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Nathan Söderblom: "*Homo religiosus?*"

BY WALTER H. CAPPS

IN HIS foreword to what will serve as the definitive work in the English language on this subject, *Nathan Söderblom, His Life and Work*, Bengt Sundkler states that he hopes to follow this volume with two more (in Swedish). The first is to deal with Söderblom's activities prior to 1914, the year in which he became Archbishop of Uppsala; and the second is to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Söderblom's theological reflection. One very much hopes that Sundkler's hopes will be realized. Furthermore, it is not inappropriate at all to note the occurrence of an already-accomplished monumental task by pointing ahead to the prospect of two corollaries. Sundkler's book is as rich in what it awakens as it is full in what it recovers. It both suggests and promises a lot.

The author (who is Professor of Church History in Uppsala University, and former Bishop in Tanzania) was asked to write this book by W. A. Visser't Hooft, former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, and by (then) Archbishop G. Hultgren of the Church of Sweden. Work on the project was facilitated by a supporting grant from King Gustaf VI Adolf. The intention was at least twofold. The study was meant to tell much of the still unwritten history of the Church of Sweden in the first three decades of the twentieth century. And, in addition, it was to serve as a large formative chapter in the story of the ecumenical movement in general.

From the outset there is no question about Sundkler's loyalty and admiration for "the great Archbishop" with whom he enjoyed cherished personal contacts during the final months of Söderblom's life. This conscious devotion is acknowledged throughout the book, and especially in the opening portions in which Sundkler measures the dependence of the ecumenical movement itself upon the work of the Swedish primate. But before the book gets very far under way the assessment of ecumenical significance is joined by an unabashed awe regarding the manifold interests which this complex person—scholar, churchman, author, ecumenical pioneer, university professor, father, husband, and son—endeavored to master. These two facets of the career—Söderblom's ecclesiastical and cultural leadership

**Nathan Söderblom—His Life and Work*, by Bengt Sundkler, Lund: Gleerups, and London: Lutterworth, 1968, 438 pages, 63 British Shillings.

and his personal resourcefulness—are the currents which underly Sundkler's presentation.

The book follows careful chronological order. Söderblom's life is traced from his boyhood in Hälsingland (during which time he manifested certain mystical traits under the influence of a pious, pietistic, and somewhat authoritarian father-pastor) to his last acts as Archbishop, and, particularly, as Gifford Lecturer in Scotland. Along the way the reader is given opportunity to watch Nathan develop into a student leader of various national and international campus religious organizations. One can also trace his activities as a young pastor in Paris, then watch behind the scenes as the complicated deliberations occur which bring about the scholar-pastor's election to a professorship in *Religionsgeschichte* in Uppsala in 1901. The career unfolds further in Leipzig. Then the reader is told about Söderblom's so-called accidental appointment to the Archbishopric in 1914. From here the personal history is sketched out in the series of ecumenical gatherings—the Nordic Church Conference of 1917, the Faith and Order meeting in Uppsala in 1918, the conferences on Life and Work in Geneva in 1920, in Hälsingborg in 1922, Stockholm in 1925, Chexbres in 1930, and the World Alliance in Copenhagen in 1922 and in Prague in 1928, to mention only the most prominent. Sundkler provides full and precise background information regarding each event as well as character sketches of the principal participants. The source of such sketches is primarily Söderblom himself, as exhibited in his notebooks, diaries, correspondence, and other personal documents.

Sundkler pictures Söderblom as a far-sighted leader, a man of immense power, aristocratic dignity, and cautious holiness, one whose passion was to serve the cause of "the free unity" of the Church. As the author portrays it, Söderblom's resoluteness in guiding Protestant Christendom toward meaningful international cohesiveness goes hand in hand with his own personal disposition. In both instances the disciplines which are imposed are rigorous, but only because the prospect of an eventual freedom is real. Again and again one finds the Archbishop stretching time to carry out official and unofficial commitments. That tendency is supported by the conviction that the individual is most "complete" when he is "most truly alive," and not until then is he fully free. It is this constellation of conviction which stands behind the metaphor Söderblom chose repeatedly (and, not least, in his address upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1930): "the peoples are members of an *organism*, but a *body* must have a *soul*, else it becomes at best a dead *mechanism*" (italics mine). If the harmonization of the organism is to occur, discipline is necessary; and the motivation of

both bodily organisms—the Church and the individual—is completion, the substance of freedom.

Two characteristics distinguish Sundkler's book from other studies which have appeared from time to time since Söderblom's death in 1931: its full documentation, and its heavy reliance on autobiographical accounts. Because the diaries, notebooks, letters, and personal documents are allowed to provide the hermeneutical canons, they themselves become the measure of both the life and work. And those diaries—like the life and work—record a wide range of sensitivities. Registered there, for example, are repeated hunches regarding the basic amicability between religious self-consciousness in general and Christian understanding in particular. In the midst of speculations of this kind are sudden, almost dramatic outbursts of affection for the simplicity of divine truth. At times Nathan Söderblom looks most of all like the "Professor of Theological Encyclopedia and Theological Prenotions" which he was. At other times he exercises to the full the authority invested in the Primate of the State Church of Sweden. On other occasions his boisterous evangelical enthusiasm calls to mind the figure of someone like Dwight L. Moody. The irony and the beauty are that Nathan Söderblom is often all of these together.

The book is valuable for many reasons. Even were it not written well (which it is) it would be worthwhile simply on the basis of the documentation it places in the English language concerning three histories: Söderblom's, the Church of Sweden's, and the ecumenical movement's. A chronicle of this kind would be useful, furthermore, did it reconstruct nothing more than the climate which spawned the Uppsalian kind of theological interest in *Religionsgeschichte*. Unquestionably, it was due in large part to Söderblom's energies and perspectives that Uppsala itself was stamped very early as a great center of research and interpretation in this field—a reputation it has sustained even to the present day. Yet, to value the book for any of these reasons is to see it in terms of its by-products: its first intention is to understand Nathan Söderblom as a pioneer and practitioner of ecumenical sensitivity.

Sundkler's study achieves all that its commission requires. Yet its higher resourcefulness may lie in an inquiry which was probably not formally requested, perhaps not even anticipated, and certainly never the object of much attention in previous Söderblom commentary. From other studies in the English language, one would expect to learn more about Söderblom himself and his role in the development of ecumenism; only Joachim Wach, and then only for a few pages, has presented Söderblom from any other perspective. But one would not be prepared for the suggestiveness of Sundkler's recordings of Söderblom's involvement in the field of psychology

of religion, nor especially of his interest in the influence of religion in personality-formation.

Once the reader senses the prominence of the psychological dimension he may have difficulty restraining the impulse to place the entire study in that framework. Indeed, the very format of the book—the dependence throughout on personal documents—provides fitting methodological support. But, more than that, *the entire personal story can be viewed as a series of identity crises*. The influence of Jonas Söderblom, Nathan's father, the reappearance of that father—sometimes in fact, sometimes in spectre—whenever the son seeks confirmation upon entering a new field of endeavor, the recourse to the efficacy of the father's motto ("not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy") as the verbal accompaniment of the rites of initiation and consecration—all of this seems to bespeak the kind of consciousness Erik Erikson would associate with *homo religiosus*.

One would be somewhat more wary of proposing this line of interpretation were it not true also that Söderblom himself was concerned throughout his life with the manifestations of religious genius. He also sought to isolate the criteria by which "the great personalities" could be identified. And, in both his writings and his university lectures, he sought to delineate the characteristics of "the religious hero." All of these interests, of course, came to focus in Söderblom's treatment of Luther. One would expect Söderblom to have interest in Luther. This was natural by virtue of office and cherished history. But, unless something more specific was at stake, one would not expect Söderblom to focus on Luther's "humor and melancholy." Moreover, the titles of the courses Söderblom taught in Uppsala University (Psychology of Religion, Luther and Mysticism, St. Francis Legends, Personality Mysticism, Socrates the Mystic, and others of this kind) testify to his special interest in the rudiments of religious selfconsciousness. Apparently he sought to zero in on this topic by analyzing the typifications of the heroic, the mystical, and the sensitive.

This line of interpretation can be harmonized by the "time stretching" process thought structures of Henri Bergson (to whose works Söderblom referred frequently). It is also in keeping with the nineteenth century Swedish biologist E. G. Geijer's concept of "the renewal process" (*förnyelseprocessen*) to which Söderblom was also indebted. At times the "great Archbishop" sounds a bit like the forerunner of Teilhard de Chardin. Certainly externally, no ecclesiastic before him manifested greater selfconsciousness regarding the dynamic-in-process of the religious personality. One cannot help but wonder whether Söderblom understood himself, despite his frequent disclaimers, as an instance of *homo religiosus*. Certainly he thought

about this typology a great deal as he sought to ascertain his own identity schema.

If such suggestions be in order—and there is only the Lutheran form of *humilitas* to qualify it—Bengt Sundkler's inability to separate the historical chronicle from the personal history has deeper roots than might first appear. It may well be that the direction and formation of the ecumenical movement is an expression of the cultural work of the religiously-sensitive man. In that sense the ecumenical movement may be regarded, at least in part, as the corporate manifestation of an intense personal compulsion to restructure the religious ideological complexion of the age. Perhaps also, the roots of the ecumenical movement (again, at least in part) are inextricably tied to the quest of at least one man for meaningful self-identity. And perhaps it is the process fabric (a la Bergson, a la Geijer, a la "organismic" thinking itself) which enabled the pioneer in the corporate sense to be the pilgrim in the other.

Söderblom has always been regarded as a bridge builder. He was chosen for the Gifford lectureship for the connections he saw between general and special revelation. His effectiveness in the ecumenical movement derived in large part from the rapport he envisioned between formerly disparate religious communions. But perhaps in the long run his intrigue will be sustained by a convergence of another kind, i.e., the interdependence of religious genius and institutional innovation. If that be the prospect, then Sundkler's book can be regarded as a landmark in providing the kinds of materials upon which such a case might be built. Like the many-sided figure it seeks to describe the book is both provocative and full—thanks, one might add, to the research assistance of an American scholar, Byron R. Swanson. The very significant present accomplishment creates more reason to hope that the two projected volumes will be completed soon. One also has reason to expect that the materials Sundkler has weaved together will inspire additional interpretative possibilities in keeping with the expandable horizon of his great Archbishop.