



Research Paper

# The place of religious experience in Nathan Soderblom's thought

Seyede Susan Anjomeruz\*<sup>1</sup> , Ghorban Elmi<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, School of Theology and Islamic Studies, University of Tehran

<sup>2</sup> Professor, School of Theology and Islamic Studies, University of Tehran

\***Corresponding Author:** Seyede Susan Anjomeruz

**Address:** School of Theology and Islamic Studies, University of Tehran

**Email:** [su.anjomerouz@ut.ac.ir](mailto:su.anjomerouz@ut.ac.ir)

**Tel:** 09355013507


[10.22080/jre.2024.28031.1222](https://doi.org/10.22080/jre.2024.28031.1222)
**Received:**

October 12, 2024

**Accepted:**

November 27, 2024

**Available online:**

December 1, 2024

**Keywords:**

Religious Experience, Nathan Soderblom, The Holy, general and special revelation, the living God.

## Abstract

The problem of religious experience is one of the most important explorations in religious studies. The Uppsala School of Religious Studies is indebted to Nathan Söderblom's influential ideas in the field of phenomenology of religion. From Söderblom's point of view the essence of religion is religious experience, the essential characteristic of which is the presence of holiness. Although Soderblom believes that God reveals Himself to humanity through His manifestations in the historical course of religions, and in his view, history is equal to God's general revelation, he considers special revelation to be that of Christianity and considers Christ to be the culmination of God's manifestation to humanity. Despite this, Söderblom, as the archbishop of the Church of Sweden, by challenging the exclusivity of the church in the subject of revelation, instead of the ahistorical and fixed concept of revelation from the perspective of the church, emphasizes the historical and dynamic concept of revelation from a general and universal perspective. From Soderblom's perspective, there is only one truth that appears in different forms in the course of evolution. By analyzing Soderblom's historical and phenomenological approach to religious forms, on the one hand, this research has caused the elimination of stagnation and prejudice in the field of religious truth exclusivity, and on the other hand, by emphasizing the single truth of existence, it promises the possibility of the unity of religions and tolerance between mankind.

## Extended Abstract

The problem of religious experience is one of the most important explorations in religious studies. The Uppsala School of Religious Studies is indebted to Nathan Söderblom's influential ideas in the field of phenomenology of religion. He as a spiritual and scholarly figure in the field of religious studies, focuses heavily on the concept of the Holy. From Söderblom's point of view, the essence of religion is religious experience, the essential characteristic of which is the presence of holiness. Although Soderblom believes that God reveals Himself to humanity through His manifestations in the historical course of religions, and in his view, history is equal to God's general revelation, he considers special revelation to be that of Christianity and

considers Christ to be the culmination of God's manifestation to humanity. Despite this, Söderblom, as the archbishop of the Church of Sweden, by challenging the exclusivity of the church in the subject of revelation, instead of the ahistorical and fixed concept of revelation from the perspective of the church, emphasizes the historical and dynamic concept of revelation from a general and universal perspective. From Soderblom's perspective, there is only one truth that appears in different forms in the course of evolution. Using the typological method, he is trying to explain that Animism, Mana and belief in God Almighty are three different but parallel types of religious experience. By analyzing Soderblom's historical and phenomenological approach to religious forms, on the one hand, this research has caused the elimination of stagnation and prejudice in the field of religious truth exclusivity, and on the other hand, by emphasizing the single truth of existence, it promises the possibility of the unity of religions and tolerance between mankind.

In the evaluation of Soderblom's view, it can be said that his approach in theology consists of three aspects: comparative, historical, and phenomenological. He considers comparative study



as a tool to strengthen interreligious dialogues, but an important criticism of Soderblom's comparative approach is that he ignores the deep philosophical and theological and even controversial differences between religions; and this emphasis on matching and similarity indirectly leads to religious relativism, so that all religions are considered as equal ways to reach the truth.

Although Soderblom's historical approach provides a basis for global studies of religion, he has sometimes judged based on his tendencies towards Christianity in his comparative analysis, and sometimes he has not considered some religions in his analysis. Instead of studying history as a neutral fact, it uses it to strengthen and fulfill its ecclesiastical and ideological goals. Soderblom's emphasis on Christianity as a tool to promote world peace is another criticized aspect of Soderblom's historical approach. He believed that the history of Christianity can serve as a guide for establishing international peace. But Soderblom's attempt to reconcile the history of Christianity with pacifist movements sometimes leads to the distortion of history and some historical events that show the aggressive or militant aspects of Christianity, such as the church's role in the Crusades or other religious conflicts, are completely ignored in his analysis.

Soderblom's phenomenological approach to religion emphasizes individual religious experience as the basic principle and that personal experience of the Holy the basis of all religious rituals. However, in criticizing his excessive fo-

cus on individual experience, it can be said that religions are not formed based on individual experience alone; as social, cultural and historical elements also play an important role in the structure of religions. Therefore, Soderblom ignores the importance of religious institutions and social structures by focusing on individual experience. He sees religion as an experienced and common phenomenon among humans, while this approach may ignore the importance of historical developments and specific socio-political conditions in the formation and evolution of religions. In addition, Söderblom tries to find a kind of spiritual unity between different religions by emphasizing the spiritual commonalities between them, but in this regard he ignores the important cultural and historical differences between religions.

The essence of religion is very important in Soderblom's theology. He, who examines the essence of religion with a phenomenological approach, considers the essence of religion to be a The Holy, which is actually the manifestation of divine power. The Holy is objectified in Mana, which is the meeting point of religions. Although his view of religion, placing the Holy as the central focus, empathetic and not reducing it to external phenomena seems reasonable; However, his comment in this field is valid only as a hypothesis, and his perception of the Holy is intuitive and personal and cannot be easily defined or limited in the field of rational thought.



## References

- Akerberg, Hans. (1975). *Omvändelse och kamp: En empirisk religionspsykologisk undersökning av den unge Nathan Söderbloms religiösa utveckling 1866–1894*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Andrae, Tor J.E. (1932). *Nathan Söderblom*. Uppsala University: Lindblads Förlag.
- Aulén, Gustaf. (1932). «Nathan Söderblom as a Theologian». *Church Quarterly Review*. 115. pp. 15-48.
- Bowker, John. (1997). *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Stuart (2012). *One hundred philosophers of the 20th century (One hundred twentieth - century philosophers)* Translated by Abdolreza Salar Behzadi. Tehran: Phoenix [In Persian].
- Cavallin, Clemens. (2018). *Roman Forum*. Gardone: Italy.
- Curtis, Charles J. (1967). *Söderblom: Ecumenical Pioneer*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.
- Curtis, Charles J. (1967). «Nathan Söderblom: Pope John of Protestant Ecumenism». *American Ecclesiastical Review*. 156. 1-9.
- Dartigues, Andre (1373). *What is phenomenology? (Quest-ce que la phenomenology?)* Translated by Mahmoud Navali. Tehran: Samt [In Persian].
- Ehnmark, Erland. (1949). *Religionsproblemet hos Nathan Söderblom*. Lund: Gleerups.
- Ehnmark, Erland. (1955). "General Revelation According to Nathan Soderblom". *The journal of Religion*. Vol. 35. No. 4. pp 218-228.
- Eliade, Mircha (1375). *religious studies (Study of Religion)* Translated by Bahauddin Khorramshahi. Tehran: Research Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies [In Persian].
- Elmi, Qurban (1377). An entry on the religious theory of Otto Clear "The concept of sacred matter". *Articles and reviews*. Number 64. From 89 to 101 [In Persian].
- Ericer, Clive. (2015). "Phenomenological approaches to the study of religion", translated by Ali Shahbazi. *Information and librarianship*. Research. seventh year No. 26. Pages 142-182 [In Persian].
- Grenz, Stanley and Olsen, Roger (2008). *Christian theology in the 20th century (20th century theology: God and the world in a transitional age)* Translated by Robert Assarian. Michel Aghamalian. Tehran: Nashre Mahi [In Persian].
- Jonson, Jonas. (2014). "Jag är bara Nathan Söderblom satt till tjänst": *En biografi*. Stockholm: Verbum.
- Lange, Dietz. (2014). *Nathan Söderblom och hans tid*. trans. Erik Aurelius and Ludvig Berggren. Skellefteå: Artos.
- Mathias, Jörg. (2014). "Unity in Christ or Pan-Europeanism? Nathan Söderblom and the Ecumenical Peace Movement in the Interwar Period". *Religion, State & Society* 41. no. 1: 5–22.
- Mc Grath, Alister (2012). *Christian theology: an introduction*. Translated by Behrouz Haddadi. Qom: University of Religions and Religions [In Persian].
- Mojtahedi, Karim (2013). *Phenomenology of spirit according to Hegel's view*. Teh-



- ran: Scientific and Cultural Publications [In Persian].
- Nelson, Derek R. (2007). "Encountering The World's Religions: Nathan Soderblom and the Concept of Revelation". *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*. Volume 46. Number 4. Winter. p.363- 370.
- Otto, Rudolf. (1917). *Das Heilige*. Breslau: Trewendt und Granier.
- Otto, Rudolph (1380). *The Concept of Sacredness (The Idea of the holy)* Translated by Homayun Hemmati. Tehran: Naqsh Jahan [In Persian].
- Schimmel, Annmarie (2009). *Friedrich Hiller*. Translated by Cambys Poornaji. The book of the month of religion. Number 159 [In Persian].
- Sharpe, Eric J. (1986). *Comparative Religion, A history* (2nd Edition). Open Court.
- Sillen, Walter. (1948). "Nathan Söderblom" in: *The Journal of Religion*. Vol. 28. No. 1. pp. 37-50.
- Söderblom, Nathan. (1910). *Religionsproblemet inom katolicism och Protestantism*. Stockholm: Hugo Grebers förlag.
- Söderblom, Nathan. (1914). "Holiness; General and Primitive". in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (vol. 6). James Hastings (ed.). Edinburg: T. & T. Clark. pp. 736-741.
- Söderblom, Nathan. (1919). "Evangelisk katolicitet" in *Enig Kristendom*. Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag.
- Söderblom, Nathan. (1933). *The Living God: Basal Forms of Personal Religion*. The Gifford Lectures. London: Oxford University Press.
- Söderblom, Nathan. (1966). *The Nature of Revelation*. ed. Edgar Carlson. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Stausberg, Michael. (2017). "The Sacred, The Holy, The Numinous and Religion: on the Emergence and Early History of a Terminological Constellation". *Religion* 47. no. 4.
- Sundkler, Bengt G.M. (1968). *Nathan Söderblom: His Life and Work*. Uppsala: Gleerups.
- Waardenburg, Jacques. (1973). *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*. The Hague: Mouton & Co. N.V.
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism/The-church-of-the-early-Middle-Ages>.