

# DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD AND THE RELIGIONS<sup>1</sup>

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In a well-known article written for a broadcast in 1954 Dag Hammarskjöld described two of the decisive influences on his religious development. The first was the influence of Albert Schweitzer; the second, of a certain medieval mysticism.<sup>2</sup>

From Schweitzer he drew principles which, merging with those drawn from his own home<sup>3</sup>, are "fully harmonized and adjusted to the demands of our world of today", and which form "a key for modern man to the world of the Gospels".

"But 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 spirit" he found "in the writings of those great medieval mystics for whom 'self-surrender' had been the way to self-realization".<sup>4</sup>

Of these two influences only Schweitzer's will be considered here.

Few people who have written on Hammarskjöld's conception of life seem to have considered the significance of his acknowledgement to Schweitzer and the "key to the world of the Gospels", though Olov Hartman, who has observed that both Schweitzer and Hammarskjöld were anything but orthodox Christians, is an exception.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Inaugural Lecture, Åbo, Finland, 20 November 1965.

<sup>2</sup> "This I believe" II, 1954, pp. 66 f.

<sup>3</sup> About Hammarskjöld's spiritual inheritance from his home, see Landberg in *Årsbok för kristen humanism*, 1964, pp. 65-86.

<sup>4</sup> About the mysticism in Vägmarken, see Hof in *Årsbok för kristen humanism*, 1964, pp. 87-95.

<sup>5</sup> *Vår lösen*, 1953, p. 398.

Schweitzer's ethical principle can be well expressed in his own words, "Reverence for Life". This principle, as he points out, is built on no philosophical or religious foundation: it is itself a foundation, a primary idea, whose only basis is to be found in the expression "I am life which wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live".<sup>6</sup> It is thus an ethical principle independent of Christianity, and indeed of all religion and philosophy, and in Schweitzer's eyes it is precisely this independence which gives to the principle its universality and broad humanity.

But Schweitzer also maintains that such a principle has an ethical mysticism and religious character of its own. "Whenever my life devotes itself in any way to life, my finite will-to-live experiences union with the infinite will in which all life is one."<sup>7</sup> "Only by serving every kind of life do I enter the service of the Creative Will whence all life emanates."<sup>8</sup> The love which lies behind this giving of ourselves is said to be the love of God, and our love and God's love, thus united, become one, and we ourselves become one in spirit with God. To express the same idea differently, the principle of Love is "the spiritual beam of light which reaches us from the Infinite"<sup>9</sup>; and "it is only through love that we can attain to communion with God. All living knowledge of God rests upon this foundation: that we experience Him in our lives as Will-to-Love."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, if, as he maintained, Dag Hammarskjöld derived his ethical principles from Schweitzer, we may believe that he also adopted Schweitzer's union of ethics and mysticism; and this can be illustrated by quoting from Hammarskjöld's personal diary, *Vägmärken* (translated into English under the title *Markings*), though naturally a full account cannot be undertaken here.

We may refer, firstly, to an aphorism from 1950: "Our will to live only survives so long as we will to live without a thought

<sup>6</sup> Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, p. 242.

<sup>7</sup> *Civilization and Ethics*, p. 246. Clark, *The Ethical Mysticism of Albert Schweitzer*, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Schweitzer, *The Ethics of Reverence for Life*, reprinted in Clark, *The Ethical Mysticism*, p. 189.

<sup>9</sup> *Out of My Life and Thought*, p. 184.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

as to whether it is our own life or not."<sup>11</sup> In this aphorism we find Schweitzer's key phrase "the will to live"; and this will to live is seen as itself subordinate to a universal will to live. We can say "we will to live without a thought as to whether it is our own life or not", and regard this saying as a new formulation of the phrase "Reverence for Life". Thus the chief principle becomes: our will to live possesses real vitality only when it shows Reverence for Life.

Similar observations are to be found among the entries for 1952. "The stream of life through millions of years, the stream of human lives through countless centuries. Evil, death, and need, sacrifice and love —. What does 'I' mean in such a perspective? Does not my reason force me to seek my own good, seek to gratify my desires, win power for myself and the admiration of my fellow-men? And yet I 'know' — know without knowing — that, in such a perspective, nothing could be less important. A vision in which God *is*."<sup>12</sup> — We can interpret this passage thus: in the universal river of life we can distinguish two forces, one representing evil, death, and need; the other the force of sacrifice and love. What importance can be attached to the individual personality in such a perspective? Little, extremely little. Self-assertion may seem reasonable, it is true, but against the background of universal life this self-assertion is totally obscured, and becomes insignificant. I have the assurance — an assurance based not upon rational knowledge but on a supernatural intuition — that self-assertion is meaningless. This knowledge is in itself a manifestation of God, a vision which has God as its source; and in this knowledge God himself is to be found.

An interpretation along these lines leads us again to Schweitzer, reminding us of his subordination of the individual to the universal life. And then the conception of God as the knowledge that self-assertion is meaningless corresponds to the conception of God as the will to love.

The entries for 1952 give us further evidence: "It may be that death is to be your ultimate gift to life: it must not be an act

<sup>11</sup> Vägmarken, p. 48. Cf. Markings, translated by L. Sjöberg & W. H. Auden, p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Vägmarken, p. 68. Cf. Markings, p. 83.

of treachery against it."<sup>13</sup> Life defined in such terms can only be universal life, and the sacrifice of one's individual for the universal life is one form of reverence for life. But if one seeks death from any personal motive, if, for example, one attempts to escape from one's purpose and responsibilities in this life, this becomes an act of treachery against the universal life.

The diary for 1956 contains a complete page of deep reflection on the relationship between the individual and the universal existence, Life with the capital L. For example: "You will find that, subordinated to Life, your life will preserve all its meaning, irrespective of the conditions given you for its realisation."<sup>14</sup> In other words, the individual existence is always meaningful if it remains devoted to the service of universal Life. Whether one is Secretary-General or not is unimportant: the meaning of personal existence is not definable in such terms.

In 1957 Hammarskjöld writes: "You will know Life and be acknowledged by it according to your degree of transparency; in other words, according to your ability to vanish as an end, and remain purely a means."<sup>15</sup> — The idea of life as a means and not as an end has already occurred to Hammarskjöld; we find it, for example, in the entries for 1950.<sup>16</sup> And we can see that Hammarskjöld's view is that we can know universal Life and its meaning only by being a means for it. Again we have a variation of the theme Reverence for Life.

It seems quite clear, then, that Schweitzer's influence on Hammarskjöld was as strong as Hammarskjöld claimed. Moreover, we can go further and claim that Hammarskjöld's fundamental religious idea, as expressed in the script of his broadcast — *faith as the union of God with the soul* — was a direct outcome of Schweitzer's teaching. Certainly Hammarskjöld himself cited St. John of the Cross as the source of this conception, but there can be no doubt that he reached his faith through a door which Schweitzer had opened. The diary for 1941–1942 will verify this statement.

<sup>13</sup> Vägmärken, p. 71; Markings, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> Vägmärken, p. 104. Cf. Markings, p. 114.

<sup>15</sup> Vägmärken, p. 124. Cf. Markings, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> Vägmärken, p. 48; Markings, p. 64.

The last entry for 1942 reads: "Our innermost creative will divines its counterpart in others, experiences its own universality — and opens the road to knowledge of the force from which it has itself emanated as a spark."<sup>17</sup> This so clearly accords with Schweitzer's ideas that I have wondered whether it can possibly be a direct quotation. If so I have been unable to trace its source, but one can see obvious parallels; Schweitzer often calls the universal will to live "Creative Force" or "Creative Will".<sup>18</sup> The universal relationship established here is precisely the "elemental thinking" which underlies Schweitzer's ethical principle of Reverence for Life: "I am life which wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live." Further we may recognize the following Schweitzerean thought: "The creative force which produces and sustains all that is, reveals itself in me in a way in which I do not get to know it elsewhere, namely, as ethical Will."<sup>19</sup> And this ethical Will is divine, a spark of the Love of God.

At this point I think we are prepared to consider the words immediately preceding this entry: "The road to knowledge does not pass through faith. But only through the knowledge we gain by pursuing the fleeting light of our innermost (creative will) do we reach the point where we can grasp what faith is."<sup>20</sup>

This can be interpreted: when we understand the universal relationship of our innermost will to live and the fact that our will to love is a divine manifestation, we can perceive that faith is God's union with the soul. To strengthen this interpretation we need only read further: "How many have been driven into outer darkness by empty talk about faith as something to be rationally comprehended!"<sup>21</sup> We cannot doubt that we have reached a point on which Hammar skjöld was personally sensitive: so sensitive that he indulges in polemics against those who differ from him in their interpretation of religious questions. This is not something of which Hammar skjöld can usually be accused. And the explanation seems to be that he himself has once been

<sup>17</sup> Vägmarken, p. 19. Cf. Markings, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Clark, *The Ethical Mysticism of Albert Schweitzer*, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Schweitzer, *Christianity and the Religions of the World*, p. 84. Clark, p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> Vägmarken, p. 19. Cf. Markings, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

"driven into outer darkness by empty talk of faith as something to be rationally comprehended".

To judge from his broadcast, and from the texts cited, Hammar skjöld's religious development proceeded from scepticism to a belief in the Reverence for Life principle; and from that to the mystical conception of faith as the union of God and the soul.

This discussion, however, has been no more than a prelude to our central topic, "Dag Hammar skjöld and the Religions", a prelude which reveals that Hammar skjöld's God was primarily Love and the Will to Love in the world and in the individual. Only against this background can we understand his attitude towards the so-called alien religions. His interest in different conceptions of life, indeed in *all* conceptions of life, is not dependent on any enlightened general tolerance, nor has it any significant connection with his involvement with the United Nations. He sought among the religions for that love and the will to love which in his eyes constituted God. For him it was vital to know whether God was manifest in China, Tibet, and Africa, or not.

In the meditation-room at the United Nations headquarters is to be found a small brochure written by Dag Hammar skjöld for the use of visitors. Visitors to this room might be of very different races, and the brochure is accordingly worded to suit all faiths. Nonetheless it clearly reveals one particular faith, the faith of Dag Hammar skjöld. Of the great stone which stands at the centre of the room we read, that it is an altar, empty not because God does not exist, nor because it is dedicated to an unknown God, but because it is dedicated to the God whom men worship under many names and in many forms. Just such a conception emerges from Hammar skjöld's posthumous book, and particularly from his discussion of alien religions. We shall see examples of this, and show that the God in question is manifest in mankind's will to love.

For our first example we may take an entry from the diary for 1955: "You are consecrated to this task — in the same manner as the victim of a still barbarian cult through the God-idea behind it: a feeble creation of men's hands — but you

have to give your all to the human dream attached to reality only therein."<sup>22</sup>

This may be interpreted: Dag Hammarskjöld is consecrated to the service of the feeble human creation called the United Nations. He is consecrated through the idea or the dream which the United Nations embodies. A parallel entry shows that this analysis is a correct one, an entry which speaks of an idea demanding his blood, and which is also embodied in an imperfect "creation of men's hands". The precise nature of this idea is not directly revealed, but whether we regard it as democracy, love, or reverence for life is only a question of degree.

We now turn to the comparison from religious history: the victim of a grim and barbaric cult among uncivilised savages is, despite its repulsiveness, seen as something sanctified, since this cult is inspired by or contains the God-idea. By the "God-idea" Hammarskjöld means probably the conception of God as Love or as the Will to Love, and one can then regard the victim as a substitute or as an expiatory sacrifice. The God-idea stands in the same relation to the barbaric cult as the dream or idea of the United Nations stands to the actual human creation of the United Nations Organisation. The comparison presupposes in any case that Hammarskjöld even considers the barbaric cult to be sanctified or justified in some degree by the God-idea. Indeed, if the comparison is to be meaningful it must stress the contrast between the barbaric nature of the cult, and the spiritual quality which inspires it.

Our next example is taken from ancient Greece, several centuries before Christ, and is concerned with King Oedipus. For this reason I will briefly recapitulate the principal features of the Oedipus legend. Oedipus's father had been informed by an oracle that his own son would murder him and afterwards marry with his mother. To counteract the prophecy the father attempted to get rid of his son immediately after birth. But the child was saved, and was eventually taken to the King of Corinth, who adopted him. When Oedipus grew up he too heard the prophecy, and believing the King and Queen of Corinth to be his real parents he left the city in an attempt to frustrate the prophecy. But on

<sup>22</sup> Vägmarken, p. 88. Cf. Markings, p. 100.

his journey he fell into a quarrel with a stranger, and killed him. That stranger was his father. When at last he came to Thebes he saved the city from a sphinx, and in return was elected King and married the former King's wife, his true mother. The prophecy had thus been fulfilled despite the several efforts to frustrate it. However Thebes was struck by a series of visitations: plague, drought, and famine. The Oracle of Delphi explained that these evils could not be averted until the old King's murderer was driven from the land. Oedipus, pursuing the killer, at last discovered that he himself was guilty, and realised, too, that he had married with his mother. With these terrible discoveries he struck out his own eyes and went into exile, exactly as the oracle had required.

Shortly we shall return to this legend as it is related in *Vägmärken*; but first we must refer to Hammarskjöld's earlier remarks on the subject of original sin (24/2/57): Original sin is described as "that dark counterpoint of evil in our nature — which, though it is not itself our nature, nonetheless forms part of it".<sup>23</sup> He goes on: "It is when we stand before the all-seeing eye of the righteous Love that we can manage to look at, dare to admit, and *consciously* suffer under this fact that something in us greets disaster, wills misfortune, is stimulated by defeat . . ."<sup>24</sup> And before this passage he says that it is "the experience of religious reality which forces the 'Night Side' out into the light".<sup>25</sup>

His comment on Oedipus immediately follows this discussion of original sin: "Oedipus, the son of a King, the winner of a throne — fortunate and innocent — is compelled to recognise the possibility and, in the end, the fact that he, too, is guilty, which makes it just that he should be sacrificed to save the people."<sup>26</sup>

This seems at first to be an illustration of original sin. It is stressed that Oedipus is innocent, but he still bears a burden of guilt. Without willing evil, despite, indeed, the fact that he has worked against evil, he came in the end to perform evil. But the final words refer not to original sin but to sacrifice, and more

<sup>23</sup> *Vägmärken*, p. 119. Cf. *Markings*, p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.



particularly to self-sacrifice for the good of others. One asks oneself: just what should we stress here? Shall we lay special emphasis on original sin, or on the action of self-sacrifice? After a while one realises that original sin and self-sacrifice must belong together here, and must illustrate exactly what he has previously said: that it is "the experience of religious reality which forces the 'Night Side' out into the light"; and that "it is when we stand before the all-seeing eye of the righteous Love that we can manage to look at, dare to admit" original sin. When Oedipus saw that it was "just that he should be sacrificed to save the people" he stood "before the all-seeing eye of the righteous Love", and he could see his guilt. Thus Hammar skjöld has discerned the will to love as a manifestation of God even in Greek ideas of the pre-Christian era.

We turn now to our next religion, the pre-Islamic Persian religion of Zoroaster. An entry of 1956 reads: "On the field where Ormuzd has challenged Ahriman to battle, he who chases away the dogs is wasting his time."<sup>27</sup> We may first remark that Ormuzd (the modern Persian Form) is the God of good, and of light, the principal divinity of the religion of Zoroaster. Ahriman is the principal demon of evil, and of darkness, the prime evil demon of the faith. The field where these two struggle against each other can only be the world. And the burden of the sentence is thus that one cannot afford the time for small battles in the world where the important struggle of good and evil is taking place.

One need not follow the faith of Zoroaster to express oneself in this way. I know that I have heard colleagues use the names of Ohrmazd and Ahriman as a humorous metaphor, and perhaps I have done so myself. But in Väg märken Dag Hammar skjöld shows more than once that he is pursuing a serious quest throughout the world and in all religions for God as love, the will to love, or for God as Good. And it appears to me that he found something of this God in the conception of the Persian Ormuzd.

The fact that his reference to Ormuzd and Ahriman is immediately preceded by a paraphrase of a quotation from St. John's Gospel would seem to support my belief. The passage reads: "And the *light* (underlined) shineth in darkness; and the

<sup>27</sup> Väg märken, p. 102; Markings, p. 113.

darkness comprehended it not." (1:5). Since Ormuzd and Ahri-man are often portrayed as Light and Darkness I cannot believe otherwise than that Ormuzd was in Hammar skjöld's eyes the same as "the light" of St. John, and that Ahriman represented St. John's "darkness".

Turning now to the religion of Islam, we must again consider the alien religion in relation to Christianity. The first words of the diary for 1955 are:

"— for nought is had that is not won — — —." <sup>28</sup>

Immediately after this he cites the words of an Islamic mystic, the Persian Djelāl ed-Dīn Rūmī, following the translation from Nicholson's little book "Rumi, Poet and Mystic" (p. 171):

"The lovers of God have no religion but God alone."

We may analyse this in the following terms: The quotation from a Swedish Passion psalm is not word for word correct. The Swedish book of psalms (89:3) shows two unimportant differences from Hammar skjöld's wording ("— *ly* intet finns som *inte* vinns — — —." according to Hammar skjöld, but in the book of psalms: "*det* intet finns, som *icke* vinns — — —.") Though the fault is unimportant it does show that Hammar skjöld was writing from memory, and not from a printed text. What is more important is that the quotation concludes with three dashes and a full stop, the dashes representing omitted words, "by love that suffers". These words, although they are omitted, would appear to have been taken as read, for without them the quotation is meaningless. We must therefore consider the full meaning: "nought is had which is not won *by love which suffers*". The key word "love" appears to be understood in this passage, and it leads us directly to the quotation from the Islamic mystic: "The lovers of God have no religion but God alone." Our first conclusion is that Hammar skjöld equates or associates the love of the suffering Christ with the mystics' love of God. This in itself is certainly important, but the quotation from Rumi says even more: the religion of the mystics is the same as God Himself. The experience, and the love, these are God. This brings us once again to Hammar skjöld's belief that faith is the union of God with the soul and to Schweitzer's conception of God as the will to love in men.

<sup>28</sup> Vägmarken, p. 83. Cf. Markings, p. 95.

The quotation from Rumi was certainly no mere curiosity for Hammarskjöld, nor merely a good parallel, but something of a divine revelation.

We turn to Chinese thought. During 1956 Hammarskjöld recorded at least three quotations from the Confucian writings. They are all worth a thorough examination, but we have only sufficient scope here to deal with one from *The Great Learning*. Here ethics are reduced to three points, all of which Hammarskjöld quotes, and which he afterwards combines with the Christian Trinity:

1. "— looking straight into one's own heart —"  
(and Hammarskjöld adds: "as we can do in the mirror of the Father's personage")
2. "— watching with affection the way people grow —"  
(and Hammarskjöld adds: "as in imitation of the Son")
3. "— coming to rest in perfect equity"  
(and Hammarskjöld adds: "as in the communion of the Holy Ghost").

Then Hammarskjöld adds the following concluding remark: "The unity of the ultimate experience corresponds to that of ethics. Even the way of the Confucian World is a 'Trinity'."<sup>29</sup>

Thus he quotes, in deep seriousness, a Confucian ethical Trinity from about 4 centuries before Christ as a parallel to the Christian Trinity. His seriousness is not affected by the fact that the two Trinities can have no historical connection. It is clear that Dag Hammarskjöld recognised in Confucianism traits from his own thoughts on the individual and the universal will to live, and his own and the divine will to love. These comparisons probably opened his mind to the wider comparison between the Confucian and the Christian Trinity, every comparison having a consciously edifying purpose.

Finally we come to Hammarskjöld's attitude to Christianity.

In his radio script of 1954 he admitted that he endorsed unreservedly, those very beliefs which once were handed down to

<sup>29</sup> Vägmarken, p. 108. Cf. Markings, p. 117.



1. Dag Hammarskjöld has considered even a barbaric cult to be sanctified by the God-idea which lies behind it.
2. The Oedipus legend exemplifies both Original Sin and Vicarious Suffering.
3. Ormuzd and Ahriman correspond to Light and Darkness in the Gospel of St. John.
4. The love of the Islamic mystics corresponds with the love of Christ.
5. The threefold ethic of Confucianism is reminiscent of the Christian Trinity.
6. Christ dies even in pagans who die in self-surrendering love.

All this seems to me to confirm that Dag Hammarskjöld sought, and believed himself to have found, the same God among different races and different faiths: the God who manifests himself as the will to love in the human soul. This conception may best be seen in Christianity, but not in Christianity alone according to Dag Hammarskjöld.

