

FAITH AS POLITICS – AND POLITICS AS FAITH: BEYERS NAUDÉ AND DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD

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As Christian church, the church must be an advocate for the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, the voiceless, the unjustly treated – notwithstanding whether they are white or black. – Beyers Naudé²

Hunger is my native place in the land of the passions. Hunger for fellowship, hunger for righteousness – for a fellowship founded on righteousness, and a righteousness attained in fellowship. – Dag Hammarskjöld³

What is faith, understood not as consoling belief, but as robust agent for the good in the face even of terrible difficulties? (Lipsev 2013:453)

Abstract

This essay explores commonalities in the faith and political spirituality of Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961) and Beyers Naudé (1915-2004) on occasion of the hundredth birthday of “Oom Bey”, as Beyers Naudé was called by those who knew him well. It presents the theology of Naudé and the spiritual dimensions of Hammarskjöld in the context of political engagement taking forms of empathy and commitment towards social justice and respect for otherness. Using their statements, it shows the parallels in their thinking, which understood faith as politics and, at the same time, politics as a matter of faith. Thereby, this essay suggests that, despite their different roles as pastor in South Africa and as Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) during the times of decolonization on the African continent respectively, both converged to a large extent in the values motivating their active roles played also in the political arena of their times.

Keywords: Beyers Naudé; Dag Hammarskjöld; faith; spirituality; politics; solidarity; apartheid; United Nations (UN).

Slutelwoorde: Beyers Naudé; Dag Hammarskjöld; geloof; spiritualiteit; politiek; solidariteit; apartheid; Verenigde Nasies (VN).

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2 From *Die profetiese roeping van die kerk in hierdie tyd*, deposited in the Beyers Naudé Archives, Stellenbosch. Quoted in English translation by Robert Vosloo (2010:8).

3 An entry from 1950 in the private notebook posthumously published (Hammarskjöld 1983:43).

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is a reflection triggered on occasion of the hundredth birthday of Beyers Naudé, commemorated in May 2015⁴ and the hundred and tenth birthday of Dag Hammarskjöld, commemorated in July 2015. It traces commonalities between the spiritual motives and values between the South African theologian and the Swedish Secretary General of the United Nations (UN). Both were firm believers in a humanity whose actions spoke as loud as their words.

They have never met, but engaging with their visions and convictions, it seems they could have been soul mates. The second Secretary General of the UN visited South Africa once, in January 1961, in an effort to find a solution to the impasse over the domestic policy of apartheid. He was not very successful (see Sellström 2011; Saunders 2011). Another planned visit had to be postponed over the crisis in the Congo. His death in September 1961, when his plane crashed upon approaching the Northern Rhodesian mining town of Ndola on his way to meet Moise Tshombé to seek a solution for the Katanga secession (Melber 2014), prevented him from returning to South Africa.

Maybe, at a later time, Hammarskjöld and Naudé might have met – in South Africa, in Uppsala or elsewhere, when ecumenical efforts were adding to the international political pressure on the Dutch Reformed Church (see Van der Merwe and Oelofse 2013). They also might have consciously recognized each other as a particular brand of human beings, who were both aware of their roots, their belongings, their identities (in the plural), and their cultural affinities to home (in the sense of *Heimat*) – a term including community, as much as tradition and landscape, anchored in the awareness of where one comes from and is rooted in. This awareness served both as a point of departure to allow engagement also with so-called others, while at the same time being aware of the similarities such “otherness” had to one’s own being. After all, the local and the global are by no means mutually exclusive or antagonistic. Being “at home” can have multiple dimensions and serves as an opportunity to engage with and in oneself and the world.

As this article shows by means of references to their views and convictions expressed, these were essential coordinates of ethical dimensions and meanings for both Naudé and Hammarskjöld. Their (self-)understanding, their morality, their beliefs and thoughts translated into practice as a faith applied. Most likely, if having had the opportunity of a personal encounter, they would have been able to realize with ease the many common values and a shared belief. The following seek to offer the evidence for such a hypothesis.

4 It was subsequently drafted to a public symposium, “Faith as politics”, held on 11 May 2015 in Uppsala, Sweden. The presentations at the symposium are published in Melber (2015).

2. THE “UPPSALA TRADITION”

Beyers Naudé has been no stranger to Uppsala. As he stated in an interview in 1995, “I was constantly visiting Uppsala and I also attended the World Council Conference there in 1968” (Sellström 1999:182). The mid-Swedish town has a long ecumenical tradition and is the home to several Nobel Peace Laureates: Bishop Nathan Söderblom (1930), Dag Hammarskjöld (posthumously 1961) and Alva Myrdal (1982). Hammarskjöld even made reference to the “Uppsala Tradition”, which he summarized as, “a spiritual legacy beyond [...] boundaries” (Hammarskjöld 1956c:164). Following his characterization of the disciples of the “Uppsala Tradition”, it becomes obvious that he indeed refers to an approach and mindset of a particular “species” beyond boundaries. His definition fully embraces people like Beyers Naudé. “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” (Hammarskjöld 1956c:164f).

Understood this way, the “Uppsala Tradition” is one of global human engagement. It is one represented at its best by Beyers Naudé, as much as by Dag Hammarskjöld. As the editors of a volume compiling 40 oral testimonies of those close to Beyers Naudé summarize in their introduction, he was, “a crosser of borders” with, “a pronounced ability to subvert the barriers of identity construed by culture, race and religion, coupled with the ability to adjust the context of his theological convictions accordingly” (Coetzee, Muller and Hansen 2015:x).

Oom Bey, as Beyers Naudé was called by those who knew him well, did so consciously and fully aware of being and feeling like a born and bred Afrikaner, a *boer van die platteland*, as much as Dag Hammarskjöld never denied his Swedish fabrics. As Secretary General, Hammarskjöld emphasized his role as international civil servant devoid of any national affiliations in terms of the execution of his office. But he always returned home, preferably seeking inner peace in the tranquility of the Northern Swedish mountain world in which he was regularly hiking. For both, Hammarskjöld and Naudé alike, it always mattered where they came from, while walking new paths as confidently as they felt in the familiarity of their origins.

3. UNIVERSAL FAITH

The perspectives and practices of the global citizen Hammarskjöld, as international civil servant, were inspired by similar religious motives to those of the servant of God's gospel, Beyers Naudé, as the posthumously discovered and published private notebook displayed.⁵ Being a regular student of the classics of spirituality, including *The imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis⁶ 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". As, "priest of a secular church" (Bouman 2005:41), he considered the UN as, "an instrument of faith" (Hammarskjöld 1954:352). When addressing the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Illinois, United States of America (USA) in 1954, he explained that for him the Charter of the United Nations, "[r]eferred 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 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" (Hammar 2005:113).

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" (Hammarskjöld 1956a: 660).

Hammarskjöld conceptualized and created a "Room of Quiet", opened in 1957 as a United Nations Mediation Room on the ground floor of the organization's headquarters. As he explained in a leaflet for visitors, it was designed as, "a place where the doors may be open to the infinite lands of thought and prayer", where according to its universal character, "none of the symbols to which we are accustomed in our meditation could be used". Instead, "simple things which speak to us all with the same language" were selected. A solid block of iron ore was the

5 See the intimate engagement with the notebook, which upon publication provoked massive controversies, by the Swedish Archbishop KG Hammar (2005).

6 A copy of this book was with him on board the plane, which crashed in the night of 17 to 18 September 1961 when approaching Ndola, killing Hammarskjöld and all 15 others on board.

central piece, understood by Hammarskjöld as, “a reminder of that cornerstone of endurance and faith on which all human endeavor must be based”.⁷

What Hammarskjöld noted in his, then to the outer world unknown, intimate notebook in the same year when he publicly contemplated about the “Uppsala Tradition”, could most likely also have been an entry in a notebook of Beyers Naudé, “Beyond obedience, its attention fixed on the goal – freedom from fear. Beyond fear – openness to life. And beyond that – love” (Hammarskjöld 1983:110). In similar fashion, *Oom Bey* is quoted, “You can never be fully human unless you’ve discovered the humanity in other human beings. Don’t close your eyes to the injustices of your own country by trying to solve the injustices of another country. That’s an evasion of Christian responsibility”.⁸ And again, Dag Hammarskjöld in 1956, “The ‘great’ commitment all too easily obscures the ‘little’ one. But without the humility and warmth which you have to develop in your relations to the few with whom you are personally involved, you will never be able to do anything for the many” (Hammarskjöld 1983:113).

According to Gisela Albrecht (2004:98), Beyers Naudé never considered his pilgrimage as a primarily political journey, but always as one determined by faith. He was guided by what he understood as obedience towards God. An obedience, which made him ultimately (and far too late, as he often said) realize what is right and what is wrong. This insight and its consequences forced him into confrontation with all that mattered to him until then; everything he was taught as holy since his birth; his church, the state, and especially his own Afrikaner people. Instead, his faith translated into loyalty to a wider humanity, over and above the ethnocentric loyalty to the group from which he originated and in whose values he was educated. But this confrontation also ended in his efforts towards reconciliation. Both confrontation and reconciliation were integral parts of the same faith (see Lombard 2015).

4. FAITH AS SOLIDARITY

Nelson (2014:106) engages with what he calls Hammarskjöld’s, “‘visionary realism’, i.e. his faith in human solidarity and reconciliation in times of ‘planetary crisis’”. He illustrates part of this belief in the dialogue the Secretary General had sought with the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber (see Marin 2010).⁹ This translates faith into politics as an active intervention into social affairs.

7 Dag Hammarskjöld, “A Room of Quiet – The United Nations Mediation Room”. Leaflet for visitors, 1957, quoted from Bouman (2005:199f).

8 Retrieved from, <http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/134585.Beyers_Naudé>. No further source is given.

9 During the fatal flight to Ndola, Hammarskjöld was busy with a translation of Buber’s, *I and thou*, into Swedish. Widely considered as a challenge bordering to a “mission impossible”, this

Hammarskjöld believed in the need to engage in the political sphere (and economic relations within and between countries) to address matters of social (in) justice. Serving as Secretary General during the time when the decolonization of African countries gained momentum, he advocated equality both locally and internationally (Melber 2012). Beyers Naudé was motivated by similar convictions since the early 1960s. His role in establishing the Christian Institute marked a shift towards political engagement, which understood the message of the gospel as one of interference in the political sphere where the politics of the day seemed to be in conflict with the humanity of the faith. It also included awareness that economic and social relations are inseparable from those of moral values and ethics.

Amongst those who were offered a forum by the Christian Institute and its Spro-cas programme, was the sociologist, Rick Turner, before his publications were, like himself, removed from the public sphere of apartheid South Africa through censorship and a banning order.¹⁰ In what had been maybe his most relevant collection of essays, Turner had observed, “unless we think in Utopian terms about South African society we will not really come to understand how it works today. We will take for granted its inequalities, power relationships and behavior patterns which need to be explained. Nor will we be able to evaluate the society adequately. We will not understand on how many different levels there are alternatives, and so the possibility of choice, and so the possibility of moral judgement” (Turner 1972:7).

Beyers Naudé, like Rick Turner and so many other less known South Africans, made choices and lived according to moral decisions. So did Dag Hammarskjöld, though in a different role and under different circumstances. Comparing their convictions, these seemingly different characters had much in common. Not least they seemed to share a similar notion of solidarity, guided by empathy in as much as social awareness. They were loyal to fundamental values in search of justice. Beyers Naudé once expressed it by means of the following words, “How do we affect reconciliation between people who hate each other? How do we handle it in a way that we can truly be reconciled, in a way that we can build together where previously we destroyed? We need to look together at what are the major causes of this conflict: poverty, unemployment, and the situation of marginalized people. What do we do to stand in solidarity with them?”¹¹

And when addressing the students at the University of Lund in Southern Sweden (close to the homestead in Backåkra, the isolated rural place he had

was indicative of the Secretary General’s cultural and philosophical engagements reaching far beyond his professional duties.

10 Rick Turner was assassinated in the presence of his young daughter on the evening of 8 January 1978 at his house in Durban.

11 Retrieved from, <<http://www.doonething.org/heroes/pages-n/naude-quotes.htm>>. No further source is given.

acquired to retire later on), Hammarskjöld stated, “The health and strength of a community depend on every citizen’s feeling of solidarity with the other citizens, and on his willingness, in the name of this solidarity, to shoulder his part of the burdens and responsibilities of the community. The same is of course true of humanity as a whole. And just that it cannot be argued that within a community an economic upper class holds its favored position by virtue of greater ability, as a quality which is, as it were, vested in the group by nature, so it is, of course, impossible to maintain this in regard to nations in their mutual relationships [...] We thus live in a world where, no more internationally than nationally, any distinct group can claim superiority in mental gifts and potentialities of development [...] Those democratic ideals which demand equal opportunities for all should be applied also to peoples and races [...] no nation or group of nations can base its future on a claim of supremacy (Hammarskjöld 1959:383, 384).

5. PERSONAL LIMITATIONS

Beyond a similar moral compass with coordinates that point into the same direction, both men seemed to share some other features, rooted in their personalities. It was said about Hammarskjöld that he at times lacked a sense of reality when it came to what is achievable, also by others, and occasionally erred in his assessment of other people he recruited for tasks mainly on the basis of his spontaneous confidence in them (see Urquhart 1972:549). As Fröhlich (2008:190) concludes, “much of his success was owing to his firm judgement based on his ethical convictions. The reverse of this was a certain tendency to overestimate the strength of his position and to mistake the political realities of a situation.”

Sture Linnér, one of Hammarskjöld’s closest staff members during the 1950s, shared this aspect of Hammarskjöld’s character in an interview as follows, “Hammarskjöld’s ethical capacity was both his strength and his weakness. Integrity, honesty and character were the basis for all his work. But at the same time he could not understand some procedures of power politics. He could not understand and would not believe that people should be dishonest on very sincere matters and he got indignant about lying. So in a way he was too trusting” (Fröhlich 2008:190f).

Similarly, Burnell (2013:314) alerts us with reference to the works of Ryan (1990) and Villa-Vicencio (1985) to the fact that Naudé was described as stubbornly independent and at times over-enthusiastic about ideas that were impractical. He was also said to have been a poor judge of human character due to his acceptance of people, and he would often be let down by them.

One of his weaknesses seems to have been, as Van der Riet (2013:51) with reference to Heaney (2004:263) observed, “the trust he sometimes foolishly placed in others”. This seems another striking analogy. It suggests that Naudé and Hammarskjöld had even more in common than their convictions; or rather, that the

related strong convictions also shaped other similar approaches to, and interactions with others.

It seems as if both, being on their respective “missions”, at times lacked the ability to make realistic judgments concerning the limitations and weaknesses of others – maybe even failing to assess their own limitations. Driven by their convictions, they occasionally tended to react under too much influence of their own coordinates, not aware enough that the coordinates of others did not necessarily have to be the same; even when it might have appeared so at first sight. There was at times an element of self-righteousness or missionary zeal, which is often shared by persons driven by visions they firmly believe in, while all too often marginalized. They end in isolation as a result of their relentless efforts to place a mirror in front of others, reminding them of their imperfection.

6. FAITH AS POLITICS OF HOPE

Putting Naudé and Hammarskjöld into a similar league, as these few comparisons have tried to suggest, seems to be a compliment for both. For them, faith was politics, and politics required faith – it at times even mounted into politics as faith. At the same time, such politics was always also politics of hope. Hope was a source of strength guiding their engagements, but it was always a hope which was not restricted to parts of humanity. It was an all-embracing hope, which considered the others and their living circumstances. As Russel Botman, former Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, stressed at Beyers Naudé’s funeral, “There is no real hope for the son of the farmer unless there is hope in the heart of the daughter of the farmworker.”¹²

Despite many setbacks, frustrations and at times maybe even moments of despair, Naudé and Hammarskjöld alike remained throughout their lives beacons of hope, nurtured by their faith into humanity as a source for continued engagement against all odds. As recorded in the transcript of extemporaneous remarks by Hammarskjöld at a United Nations Correspondents Association luncheon in his honour on 9 April 1958, he maintained, “a belief and the faith that the future will be all right because there will always be enough people to fight for such a decent future” (quoted in Falkman 2005:51). *Oom Bey* would have in the eyes of Hammarskjöld certainly be one among those.

But the hope and engagement also required a firm belief, guided by courage. “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” (Hammarskjöld 1956b:142).¹³

12 Tribute to Beyers Naudé. Unpublished paper delivered at the Memorial Service of Beyers Naudé. Stellenbosch, 18 September 2004, quoted by Van der Riet (2013:125).

13 The quote is from Ezra Pound, *The Cantos (Canto, XC)* (London: Faber, 1975).

Such courage also included the willingness to embark on the journey into the unknown, which, as an integral part, required the long journey within. Part of what the late Norwegian theologian and politician, Inge Lønning, qualified as, “the Reader’s Digest version” of Hammarskjöld’s legacy, holds true again for both proponents and can be listed:

- Common standards for judgment on how power is exercised could only be moral standards, resting on common human morality, expressed with unbearable accuracy in the sentence ‘We regard it as self evident that all men are created equal’ (The preamble to the United States’ Declaration of Independence, 1776).
- The principle of the equal dignity of all human beings is the indispensable presupposition for the idea of human rights, which has its complement in the recognition of human obligations, in condensed form expressed in the commandment of love.
- To be a durable guiding star for the world of politics the triangle of human dignity/human rights/human obligation needs to be strengthened by the recognition of mankind as a community of shared responsibility and shared guilt, expressed in the shortest possible formula in St. Paul’s statement, ‘For all have sinned and come short of the Glory of God’ (Romans 3:23).
- Morality, regardless of whether it is brought to awareness of the individual or not, has a religious dimension. Among models of ethical reflection a renewal of the ancient ethics of virtue would be the most promising alternative to take care of that dimension, which is indispensable as a bulwark against the pitfall of moralism. (Lønning 2010:35f.)

7. TOWARDS TRUE HUMANITY – THE COURAGE OF FAITH

Knowing where to come from and where to go to, was a similar source of inspiration for both Hammarskjöld and Naudé. It served as a point of departure and home base to embark on the journey into the unknown. Both were never in denial of their roots. Being an Afrikaner in “bone and marrow”, as *Oom Bey* was characterized by Nelson Mandela (Van Kessel 1997:5), Naudé, like Hammarskjöld as the international civil servant who never abandoned his Swedish impregnation,¹⁴ was rooted in an identity which gave him the security of engaging with (real or perceived) so-called otherness. This offered the coordinates to embark on

14 The blueprint for Hammarskjöld’s perspectives embedded in his socialisation was best summed up at the beginning of his time as Secretary General in his thoughts written for Edward R Murrow’s widely acknowledged radio programme, “This I believe”, in which he describes faith as, “a state of the mind and the soul” (Falkman 2005:58).

explorations beyond the narrow limitations of a group imprisonment. It allowed for an open-minded, curious search for the varieties in humanity – explorations all serving the similar purpose of belief in the better world; a world which is better because it offers a decent living for all, free of discrimination and prejudice, no matter where the people came from.

Maybe the most adequate and rewarding recognition of what *Oom Bey* and his life-long partner, Ilse (whose essential role and influence would actually deserve much more recognition than being merely mentioned in passing), stood and stands for, came from the late Madiba. “Standing in the tradition of great Afrikaners and Patriots like Bram Fischer, Betty du Toit and others, his life is a shining beacon to all South Africans – both Black and White. It demonstrates what it means to rise above race, to be a true South African. If someone asks me what kind of a person a New South African should be, I will say: Take a look at Beyers and his wife Ilse.”¹⁵

On 3 December 1960, less than a year before his untimely death, Dag Hammarskjöld entered in his notebook the only rhymed poem. It reads in an adjusted English translation as follows and might have been whole heartedly subscribed to also by Beyers Naudé.

“The way,
You shall follow it.
Success,
You shall forget it.
The cup,
You shall empty it.
The pain,
You shall conceal it.
The answer,
You shall learn it.
The end,
You shall endure it.”¹⁶

This should not be misunderstood as a capitulation in resignation. It should be seen as the expression of another form of determination to walk the path, in firm belief that this is the justified way. Hammarskjöld, according to Bouman (2014:83), “argued that scepticism towards progress in history could be overcome through spirituality and inspiration by faith”. As he stated in his speech to students at Stanford University, “Whatever doubts history may cast, I believe that the hope for a world of peace and order, inspired by respect for man, has never ceased to agitate the minds of men. I believe that it accounts for the great and noble human spirit

15 Speech by President Nelson Mandela at the celebration of Beyers Naudé’s 80th birthday in 1995. Retrieved from, <<http://robt.shepherd.tripod.com/beyers.html>>, quoted in Burnell (2013:319).

16 This is the translation offered by Erling (2011:259), which deviates from the one by WH Auden (Hammarskjöld 1983:177).

behind the ravaged exterior of a history whose self-inflicted wounds have become more and more atrocious” (Hammar skjöld 1955:512).

Beyers Naudé, like Dag Hammar skjöld and many more, stood for such ideals, beliefs and convictions – and lived accordingly. What Nelson (2014:118) attested to Hammar skjöld, has been equally true and applicable for Naudé. They both, in different roles, but complementing ways, “applied the courage of faith in order to overcome ideology and destructive chaos”. Their values have survived their worldly lifespan. What Erling Eidem, Archbishop of Sweden, observed at the funeral of Dag Hammar skjöld (as quoted in Urquhart 1972:597), holds true also for Beyers Naudé and all of us others, “death forces us to face the old and always so disturbing question of the meaning and fulfillment of our life on earth. The answer may be expressed in one word, serve – so measurelessly simple, yet so overwhelmingly filled with significance.”

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