to try all possibilities he could find. Many possibilities were closed in front of him, but he tried to find new ones. There is a lot of stubbornness (and creativity) also in his efforts, before he could preside his conference.

But there is also an element of obedience, in general and to the prayer of Christ "that they may be one" (John 17: 20-23). In a catholic critique he was even accused of stressing the \textit{imitatio}-motive to such an extent that he was indifferent to those problems which Faith and Order tried to tackle (NSIM 338)!

To some extent this can be true. He was active also within Faith and Order, one of its vice presidents, very active on the Lausanne conference 1927 and very concerned in trying to unite the two branches of the ecumenical movement. But questions of faith (doctrine) and order (the organisation of the churches) were not at all as urgent for him as questions of life and work. In Lausanne he even became controversial, as he - together with other Lutherans - made an official declaration stressing "the Lutheran view on the relation between the visible church and the invisible church as a dynamic relation, where the visible church is to be seen in how the Word and the sacraments are administered" (not in any visible organization). That was seen, especially by American anglo-catholics, as a betrayal of the ecumenical idea. (NSIM 338-342)

But for Söderblom the important thing was not to find consensus. His ecumenical vision was related to a very specific understanding of Christian faith, which forced him to study also non-Christian religions in a very serious way. This programme was not a programme of compromise!

\textbf{Quotations are made from:}

Nils Karlström (ed), \textit{Nathan Söderblom in memoriam}, Stockholm 1931, (quoted NSIM), with the articles

- Tor André, Nathan Söderblom as a historian of religion, p 25-62,
- Gustaf Aulén, The theological life-work, p 63-104
- Yngve Brilioth, The ecumenical life-work, p 273-347
- and a bibliography on Söderblom's writings, p 391-452, 669 titles)

Nathan Söderblom, \textit{Naturlig religion och religionshistoria. En historik och ett program} (Natural religion and history of religions. A historical account and a programme), Stockholm 1914 (German edition: Die sogenannte natürliche Theologie und die Religionsgeschichte, Meissen 1913)


Indirectly are quoted

Nathan Söderblom, Uppenbarelsereligion, 1903 (Religion of Revelation)
In the library at Chancellor College: you can find

- *The Living God* (his Gifford Lectures 1931),
  with a biographical introduction by Söderblom's son in law
  and later successor as archbishop, Yngve Brilioth (2 copies)

- *Holiness (General and Primitive)*
  article in *Encyclopedia for Religion and Ethics.*

In the Kachere Institute you can also find the following unpublished lectures by Söderblom

  Lecture at Yale university November 30th 1923

- *Humour and Melancholy in Martin Luther.*
  Lecture at the University of Chicago October 18th 1923

- *The four hundreth Anniversary of Luther in Worms.*
  Lecture at Gustavus Adolphus, St Peter, October 29th 1923

- *Martin Luther's Universal Significance.*
  An Adress on Luther's Birthday, November 10, 1923, in Philadelphia

and

- Nathan Söderblom, *Memories from the Eighties and Nineties.*
  Unpublished translation by Carl Axel Aurelius of an extract from
  Nathan Söderblom's article with that title in the book
  *Upsala Kristliga Studentförbund 1901-1926*, Uppsala 1926