

Dag Hammarskjöld and Politics as Faith

Commemorating Those Who Died Near Ndola on 18 September 1961

Fifty-seven years ago, shortly after midnight on 18 September 1961, an aircraft crashed on its approach to Ndola airport in the British colony of Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. On board were sixteen people: the UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, the members of his mission, and the Swedish crew. They were (in alphabetical order):

- Serge Barrau (UN guard)
- Francis Eivers (UN guard)
- Vladimir Fabry (legal adviser)
- Per Hallonquist (pilot in command)
- Dag Hammarskjöld (UN Secretary-General)
- Stig Olof Hjelte (UN guard)
- Harold Julien (acting ONUC chief security officer)
- Alice Lalande (secretary)
- Lars Litton (pilot)
- Harald Noork (purser)
- Per Edvald Persson (UN guard)
- Bill Ranallo (bodyguard)
- Karl Erik Rosén (operator)
- Heinrich Wieschhoff (Africa specialist and advisor)
- Nils Göran Wilhelmsson (flight engineer)
- Nils-Erik Åhréus (pilot)

This presentation¹ seeks to summarize and recall some of the fundamental values and principles guiding the mission and Hammarskjöld's moral compass. It reminds us of the values, for which these people and so many others in the service of the United Nations have sacrificed their lives.

¹ Based on extracts from a chapter in Henning Melber, *Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations and the Decolonisation of Africa*. London: Hurst 2019 (forthcoming).

In his first end-of-year message as the United Nations Secretary-General, Hammarskjöld insisted that the private world within each individual must mark the beginning of any work for peace:

To build for man a world without fear, *we* must be without fear. To build a world of justice, *we* must be just. And how can we fight for liberty if we are not free in our own minds? How can we ask others to sacrifice if *we* are not ready to do so? Some might consider this to be just another expression of noble principles, too far from the harsh realities of political life ... I disagree.²

Hammarskjöld's loyalty to ideals having their origin in earlier times manifested itself in a variety of convictions and principles, which reached far beyond the day-to-day execution of office. His sense of duty was an integral part of a wider conviction he also subsumed under faith. As "priest of a secular church"³ he understood the United Nations, while necessarily outside of all confessions, as "an instrument of faith".⁴ Based on his conviction that success will never be a final one but "found rather in the stamina to continue the struggle, and in the preservation and strengthening of faith in the future of man"⁵, he stressed this core ethics of service numerous times during his early years in office. Here in an address at Berkeley in June 1955:

It has rightly been said that the United Nations is what the Member nations make it. But it may likewise be said that, within the limits set by government action and government cooperation, much depends on what the Secretariat makes it. That is our pride in the Secretariat, and that is the challenge we have to face.
[...]

The motto of one of the old ruling houses in Europe was: "I serve." This must be the guiding principle, and also the inspiration and the challenge, for all those who have to carry the responsibility of office for any community. Is it not natural that this motto should be felt with special faith, sincerity and loyalty by those

² 'From New Year's Message as Broadcast over United Nations Radio,' New York, 31 December 1953, in Andrew W. Cordier and Wilder Foote (eds), *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations. Vol. II: Dag Hammarskjöld 1953-1956*. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1972, p. 209.

³ Monica Bouman, *Dag Hammarskjöld, Citizen of the World*. Kampen: Ten Have Baarn 2005, p. 41.

⁴ 'Address Before Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches,' Evanston, Illinois, August 20, 1954, in Cordier and Foote, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

⁵ 'Address at Commencement Exercises of Amherst College,' Amherst, Massachusetts, June 13, 1954, in Cordier and Foote, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

who assist in the greatest venture in international cooperation on which mankind has ever embarked?⁶

Clearly influenced by his socialization, Hammarskjöld summarized the “Uppsala Tradition” as “a spiritual legacy beyond ... boundaries”⁷, which he characterized in the affirmative as one he obviously identified with when speaking on occasion of being awarded a honorary doctorate by the Upsala College in New Jersey in June 1956:

At their best the representatives of this legacy show the quiet self-assurance of people firmly rooted in their own world, but they are, at the same time and for that very reason, able to accept and develop a true world citizenship. At the best they are not afraid to like the man in their enemy and they know that such liking gives an insight which is a source of strength. They have learned patience in dealings with mightier powers. They know that their only hope is that justice will prevail and for that reason they like to speak for justice. However, they also know the dangers and temptations of somebody speaking for justice without humility. They have learned that they can stand strong only if faithful to their own ideals, and they have shown the courage to follow the guidance of those ideals to ends which sometimes, temporarily, have been very bitter. And finally, the spirit is one of peace...⁸

When addressing the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954, he explained that for him the Charter of the United Nations

...referred to something which could be understood as God’s will. By this he meant belief in the dignity and value of the individual and a shared desire to practise tolerance and live together in peace. For Hammarskjöld these propositions were analogous to the commandment to ‘love our neighbours as we love ourselves’. While the UN necessarily stood outside of all confessions, the organization was nevertheless an instrument of faith as its aims were

⁶ ‘Address at Special United Nations Convocation of the University of California,’ Berkeley, California, June 25, 1955, in Cordier and Foote, *op. cit.*, pp. 519 and 524.

⁷ ‘On the Uppsala Tradition – From Address after Receiving Honorary Degree at Upsala College,’ East Orange, N.J., June 4, 1956, in Cordier and Foote, vol. III: Dag Hammarskjöld 1956-1957. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1973, p. 164.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 164-5.

synonymous with God's will. Thus, despite their different functions, the UN and the churches stood side by side in the struggle to establish peace.⁹

His spiritual background did not prevent him from a vision, which shaped worldly norms and views as integral part of the global contract, which in his view was supposed to be governing the United Nations. He summed this up maybe best in the following words at a UN meeting in 1953 at the Royal Albert Hall in London: "The United Nations is faith and works – faith in the possibility of a world without fear and works to bring that faith closer to realization in the life of men."¹⁰ For him the shared values mattered. Serving the United Nations was in his eyes more than executing a job. Addressing the staff in April 1958 after his re-appointment for a second term, he stated:

We are not what we should be, we have not reached the full strength of our possible contribution, until we have managed to develop within ourselves, and in relations with others, the sense of belonging. We are no Vatican, we are no republic, we are not outside the world – we are very much in the world. But even within the world, there can be this kind of sense of belonging, this deeper sense of unity. I hope we are on the road to this sense.¹¹

His "visionary realism", i.e. his faith in human solidarity and reconciliation in times of 'planetary crisis'¹², translated faith into politics as much as politics for him were a matter of faith, understood as in the Preamble of the Charter, "to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained".

Hammar skjöld's engagement with others was guided by a deeply ingrained Swedish value system and identity in combination with a similar deeply ingrained religious spirituality. This, however, was not an ethnocentric limitation of cultural particularism.

⁹ KG Hammar, 'Dag Hammar skjöld and Markings,' in Sten Ask and Anna Mark-Jungkvist (eds), *The Adventure of Peace. Dag Hammar skjöld and the Future of the UN*. New York and Houndsmill: Palgrave MacMillan 2005, p. 113.

¹⁰ 'Address at a Public Meeting Organized by the United Nations Association at the Royal Albert Hall,' London, December 17, 1953, in Cordier and Foote, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹¹ 'Meeting at the Beginning of His Second Term,' New York, April 10, 1958, in Cordier and Foote, vol. IV: Dag Hammar skjöld 1958-1960. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1974, p. 68.

¹² Paul R. Nelson, 'Dag Hammar skjöld's spirituality and the quest for negotiated peace, reconciliation and meaning,' in Carsten Stahn and Henning Melber (eds), *Peace Diplomacy, Global Justice and International Agency: Rethinking Human Security and Ethics in the Spirit of Dag Hammar skjöld*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014, p. 106.

As a point of departure, it allowed him to expand the frontiers and the horizon with an open mind. It empowered him to engage with others without fear or defense mechanisms, purely in search of both, commonalities in the human species and the variety of cultural, religious or other differences. Being a regular student of the classics of spirituality, including *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis¹³ and the works of Meister Eckhart, but also intimate with the Buddhist tradition, Hammarskjöld was not confined to a certain theological or teleological mindset. He had an all-embracing approach towards humanity and human interaction in the spirit of mutual respect and the recognition of what in today's jargon would be termed 'otherness'. The ability to look outward from a firm inner world inspired Mats Svegfors to qualify Hammarskjöld as "the first modern Swede".¹⁴

In one of his rare extemporaneous speeches, prompted by a moving encounter during a cultural event performed in his honour, Hammarskjöld addressed the Indian Council of World Affairs by stressing the universality of the human dimensions: "With respect to the United Nations as a symbol of faith, it may ... be said that to every man it stands as a kind of 'yes' to the ability of man to form his own destiny, and form his own destiny so as to create a world where dignity of man can come fully into its own."¹⁵

Another permanent trait in Hammarskjöld's thinking, much related to the notion of solidarity, has been the universal challenge to humanity, which knows no geographical limitations or restrictions through state borders but touches everyone. As he stated in June 1954 at Amherst College:

We know that the struggle for the souls of men between freedom and tyranny, between idealism and materialism, does not recognize national frontiers. Though one or the other may be dominant in a society at any one time, such dominance is a passing phenomenon. For the struggle belongs to all humanity and it is going on all the time in all societies of man. Thus the divisions that we see today between the nations should not be considered as fixed, or eternal, or even as basically significant in the geographical sense.¹⁶

This remained his credo also years later:

¹³ A copy of this book was with him on board of the plane.

¹⁴ Mats Svegfors, *Dag Hammarskjöld. Den förste modern svensken*. Stockholm: Norstedts 2005.

¹⁵ 'The United Nations – Its Ideology and Activities. Address before the Indian Council of World Affairs,' New Delhi, India, February 3, 1956, in Cordier and Foote, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 660.

¹⁶ 'Address at Commencement Exercises of Amherst College,' Amherst, Massachusetts, June 13, 1954, in Cordier and Foote, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

The conflict between different approaches to the liberty of man and mind or between different views of human dignity and the right of the individual is continuous. The dividing line goes within ourselves, within our own peoples, and also within other nations. It does not coincide with any political or geographical boundaries. The ultimate fight is one between the human and the subhuman. We are on dangerous ground if we believe that any individual, any nation, or any ideology has a monopoly on rightness, liberty, and human dignity.¹⁷

He was cautious not to lose sight of such individual side to engagements with the outer world. Critical self-exploration and soul-searching was part of his approach to life: “The longest journey”, he started one of his poems in his notebook in 1950, “is the journey inwards”.¹⁸

Dag Hammarskjöld held a firm belief in the autonomy of the office of the Secretary-General and the Secretariat, which ought not to be degraded to a mere instrument and conference machinery serving the interests of the powerful states. Hammarskjöld was determined not to surrender the power of definition to individual Member States. Embedded in his ethics of the Swedish civil servant, he strongly advocated the autonomy of the staff serving at the United Nations, being loyal to the Charter and other normative frameworks, but not to the country of their origin. “International service requires of all of us first and foremost the courage to be ourselves”, he stated in the first of a series of pioneering speeches on the subject.¹⁹

He dismisses the question, whether such service “is possible without split loyalties in a divided world”, as unreal problem:

We embrace ideals and interests in their own right, not because they are those of our environment or of this or that group. Our relations to our fellow men do not determine our attitude to ideals, but are determined by our ideals. If our attitude is consistent, we shall be consistent in our loyalties. If our attitude is confused, then our loyalties will also be divided.²⁰

¹⁷ “The Walls of Distrust”. Address at Cambridge University, Cambridge, England, June 5, 1958, in Cordier and Foote, vol. IV, *op. cit.*, p. 91-2.

¹⁸ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*. New York: Ballantines 1983, p. 48.

¹⁹ “International Service” – Address at Johns Hopkins University Commencement Exercises, Baltimore, Maryland, June 14, 1955, in Cordier and Foote, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 503.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 504.

For him, the international civil servant “remains under the obligation that applies to all of us – to be faithful to truth as he understands it”.²¹ Faithfulness, faith, truth, loyalty and integrity are the keywords in his elaborations appealing to “the pursuit of happiness under the laws of conscience which alone can justify freedom”.²² Again he stresses the importance of the “inner dialogue” as the source of one’s values, with the results “evident as independence, courage, and fairness in dealing with others, evident in true international service”.²³

On 8 September 1961, Dag Hammarskjöld addressed the staff at the Secretariat in New York before departure to the Congo. It turned out to be the last time. His words then sound like a legacy:

What is at stake is a basic question of principle: Is the Secretariat to develop as an international secretariat, with the full independence contemplated in Article 100 of the Charter, or is it to be looked upon as an intergovernmental – not international – secretariat providing merely the necessary administrative services for a conference machinery? This is a basic question, and the answer to it affects not only the working of the Secretariat but the whole of the future of international relations. (...) There is only one answer to the human problem involved, and that is for all to maintain their professional pride, their sense of purpose, and their confidence in the higher destiny of the Organization itself, by keeping to the highest standards of personal integrity in their conduct as international civil servants and in the quality of the work that they turn out on behalf of the Organization. This is the way to defend what they believe in and to strengthen this Organization as an instrument of peace for which they wish to work. (...) It is false pride to register and to boast to the world about the importance of one’s work, but it is false humility, and finally just as destructive, not to recognize – and recognize with gratitude – that one’s work has a sense. Let us avoid the second fallacy as carefully as the first, and let us work in the conviction that our work *has* a meaning beyond the narrow individual one and *has* meant something for man.²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 506.

²³ *Ibid.*, 507.

²⁴ ‘Last Words to the Staff – from Remarks on Staff Day,’ New York, September 8, 1961, in Cordier and Foote, vol. V: Dag Hammarskjöld 1960-1961. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1975, pp. 563, 564 and 566.

In 1952, before knowing that he would become the world's highest international civil servant, he had entered into his notebook: "Never, 'for the sake of peace and quiet,' deny your own experience or convictions."²⁵ Four years later he ended a speech in celebration of the 180th anniversary of the Virginia Declaration of Rights with the words:

It is when we all play safe that we create a world of the utmost insecurity. It is when we all play safe that fatality will lead us to our doom It is 'in the dark shade of courage' alone, that the spell can be broken.²⁶

In a speech at the inauguration of the Dag Hammarskjöld Trail in Abisko in September 2004, the then Swedish archbishop KG Hammar shared an observation and thought, which I think applies to all those men and the woman who died with him in the service of a greater good. As Hammar suggested,

... it is important not to confuse the organisation, institution, apparatus, temporary tasks, the temporary creation that the idea had been embodied in, with the actual idea. Ideas cannot live without bodies. But it is crucial to see the difference between the outer apparatus, the outer temporariness, and the idea that the outer apparatus has been tasked with bearing. What I think helped him to deal with the awful criticism he received many times while at the UN was precisely that the UN as an organisation was not the main thing – the idea of serving justice, peace and humanity was.²⁷

Not only today on this occasion, but every day, we should gratefully remember the men and women serving such cause, and join them.

²⁵ Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

²⁶ 'Address at Celebration of the 180th Anniversary of the Virginia Declaration of Rights,' Williamsburg, Virginia, May 15, 1956, in Cordier and Foote, vol. III, *op. cit.*, 142. The quote is from Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, Canto XC.

²⁷ *The Way Chose You. Archbishop Emeritus KG Hammar's Meditations upon Dag Hammarskjöld's Markings 2018*. Edited by Hans Kristan Simensen. Göteborg: Kultursamverkan Svenska kyrkan 2018, p. 21f.