

BOOK REVIEWS



HAMMARSKJÖLD: A LIFE

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Reviewed by **James George**

AS ROGER LIPSEY's magnificent life of the most remarkable United Nations Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld, reveals, it has taken fifty years to begin to understand the inner dimensions of this great diplomat who, more than any other person, embodied the spirit of internationalism and gave voice to the world's crying need for peace in a world of warring nations.

Great men do not appear every day, and when they do it takes time to recognize their true greatness. It seems to me that this is because their greatness lies in their unseen relationship to that which is the Source of all life and of all meaning in our ordinary world, whether or not we dare to call that source God.

Sir Brian Urquhart (one of Hammarskjöld's principal assistants in the United Nations Secretariat) had already written what Lipsey himself describes as "the best biography we shall ever have" of Hammarskjöld before Lipsey set to work. Lipsey, however, had unparalleled access to private correspondence and the best translators from Swedish to help him to understand the subtleties of what Hammarskjöld described as his "negotiations with myself ... and with God" in his private notebook, posthumously published as *MARKINGS*. Even more important, I feel, is the fact that my friend Roger Lipsey has spent his own lifetime of experience and search in trying to live an awakened life in today's world. He is fascinated by Hammarskjöld's spiritual journey, which was formed by his selfless devotion to a service not just to the idea of peace but to "that something or someone" that Hammarskjöld felt as the Source of all that is. Lipsey admires the lonely courage of a man who had almost no companions on this journey but many others who were mainly interested in frustrating his attempts at practical compromises that would advance peace, if even in the most modest steps. Hammarskjöld wrote in *MARKINGS* a month before his death, "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action" and Lipsey recognizes Hammarskjöld as a man actually aware of living the frictions of daily life as a spiritual discipline. Only a fellow-spirit could have the intuitive understanding that Lipsey brings to the appreciation of Hammarskjöld's greatness. For Hammarskjöld was not only, I would say, the greatest Secretary General but a spiritual exemplar for our "global village" today.

With Endnotes and Bibliography, this is a 752-page study of Hammarskjöld's life that follows a man who was the youngest son of a Swedish Prime Minister and unexpectedly was thrust into what his predecessor described as the world's most impossible job. As Secretary General from 1953 until his plane crashed (or was shot down) in what was then Rhodesia in 1961, Hammarskjöld played a part, sometimes successful, sometimes not, in salvaging peace and justice from violence and hatred, in China, the Middle East, Suez, Tunisia, and the Congo. Lipsey gives us front row seats at all the great occasions when the world "let Dag do it" and not least in his famous confrontation with the head of the USSR, Khrushchev, demanding the Secretary General's resignation, which the General Assembly, after listening to Hammarskjöld, declined to give him. Lipsey gives us a vividly intimate look at all these dramatic events.

During the first four years of Hammarskjöld's tenure, I was assisting the Canadian Foreign Minister (later Prime Minister) "Mike" Pearson at the United Nations. We often met with Hammarskjöld, but I had to wait for Lipsey's book to read some of the private notes Hammarskjöld and his staff were exchanging during the night-long debates of the Suez crisis in 1956, while Hammarskjöld and Pearson were hastily inventing a UN Peacekeeping Force in response.

Of course I had little idea of Hammarskjöld's spiritual nature until *MARKINGS* was published after his tragic death. What I did know at that time, and appreciated, was Hammarskjöld's courage in insisting on creating within the Secretariat building what he called a Quiet Room, which he felt was needed

because “we all have within us a center of stillness surrounded by silence.” This was not a priority among his mostly very secular colleagues who would have found very different uses for the space.

For readers of *Parabola*, I think it will be of less interest to compare Urquhart’s biography with Lipsey’s more nuanced account of Hammarskjöld’s outer life than to concentrate here on what Lipsey reveals of the Secretary General’s inner struggles to serve his great calling selflessly. *MARKINGS* is a great resource for this, and we can resonate to his cry to

“Thou,
Whom I do not know
But whose I am.”

As all the great teachings affirm, only when I am fully present is it possible for a human being to be united with the Source of action and be the vehicle for the action of a higher force in our world. But how? What does it mean? Here are three responses from *MARKINGS* cited by Lipsey:

“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’.”

“Consciousness emptied of all content,
In restful harmony—
This happiness is here and now,
In the eternal cosmic moment,
A happiness in you—but not yours.”

“In that faith which is ‘God’s union with the soul,’
You are one in God,
And God wholly in you,
Just as, for you, He is wholly in all you meet,

With this faith, in prayer you descend into yourself to meet the Other.

In the obedience and light of this union,
See that all stand, like myself, alone
before God,

In that faith ... *everything* has meaning.”

HOW DID Hammarskjöld develop such deep experiential insights all by himself—

without a spiritual guide or community—“alone before God?” When *MARKINGS* was first published (1964), Lipsey tells us, it “revealed a person whom scarcely anyone had known as a religious seeker, taking his lead from Albert Schweitzer for ethics and from medieval Christian mystics for the conduct and direction of inner life. He proved to be Pascal-like in his critique of self and society, Montaigne-like in his questioning, Augustine-like in his need and willingness to chronicle his hard journey.” On his final flight to Africa, Hammarskjöld was translating Martin Buber’s *I AND THOU* into Swedish. At the United Nations Headquarters, I was aware that two of my friends, the Permanent Representatives of India (Dayal) and of Pakistan (Bokhari), were having long talks with the Secretary General about spiritual questions. However, I believe that all these various influences on Hammarskjöld were of less importance to him than his familial Christian background. He was always a practicing Christian; and all the other influences he explored only strengthened and deepened his understanding of his faith.

Lipsey has also told us more than anyone else about Hammarskjöld’s “monasticism,” and the reports circulated by friends of his predecessor suggesting he was “a fairy.” Hammarskjöld never married, but Lipsey’s objective research concludes that the question doesn’t

matter—he was a monastic. Also, with the help of Susan Williams’s latest findings, Lipsey says that the jury is still out on whether Hammarskjöld’s last flight crashed or was shot down, but it now looks more likely that those, both black and white, who wanted him dead, succeeded, and that their cover-up is at last unravelling.

Thanks in large measure to Hammarskjöld, the United Nations has not failed and there has been no nuclear World War III. We are still here to contemplate his outer and inner greatness. Even President Kennedy felt it, calling him “the greatest statesman of our century.” “If we are to prevail,” Hammarskjöld had once told an audience at the Museum of Modern Art, “we must be seers and explorers.” Lipsey continues: “Seers are not wholly of this world; they know another.... Explorers belong to this world; they like maps and terrain and challenges. Dag Hammarskjöld was both seer and explorer. Without ‘noise,’ as he used to say—without calling attention to it—he brought spirit into public life and learned through public life to care still more for the point of rest at the center of our being.”

Thanks to Lipsey, we now know much more about an important figure and also about his inner life in the midst of the United Nations “noise.” But how many more human beings, unknown to us, may now be serving as vehicles for the action of spirit in our world? That question gives me, and I trust you, grounds for hope.

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