

6-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Andreen, Gustav and Norton, John E. (2005) "Söderblom and the Augustana Synod," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 25 : No. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol25/iss2/6>

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Söderblom and the Augustana Synod

BY GUSTAV ANDREEN, PRESIDENT OF AUGUSTANA COLLEGE

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

TRANSLATED BY JOHN E. NORTON

I first met Nathan Söderblom in early 1903 in Lund, where he and I were guests of Dean Pehr Eklund. It was Söderblom's first visit to Lund since becoming professor of theology at Uppsala; he wished now, as he said, to become acquainted with the men of the Church and University in that ancient Archbishopric. Professor Söderblom mentioned his 1890 visit to America as representative to the student conference in Northfield, Massachusetts. He had spent a few days in New Haven, Connecticut, where he took the opportunity of visiting a service in the city's Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Dean Eklund and Prof. Söderblom spoke eagerly about religious and philosophical trends, especially in Germany. Then they took up the catechism for thorough discussion. The dean presented Luther's explanation of the third article, and maintained forcefully that when Luther wrote it, he was inspired; his explanation of the second article was also mentioned. I remembered that conversation when I participated in the Lutheran World Conference in Copenhagen, where Archbishop Söderblom, during his speech about Martin Luther, given in *Vår Frue Kirke*, let every participant stand and read Luther's explanation of the second article in his own language. That year, Söderblom's book about the catechism was published.

After the visit in Lund in 1903, I was invited to a committee meeting in Uppsala to discuss the fund which was later named "The Oscar II Professorship at Augustana College." I was happy to again see that venerable old university and church town, where I had studied in 1888-89 as "*civis academicus*."

An evening before the meeting, Librarian Aksel Andersson had arranged a gathering in honor of that stranger from America, attended by professors Noreen, Schück, von Friesen and Professor Söderblom. You can imagine the conversation in that group was lively and spiritual. Images from Paris, Rome, Värmland, and runestones were woven into it, and questions were asked of their guest about America.

Directions and questions from the academic community of various lands were taken up. Professor Schück almost surprised us by directing the conversation towards the prophet Amos and his works. We others listened with greatest interest to the discussion which was spun out between professors Schück and Söderblom about that shepherd from Tekoa and his prophecy, one of the first to come forward in Israel. From memory, they both cited his words and filled our hearts with the same admiration for the prophet they themselves had. They spoke of Amos's understanding of God, about the demands placed, not on outward ceremony, but upon righteousness among the people who truly worship Jehovah, about "the Lord's day," about purification and a happy future. It became for all of us a living, sparkling theological lecture beyond compare!

Afterwards, Professor Söderblom asked me about the collection in Sweden for Augustana College, since he had spent the past few years abroad. I told him that people in Sweden had begun to interest themselves for Swedish-America's oldest seat of higher education, Augustana College and Seminary, founded during the pioneering time of 1860.

Professor Söderblom warmed my heart with the words: "I will happily do everything I can to encourage it." My correspondence with the Archbishop was not frequent, but I appreciate deeply those letters he sent me.

In one letter, dated 1 July 1913, I supplied Söderblom, then professor in Leipzig, much of the information he asked concerning religious conditions and personalities in America.

Professor Söderblom replied from Leipzig on 12 January 1914 in a personally-written letter: "Your valuable information did not come too late. The mentioned, prominent Lutherans have signed their names as being among those who wish to offer their moral support to the intended Congress of Faith and Order. I was also asked, but saw it wisest to abstain for the moment. Programs have been sent even to Sweden, and some of our youth are interested in it. They want me as part of some kind of action. But since the initiative comes from the American Episcopal Church, there is reason to be careful. I hear from Silas McBee, himself an Episcopalian, with a dislike for the sometimes disloyal competition the Episcopalians are carrying out with Augustana, that the planned congress has no great prospects. In any case, the Church of Sweden's Alpha and Omega about America must be closer ties with the Augustana Synod. It was beautiful to hear about the increased closeness between the General Synod and General Council. Just think if the next *Allgemeine Evang. Lutherische Konferenz* could be held in the United States, to show the Lutherans how empowering their unity and cooperation is, while showing the world what Lutheranism means."

In October 1915 I wrote to the Archbishop concerning the effort being made to establish the position of bishop within the New England Conference of the Augustana Synod. He answers in a letter, dated 4 November 1915:

"I have followed with very lively interest the developments concerning the position of bishop within the New England Conference. You understand certainly how important and valuable your detailed letters have been for me. Now I ask, relative to this case, your answer to the following question: if the Synod finds it both useful and biblical, and in accordance with the Swedish Evangelical Church practice, to make their leading men bishops, is it not then necessary or at least desirable that the Synod's president first be installed in the episcopate, before the question of eventual installation of a conference chairman as bishop? It is, as you understand, very important to have your opinion in this case. I hope that we might have reached agreement before the (Reformation) anniversary year on how to together celebrate this event."

I naturally granted the Archbishop the truth of his statement. When I in 1899 attended Professor J.A. Ekman's installation as bishop, the question remained irresistibly before me: When will a son of the Augustana Synod kneel before this holy altar to be installed by the primate of our father's church as bishop of our own Swedish-American Lutheran Church?

Despite the Archbishop's heavy schedule, he sent me a letter dated 6 June 1919, saying:

"It may be of interest to you to hear something about the Episcopal bishops' visit to Uppsala last Wednesday the 4th. It went well. Their ambitious plans, supported even by Lutheran churchmen in the United States, for a world conference *On Faith and Order* will not in any way take an unclear position on the ecumenical conference the Nordic bishops are now working towards. I was very anxious to affirm that the Augustana Synod is our true relative and contact

with church life in the U.S. I got the impression that these three men fully appreciated the Augustana Synod's position, and my words that she must go her own way beside us, with full respect and sympathy for the good which the Episcopalians do, and with the joint understanding that so long as this is associated with each other's special mission, but that every proselytism must be avoided. The three men made a serious and remarkable impression upon us. I include a copy of my greetings. My thought is that Bishop Lönegren of Härnösand will soon take up and continue the beautiful task of our dear old Bishop von Scheele, as the connecting link between our churches."

In my response of 1 October 1919 I included the following words:

"I thank you for the writings you sent me, read with greatest interest by me and others who asked to share their contents. The Catechism Committee of the Augustana Synod is now meeting here in Rock Island; the copy I received of your *Katekes-förklaring* has been read eagerly and considered by its members and they have kept the copy during their discussions."

The Archbishop, who had himself been a seamen's chaplain and held an undiminished interest for its mission, wrote me on behalf of the Church of Sweden's Mission Board in May 1920 about placing a seamen's mission in Boston and other harbors in the United States, which was presented to Dr. G.A. Brandelle and the Synod meeting in Jamestown in 1920.

In the beginning of the 1920's, the Archbishop was again encouraged to visit the United States. Official invitations were extended from three sources: from The Committee of Faith and Order, from the American-Scandinavian Foundation, and the Augustana Synod, with special thought of dedicating the Augustana Theological Seminary.

In response to my letter about his visit to Rock Island, the Archbishop answered in a letter from Uppsala dated 7 January 1922:

"Dear Brother! I hope you continue to permit our use of this personal greeting, begun during your visit here in Uppsala. I thank you heartily for the friendly letter and action which I have already received from Augustana, and which show me what I already know and have expressed, that the most important task of a trip to America is contact between the Church of Sweden and Augustana.

I ask that you express to the directors of Augustana College and Theological Seminary my deeply felt thanks for their generous invitation, received by both me and His Majesty the King. Since I hear that the (theological) faculty building is soon to be finished, and since many events, some just in the last few days, make it desirable to delay my trip to America until 1923, and thereby gain the advantage of representing both the Church of Sweden and Uppsala University at the dedication of that building, I must delay my decision until I've been able to confer thoroughly with Dr. Brandelle."

Because of the above invitations, Söderblom's trip to America was realized. His arrival was greeted with enthusiasm within church circles, and was noted by the entire American people and their government. He stood not just as a representative of Sweden and Scandinavia, but as a representative of Lutheranism, for Protestantism, for a rapprochement between church bodies, for which he, through his personality, his position, and his lifelong ecumenism worked. As for the Archbishop's travels in America, his visits to various conventions at the most distinguished American universities and other centers, I refer to Dr. L.G. Abrahamson's article; he was the Archbishop's faithful and efficient guide on that journey.

A wonderful aura surrounds the Archbishop's visit to Augustana College and Seminary in Rock Island, Illinois. The festivities of 4-6 November 1923 attracted throngs of visitors to Augustana's "Zion Hill," as our fathers called the site for our school. They came as pilgrims, not just from nearby communities, but from the

nation's theological seminaries, from many colleges, from various Lutheran denominations, from many other church organizations, representatives of church and state, to listen to the Archbishop's well-weighed words, and to participate in the 6 November dedication of the new building complex erected for the Theological Seminary on the heights where the late Dr. Tufve N. Hasselquist hoped to see that "home for disciples of the Prophets."

Should I try to follow the stream of festivities which began on Sunday 4 November with the Archbishop's inspired sermon at "the Cathedral" (First Lutheran Church) in our neighboring city of Moline? That congregation was founded in 1850 by pioneering pastor Lars Paul Esbjörn.

That evening, the large Augustana auditorium was filled to the last seat by nearly 3,000 guests, eager to hear the welcome greeting of Dr. G.A. Brandelle, and the Archbishop's speech in English. On Monday evening, as the Archbishop and his wife visited the President's home, students greeted them with song and speeches, to which the Archbishop responded with glowing words. Even his son Jon Olof was object of their greetings; his student cap was presented to the student body president, and is now part of the Augustana College museum collection.

The great day was 6 November; never had Augustana seen such an academic procession like that from Denkmann Library up to the Seminary buildings, with the Archbishop in his garb, crozier in hand; faculty and academic visitors in their "caps and gowns," drawn from European universities and transmitted to America through England. The architect ceremoniously turned over the keys to appropriate officials, who accepted them with brief remarks. In the chapel, filled to capacity, dedication of the Seminary's new home took place, together with installation of Dr. G.A. Brandelle as President of the Augustana Synod, in which the Archbishop participated. His spiritual talk followed on the subject: "And the Truth Shall Make You

Free."

During the luncheon which followed in the College gymnasium, led by Board Chairman Dr. A. Theo. Ekblad, and attended by several hundred, the Archbishop filled his talk with rich humor and even wove in a song, giving expression to his warm wishes for success.

In the afternoon, an academic festival was held, chaired by the college president, during which the Archbishop presented some of his impressions of America, especially of the daughter church, the Augustana Synod and its schools. He touched on the importance of King Gustav Adolf's achievements, (support of the Protestant cause during the 30 Years' War, ending with his death at the battle of Lützen in 1632) remembered on 6 November by a thankful world which now bears blessed fruits far from Lützen, in the distant Mississippi Valley. He then turned to his favorite subject: our unity as Christians; it was the ecumenist who spoke those weighty words.

A few days later, when the Archbishop had to travel to Detroit for a church festival, his wife held an especially well-received talk in Rock Island on the subject of "A Hundredth Birthday," as we celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the Archbishop's father's (Jonas Söderblom) birth.

Yet another important event was remembered later by these, our friends. In the summer of 1899, I had the pleasure of extending thanks of Swedish-Americans during dedication of a memorial at the grave of our founder, Rev. Lars Paul Esbjörn in Östervåla. When Archbishop Söderblom came to Östervåla in 1925 as visitor, his wife placed a wreath at Esbjörn's grave, and he sent me the following telegram:

"Brotherly greetings from a congregation of thousands, and a representative of the Archbishopric, assembled at Esbjörn's grave in Östervåla, from (Nathan Söderblom) Visitor."

How should we evaluate the meaning of Archbishop Söderblom's visit to us in the West? The feeling of

togetherness was drawn more firmly between the mother church in Sweden and her daughter church in America. Our horizons were broadened, towards a more encompassing understanding of the unity which exists between all Christians, and especially within the evangelical churches. We gained a clearer view of the treasure we now own, and for the historic connection with our past. We learned that we should and could retain our individuality and at the same time cooperate with other believers.

Above all, the Archbishop was Christ-centered in his understanding, as it involved salvation of both the individual and humanity. In America, as well as other parts of the world, we recognize the wonderful power of faith which streamed forth from that man.

When I, in September 1929, visited a service at St. Peter's Church in Bremen, Germany, its dean preached on Acts 10:35, emphasizing in his opening the contributions of various lands and churches to the spread of Christianity, and twice mentioned especially the invaluable contributions of Archbishop Söderblom towards the true unity of the Christian Church through understanding and cooperation, built on the basic truths of Christianity.

During a visit to Palestine, I had the pleasure of meeting Archbishop Eudoros in the Greek Orthodox Patriarch's residence in Jerusalem. He brought our conversation around to the ecumenical meeting held in Stockholm; he deeply appreciated Archbishop Söderblom's work encompassing the world, which brought blessings even to the Greek church. Archbishop Eudoros spoke not only of the church's battles ("we're now going through a baptism of fire," he said) and divisions, but also of the assurances given us in Christ's word, a word upon which even Archbishop Söderblom based his work: "They shall hear my voice, and it shall be a flock and a shepherd."

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