


Spiritual autobiographies as sources of the ecumenism: Dag Hammarskjöld's case

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An important genre of the theological area, spiritual autobiography is currently undergoing a rediscovery process, because of recent research on this topic. Written by important mystical personalities belonging to different Christian traditions (such as Saint Silouane the Athonite or Saint John of Kronstadt for the Orthodox area, Saint Teresa of Avila for the Catholic one and Dag Hammarskjöld for the Lutheran one), spiritual autobiographies can constitute a valuable source for the understanding of their authors' thinking and perception of fundamental topics such as ecumenism. Being aware of this aspect, we will start from a case study, namely that of Dag Hammarskjöld, and we will try to see how this category of texts can be used in order to understand the attitude of the authors of spiritual autobiographies and their motivation in the ecumenical space.

Contribution: The research helps the reader to see how the spiritual autobiographies can be a source of understanding the ecumenism of mystical vocations, using as example Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*.

Keywords: Dag Hammarskjöld; *Markings*; Lutheran theology; western mystics; ecumenism; haiku; literature.

Introduction

Spiritual autobiography is an important inter-disciplinary genre (ed. Dinzelbacher 1993:82–85; Morariu 2018b:145) that can be used in multiple ways and can create important bridges between spiritualities, although theological research has not yet studied it enough (Morariu 2019:12). The fact that texts that can be classified in this category contain information, uncensored by their authors, about their spiritual path and about the elements that contributed to their mystical development is important and could offer an honest testimony and, at the same time, solutions to some of the reader's problems.

Moreover, although they were not meant to present chronicles of events, they can be used as sources for biographical reconstructions, in order to understand the inner motivations of a certain event. According to specialists (Moschella 2011:95–98), from a psychological point of view, they can also be used in a therapeutically way, because of the fact that they can help people to better understand themselves and to discover how they can heal their souls through spirituality. As for the theological point of view, they can be used (as it has already happened) for proselyte purposes (Scott 2009:139–143).

Of course, because of the fact that many of the authors of texts belonging to the category of spiritual autobiography can also be considered to have had mystical vocations (such as Saint Siluan the Athonite (Athonite 1994), Saint Teresa of Avila (Avila 1995), Saint John of Kronstadt (Sergieff 1897), Dag Hammarskjöld (Erling 2010; Hammarskjöld 1972), Faustina Kowalska (2008) and Mother Teresa of Calcutta (2007), the investigation of their notes can also be useful for the deeper understanding of spirituality and the aspects related to it.

People with ecumenical openness, most of the authors of such notes speak about the way in which they discovered their ecumenical vocation and about the way they saw their neighbour, they interacted with them and they discovered (God's image) in them, changing their life. As they are uncensored sources and as they present the way in which their authors tried to develop their mystical gifts, they are certainly important for the understanding of the ecumenism of the mystics. For example, in the case of the Lutheran mystic Dag Hammarskjöld, it shows the way in which he discovered the other, how it could change his life and help him to strengthen his relationship with God. At the same time, it shows how he perceived his contribution in this area.

For this reason, we will try to bring into attention Dag Hammarskjöld's spiritual autobiography and we will try to show how it can be used as a source for the understanding of his ecumenist attitude and commitment, because of the fact that he had both a mystical and an ecumenical vocation. Since many of the readers are not familiarised with his life and work and know only a few things regarding his activity as the Secretary of the United Nations, we will also try to make a presentation of his life and activity.

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961) – Some biographic landmarks

The beginnings and his formation

An important personality of the Swedish culture and part of what one could consider a cultural dynasty (Redaction 1962:674), Dag Hammarskjöld was also a person with a rich cultural background. He studied law, economy and philosophy in Sweden and later on in Amsterdam (Renton 2012:21) and he was not only a professor in Stockholm but also worked in the economic system and in diplomacy. During his life, he published literature (Hammarskjöld 2000), philosophical meditations (ed. Toren 2011) and works on economy and he had a rich activity as the Secretary of the United Nations. His contributions in the political field are linked with the end of international crises such as those of Suez, Niger and Congo (Redaction 2003; eds. Stahn & Melber 2014). Sometime towards the end of the crisis of Congo, he lost his life in a terrible air-crash that took place in Ndola (Zambia).

Born on 29 July 1905 in Jonköping, he was the son of Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, the Prime Minister of Sweden from 1914 until 1917, and the one who was close to king Gustaf V. A Christian with moral roots (eds. Cordier & Footes 1977:195; Lyonn 2006–2007:81). He *was* also a notorious personality of his times (in the Swedish Academy, he was followed by Dag). The maternal models were also important. He was the nephew of Carl Jonas Love Almquist (1793–1866) (Jordan & Lenz 2002:80), one of the most important Romantic poets of the 19th century (Redaction 1962:674), and the son of Agnes Almquist Hammarskjöld, known for her religiosity and concern for the theological area, which brought her closer to Lars Olof Jonathan Soderblom, the Lutheran bishop of Uppsala (Lash 1961:24; Lyonn 2006–2007:81).

His studies also helped young Dag to get closer to spirituality and to know God in an ecumenical context. He approached law and economy in Uppsala and Stockholm (Lyonn 2006–2007:131). He also graduated from the faculty of history of arts in 1928 and he earned a BA degree in philosophy (Hanley & Melber 2011:9). Later on, on 04 November 1934, he received his PhD in economic sciences from Amsterdam University, his thesis being entitled: *The Spread of Boom and Depression* (Renton 2012:21). In the same year, he was awarded a PhD by Stockholm University (Morariu 2016:48; Renton 2012:21), where he would become a professor of political economy (Renton 2012:21). Along with his academic activity,

he also improved his knowledge in classical languages such as Latin and Ancient Greek, which explains his passion for the patristic works (Renton 2012:21). As a professor, Dag also started to work in diplomacy. In 1936, he was appointed permanent undersecretary of the Swedish National Bank and in 1941, he became its governor (until 1948) (Hanley & Melber 2011:9; Morariu 2016:51). At the same time, in 1945, he became counsellor for financial and economic problems within the Swedish government and, in 1947, he became undersecretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, in charge of the same aspects. Likewise, he took part in several conferences and in the implementation of the Marshall plan (Hanley & Melber 2011:9; Morariu 2016:51).

Between mystics and diplomacy

Without being a member of a political party, he had a fast ascension in the Swedish governmental structures, in 1951, becoming part of the Ministry of External Affairs and from 1951, a minister without portfolio (Hanley & Melber 2011:9; Morariu 2016:51). This determined him to give up his banking activity and to take part in different international events (such as the one between 1951 and 1952, when he took part in the 6th UN Assembly as vice-president of the Swedish delegation, and that between 1953 and 1954, as president of the 7th session of the UN General Assembly) (Hanley & Melber 2011:10). This led towards him becoming the Secretary General of the UN in 1954, where he found solutions to crises such as those of Lebanon, Suez and Congo. What granted him notoriety in the public space was an action from 1955, when he would manage to obtain from Peking the release of some soldiers who had become prisoners of war (eds. Cordier & Footes 1977:415–424) and his conflicts with important leaders like Khrushchev. As a politician, he always tried to differentiate between the private and the public person (Boudreau 1991:144; McClendon 2002:30), a fact that sometimes created him strong interior struggles. Still, when needed, he clearly expressed his beliefs. One of the analysers of his biography shows, regarding this aspect that (McClendon 2002):

In the first year of his U. N. Career, 1953, he was asked to contribute one of a series of radio talks arranged by Edward R. Murrow, and subsequently published under the title *This I Believe*. In seven brief paragraphs, as today's reader can see, Hammarskjöld touched almost every theme which was central to his spiritual life. (p. 30)

He remained in this function until his death on 18 September 1961, when the air crash at Ndola put an end to his life, shortly after he had had an important contribution to the end of the Congo crisis, his death occurring under suspicious conditions gave rise to important questions even today.

Besides this activity, he also published various fictional books in which his mystical appetite is visible (Hammarskjöld 1954, 2000). Although in many situations, theological elements are introduced in a rather hidden manner, they are, however, present there. Sometimes, his discourse contains references to his religious beliefs and to various biblical passages.

Nonetheless, religious beliefs are mostly part of his private life, which is why they were only discovered shortly after his death. As a diplomat, he was a calm and serious person, defined often as in love with his profession, an aspect that also influenced his matrimonial status too.

Markings

After seeing the main aspects that define the life and activity of the Swedish diplomat, we will try to present his spiritual autobiography, *Markings* (Erling 2010; Hammarskjöld 1972), because of which he is considered amongst the 'great mystics of the 20th century' (Beyschlag 2003:509–512), whilst important voices from different Christian backgrounds often make reference to his ideas (Possenti 2013:12) and the *Lutheran book of worship* considers him relevant enough to be included in the commemoration calendar (Redaction 1978:11). The book which transformed him into such a famous personality is the one where he describes his fight with himself,¹ namely *Markings*. Published posthumously, the book was found between other documents by his secretary and it describes his fight with himself (Stolpe 1966:56), containing his spiritual notes from 1925 until 1961. Segmented into three parts, the first one contains his notes between 1925 and 1930, the second his notes from 1941 until 1950 and the third one, his notes from 1950 until his death. It is still unknown why the notes between 1930 and 1941 are lacking. Most probably, the author decided to write them in another notebook which has been lost in the meantime.

The style of the three parts is different and the content is also presented in a patchy way. The author alternates both moments and styles. Therefore, along with beautiful descriptions, there are also haiku poems, short meditations or summaries to quotations from various authors or presentations of different events. Sometimes, the author decides to write in a very personal way, whilst, in other situations, he simply uses images or a very impersonal style (Urquhart 1972:89). Amongst the most important topics he approaches, there can be found virtues such as humility, love or perseverance, together with negative aspects like depressions or suicide. Sometimes, he also remembers important aspects of his life, such as his activity in the ecumenical field or he even uses his position to encourage churches towards ecumenism.²

Spiritual autobiographies as sources of the ecumenism: Dag Hammarskjöld's case

Without presenting a topic directly related to ecumenism, but rather acting in its favour by bringing into his work the

1. In the note addressed to Leif Belfrage, the Swedish Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, found after his death together with the manuscript, Dag Hammarskjöld said the following about this aspect: 'If you find them worth publishing, you have my permission to do so – as a sort of "White Book" concerning my negotiations with myself – and with God' (Nylund 2014:73).

2. Therefore, as Bernhard Erling shows: 'DH spent much of 1954 completing his reorganisation of the UN Secretariat. During the summer (August 20), he addressed the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois, recalling his own early acquaintance with the ecumenical movement during his student days. He challenged the churches to fight for an ever-wider recognition of their own ideals of justice and truth and to help people see the strength that follows from the courage to meet others with trust' (Cordier & Foote 1978:351–356; Erling 2010:105).

Gospel's principles and by expressing his admiration for relevant authors from other Christian backgrounds and by presenting his inner feelings related to different experiences from his daily life, Dag Hammarskjöld succeeds in becoming 'a mystic of faith' (Vesa 2014:5) and a promoter of genuine values.³

Between literature and theology – Dag Hammarskjöld's sources of ecumenical mysticism

In the very beginning of his notes, there is a beautiful poem that can be interpreted in different ways but, because of the fact that its central idea is that of sacrifice, it must be understood as an allusion to Christ's sacrifice (Erling 2010):

Smiling, open, incorruptible – / The body disciplined and free.
/ The man who became what he could be / And was what he
was – / Ever ready to gather everything / Into one single
sacrifice. (p. 2)

The same ambiguity that accompanies this poem and speaks about one single sacrifice in everything is given can also be found in future poems dedicated to topics such as death, which makes the reader think about altruism converted into love as the basis of his or her relationship with the other.⁴

Having Christ at the base of his thinking and using the Scripture as a fundamental source, Dag Hammarskjöld also accomplishes an indirect cultural ecumenism (Morariu 2016:71) by promoting ideas from other Christian spiritualities in his writings. Amongst the most important authors who influenced his way of thinking, some Catholic ones are truly representative, namely the Medieval Catholic Mystics (Nyklund 2014:75). In the foreword of one of the most recent annotated editions of his spiritual autobiography, Bernhard Erling counts how many times their ideas appear in the notes of the Swedish diplomat and insists on the way in which Dag Hammarskjöld saw them or used them in his context. He also shows how they motivate the investigated mystic in his approaches (Erling 2010):

The importance of the medieval mystics for DH has become apparent as the sources of DH's citations in *Waymarks* have been determined. It is now known that he cites Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) at least nine times (see 51:1) and Thomas à Kempis (1380–1470) (Erling 1987:341–357) seven times (see 53:8). While these men spent their lives in the service of the church, one of them living in a cloister, DH wrote, 'The way to sanctification in our time necessarily passes through the world of action' (55:65). How he understood this essential interrelation between faith and action is spelled out in *Waymarks*. At a time when the urgent need to bring together into fruitful interrelationship

3. Even in the United Nations, he tried to bring some important aspects of spirituality. In the forward of his annotated spiritual autobiography, Bernhard Erling will show the following related to this aspect: 'He also planned and supervised in every detail the creation of the United Nations Meditation Room and wrote the text that is given to those who visit the room' (Erling 2010:XI).

4. 'He shall thrust his rapier into a man fully awake. / But how painful is not the memory/ Of each hour I frittered away' (Erling 2010:3).

personal faith and the common life in an increasingly pluralistic world is becoming ever more clearly recognized, DH's journal merits careful study. This reader's guide has been written to help those who would engage in such a study. (p. XIII)

Using Catholic sources in defining his thinking or arguing something related with his religious feelings is, for a Lutheran, a first step to Ecumenism. Indeed, they are part of a common heritage, but of one neglected in many situations by the Reformed space, that him, like other mystics, will start to rediscover. This aspect will also constitute an important element in the creation of bridges between spiritualities, but also between theology and culture, where, because of the influence of philosophy, those authors were very known.

Very attached to his family (he remained with his father until his death) (Morariu 2015:188), he lived, with small intermittencies, in Stockholm and worked in diplomacy and at university until 1954. There, he had time not only to read the aforementioned sources but also to meditate on them. Having a contemplative nature, his entire life being proof of this (Lipsy 2013:7), he often directed his thinking towards the deeper understanding of the self. Sometimes, the results of his efforts were remarkable. Such an example can be considered from the following note (Erling 2010):

The more faithfully you listen to the inner voice, the better you will be able to hear what is sounding around you. And only the one who hears can speak. Is this the way that leads to the union of the two dreams: in clarity to be able to mirror life – in purity to be able to mold lives? (p. 10)

It is no doubt that, primarily, he intended to speak about himself and about his attitude. However, when one reads Saint Silouane the Athonite's notes on humility and deep inner evaluation (Athonite 1994:49), one will surely be amazed by the similarity between the Orthodox and the Lutheran mystics' approaches. Either that it has as its subject an introvert personality or not, the silence constitute, according to the aforementioned Russian personality a way of talking with God. Talking in silence, because he speaks to the silent heart. In the Eastern Theology, it constituted the base of the Hesychast spirituality, that was put into practice especially in the monastic space. Without developing a deep theology of the problem, Dag Hammarskjöld uses the same principles in developing his inner relationship with God. A comparative analysis is not possible there because of the dimensions of such a research but it would surely be interesting and useful and would contribute to understanding both why Silouane was considered a Saint without border and the Swedish diplomat, a Lutheran mystic of the 20th century.

Descending within the self, he met the silence which, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta (2010) said, stays at the base of the encounter with God (p. 22). This encounter brings to that person knowledge on how to accomplish God's will and, at the same time, it brings the possibility to better understand one's neighbour, as God speaks to one through the neighbour's voice. This could also be a useful element

for the ecumenical environment and it clearly contributed to his appointment as representative of ecumenism. Hammarskjöld was aware of the fact that the more you descend within yourself, the better you can understand the others, irrespective of culture, nationality or language. When someone descends inside his or her inner world, he or she discovers the unity with the other and that he or she has the same struggles as his or her neighbour, that we all have the same nature.

The orientation towards the inner world and the desire to discover God within oneself and to prepare the self to host God can sometimes make the one who has such endeavours be afraid or even have doubts about the end. Dag Hammarskjöld also had these feelings and he often expressed them. A poem from the beginning of *Waymarks* can definitely be considered as representative of his thinking (Erling 2010):

I am being driven farther / Into an unknown land. / The ground becomes harder, / The air more sharply cold. / Moved by the wind / From my unknown goal / The strings quiver / In expectation. / Still questioning, / Shall I arrive, / Where life rings out / One clear simple note / In the silence. (p. 1)

Bernhard Erling's commentary on this passage⁵ does not satisfy us neither in terms of his approach nor with respect to the parallels the author makes with other passages. Indeed, it is possible that the author used the image of the mountain and his passion for hiking as a pretext for his notes, but the message is much deeper than it seems to be. The image of the man who does not know the end of his journey, is tormented by questions and has no certitude about the end, but never loses hope, is clearly related to his mystical experience. The tension between the desire of meeting God and the lack of certitude that humans will be able to accomplish all the requested tasks for that, it is illustrated there in a very interesting way. Nylund and other exegetics of Hammarskjöld's work (Nylund 2014:73) show that, many times, different authors who investigated his work either neglected its religious meaning or tried to prove that he intended to say something that has nothing to do with religiosity. The same author also investigates a few of the ambiguous passages of *Markings* (Nylund 2014:73–75) and proves their deep mystical meaning. We believe that the same can be said and shown about this passage too, where, like in other situations, ambiguity leaves the impression of a complicated relation with divinity, expressed through literary elements such as the haiku poems.

Prayer and ecumenism – Dag Hammarskjöld's approach

Prayer was another element that defined Dag Hammarskjöld's life. He did not only pray but he also spoke with God and

5. He says there the following: 'DH enjoyed hiking in the mountains of Lapland and he compares life as he is experiencing it to climbing a mountain. As one climbs higher one walks on rock, the air becomes colder, and there may be a wind. He shifts to musical imagery to describe his expectations. Life's goal is defined in terms of clarity, simplicity, silence, all positive terms for DH. For other waymarks containing mountain climbing imagery, see 25–30:5, 25–30:7, 56:5, 56:62, 57:45, 59:114, 61:12. Remarkably the final entry in *Waymarks*, 61:19, also contains this imagery. In 51:47, the imagery of depth is used to refer to the unknown toward which DH feels himself both drawn and driven' (Erling 2010:2).

tried to understand God's will and to fulfil it. Sometimes, he was also tempted, but he always managed to see God's love beyond temptation and to resist. One of these temptations determined him to meditate on the 'Lord's prayer' in a serious way. Using a beautiful wording that evokes the chiasmic structure of the Psalms, he begins his thought with the formula 'lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil' and shows, through a rhetoric question, that in order for God to release humans from evil, the latter must say 'yes':

Lead us not into temptation, / But deliver us from evil; / Let everything in me serve You, / And thus free me from fear. / You dare your yes – and experience a meaning. / You repeat your yes – and everything receives a meaning. / When everything has meaning, how can you live anything / other than a yes? (Erling 2010:150; Morariu 2016:100)

Serving God means being released from the domination of sin and it is not only the purpose of a unique mystic such as Hammarskjöld's but also the aim of any Christian tradition and, definitely, the ecumenical purpose. Teresa of Avila also insists on this aspect, which she sees as a consequence of the work of grace and which also helps become humbler (Teresa of Avila 1995:108–109). Like Dag Hammarskjöld, she also speaks about the fact that serving God is a difficult task and it is often related with pain and suffering. But this suffering becomes for mystics, because of the work of grace, something easy to bear and brings also to the closeness with the Lord (Teresa of Avila 1994:119).

Love – Basis for life, mystics and ecumenism

An essential element of Dag Hammarskjöld's accomplishment is honesty, the direct and unmasked interaction with the other, based on trust and love. Being a direct person, although he worked in diplomacy, the Swedish Lutheran author did not resort to aesthetic sympathy, which sometimes placed him in situations of conflict with leaders such as the Russian Khrushchev (Urquhart 1972:89). Nonetheless, this did not make him change his attitude. Moreover, after a meeting with a leader with such qualities, which took place in 1957, he wrote in his diary:

How selfishly aesthetic our 'sympathy' as a rule is, we see in those moments when we momentarily can make the basis for another's – always threatened – vital confidence our own, that is, when we can make that which for him makes it possible 'to continue' the condition for our own self-preserving self-esteem.

In this – as in other things – realism is the opposite of profanation. The truth we must endure is reality without the reconciliation of time. (Erling 2010:192; cf. Morariu 2016:132)

In diplomatic relationships, an 'aesthetic' sympathy can be useful in the preservation of some appearances, but it is surely inefficient. The same can be said about its presence in ecumenical dialogue. Therefore, if the ecumenical dialogue has something to learn from Hammarskjöld's mark, it is that, although, in the beginning, a direct and honest attitude can look unfriendly, it is much more productive than a fake smile or a dishonest attitude which pretends to be open to dialogue.

Although he comes from a society often known for its respect for etiquette, DH will be a man who will always know how to pass over it and to establish deep, natural and honest relationships with others, fact proved by the way how he was perceived and by the memorials left by him and by the ones who have known him. Love, the engine that puts into work the Holy Trinity was a guiding virtue for him too and transformed him into an example for the ecumenical area.

Conclusion

There are clearly many other things to say about Dag Hammarskjöld and his spiritual autobiography as a source for the understanding of his ecumenism, just as there are many things to be said about aspects of political theology (Morariu 2018a:1–5) or about other elements from his notes. However, because of the space limitations of such a research and because of the fact that we consider that we have managed to touch upon the main issues related to the topic under discussion, we shall not expand on it any further. As it could be seen, Dag Hammarskjöld's spiritual autobiography, like others, can be considered an important source for the understanding of the life and interior transformation of its author. In our case, it is also a useful source for the understanding of ecumenism in the eyes of an important Lutheran mystic (Beyschlag 2003:509) who could be considered a 'Saint without borders'.

Although he does not activate constantly in the ecumenical field or in the World Council of Churches and he rarely used the term 'ecumenism', by living according to the principles of the Gospel, he was a real ecumenist. For him, ecumenism has a practical, a cultural and a mystical dimension. The practical one is related to the way in which he sees the others and the relationship with them in relation to God. The cultural one consists in promoting sources from other spiritual backgrounds and in speaking about the elements with the universal value that they contain. Dag Hammarskjöld acts as such when he resorts to ideas belonging to Meister Eckhart, Saint John of the Cross or Teresa of Avilla. He succeeds not only in creating bridges with other spiritualities (as he also did with philosophy, by using quotations from authors such as Martin Buber) (Buber 1937; Erling 2010:56) but also in showing the way in which the common heritage has been kept in different traditions. The mystical one is related to his intrinsic experiences and to the way in which this made him see the others and love them or help them in different situations. The deeper is the relationship with God, the more one is able to understand others (a fact which is also underlined by other authors such as Teresa of Avila or Silouane the Athonite). All these aspects make Dag Hammarskjöld a 'mystic of faith' (Vesa 2014:5) and transform his spiritual autobiography not only into a text addressed to those interested in the spirituality or in the history of the 20th century but also into a tool useful for the understanding of the ideas and actions of an important man who was the second world's personality to receive posthumously the Nobel prize for peace (Jordan & Lenz 2002:80) and one who, having a strong relationship with

God, was probably one of the most eligible personalities of his time who could offer to the world true answers and authentic solutions to its problems.

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I-M.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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