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“news, reviews, and commentary on contemporary religious history with a focus on Germany and Europe in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.” We want to continue John Conway’s tradition of prompt reviews of new books written in language that reaches (indeed, brings together) experts in modern German church history with members of the broader public who are interested in this subject. But we also want to gradually expand the scope of our work (as we have been doing over the past couple of years) by publishing editorials, talks, new research reports, and other similar kinds of writing.

As ever, we hope you enjoy this edition of *Contemporary Church History Quarterly*, even as we have already begun to plan for a full slate of reviews in our upcoming December issue.

On behalf of the editorial team,

Kyle Jantzen, Ambrose University College

REVIEW OF DIETZ LANGE, NATHAN SÖDERBLOM UND SEINE ZEIT

September 1, 2013 · by [John S. Conway](#) · in [Reviews](#), [Volume 19 Number 3 \(September 2013\)](#) · [Edit](#)

Contemporary Church History Quarterly

Volume 19, Number 3 (September 2013)

Review of Dietz Lange, *Nathan Söderblom und seine Zeit* (Göttingen and Oakville, CT, USA: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), Pp 480, ISBN 978-3-525-5701-5.

By John S. Conway, University of British Columbia



A new biography has recently been published in Germany of Nathan Söderblom, the most prominent Protestant church leader in the decade of the 1920s. The author, Dietz Lange, is the emeritus professor of

Systematic Theology in Göttingen, and in this laudatory but leisurely account of Söderblom's career, the emphasis is placed on the evolution of Söderblom's intellectual ideas and his relations with other scholars and theologians of his time. Lange supplements but does not supplant the standard biography in English, written nearly half a century ago by Bengt Sundkler, which concentrated on Söderblom's main claims to fame, his championships of the peace endeavours during the first world war, and his leadership of the ecumenical movement in the aftermath.

Lange traces Söderblom's energetic and often fervent debates about the theological novelties at the end of the nineteenth century, when the impact of German Protestant scholarship, at the hands of such men as Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack, was at its height. Although brought up in the rather narrow evangelicalism of a Swedish pastorate, Söderblom quickly took advantage of the new and wider horizons of this contentious German Protestantism. At the same time, he retained his original attachment to the forms of Swedish piety of which he became the prime exemplar. His talents led him early in his career to take on new opportunities for service, first as chaplain to the Swedish community in Paris for seven years, and later on, for two years, as visiting Professor of Church History in Leipzig University. These postings gave him insight into the rival militaristic and nationalistic sentiments in Europe, which did so much to lead to open hostilities in 1914.

Söderblom returned from Paris in 1901 to take up the chair of Comparative Religious History in Uppsala, when, as Lange describes, his main interest was in the development of religious ideas and practices amongst earlier civilisations or societies, which led to a close examination of such themes as the godhead, eschatology, the appearance of ethical systems, or the relationship between such theologies and magic.

But in the summer of 1914, Söderblom's career took a wholly unanticipated turn when he was appointed Archbishop of Uppsala and Primate of the Swedish established church. A few months later the outbreak of war on the continent imposed new and burdensome international responsibilities. He quickly gave his support and that of his church to Sweden's position of neutrality. He gave strong leadership to the efforts to stop or mitigate the hostilities, and deplored the readiness of churchmen in both camps to claim that God was on their side. At no point was he prepared to believe that divine approval should be claimed for either side's military ambitions or their effects. War to him was nothing less than a disaster. As a result he sought to mobilize the Christian churches in the neutral countries to put forward peace proposals, which however were rejected by one side or the other. But such efforts gave him an international prominence and a determination to make reconciliation and reconstruction his top priority in the post-war years.

Lange's biography recapitulates the well-known story of Söderblom's initiatives and leadership which resulted in the creation of the Life and Work movement of the churches. To his great regret he was unable to gain the support of the Roman Catholic Church, but effectively drew together the Protestant and the Orthodox churches in an unprecedented commitment to ecumenical co-operation, which was to become the basis for the future World Council of Churches.

The high point of Söderblom's influence came at the notably famous Stockholm Conference of 1925, when for the first time since the end of the Great War churchmen from all different denominations and groupings were able to meet to consider how to make plans for a more harmonious and effective church witness. It was surely due to his generous and inspiring leadership that the churches were encouraged to set aside the resentments and grievances caused by the war, and to focus on the positive steps which greater ecumenical co-operation could produce. In this regard, he strongly urged that the churches support the work of the newly-established League of Nations. But the German delegation, consisting mainly of staunchly conservative nationalists, refused all such panaceas. They maintained a wholly pessimistic view of the future, and loudly protested against the so-called injustice of the Versailles Treaty. Lange lets them off very lightly.

Söderblom's chief hope was that the ancient divisions within the churches would be replaced by a new spirit of evangelical catholicity. But, as Lange admits, neither the theological climate nor the political circumstances of the 1920s were propitious. The rise of Fascism and Nazism in the 1930s destroyed most of Söderblom's optimistic world-view. He died in 1931 and his influence ebbed rather quickly. The renown and reputation earned by his indefatigable witness, which had brought him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1930, was all too soon forgotten. But the hope of calling the churches together for a more effective witness to Christian life and work still remains as Söderblom's lasting legacy. We can therefore be grateful to Professor Lange for recalling the numerous contributions to this cause made by this redoubtable world churchman.

REVIEW OF CARSTEN LINDEN, DIE BEDEUTUNG DES BEZIEHUNGSGEFLECHTS DER OSNABRÜCKER EV.-LUTH. PASTOREN FÜR DEN VERLAUF DER OSNABRÜCKER KIRCHENPOLITIK 1907-1936

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Contemporary Church History Quarterly

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Review of Carsten Linden, *Die Bedeutung des Beziehungsgeflechts der Osnabrücker ev.-luth. Pastoren für den Verlauf der Osnabrücker Kirchenpolitik 1907-1936* (Hamburg: Dr. Kovac Verlag, 2012), 2 Vol., 960 Pp.

By Hansjörg Buss, Universität des Saarlandes