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To Find Him Alone Was to Find Him in Prayer with His God

BY L. G. ABRAHAMSON (1856–1946), EDITOR OF “AUGUSTANA”

(Previously printed in *Hågkomster och livsinytryck till minnet av Nathan Söderblom* (1934))

TRANSLATED BY JOHN E. NORTON

My first memory of Nathan Söderblom, this man who, in a way given to few people, belonged to all Christianity, dates back to the Congress of Religious Science in Stockholm the summer of 1897.

Söderblom was at that time legation chaplain in Paris and had already, though young, attracted attention, especially for his interest in the common, high tasks of the Church. He served as secretary of that conference, and I remember his talk on “Religion and Social Development.” Now we recall how he, in that talk, and through other comments during the conference, gave a sense of the direction for the future of his broad scientific and theological authorship.

In connection with that conference, a large Nordic spiritual mission meeting was also held in Stockholm. Of the speeches at that meeting, especially Bishop Ullman’s sermon and Prof. Rudin’s speech, I have unforgettable memories. During the meeting I also had the opportunity to make personal observations on Söderblom’s positive spiritual gifts, observations which confirmed what I had heard about him as a student at the University of Uppsala, and about the tireless work he devoted there to encouraging spiritual interests among students. That conviction about his depth, his entire life and world view, and his dominating spirituality was confirmed during the acquaintance which I later had the great benefit of making with him.

And, he himself placed that direction, which he never denied, in connection with his parental home, where, as he once said, “Rosenius and the (pictorial) works of your Olof Olsson were read frequently.”

In 1909 those of us in the Augustana Synod had special reason to thankfully remember Söderblom. The year before the widely published Lambeth Conference had been held in England, with the Church of Sweden represented by Bishop Totie. As a direct result of negotiations at that conference, an official delegation of English clergymen arrived in Uppsala the next year, led by the Bishop of Salisbury, Dr. Wordsworth. Even the Episcopal Church in America was represented by the Bishop of Marquette, Dr. Williams. The intent of that meeting in Uppsala was to create a closer cooperation between the Swedish and Anglican churches. In those negotiations, openly stated, was a request from the Anglican delegation to representatives of the Church of Sweden asking them to recommend the Episcopal Church to the Swedish Lutheran community in the United States.

It was Prof. Söderblom who spoke for our synod during that Uppsala meeting. His friendly attitude towards the Anglican Church is well known. But, without reservation, he explained that the Church of Sweden considered the Augustana Synod its daughter church, and that she could not undertake anything which was in conflict with its interests. He stood

firmly by that position. He accented as powerfully as he could by inviting the Augustana Synod to be represented at his installation as Bishop and during his sermon at St. John the Divine in New York he used the opportunity to explain the relationship of his church with the Augustana synod. It was clearly archbishop Söderblom who took the wind out of the Episcopalian sails. In the many good things archbishop Söderblom said of the Anglican Church, about its importance for Protestantism, and of its world mission, we agree. But as we do that, we also disapproved of its going into sectarian proselytizing propaganda so unworthy of that church.

We should mention another case where we came in direct contact with Söderblom during his professorship at Uppsala. One of our young, active pastors requested assignment to the Uppsala diocese. His request was approved, but on the embarrassing condition that he could not rise to any position above assistant vicar. The man had completed all examinations required by the Augustana synod for investiture, and the synod newspaper thus protested the decision of the diocese. Upon recommendation of Prof. Söderblom it was changed, and the pastor was taken into the service of the Church of Sweden without conditions, and with the right of counting as service years the time he was active as a pastor in our Synod.

We thus reached a successful con-

clusion, with Prof. Söderblom's help, in a case of unfortunate misunderstanding.

It would not be right of me, in writing these memories of Nathan Söderblom, to pass by the impression I had of his positions on the main tenants of our Christian faith, for on that subject there exist many beliefs and much misunderstanding. I freely admit that Söderblom's intellectual and religious horizons were so broad that I could not encompass them. I must agree with what a bishop said to me during installation ceremonies in Uppsala in November 1914, "It is difficult for the average man to understand a universal genius." But despite my limitations, I believe that I understood enough of Söderblom's religious views to support my conviction that he was a faithful confessor of our evangelical church's great truths of salvation. He expressed it in a most beautiful witness on his own deathbed.

For us in this country to judge him correctly, we must consider the different conditions existing between state church and free church. On more than one occasion in Sweden I have been reminded that there is a greater freedom in the state church than is the case in free churches, and that situation I could neither deny nor complain of. It is known, even in Sweden, how in this country there is a clearly marked division between what is called "theological modernism" and "fundamentalism." Between the two are no ties. One is either in one camp or the other. A "modernist" is a person who denies virgin birth, the Godliness of Christ, Christ's suffering in our place, Christ's resurrection, Biblical inspiration, and in general all the supernatural in religion, but just as decidedly the "fundamentalists" confess those beliefs. With the exception of the non-confessional Congregational Church, which was a precursor of Unitarianism, and which cannot show any notable growth, the leading reformed churches are associated with the fundamentalists.

As for our Lutheran church, we sympathize with the fundamen-

talists, but without carrying their title. She is without reservation exactly what her name "Evangelical Lutheran" means, and that is more than "fundamentalist." We can express as an undeniable fact that in none of this country's Lutheran seminaries is there any professor who praises theological modernism. When our modernists called Söderblom one of their own, they did him an injustice. They could find no support for their assumptions in his speeches and preaching during his travels in America. Those sermons, published in his book *Från Uppsala till Rock Island*, and publications like his Lutheran book *Humor och melankoli*, his explanation of the Catechism, his important book *Uppenbarelsereligion, (Religion of Revelation)* etc., give witness to the teachings denied by the modernists. He was an Evangelical Lutheran theologian. In his own pastoral letters he expressed as strongly as can be put into words how clear the teachings of the Lutheran church were in his thoughts, and how dear they were to his heart.

Uppsala in 1914

My memories of Söderblom take me back to Uppsala and his installation as archbishop in November 1914. There our close friendship began, which, through his great friendliness, was maintained and deepened, and which brought such great spiritual gifts. I was his guest the entire time; he met me at the station, and showed me such kindness that I was both amazed and ashamed. Learning to know him was a very interesting study, and I began to understand the secret of the irresistible impression he made on all with whom he came in contact. It was a personal magnetism which I have never again seen in any other person. At the same time I understood that it was our synod he first honored through the great friendliness he showed me; our meeting was the beginning of a personal friendship for life.

He had kindly made room for me on the inaugural program to review our synod and its activities. In

greetings he brought during the great festive dinner to representatives from other countries, he spent time especially on our synod and its representative. The celebrations, which lasted several days, were festive from beginning to end. One of the German Lutheran Church's superintendents said that one would have to go back to the early church to find a religious festival which in solemnity and spiritual riches could be compared with this. I completely enjoyed the wealth of spiritual gifts delivered during those days. I must also admit that I used every opportunity to gain insights into the archbishop's activities as professor and pastor, into his theological views, and especially concerning his relationship with the positive spiritual powers among students and society at large. I left Uppsala with the conviction that the Church of Sweden, in its archbishop, had a great spiritual power and a called servant of the Lord, from whose activities one could hope much. And all those great hopes were filled and exceeded. Uppsala became the center of idealistic and church efforts in a way which hadn't happened in any other place for hundreds of years.

After the installation in 1914, I had two more opportunities to be a guest in the archbishop's residence in Uppsala; at the church meeting in Stockholm of 1924, and in connection with the great Reformation Memorial celebrated in Copenhagen in 1929.

As our synod, during its 1916 conference, took actions to celebrate the Reformation during the coming year, a decision was made to invite Sweden's archbishop to honor the event by his participation, and to set aside as much time as possible for him to visit the most important sites within the synod. In the event that he could not attend, the synod asked that he send another bishop. It was not possible for him to travel, and he extended the synod's invitation to the Bishop of Härnösand, E.F. Lönegren. But the World War and other reasons made it impossible even for him to visit, and the synod was forced to

celebrate its first Reformation festivities without participation of any bishops from the mother church.

Söderblom in America

In the spring of 1923 I received a letter from Söderblom in which he said it would be possible for him to come to America that fall. I presented that letter to the board of Augustana College and Theological Seminary, which decided to invite the archbishop to attend the dedication of the Theological Seminary's new buildings, and that in connection visit as many Swedish congregations as possible. The synod joined in that invitation at its June conference. I was honored by the directors with the task of planning the archbishop's trip, which also meant deciding which places should be visited, and the timing of the visits. I had previously had similar responsibilities in connections with the three visits made to us by Bishop von Scheele. As soon as word got out in this country that the archbishop was expected, invitations came from many organizations, such as the Federal Council, the Church Peace Union, and from the American division of the World Alliance. More invitations came from universities in various parts of the country.

Based on experience, I knew that it was no easy task to plan visits in a country as large as ours. What made the task especially difficult and nearly impossible for me was the fact that each of the above organizations had its own plans for the archbishop's trip which they wished to carry out. This was also the case with the universities, and it was easy for me to understand that a university man like the archbishop would be especially attracted to invitations from academic circles. After unsuccessful attempts to reach agreement with those organizations in the East, I was forced to turn to the archbishop for a decision as to whether he would follow the plan I had proposed, in which I included visits to universities, as many as he wished, and at meetings organized

by the above organizations, or if he would follow the plan offered by the Federal Council. In the latter case, it would naturally be impossible to work out any firm plan to visit the Swedish colonies and congregations. The archbishop decided to become a guest of the Augustana Synod, something for which he, during and at the close of his trip, expressed his great satisfaction. I worked out and delivered a detailed plan for visits to places from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and included time for visits to universities and church organizations which had invited him. He approved the plan, after which I could send out firm information to the places included in the program.

Our invitation included even Mrs. Söderblom. She came and left wonderfully light and highly appreciated memories behind in Swedish America. Through her noble personality and tactful approach, she won friends everywhere. Swedish America's women greatly appreciated having her among them. All who had the benefit of being brought into the presence of her personality hold thankful memories of her. The archbishop's son, Jon Olof, came as the archbishop's secretary, and he won friends wherever we went by his charming, open, and energetic ways.

On 25 October 1923 the archbishop, Mrs. Söderblom, and their son came ashore in America, greeted and welcomed by a great gathering of America-Swedes who had assembled at the pier.

From the almost ten weeks during which I had daily opportunity to work with the archbishop, I gathered experiences which I appreciate more than can be put into words. It was for him a time filled with work, and to a greater degree than what my plan, with his approval, had envisioned, thanks to his great willingness to agree to all the new demands placed upon him. Those demands came despite my efforts to prevent them, from many of our congregations, but especially from universities and church circles across the country as we travelled. The archbishop's name and reputation

preceded him, and from everywhere in the country came requests for visits. Among all the universities he was able to visit, I cannot recall one where he did not have personal acquaintances, and in most cases friends who had been guests in his home.

In his demanding program during his days in New York were a sermon at Gustav Adolf Church, which had to be repeated because of the huge influx of people, speeches in English under auspices of the Federal Council, and a speech in English at the great banquet organized in his honor.

3,500 Miles Across America

The nearly 3,500 mile journey began across the American continent to San Francisco, a trip requiring nearly four days. This was made necessary by the firm dates for visits in Rock Island, Minneapolis, and Chicago, as well as at universities in the East. The archbishop was very satisfied with it. The long journeys gave him time to rest, he said. As many comforts as could be offered by a rail car were prepared in our Pullman sleeper, and I never failed to make use of the best available. During his journeys, the archbishop spent 21 nights in a Pullman sleeper. The nights were used often for travel to make it possible to meet all the tasks of the day.

But what was his rest like? As usual – in the form of work. During breakfasts in the dining car his drawing room was made up, (with its comfortable sofas, chairs, and bathroom, etc.). After breakfast, a time of meditation, and then to a writing table with his secretary-son, who transcribed the archbishop's dictation of lectures, sermons, and letters. That was their morning.

After lunch, the archbishop took two hours' rest from his usual work, and those hours became memorable times for me. He wanted me to talk about our synod and its activities, and church activities in our country in general, but I soon trained myself to shift the task from me to him. I

was always prepared to ask questions, and I got to listen to that great man's clear expositions of important life questions for the individual, church, and society. He never hesitated to express himself in his straightforward and honorable way on open and debated questions in the theological world. I had previously had opportunity to take a similar course in practical and theoretical theological questions. When I started my first trip as host for Bishop von Scheele, he said to me: "Now, we'll make a firm agreement to set aside one or two hours each day for an exchange of thoughts. There's much I want to learn about conditions here, and if I can shed light as an old professor on questions you ask, I'm at your service. And if we can't find time during the day, we'll do it at night, before going to bed."

That I sought to gain clarity about our time's most discussed person in the church arena, a person about whom, in church circles, one heard diametrically opposed judgments, was quite natural. And I can now assure you that the impression I gained, even at our first meeting, was confirmed by our continued conversations during our travels, in homes, including mine, and his in Uppsala, and through his sermons and speeches which I had the pleasure of hearing during the trip. I remember how clear the positively spiritual was in him. He was a man of prayer. To

find him alone was to find him in prayer with his God. One of our church's foremost Eastern theologians told me: "It was during a vespers in his home in Uppsala that I first learned to know the archbishop." And the way in which he confessed his Savior in whatever social group he found himself almost overwhelmed me. I have memories of that which I can never forget. And as for his theological views, I again express my conviction that he was an Evangelical Lutheran theologian and that he proclaimed, lived, and died with faith in the saving truth of our Christian belief. I admit that in many of his writings there are expressions before which I stand, wondering and questioning, but I attribute that to my limited ability to grasp it.

University Visits

American universities competed, as mentioned, in their efforts to gain a visit by the archbishop. He lectured at the following universities: Columbia in New York; University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; Johns Hopkins in Baltimore; Yale in New Haven; Harvard in Cambridge; Clark in Worcester; University of Chicago; University of Minnesota in Minneapolis; and the University of California at Berkeley. At Harvard and Yale he held lecture series. From the latter, he had highly appreciated memories from the time he spent there as a young student in connection with

the Northfield meeting of 1890.

His most important work during his time in America took place within the Augustana Synod, in its congregations and schools. In working out plans for his trip it was important to choose places where the largest numbers of synod members and Swedish descendants might hear him, and nowhere where he appeared could the locale handle the throngs. In most places, special meetings were arranged for those Protestant clergy within the community who expressed interest in hearing him, and he was always willing to meet their desires.

For more information about his deeply-appreciated work in our congregations and schools, I refer to his own story in the book *Från Uppsala till Rock Island*, and to his wife Anna's sympathetic and engaging *En Amerikabok*.

Our Augustana Synod had archbishop Söderblom as a devoted, valuable friend. He confirmed that during his unforgettable time among us and in the land of our fathers he used every occasion offered him to advance the interests of our synod. His memory is thus lovingly kept in all of Swedish-America and in the Augustana Synod, daughter church of the Church of Sweden.

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Some statistics on Sweden 2004

The Swedish Bureau of Statistics (*Statistiska Centralbyrån*, SCB) recently published some figures on Sweden of today:

- The population increased with 35,722 individuals, which made the total reach slightly above 9 million for the first time.
- 16% of the population was born abroad.
- 11% of the population is under 10 years of age.

- the median expectation of life length is 82,7 years for women, and 78,4 years for men.
- The typical immigrant is a 27 year old woman, coming from Norway.
- A third of all Swedes have surnames ending in -son.
- During his lifetime a Swede moves home 11 times.
- Marriages dissolved in 2004 had lasted for 13 years if the partners were born in the same country, and

nearly 10 years if born in different countries.

- 1600 individuals were adopted, and two thirds of those were born abroad.

According to the historical statistics the Swedish population grew like this:

1749	1,764,724
1800	2,347,303
1850	3,482,541
1900	5,136,441