

Religion and Religious Studies Ex Cathedra Uppsala

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I am deeply honored to be invited to pay tribute to Eric J. Sharpe on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. Sharpe has worked tirelessly to advance the work of the academic study of religion throughout the world. Indeed, when the historians look back upon our era, they will recognize even more fully than is recognized today that Eric Sharpe is one of our seminal theorists. Not only has he distinguished himself within his own fields of inquiry and research, but he has conducted himself in such a way as to lend definition to the field. In doing his own work, he has established effective instrumentations through which others have been able to come to a clearer understanding of the intentions and capacities of the scholarly study of religion.

The primary example, of course, is his *Comparative Religion*, first published in 1975 and reissued several times since.¹ Here Sharpe has provided a kind of overview of the field, identifying the formative contributors and tracing the prominent issues and responses thereto. There is much more. Belonging to the same genre of analysis and interpretation are his *Fifty Key Words: Comparative Religion* (1971)² as well as his *Understanding Religion* (1983).³ He has also done considerable editorial and review work. The book he edited in honor of the late Professor Brandon, *Man and His Salvation* (1973),⁴ his 1990 *Journal of Religion* review essay on the entries on religion in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*,⁵ and his numerous reviews of the writings of others, to cite just a few more examples, are reflective of the same interest. And this does not even

begin to acknowledge the extensive service he has dedicated to the International Association for the History of Religions, the work he performed on behalf of Lancaster University, or the leadership he has provided to colleagues and institutions in Australia from his position as chair of religious studies at the University of Sydney.

One looks through all of this for the presence of organizing principles, which, by the way, are not difficult to uncover. First, he understands that those who are engaged in the academic study of religion should know their own field's "second-order traditions"; that is, the history of such study, the contributions of the seminal theorists, the dominant points of methodological departure, the burning issues and the unresolved problems. Sharpe is fully aware that scholarship does not occur in isolation, and that what is undertaken in one period is influenced by that which occurred in the previous period. Without question he understands the development of the academic study of religion to be organic development. The corollary is that there is a fundamental unity to the endeavor. In short, in spite of the fact that historians, sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists and others are engaged in the effort, there is a common intention: namely, to make the subject of religion intelligible.⁶

Secondly, at a time when the dominant tendency among scholars is to sharply distinguish the study of religion from the study of theology, Sharpe has consistently argued for a recognition of overlapping and not necessarily antagonistic interests. The title he gave to the essays in honor of Professor Brandon, the majority of which belong to the history of religions, is *Man and His Salvation*. As a historian of the study of religion, he is well aware of the fact, as he put it, that "practically the whole of the comparative religion establishment in the half century between about 1889 and 1939 was made up of scholars very much involved in the practice as well as the study of religion."⁷ Instead of emancipating itself from any and all theological influences, Sharpe has encouraged religious studies to continue to participate in the dialogue. His fear is that any progressive "secularization of the history of religions" will gradually remove such study from both "the world of religion and the world of the intellect."⁸

Thus, Sharpe has paid close attention to mission theory when examining the ways in which the tenets of a religion are nuanced to meet specific social and cultural needs and interests. The world of *religionsgeschichte* and *religionswissenschaft* scholarship has given respectful acknowledgment to Sharpe's chronicles of the development of the field and discipline. Much less interest is expended on Sharpe's analyses and

interpretations of the contributions of two mission theorists—J.N. Farquhar and A.G. Hogg. Yet both are subjects to which Sharpe has devoted significant books. In *Not to Destroy but to Fulfil: The Contribution of J.N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India before 1914* (1965),⁹ he concentrated on a specific example of the engagement of one religious tradition (together with the culture through which it is expressed and by which it is supported) by the advocates of another. In so doing, he has detailed the adjustments the advocates make in order to try to acknowledge and, if possible, accommodate what for them, at least at the outset, was understood to be an alien point of view. Sharpe recognized that both religious traditions would be influenced by the encounter. Moreover, he observed that the advocates' orientation would be significantly modified by the requirements of effective communication. In dealing with this subject, Sharpe did not present himself as an advocate of Farquhar's theology, but rather as a scholar who recognizes mission theory to be a fit topic for religious studies scrutiny.

The same holds true, of course, for his book *The Theology of A.G. Hogg* (1971).¹⁰ Hogg, like Farquhar, was a Christian missionary to India. Sharpe understood that Hogg was the bearer of a living theology that would find itself placed in a setting wherein it would become subject to a series of reciprocal influences. The effort enabled Sharpe to analyze prevailing Christian attitudes towards Hinduism, and to present these with such clarity and objectivity that they would be better understood even by their own sponsors. He fully realized that one could conduct a comparative analysis of the two dominant religious traditions, Christianity and Hinduism, in the abstract. But he believed that the examination gains much resiliency when the scholar focuses on a specific instance of encounter and engagement. After all, it was not Buddhism in the abstract that made the journey from India to China to Japan and to other regions of Asia, but Buddhism influenced substantively by these series of encounters with specific social, cultural and intellectual circumstances. So too the movement of the Christian religion, from its origins into the regions within which it sought effective representation and expression, was marked by accommodation, assimilation and manifest forms of syncretisation. Had Sharpe not affirmed that theological formulations belong to the body of knowledge and information religious studies scholars take seriously, he would not have engaged in an examination of mission theory. But in being so engaged, he has illumined an investigative modality through which comparative analyses of religious traditions—which is the primary intellectual activity that belongs to comparative

religion—might proceed with the benefit of specific historical and cultural data.

My suggestion is that there is one seminal figure who stands as model and exemplar for the way in which Eric Sharpe understands religion to be properly approached. This figure is Nathan Söderblom, who was both professor at Uppsala and archbishop of the Church of Sweden. Not unexpectedly, in addition to his chronicling of the development of the academic study of religion and his analyses of encounters between Christianity and Hinduism in India, Sharpe has published a book entitled *Nathan Söderblom and the Study of Religion* (1990).¹¹ Here the guiding principles are stated explicitly. When contending that Söderblom's scholarship qualifies as phenomenology of religion, Sharpe notes that two sets of ideals were operative. On the one side, Söderblom was influenced by the Christian tradition (namely, the life of the church, its theology, its prescribed practices). On the other, he was schooled in the scholarly investigative methods that were thoroughly reflective of strict scientific standards. How did he juggle these? Sharpe writes that Söderblom "was convinced that the two were entirely compatible, but still they needed to be justified in their interrelations, not least in the face of those who were equally convinced of their incompatibility."¹² In support of this view, Sharpe places these statements or affirmations of Söderblom on the frontispiece:

The scientific approach to the study of religion—or of anything else—does not rest on the absence of personal conviction, least of all on the absence of a religious conviction. The scientific approach is tested by its results: it rests upon scientific competence and a love of truth (1907).

I know that God lives. I can prove it by the history of religion (1931).

Sharpe provides this summary of Söderblom's attitude near the end of his book:

... although in a sense Söderblom was clearly one of the last of the encyclopedists in the study of religion ... he was least of all a dilettante in the pejorative sense of the word. He was versatile, yes, if for no other reason than that a mind like his would not be imprisoned within the narrow boundaries of any of today's subject specializations. He was a comparative

religionist ... a phenomenologist of religion ... and a scholar for whom the whole of the record of religion in the world had to be taken into account by whoever would explain any part of it. Today, to be a historian of religion(s), a comparative religionist, a religious studies person, or whatever, is frequently taken to indicate a lack of personal involvement (or indeed interest) in anything having to do with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Sharpe adds that "many of us rub our eyes in bewilderment when faced with the extraordinary sight of an Iranist and comparativist writing books on Catholic Modernism and Martin Luther."¹³ Then he provides the principle:

... it matters relatively little which of Söderblom's books one approaches: all in the end give the same impression, that the serious business of life has, first and last, to do with the individual's encounter with the living God. Without such an encounter, there can be religion of a kind, but not "real" religion as Söderblom understood it.... Always and everywhere the final meaning is the same: that there is a Will and a Power in the universe ready ... to break through and take charge.¹⁴

Though the language of description seems more Sharpe's than Söderblom's, the implications for the study of religion are apparent. In the first place, the various endeavors that belong to understanding "real religion" are compatible with each other. Therefore, scholarship and worship are intended to be mutually supportive. Secondly, all of it serves as the means through which the reality of God might become disclosed. As Sharpe portrays Söderblom's conviction:

... in his private equation, religion equaled reality equaled life. And it was a mark of his breadth of vision that his own private pantheon included so many "geniuses"—all of them in some measure prophetic in that all having experienced "the living God" in their own lives, could not but act upon what they had experienced.¹⁵

These are Eric Sharpe's words about Nathan Söderblom's orientation of religion, but it seems quite clear, at least in passages wherein the unity of religious experience is affirmed, that Sharpe is also speaking on his own behalf. After all—and this is my fundamental

contention—Nathan Söderblom seems to have provided the singular most important model for Sharpe regarding how one conducts oneself as a scholar in the field of religious studies.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the passages wherein Sharpe makes his own position the most vivid, in my judgment, come in a much less known essay on the subject of sacred music. In an essay "Sacred Music and the Sacredness of Music," published in September 1990 in the *Australian Religious Studies Review*,¹⁷ Sharpe provides some reflection on thoughts he has had as a professional musician on relationships between the phenomenology of religion and the phenomenology of music. It was a member of the choir that performed in Uppsala Cathedral—in the very sanctuary wherein Nathan Söderblom had been archbishop—that he came to appreciate that religion exhibits a variety of modalities, one of which lies in music. If one were to try to translate the insight into formula, it would be that "a focus of the sacred" is to be experienced in "a very unremarkable combination of rhythm, melody, and harmony." In the same essay, Sharpe tells of the experience of listening to a concert in the Opera House in Sydney during which "there was a moment ... when admiration almost became worship, when the concert hall became a sanctuary, and when *sensus numinis* broke through." Much is packed into such statements, some of which pertains to the impact of music—whether the environment be cathedral or opera house. But I would suggest that the significance of the passage is to be found most disclosively in the coupling "broke through." Such action is in full concordance with Sharpe's previous depiction of Söderblom's view of religion: namely, that it pertains to the "will and power in the universe" that is "ready to break through and take charge."

This states clearly a conviction of Söderblom's that Sharpe has adopted. When religion equals reality equals life, there are indeed a variety of occasions and modalities by which the power of the sacred might "break through." Certainly this occurs within religious experience itself, where experience might be mediated by the religious traditions as well as by music, art and drama. From time to time, the *sensus numinis* might also break through in the encounter between religious traditions. From time to time the *sensus numinis* might break through when westerners try to read, appreciate, and understand the Hindu religious classic—a transaction Sharpe has worked to facilitate with his book, *The Universal Gita: Western Images of the Bhagavad Gita* (1985).¹⁸ And the same goes for the analyses of mission theory, which might assist disclosures of unexpected kinds on both sides of the engagement. But

truly the most phenomenal insight is that the scholar, as scholar, can experience the power of the *sensus numinis* from time to time. That is, it is not simply that religion is located somewhere else, and the scholar's task is to take inventory and provide accurate reports. No, for Eric Sharpe (as for his "mentor" Nathan Söderblom), the truth is that the religious studies profession is in trusted possession of a combination of vocational ingredients through which a recognition of the *sensus numinis* can inspire awe. Hence, the propriety of Söderblom's declaration: "I know that God lives. I can prove it by the history of religion." Such observations and convictions also affirm that the equations between religion, reality and life are reflective of experience that is self-consistent. It is a world wherein the most evident disjunctures eventually yield to a unity, or, rather, a harmony, as in Pythagoras' acknowledgement of "the music of the spheres."

I wish to record my thanks to Eric Sharpe for the power of his insight and the quality of his scholarship. Most of all, I wish to express my gratitude to him for affirming that religious studies is one of the key modalities through which the organic wholeness of life is respected. I too have been to the Uppsala Cathedral, and have been attentive to its music.

Notes

1. Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1975).
2. Sharpe, *Fifty Key Words: Comparative Religion* (London: Lutterworth, 1971).
3. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1983).
4. Sharpe, ed., *Man and His Salvation: Studies in Memory of S.G.F. Brandon* (1973).
5. Sharpe, "The Study of Religion in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*," in *Journal of Religion*. vol. 70, no. 3, July 1990, pp. 340-352.
6. See, for example, Sharpe's "Rethinking Religion—Connecting Cognition and Culture," in *Anthropos*. vol. 87, no. 4, 1992, pp. 608 ff.
7. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*.

8. Sharpe, "The Secularization of the History of Religions," in *Gilgul: Essays on Transformation, Revolution and Permanence in the History of Religions*, ed. by S. Shaked, D. Shulman and G.C. Stroumsa (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), pp. 255-269, p. 263).
9. Sharpe, *Not to Destroy, but to Fulfil: The Contribution of J.N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India before 1914* (Lund: Gleerup, 1965). See also Sharpe's *John Nicol Farquhar: A Memoir* (Calcutta: Y.M.C.A. Publication House, 1963).
10. Sharpe, *The Theology of A.G. Hogg* (Madras: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1971).
11. Sharpe, *Nathan Söderblom and the Study of Religion* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
12. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
16. For an evaluation of Söderblom's contribution to the study of religion, see Sharpe and Anders Hultgard, eds., *Nathan Söderblom and His Contribution to the Study of Religion: Essays in Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of His Death* (Uppsala, 1984).
17. Sharpe, "Sacred Music and the Sacredness of Music," in *Australian Religious Studies Review*. Vol. 3, no. 3, September 1990, pp. 22-25.
18. Sharpe, *The Universal Gita: Western Images of the Bhagavad Gita* (London: Duckworth, 1985).

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