

Artisan of Christian Unity between North and East: Nathan Söderblom. His correspondence with Orthodox personalities (1896-1931), Macarie Drăgoi (ed.), Felicitas, Stockholm, 2014, 560 p.

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Thanks to the efforts of Macarie Drăgoi, the Romanian orthodox bishop of Northern Europe, the correspondence of Nathan Söderblom – the Lutheran Archbishop of Sweden (1913-1931) and Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1930 – reveals his pioneering struggle to establish an inter-Christian dialogue at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Lutheran Archbishop represents one of the most important personalities involved in the creation of bonds of trust, respect, and friendship between divided Christians, and his correspondence proves extremely valuable for the better understanding of the history of ecumenical dialogue.

The volume is even more valuable since Archbishop Nathan Söderblom has been already acknowledged as an important architect of dialogue aimed at re-establishing Christian unity based on initiatives that could promote common religious values despite denominational differences. His overwhelming contribution is illustrated in the fact that he achieved dialogue through practical collaboration, in accordance with the Church's mission when facing the reality and challenges of society (p. 10).

This dialogue took place in the atmosphere dominated by the idealism prevalent after 1918, when political-diplomatic and ecclesiastical European circles tried to found grand projects. A direct result of this most interesting ecumenical initiative was the organising of the Ecumenical Conference in Stockholm, held from August 15 to 30, 1925, which was attended by 680 delegates from 37 countries, representing various churches, denominations and Christian communities.

In order to prepare for this Ecumenical Conference Archbishop Nathan Söderblom began an extensive correspondence with the main leaders of these communities. The volume edited by Macarie Drăgoi brings to our attention the exchange of letters with the Orthodox Churches, a correspondence which continued until Söderblom's death. Through reading these letters one obtains

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an image of Archbishop Söderblom as a very careful observer in capturing and sketching the figures and physiognomy of Orthodoxy's representatives, who were, within European Christianity, distinct from the ecclesiastical and spiritual Protestant model (p. 20).

Archbishop Söderblom's correspondence is divided into 15 main sections. However, the most significant parts of his epistolary exchange are formed by the letters sent to and received from the Ecumenical Patriarchate (1915-1931) [p. 93-239] and the Russian Orthodox Church (1896-1931) [p. 275-394].

During the preparatory stages of the conference in Stockholm, the Swedish Prelate, as well as other prominent members of ecumenical action at the time, had already deemed the Ecumenical Patriarchate a major centre for all of Christendom due to its authority and age. The 110 letters exchanged with the hierarchs and theologians from Constantinople show the importance and the breadth of this centre for all Christendom's continuity with the apostolic tradition and with Christianity of the first millennium. The content of this correspondence is relevant for both the preparatory period of the Ecumenical Conference in Stockholm in 1925 and its subsequent impact and significance, as these letters treat aspects of protocol and courtesy, "as well as profound issues relating to the involvement of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate (and Orthodoxy in general) in the ecumenical movement" (p. 28).

Regarding the correspondence with the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, it is clear that the personal relations doubled through the epistolary exchange with the Russians are some of the oldest, because Söderblom had had relations with some exponents of this Church ever since 1900. The entire epistolary dialogue proves not only the geographic proximity and longstanding cultural relations between Russia and the North of Europe, but also "how ready an audience he had and what a favourable reception the initiatives enjoyed among the ranks of the Russian Orthodox clergy and *intelligentsia*" (p. 48). This correspondence includes 132 letters presenting three categories of content in general aspects of protocol, theological and religious aspects, and cultural issues. Addressed to both clergy and laymen, these epistles emphasise the true nature of the relations between Söderblom and the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. These are not institutional relations, more difficult to achieve in the context of the religious politics introduced by the Soviet regime after 1917, but rather personal relationships through which the Swedish prelate established the basis for inter-confessional dialogue from theological and cultural themes.

Also important are the sections of Archbishop Söderblom's epistolary exchange with the representatives of Patriarchate of Alexandria (1924-1930) [p. 239-269] and of the Serbian (1923-1931) [p. 395-422] Romanian (1918-1930) [p. 423-462] and Bulgarian Orthodox Churches (1917-1931) [p. 463-490].

Nathan Söderblom's correspondence with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem [p. 269-274], the Georgian Orthodox Church [p. 491-499], the Orthodox Churches of Cyprus [p. 499-502], Greece [p. 503-516], Poland [p. 517-534] and of Finland [p. 535-542] as well as the Coptic Church in Egypt [p. 543-546], the Church of Armenia [p. 547-550] and the Church of Malabar [p. 551-552] was rather modest, consisting of a few letters regarding the preparation of the ecumenical conference in Stockholm in 1925.

All of these epistles, recovered from the correspondence archive of the Swedish Archbishop in the Carolina Rediviva Library, University of Uppsala, transmit Söderblom's determination to raise awareness of the cultural values and spirituality of Eastern Christianity. The letters are profoundly marked by a distinguished attitude and an openness towards the Orthodox Churches, who are seen as equal dialogue partners. Finally, the letters are not only examples of western courtesy but also of Söderblom's inner calling to bring the Church of Christ to unity, making of Archbishop Söderblom a role model for today's participants in ecumenical dialogue.