

# DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD AND THE MYSTICS

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THE SWEDISH STATESMAN Dag Hammarskjöld, secretary general of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961, is renowned for the aphorisms published in his diary, entitled *Markings*.<sup>1</sup> He drew profound inspiration for his own life from writers and poets—he was himself a poet—from the Bible, especially the Psalmists, and from Christ, while remaining critical of conventional religion.<sup>2</sup> He talked about his own ‘never abandoned effort frankly and squarely to build up a personal belief in the light of experience and honest thinking’.<sup>3</sup> Although there was no sudden change, but rather a development in his fundamental religious attitude, he nonetheless experienced ‘a decisive moment of transition’, as Henry Van Dusen puts it.<sup>4</sup> Van Dusen quotes this entry in Hammarskjöld’s *Markings*:

I don’t know Who—or what—put the question. I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

From that moment I have known what it means ‘not to look back’, and ‘to take no thought for the morrow’. (169)

<sup>1</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, translated by Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1964). Subsequent citations in the text; all italics are Hammarskjöld’s. The Swedish original was published in 1963.

<sup>2</sup> From writers and poets, see 39, 42, 68, 75, 83, 85, 87, 118, 122, 130, 132, 134, 168; Hammarskjöld himself as poet, 31, 51, 60, 61, 65, 75, 84, 85, 90, 103, 121, 141–146, 149–162, 165–167, 170–181; from the Bible, especially the Psalms, 94, 98, 99, 104, 168, 178, 103, 110, 111, 115, 118, 121, 123, 125, 131, 138, 147, 163, 164, 168; Christ, 36, 37, 50, 51, 56, 63, 72–73, 82, 88, 92, 95, 99, 101, 110–112, 114, 116, 117, 130, 132, 134, 140, 163, 169.

<sup>3</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld, ‘Old Creeds in a New World’, in *The Servant of Peace: A Selection of the Speeches and Statements of Dag Hammarskjöld*, edited by Wilder Foote (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Henry P. Van Dusen, *Dag Hammarskjöld: The Statesman and His Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 100.

### ***The Influence of the Mystics on Hammar skjöld***

A number of the thoughts set down in *Markings* are very close to the stark pronouncements of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, especially in his German sermons. They constitute a remarkable actualisation by a twentieth-century man of insights first expressed by a thirteenth-century contemplative-in-action.

Eckhart was not the only mystic to influence Hammar skjöld. In fact, he quotes a number of others, albeit not often: the Islamic Rumi (95), Blaise Pascal (111) and Tszé Sze (117)—each of them only once. There are also a couple of references to Thomas Aquinas (88, 98) and three to John of the Cross (91, 115, 139). In his commentary on *Markings*, Gustaf Aulén notes:

Hammar skjöld describes faith in many ways: two of these provide definitions. One from Saint John of the Cross: 'Faith is God's union with the soul'.<sup>5</sup> The other: faith, or the 'unheard-of', is 'to be in the hands of God' or 'under the hands of God'. Both 'definitions' are repeated several times in *Markings* ....

Two definitions of faith: one from the mystics, one from the Bible. By no means does this imply that the first definition has no roots in the Bible, and still less that Hammar skjöld saw that definition as unbiblical.<sup>6</sup>

In the last chapter of his book, Aulén asks, 'was Hammar skjöld himself a mystic?' He answers:

In light of the very ambiguity of the term, the question whether Hammar skjöld can be designated a mystic cannot be answered by a simple yes or no. The important thing for us, accordingly, is not to decide whether he was a mystic or not, but to ferret out what the mystics meant for him. He has himself clearly informed us that the mystics important to him were 'the great medieval mystics', and he has also explicitly said that the help they gave led to a better understanding of the Christian faith.<sup>7</sup>

The pages that follow in Aulén's complex discussion of this issue make it clear that Hammar skjöld was a man of *faith* to a high degree.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Aulén gives us here his revised translation of this excerpt from *Markings*, 91. See Gustaf Aulén, *Dag Hammar skjöld's White Book: An Analysis of Markings* (London: SPCK, 1970), 41–42.

<sup>6</sup> Aulén, *Dag Hammar skjöld's White Book*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Aulén, *Dag Hammar skjöld's White Book*, 113 and 114; see also 112–124.

<sup>8</sup> See Aulén, *Dag Hammar skjöld's White Book*, 138–152 and Van Dusen, *Dag Hammar skjöld*, chapter 5.



*Dag Hammarskjöld*

As secretary general, he declared: ‘The United Nations stands outside—necessarily outside—all confessions but it is, nevertheless, an instrument of faith’.<sup>9</sup> In his diary he offered this prayer:

Give me a pure heart—that I may see Thee,  
 A humble heart—that I may hear Thee,  
 A heart of love—that I may serve thee,  
 A heart of faith—that I may abide in Thee (93, 176).

Obviously Hammarskjöld’s faith was marked by tinges of mysticism, for instance by his sense of an immediate divine presence. Furthermore, it was his relationship with God that prompted his engagement in human affairs, as was the case for Eckhart—and for Ignatius of Loyola. Thus he wrote:

The explanation of how man should live a life of active social service in full harmony with himself as a member of the community of the

<sup>9</sup> Hammarskjöld, ‘An Instrument of Faith’, in *Servant of Peace*, 56–57.

spirit, I found in the writings of those great medieval mystics for whom 'self-surrender' had been the way to self-realization, and who in 'singleness of mind' and 'inwardness' had found strength to say yes to every demand which the needs of their neighbors made them face, and to say yes also to every fate life had in store for them when they followed the call of duty, as they understood it.<sup>10</sup>

As secretary general of the United Nations, Hammarskjöld exemplified this kind of commitment. In his biography, Sven Stolpe refers to Hammarskjöld's achievements, such as securing the release of eleven US airmen, shot down and imprisoned by the Chinese in 1953, his handling of the Suez crisis (1956) and the Congo crisis (1960–1961).<sup>11</sup> Such a contribution to world affairs could not have been made without hope. Accordingly, in a speech at the second assembly of the World Council of Churches, quoting the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:34) on worrying about tomorrow, Hammarskjöld said:

The Cross, although it is the unique fact on which the Christian Churches base their hope, should not separate those of Christian faith from others but should instead be that element in their lives which enables them to stretch out their hands to peoples of other creeds in the feeling of universal brotherhood which we hope one day to see reflected in a world of nations truly united.<sup>12</sup>

In an address at Johns Hopkins University Commencement Exercises, he elaborated:

International service requires of all of us first and foremost the courage to be ourselves. In other words, it requires that we should be true to none other than our ideals and interests—but these should be such as we can fully endorse after having opened our minds, with great honesty, to the many voices of the world. The greatest contribution to international life that any one can render—be it as a private citizen or as one professionally engaged in international work—is to represent frankly and consistently what survives or emerges as one's own after

<sup>10</sup> Hammarskjöld, 'Old Creeds in a New World', 24.

<sup>11</sup> Sven Stolpe, *Dag Hammarskjöld: A Spiritual Portrait*, translated by Naomi Walford (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 81.

<sup>12</sup> Hammarskjöld, 'An Instrument of Faith', 61.

such a test. Far from demanding that we abandon or desert ideals and interests basic to our personality, international service thus puts us under the obligation to let those ideals and interests reach maturity and fruition in a universal climate.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, we must take account of the remark made by the poet W. H. Auden, one of his translators: 'If we read *Markings* without remembering all the time that it was written by a man who was a great "worldly" success, we shall fail to grasp the meaning of the sadness and "unworldliness" of many of the entries'.<sup>14</sup>

Sven Stolpe, who knew Hammarskjöld as a twenty-year-old, summed up his overall impression as follows: 'From the beginning I felt very strongly that this young man was purer than perhaps anyone I had ever met'. Of *Markings*, he wrote: 'In this book he gives youthful expression to his longing for purity, heroism, clarity, integrity'.<sup>15</sup> Hammarskjöld never ceased pursuing this ideal. However, he had to go beyond the limitations of this self-perfecting programme. Stolpe affirmed:

Throughout his youth and the early years of his manhood, Hammarskjöld—like all lonely idealists—had striven to shape and polish his personality towards perfection. This is humanism: faith in mankind. Now he sees—and rejoices with his soul at the discovery—that this battle is not the essential one. He becomes 'strong and free, because he no longer exists'.<sup>16</sup>

At this point, Hammarskjöld had indeed become a mystic.

I now invite my readers to meditate on some of the entries in his diary, taking into account my article on Eckhart published in an earlier issue of *The Way*, with a view to noting the similarity between these two mystics' convictions and pondering the profundity of their ruminations.<sup>17</sup> Since these thoughts are for the purpose of meditation, I will not comment on them at this point; only at the end shall I offer a comparison between Eckhart and Hammarskjöld.

<sup>13</sup> Hammarskjöld, 'An Instrument of Faith', 80–81.

<sup>14</sup> W. H. Auden, 'Foreword', in *Markings*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Stolpe, *Dag Hammarskjöld*, 48, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Stolpe, *Dag Hammarskjöld*, 86. The English edition of *Markings* translates this, perhaps more clearly, as 'strong and free because *his self* no longer exists' (96).

<sup>17</sup> See Louis Roy, 'Meister Eckhart's Construal of Mysticism', *The Way*, 56/1 (January 2017), 77–88.

### **Hammar skjöld's Quotations from Eckhart<sup>18</sup>**

*'Only the hand that erases can write the true thing.'* (epigraph)

*'How can we ever be the sold short or the cheated, we who for every service have long ago been overpaid?'* (67)

*'But how, then, am I to love God?' 'You must love Him as if He were a Non-God, a Non-Spirit, a Non-Person, a Non-Substance: love Him simply as the One, the pure and absolute Unity in which is no trace of Duality. And into this One, we must let ourselves fall continually from being into non-being. God helps us to do this.'* (99)

*'There is a contingent and non-essential will: and there is, providential and creative, an habitual will. God has never given Himself, and never will, to a will alien to His own: where He finds His will, He gives Himself.'* (111)

*Semina motuum [seeds of movements]. In us the creative power became will. In order to grow beautifully like a tree, we have to attain that rest in the unity in which the creative will is re-transformed into instinct—Eckhart's 'habitual will'.*

*'—looking straight into one's own heart  
(as we can do in the mirror-image of the father)  
—watching with affection the way people grow—  
(as in imitation of the Son  
—coming to rest in perfect equity'  
(as in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost)*

*Like the ultimate experience, our ethical experience is the same for all. Even the Way of the Confucian world is a 'Trinity'. (117)<sup>19</sup>*

<sup>18</sup> See Manuel Froehlich, *Political Ethics and the United Nations: Dag Hammarskjöld as Secretary-General* (London: Routledge, 2008), 76: 'The sheer number of quotations from Meister Eckhart indicates the importance Hammarskjöld must have attached to this leading figure in German mysticism (1260–1327). Hammarskjöld quotes from a 1934 edition that he probably acquired shortly after it appeared. The book lay right next to his writing desk ....' The edition in question is *Meister Eckeharts Schriften zur Gesellschaftsphilosophie* (Jena: Fischer, 1934).

<sup>19</sup> I have adopted Aulén's emendations to the translation here (*Dag Hammarskjöld's White Book*, 48). In this passage Eckhart's phrases seem to be intertwined with Hammarskjöld's own.

*'It is in this abyss that you reveal me to myself—I am nothing and I did not know it.'*

*'If, without any side-glances, we have only God in view, it is He, indeed, who does what we do .... Such a man does not seek rest, for he is not troubled by any unrest .... He must acquire an inner solitude, no matter where or with whom he may be: he must learn to pierce the veil of things and comprehend God within them.'*

*'Of the Eternal Birth'—to me, this now says everything there is to be said about what I have learned and have still to learn.*

*'The soul that would experience this birth must detach herself from all outward things: within herself completely at one with herself .... You must have an exalted mind and a burning heart in which, nevertheless, reign silence and stillness.'* (123–124)

*'Believe me: this, too, belongs to perfection, that a man so undertakes works, that all his works fuse into one work. This must be done 'in the Kingdom of God'. For I tell you the truth: all works which man does outside of the Kingdom of God are dead, but those which he does in the Kingdom of God are alive ... just as God is not distracted or changed by any of his works, nor, too, is the soul so long as she works according to the law of God's kingdom. Such men, therefore, may do works or do them not, but remain all the while undisturbed. For works neither give them anything, nor take anything from them.'* (158).

*'In the Kingdom of God—; all works are equal there, my smallest is as my greatest, my greatest as my smallest.—About works in themselves there is something divisive which causes a division in the souls of men, and brings them to the brink of disquiet.'* (158)

### **An Entirely Free Person**

We find in Dag Hammarskjöld's diary many fundamental themes that are by and large the same as Eckhart's, for all the difference of vocabulary, and whether or not there is direct quotation. There are no traces of any sudden conversion in the writing of either, simply a continuous maturation; there are frequent quotations from the Bible; and great importance is given to the Trinity. The reality of God is presented as the absolute Unity, by contrast with the 'nothing' of the human individual.

There is a sense of the eternal now, the superabundant divine gift to us, freedom, detachment, nakedness, the abolition of the ego, an insistence on solitude, and contemplation in the midst of demanding engagement. Let us keep in mind that Hammarskjöld, as secretary general of the United Nations, and Eckhart, several times prior provincial of the Dominican Order in Germany, were capable of sustained prayerfulness while fulfilling exacting duties—which indicates an exceptional composure in both of them.

Finally, given that Luther had railed against most forms of mysticism,<sup>20</sup> I find that the *Lutheran* Hammarskjöld, by reaching back to the medieval Catholic mystics and by quoting non-Christian mystics, demonstrated (without even trying to do so) that he was an entirely free person—a rare specimen in the field of international politics.

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<sup>20</sup> Especially against Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite. However, Luther praised Johannes Tauler and the anonymous author of the *Theologia Germanica*; he edited the latter.