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Dag Hammarskjöld's religiosity and norms entrepreneurship: A postsecular perspective

ABSTRACT: In 1953, the UN General Assembly elected a low-key and relatively unknown personality as the second Secretary General of the UN. Dag Hammarskjöld, nonetheless, turned out to be one of the most entrepreneurial and innovative SGs that the UN has ever had. He invented peacekeeping, radically reformed the administrative structure of the UN, and promoted a crucial multilateral diplomatic role for the UN Secretariat. Behind this innovative approach to the politics of the UN, there was a personality with a deep and complex religious discernment that emerged occasionally in public speeches, as well as in private writing. This paper interprets Hammarskjöld's norms entrepreneurship through the lens of postsecular theory and the concept of Habermasian institutional translation. It shows how -in contrast with merely secularist assumptions – Hammarskjöld's religiosity shaped and advanced international political processes consistently with the principles of the UN Charter.

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Introduction¹

In 1953, a relatively unknown diplomatic figure was elected Secretary General (SG) of the United Nations; only the second since the foundation of the organization. The world, perhaps even those responsible for Dag Hammarskjöld's appointment, were not fully aware that the new SG was a skilled diplomat, committed to the principles of international peace, justice, and multilateralism. What is interesting for the sake of the present analysis is that this commitment to the principles of the UN Charter was not informed by a morally thin, liberal humanitarianism; instead, Hammarskjöld was a person with a spiritual and religious sensibility that inspired his international normative agency.

This appears somewhat incongruous with the everyday business of politics and of international politics in institutions such as the UN embedded in the liberal secular context. How could someone like Hammarskjöld interpret the role of SG, harmonizing his religious and spiritual discernment with the provisos of neutrality and secularity inherent to this public international office?

I advance the hypothesis that Hammarskjöld's norms entrepreneurship as SG can be explained through a postsecular perspective. The paradigm of secularism would suggest that the only way to operate in a liberal context is that of restraining the religious self to the sphere of the private, adopting a neutralist, publicly "reasonable", stance in the public sphere. Nevertheless, Hammarskjöld was constantly motivated in his public activity of SG also by his religious sensibility. In fact, as we shall see, religious commitment was an influential factor in the interpretation of his office.

Hammarskjöld was capable of "translating" the semantics (Barbato 2010, 549) of his religious experience into the language of what he defined the "secular 'church' of

ideals and principles in international affairs of which the UN is expression.”

(Hammar skjöld 1953a, 7)

His activism, innovation, leadership in office, and his capacity to reform the Secretariat and the UN international role, (Lash 1962) are testimony of a will to contribute to the endeavor of a more just global order resulting from the “institutional translation” of religious principles into political directives, interpretative of the UN Charter principles.

This essay does not intend to contribute to the biographical account of Hammar skjöld, for this task has already been egregiously carried out by others, (Urquhart 1984, Lipsey 2013) nor does it aim to delve into the vast debate on religion and postsecularism in international relations.² Instead, by juxtaposing the concept of postsecularism with a selective analysis of Hammar skjöld’s activity and discourse as SG, I explore how postsecularism and the concept of institutional translation can be operationalized to understand the inherent tension between religious sensibility and political activity in Hammar skjöld’s normative agency at the UN. In this way, the case of SG Hammar skjöld further validates the postsecular thesis that religion can constructively engage with the liberal and secular(ist) assumptions of international society. (Barbato 2012, Barbato and Kratochwil 2009, Habermas 2006) It is perhaps not a coincidence that the role of leaders such as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi or Lech Wałęsa among others, can hardly be appreciated in their complexity by ignoring the religious orientation underlying their motivations.³

The analysis starts by touching upon postsecularity with a special focus upon the concept of institutional translation. Then it moves on to introduce the activity of Hammar skjöld as SG. These will be cursory overviews, instrumental to the

subsequent examination of Hammarskjöld's interpretation of his role of SG and his institutional translation of religious principles into political action reflecting the principles of the UN Charter.

A Habermasian Understanding of Postsecularism: Institutional Translation

As Mavelli and Petito observe postsecularism can be understood at least in two ways. Firstly, it can be an analytical category referring to the phenomenon of the "return of religion" in (international) politics. Secondly, postsecularism can be understood as "a form of radical theorizing and critique prompted by the idea that values such as democracy, freedom, equality, inclusion and justice may not necessarily be best pursued within an exclusively immanent secular framework." (2012, 931) To an extent, both interpretations are relevant for our analysis of Hammarskjöld's norms entrepreneurship, but the normative acceptance plays a more important role.

Among the most influential thinkers who have theorized postsecularism there is Jürgen Habermas. According to Habermas, secularization is a process very much alive in our age, especially in the form of a "differentiation of functional social system", whereby churches and religious groups "confined themselves to their competences in other areas of societies". Furthermore, secularization substantiates in the individualization of religious life, that is the experience of faith in the personal and subjective sphere, instead of casting its influence in the public sphere. (2008, 19) However, Habermas draws a line between secularism and postsecularism by observing that religion has not completely lost relevance in politics and society. In fact, our societies are not truly secular, as secularist theory claims; instead, they are postsecular because "In these societies, religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the

course of modernization is losing ground.” (2008, 21) Although Habermas’s analysis is mainly concerned with domestic politics, it is not an overstatement that the same applies, perhaps even more forcefully, to international politics, where the return of religion has been widely observed. (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003)

Habermas notes that a postsecular society has not abandoned secularism nor considers it overcome by times; rather, it is a society in which there is a “change of consciousness” on the place of religion and religious communities in society, both among its religious and non-religious citizens. (2008, 20)

How then should political institutions relate to a postsecular society? This question moves from a sociological analysis of religion to a prescriptive and, therefore, normative discussion. In a study of the role of religion in the public sphere, Habermas analyzes the idea of public reasoning in the liberal constitutional state, as developed by John Rawls in *Political Liberalism* (2005), and disagrees with him over what he deems an overly narrow definition of the role of religion in the public sphere. (Habermas 2006, 4-9)

In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls has asked “how is it possible - for those of faith as well as the non-religious (secular) to endorse a constitutional regime even where their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper under it and indeed may decline?” (2005, 459) His answer, according to Habermas’s interpretation, is that citizens not only have to accept the secular separation of church and state, but that public reasoning should rely on principles that would be accepted impartially by anyone, notwithstanding his/her religious or non-religious sensibility.

As Rawls says: “reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course

proper political reasons - and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines - are presented.” (2005, 462 Emph. Added) If we had to apply this approach to the role of the UN SG, and to Hammarskjöld relevant for our discussion, what we should expect is the articulation of a political discourse that is presented on the basis of “proper political reasons”. As we shall see below, however, Hammarskjöld referred to broader and also religious principles in explaining his normative agency as SG.

According to Habermas, Rawls’s conditions overburden citizens who commit to a faith with a requirement incompatible with a liberal principle of tolerance. As he says “the liberal state [...] cannot at the same time expect of *all* citizens that they also justify their political statements independently of their religious convictions or world views.” (2006, 8 Orig. Emph.)

Habermas, therefore, advances the idea of “institutional translation”: a process whereby religious language can be decoded into an institutional language understandable by all citizens, no matter their religious views. The process should lead to a formulation of political stances that allows religious citizens not “to split their identity into a public and private part the moment they participate in public discourses.” (2006, 10) In this way, institutional translation enables religious communities to accommodate their claims into the institutional system of the state without relegating their religiosity to the private sphere, as would normally happen in a secularist context.⁴

It shall be highlighted that institutional translation is a process that interests the public political sphere, which should take place in the pre-parliamentary phase of the political debate. Habermas states that once a citizen is in charge of a public office, he or she is acting within the framework of a secular liberal polity and, therefore, is

supposed to exercise its political authority with neutrality towards other world views.
(2006, 9)

As we shall see further below, the idea of an institutional translation of religious values into the normative framework of the UN Charter, reflects more thoroughly the kind of process that Hammarskjöld undertook as a person with a religious conscience actively engaged in the public political sphere of international politics. Instead of splitting his identity into a private religious self and a secular international civil servant, he translated religion in the institutional language of the UN.

Habermas's theorization of institutional translation as an approach to postsecular society has sparked an extensive debate beyond the scope of this discussion. Criticism has come from two main perspectives. One observes that his conceptualization is not persuasive in solving the tension between secular public institutions and religious citizenship: critics such as Fred Dallmayr (2012) imputes to Habermas a secular bias , which defeats the purpose of institutional translation as a remedy for the problem generated by postsecularism as a social phenomenon. They advocate the need for a radical re-thinking of secular institutions that goes beyond the current idea of secularism and of institutional translation as theorized by Habermas. (Mavelli and Petito 2012, 936)

Others, for example Mariano Barbato(2012) and Friederich Kratochwil, (2009) adopt a more sympathetic, though not uncritical, stance towards Habermas's view on postsecularism. Barbato for example uses postsecularism as a theory to discuss phenomena such as the Arab uprisings of 2012 or the fall of the USSR. (Barbato 2012, 1085) Furthermore, institutional translation has been used as analytical concept in the analysis of norms diffusion processes in Bettiza and Dionigi (Bettiza and

Dionigi 2015) who illustrate how successful norms diffusion from religious actor can depend on their institutional translation. More in general, postsecularism and institutional translation are concepts that have the potential to re-evaluate critically the impact of religion on international politics complementing or correcting those aspects that a secularist approach would otherwise neglect.

As Elizabeth Shakman Hurd says, we cannot fruitfully use the categories of religion and secularity as an ahistorical and apolitical dichotomy; instead, these have to be understood as contingent and historicized. (2008, 2011) José Casanova, from a more sociological perspective, has traced a process of “deprivatization” of religions and claimed that “we need to rethink the issue of the changing boundaries between differentiated spheres and the possible structural roles religion may have within those spheres as well as the role it may have in challenging the boundaries themselves.” (1994, 7) Postsecularism as an analytical framework questions the dichotomy between the religious and the political revealing a more entangled relationship between the religious sensibility of citizens and the institutions with which they interact.

On the basis of these considerations, can we revisit the role of major norms entrepreneurs characterized by distinct religious conscience, in a way that is aware of this aspect? I will propose an answer to this question by considering the case of Hammarskjöld, who epitomized an effective engagement between religious commitment and international political agency in a liberal and secular institution that is the UN. An explanation of his normative agency that fails to consider his religious sensibility would provide only a partial explanation of a more complex interaction between religion and politics.

Hammarskjöld: the SG as Norms Entrepreneur

Hammar skjöld was born in a family with a longstanding political and diplomatic tradition active in the life of the Church of Sweden (Urquhart 1984, 19-23, Lyon 2007, 114, Lipsey 2013, 16, 21, Fröhlich 2007, 52-60). According to his biographers, he found his faith especially through her mother as well as on the basis of his relationship with the local clergy. (Lipsey 2013, 25-28) In this respect, Lipsey highlights the role of Nathan Söderblom, (the archbishop head of the Swedish church and a family friend of the Hammar skjöld's) as a key figure in the spiritual and religious upbringing of the future SG. Söderblom, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, was a lively intellectual religious pastor with a fervent inclination for dialogue among the Christian churches and ecumenism at large, all traits that were transmitted to Hammar skjöld.⁵ (Lipsey 2013, 38-9)

At the age of thirty, after studies in economics and law, he was appointed Under-Secretary in the Swedish Ministry of Finance and, subsequently, he proceeded in his career as a civil servant in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Among other tasks he was also involved in the implementation of the Marshall Plan and the setting up of the Council of Europe. These experiences were important to subsequently qualify Hammar skjöld for his next position.

In 1953, at the age of 47, he was elected SG of the UN by the General Assembly (UNGA) upon the suggestion of the Security Council (UNSC). The election of Hammar skjöld to this office was far from being an obvious process. (Urquhart 1984, 9-16)

His predecessor, Trygve Lie, had resigned because of tensions between the Eastern and Western bloc regarding his stance on the Korean War. The UNSC had difficulties in finding candidates that could be accepted by acrimonious enemies with opposed

views on world politics. After a few months, the name of Hammarskjöld emerged, although not endorsed directly neither by the USA nor by the USSR. The choice was in part due to Hammarskjöld being perceived as a technocrat, with no strong political orientation, relevant professional experience, and from a country with a neutralist reputation. Indeed, his predecessor, also motivated by personal conflictive interests, expressed doubts over Hammarskjöld's aptness for the office and claimed that he would have been "just a clerk". (Urquhart 1984, 15, Lipsey 2013, 97)

The judgment of Hammarskjöld as a technocrat proved useful for his election to office, but turned out to be a miscalculation. Hammarskjöld did embrace a line of neutralism⁶ as his office demanded, but this did not entail an apolitical interpretation of his job, instead he became a groundbreaking figure in the implementation of the SG office mandate. (Traub 2007, 186) According to Robert Cox:

Dag Hammarskjöld entered the UN with the public image of an administrator who would keep the United Nations' house in order and avoid rash political initiatives –on both grounds probably contrasting with his predecessor in the minds of those who appointed him. Yet it was Hammarskjöld, responding to the opportunities thrown up by the world events following his appointment, who gave effective political content to the office of the Secretary-General. (1969, 209)

Rather than remaining a mere enactor of heteronomous bureaucratic procedures, Hammarskjöld was a normative agent as he autonomously interpreted, promoted, and implemented norms and principles that would have remained otherwise subject to the sole influence of external structural constraints, such as the bipolar system or the superpowers' interests of minimizing UN influence in international politics.⁷ His

agency, then, can be understood as “the ability to perform in a way that actually makes a difference” (Oestreich 2012, 12), in the sense that it is noticeable a significant mutation of the role of the Secretariat and its mandate as the outcome of his activity in office.

It is possible to identify three areas of norms entrepreneurship⁸ in Hammarskjöld’s activity at the UN. The first regards administration and concerns above all the re-organization of the secretariat and re-definition of the identity and role of the international civil servant.

The second area relates to diplomacy, a classical practice of international politics which Hammarskjöld understood as the embodiment of hope alternative to war.

Hammarskjöld made the UN Secretariat a central hub for multilateral diplomacy and inaugurated diplomatic strategies such as the “Peking Formula”, “quiet diplomacy”, and “preventive diplomacy”.

Thirdly, the newly appointed SG established new courses of action for the UN to intervene directly in crisis management and prevention such as peacekeeping, observer groups, and UN “presences”. As we shall see in the following section for each of these areas of action, the religious sensibility of Hammarskjöld constituted an important factor shaping his activity.

In the first year of his office, the new SG worked to develop and restructure the UN organizational framework, which was affected by its only recent establishment and which was under the attack of the superpowers. The USA had previously imposed a regime of control on the staff of the Secretariat as part of its McCarthyist policy, and therefore, undermined the independence and credibility of the UN staff. (Urquhart 1984, 61-65) On the other hand, the USSR was harshly critical of Hammarskjöld’s

predecessor for his stance on the Korean War and therefore, the Secretariat itself was discredited in the eyes of the Eastern bloc. (Urquhart 1984, 53-54) The new SG reconfigured relations with the superpowers recovering the Secretariat credibility. Subsequently, Hammarskjöld was responsible for streamlining the structure of his office, establishing Under-Secretaries to support his work and significantly centralizing the activity of the UN in the hands of the Secretariat. Among the major achievements of the administrative reform of the UN, there was the consolidation of the role and reputation of the international civil servant at the UN. Hammarskjöld founded the ethics of UN international civil service; he emphasized the idea of “serving” with integrity the collective interest of humanity in abidance with the directives of the UN Charter. (Fröhlich 2007, 164-174)

Within the context of this administrative reform, the new SG succeeded in establishing amicable relations with the permanent representatives of states at the UN and he, at least at this early stage, changed the attitude of the superpowers towards the organization. A telling example of this change is that the USA, at this point under the guide of Eisenhower, tasked the UN with overseeing the peaceful use of atomic energy. (Urquhart 1984, 84) Furthermore, relations with the USSR, although initially difficult, changed into a positive relation with Andrey Vyshinsky, the USSR foreign minister, which were subsequently conducive of a more positive attitude towards the UN. (Urquhart 1984, 53)

Hammarskjöld fully capitalized on the progressive centralization of his office and the diplomatic network that he put in place to then engage in more substantially political operations. Three main examples can serve the purpose of showing the diplomatic

innovations that were introduced by Hammarskjöld: the 1954 hostage crisis in China; the Suez Crisis of 1956; and the Lebanon Crisis of 1958.

In 1954, eleven US airmen were held in detention in China because of an alleged violation of Chinese airspace. The case sparked political reactions in the USA, who even threatened the use of force against the PRC. For the first time, the SG was tasked with negotiating a way out of the crisis. Eventually, this unprecedented role would come to be known as the “Peking Formula”. (Urquhart 1984, 105, Lash 1962, 548)

Hammarskjöld put all his credibility, and that of his office, at stake in this first mission in the PRC. As it will be highlighted below, for Hammarskjöld diplomacy was the practical enactment of a principle of hope, which should have been exercised as alternative to any form of bellicose activity. He, therefore, contacted directly Chou En-lai, and was received with his taskforce in Peking, where he established a personal relationship with the Chinese premier. Eventually, on the day of Hammarskjöld’s birthday, Chou En-lai sent a personal telegram to Hammarskjöld, congratulating him on his birthday and announcing a unilateral decision to release the American prisoners. (Urquhart 1984, 94-131, 126)

The diplomatic initiative was considered a personal success universally acknowledged, including by Eisenhower. (Jackson 1957, 433, Urquhart 1984, 127-128) The Peking experience established a precedent that entrusted the SG with an innovative role of independent and legitimate authority, mediating diplomatic relations for the purpose of crisis management. Hammarskjöld carved out this new role for the SG through an innovative interpretation of the mandate given by the UN Charter to the SG, especially under articles 7, 98 and 99. (Lash 1962, 548) His activity of interpreter of the Charter allowed him to gain a degree of autonomy in

diplomatic action that facilitated the diffusion of a new diplomatic practice.⁹ This was also possible because the mandate of the SG is among the vaguest in the definition of its duties in the Charter as Thomas Franck has observed the “Secretary-General invents himself” defining and re-defining the limits and possibilities of his international role. (Franck 1985, 117-133)

The events of the Middle East would have constituted another opportunity to advance the role of the UN as an actor promoting international peace through multilateral diplomacy. In 1955, the SG was tasked by the UNSC to undertake a fact-finding mission regarding the alleged violations of the truce agreements between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries that were under the surveillance of the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO). Hammarskjöld undertook the mission rather reluctantly because he was aware that success was highly unlikely in the volatile situation, but he was also conscious of the duty of the SG to act in anticipation of what seemed an impending conflict. The mission was relatively successful in establishing the SG as the only trusted channel between Jamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt and Ben-Gurion in Israel. Nevertheless, the Suez Crisis erupted in 1956 for reasons and causes that were beyond the SG’s control.

The role of the UN was crucial in facilitating a speedy agreement on a ceasefire, but what was also particularly innovative of the UN was the fact that in the aftermath of the joint Israeli, British, and French war against Nasser’s Egypt, the UN deployed a peacekeeping military force in the region: the UN Emergency Force (UNEF). The idea of a UN military force was originally proposed by Canada to end hostilities and monitor the truce, but Hammarskjöld drafted the guidelines of the mission and gave instructions on its deployment after the ceasefire.

According to Brian Urquhart (who was personally involved with Ralph Bunche in setting up the new peacekeeping operation), “this document both laid the foundations for an entirely new kind of international activity and set out principles and ideas that were to become the basis for future UN peacekeeping operations.” (Urquhart 1984, 180) Hammarskjöld boosted his already high reputation of tireless diplomat. The US President Eisenhower was quoted commenting Hammarskjöld’s role in the crisis as saying: “the man’s abilities have not only been proven, but a physical stamina that is almost remarkable, almost unique in the world, has also been demonstrated by a man who night after night has gone with one or two hours’ sleep, working all day and, I must say, working intelligently and devotedly.” (Urquhart 1984, 194)

Almost simultaneous to the Suez Crisis was the Hungarian Crisis, for which the SG activity was remarkably less effective and influential. The case of Hungary is indicative of how the agency of the SG was aware of his limits and the risk of venturing into operations that would have faced insurmountable opposition from the superpowers. (Jackson 1957, 438-440) It is also for this reason that his diplomatic action has been considered not only idealist in its adherence to the Charter, but also realist in the appreciation of the limits of its office. (Troy 2010) As Ian Johnston observes, the effectiveness of the SG in norm entrepreneurship is determined by political circumstances that can facilitate or obstruct the emergence of new normative trends. (Johnstone 2007)

In 1957, Hammarskjöld was re-elected with a unanimous vote by the UNGA. Very soon, the Middle East returned to be the focus of his diplomatic activity as SG. This time, the source of instability was the birth of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, which had repercussions on the stability of Lebanon.

The Christian factions of Lebanon were calling for international intervention (especially American) to contain the expansion of the pan-Arabist influence in Beirut. The political polarization between pan-Arabist and pro-Western factions caused the outbreak of a civil unrest, which Hammarskjöld feared might be a cause for a wider conflict. Hammarskjöld, therefore, engaged in intense diplomatic activity in the region to de-escalate the conflict, while sending to Lebanon a non-militarized observation mission (UNOGIL) to survey the alleged transfer of weapons from the UAR to pan-Arabist factions in Lebanon. He took advantage of his connections with Nasser, who assured the SG there would be no meddling into Lebanese affairs, but the situation escalated with the expansion of the crisis to Iraq, where a coup removed the pro-Western monarchy of King Faisal, producing a wave of instability in the region. Under the pressure of the Lebanese president, Camille Chamoun, the USA eventually intervened. Nevertheless, Eisenhower's move tried to avoid direct involvement in local matters and provocation of an escalation on the USSR side. The services of the UN, therefore, were crucial in managing a crisis that could have spiraled into a fully blown conflict. Eventually, a UNGA resolution was adopted, calling for the maintenance of the independence and integrity of all states in the Middle East. (Urquhart 1984, 261-292)

The crises of the prisoners in the PRC, Suez, and Lebanon, epitomize the innovations in diplomacy and UN practice introduced by Hammarskjöld's mandate. He interpreted the diplomatic role of the UN Secretary as that of filling the vacuums left by the Bipolar System, in order to avert the risk of turning these spaces into Cold War battlefields. As Urquhart observes his commitment to an idea of preventive diplomacy was due to the principle that preventive diplomacy was far more effective as strategy

than corrective action, which is always more problematic and expensive. (Urquhart 1984, 256)

The analyses of Hammarskjöld's diplomacy (Lash 1962, Cox 1969, Traub 2007) have highlighted his innovativeness and executive interpretation of his role, which rendered the Secretariat a hub for multilateral negotiations facilitated by strategies as the Peking Formula; quiet and preventive diplomacy; and the use of multinational armed forces for peacekeeping.

According to Joseph Lash, Hammarskjöld was convinced that the institutional role of the SG was influenced by the constitutional profile of the US president and he interpreted his mandate by attaching a strong executive value to the vague directives of the UN Charter concerning the role of the SG. (Lash 1962, 547) As Cox observes, Hammarskjöld was the first to attribute to the UN, and the Secretariat in particular, an "executive function" that became a reality with the implementation of the first UN peacekeeping missions in the Sinai and then the Congo. (1969, 213) In some cases, Hammarskjöld even acted on his own initiative, with no explicit mandate of the UNGA or UNSC, as in the Laos crisis of 1959. What is perhaps indicative of diplomatic ability is that Hammarskjöld's executive interpretation of the SG office, although it was criticized, was never fundamentally undermined by the member states until the Congo crisis erupted. (Lash 1962, 555-560)

The complexity of the Congo crisis prevents us from trying to give a superficial account herein. The withdrawal from the country of the Belgian authorities (as requested by a UNSC Resolution 143 of 1960) left the country prey to internal and foreign forces, determined to either maintain control or establish a new authority in the country. The Congo plunged into a civil war between internal factions, foreign

mercenary troops, and attempts of secession -especially in the area of Katanga - all of these influenced by the interests of the great powers and by multinational companies operating in the region. Within this context, Patrice Lumumba, the leader of the newly independent country, was assassinated. UN action in this situation was unprecedented for its use of military force (which Hammarskjöld tried to avoid as much as possible) in the attempt of preventing the break out of all-out war, but the UN was eventually drawn into the conflict. (Urquhart 1984, 570)

Hammarskjöld realized, since the beginning, that this would be the last crisis he would manage. He sensed the limits of his possibility to act effectively and he let his closest collaborators know that he would have resigned afterward. (Urquhart 1984, 565)¹⁰

When trying a last push to bring parties together for a solution of the imminent conflict, the SG flew to the Congo. He made desperate attempts to bring the diplomatic process back on track with a ceasefire. At one point, Hammarskjöld flew to Ndola (Zambia) to meet one of the parties involved in the conflict. His plane crashed, leaving no survivors. Susan Williams's study has advanced substantiated hypotheses that the SG had been deliberately killed. (Williams 2011)

In the briefcase of his last trip, Hammarskjöld had a pocket copy of the UN Charter, the New Testament, the Psalms, two books by Rainer Maria Rilke, and a book by Martin Buber that he was translating into Swedish. (Urquhart 1984, 587) Behind the international civil servant who innovated the UN, there was a man with a religious and spiritual life. Was the religious discernment of Hammarskjöld exclusively a matter of private life and introspective spirituality, or did it play a role in shaping and motivating his normative agency as the UNSG?

Reconciling the Religious Self with the Ethics of the International Civil Servant

Let us resume Rawls's question of "how is it possible - for those of faith as well as the non-religious (secular) - to endorse a constitutional regime even where their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper under it and indeed may decline?" (2005, 459) The question remains central because we could ask it with regard to Hammar skjöld.

As Urquhart puts it, "[Hammar skjöld] was a member of that small and lonely band who throughout history have engaged at the same time in trying to deal with the hard world of political and social reality and in searching endlessly for a spiritual meaning which transcends that world." (1984, 23-24) His religious ethics may not have been ideal to operate in a secular institutional context, nevertheless the previous section has shown that it did not constitute an impediment of acting vigorously as the head of the UN; in fact, it was an incentive. How so?

Much of the liberal reflection on the role of religion in liberal institutions sees secularism as the main answer to Rawls's question. It claims, that comprehensive religious doctrines shall give precedence to justifications underpinned by sole political public reason, thus producing a "split" (Habermas 2006, 10) between a private religious self and the public civil self. To this stance, postsecularism replies with a more hospitable stance to religious views also because it values their potential for criticism and social and political transformations. Habermas proposes the concept of institutional translation discussed above as a way of mediating between the religious and the political spheres, instead of predicating for a hermetic separation of the two.

Hammar skjöld's way of reconciling his religious identity with his role of SG has more to do with a postsecular approach than a merely secular interpretation of the

relation between religion and politics. A selective reading of texts by Hammarskjöld shows his religious commitment to a progressive conception of Christian faith and how this can be understood as a motivational factor for the normative innovations introduced by him with regard to the role of the UN civil servant, multilateral diplomacy, and peacekeeping.¹¹

The main reference on Hammarskjöld's religious reflections is his diary *Markings* (1964). *Markings* is a complex and hermetic text between poetry and prose which collects Hammarskjöld's most personal reflections and feelings before and during his office as SG. (Fröhlich 2007, 60-74, Lipsey 2011) Even though it constitutes the most important source to approach Hammarskjöld's spirituality, it does not constitute the ideal source for this analysis because, being a personal diary, its text was not meant to address the public and therefore does not provide examples of how Hammarskjöld related his religious sensibility to the public sphere.¹²

Instead, I shall focus on some of his public statements, especially those in which the connection between religion and the role of the SG are most evident. Since the beginning of his mandate as SG, Hammarskjöld endorsed neutrality as the foundation of his office, but this did not mean that he would have not let his personal views come across the diverse audiences he met. (Fröhlich 2007, 129-30 and 179-182)

Especially in the earlier stages of his career of SG, he publicly displayed his religiosity. The inaugural statement of his first mandate shows this clearly. He began by outlining the role of the UN as an organization primarily tasked with a "work of reconciliation and realist construction"¹³ and then concluded by reminding the audience of the celebration of the Christian Easter that had just taken place at that time. As he says:

May I remind you of the great memory just celebrated by the Christian world? May I do so because of what that memory tells us of the redeeming power of true dedication to peace and goodwill towards men? We are of different creeds and convictions. Events and ideas which to some of us remain the very basis of our faith are elements of the spiritual heritage of man which are foreign to others. But common to us all and above all other convictions stands the truth once expressed by a Swedish poet when he said that the greatest prayer of man does not ask for victory but for peace.

(Hammar skjöld 1953b, 698)

Hammar skjöld did not refrain from making obvious his religious sensibility in front of the UNGA. On this occasion, he refers to the Christian Easter as a memory that can be shared among different faiths as a reminder of the “redeeming power” of dedication to peace and goodwill towards men. In other words, he is giving an interpretation of the Christian tradition as a foundation for the action of peace and human goodwill. The vocabulary used in the statement, the reference to Easter, to creed, faith, spiritual heritage, and the act of praying, all belong to the language of a man of faith and are projected onto his institutional role of SG.

The role of religion in informing his action as SG became even more obvious when, in a 1953 radio program, he was asked to discuss his religious beliefs. The SG did not refrain from engaging in the task and released a dense note regarding his religious views. The text is revelatory of how Hammar skjöld interpreted his role of SG as part of his religious life and not as a departure from it. At one point, he declares that:

the explanation of how man should live the life of active social service in full harmony with himself as a member of the community of the spirit, I

found in the writings of those great medieval mystics for whom “self-surrender” had been the way to self-realization, and who in “singleness of mind” and “inwardness” had found strength to say yes and to say yes to every demand, which the need of their neighbors made them face, and to say yes also to every fate life had in store for them when they followed the call of duty¹⁴

Hammarskjöld declared how he interpreted his role of public civil servant as a call of duty to which he “surrendered” to serve the other. He did so following the teachings of medieval mystic literature.¹⁵ His role of SG, therefore, is in fulfilment of what he considered a duty justified by religious commitment. The declaration explains the kind of ethical background that motivated Hammarskjöld’s redevelopment of the international civil service, emphasizing the importance of moral integrity, the idea of “serving” the public interest, and doing so with a sense of full personal commitment.

This is stressed with force in a message that Hammarskjöld sent to the UN staff, and which further highlights how he interpreted the role of the civil servant, not as simply split between private and public, but as a projection of the most intimate convictions on public activity. As he said to his colleagues:

Our work for peace must begin within the private world of each one of us. 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 minds? How can we ask others to sacrifice if we are not ready to do so? ¹⁶

Hammarskjöld conceptualized the work of the UN staff not in abstraction from their inner moral commitment, but as an expression of it. It can be inferred from this that he

considered the idea of serving the principles of peace, freedom, and justice as the enactment of his faith.¹⁷

In further illustrating how Hammarskjöld's religious conscience influenced the interpretation of his office, it should be considered how he conceived the UN as an organization. On various occasions, Hammarskjöld defined the organization as a "church of ideals". In a speech given to the American Association for the United Nations, he articulated the concept as follows:

I conceive the Secretariat and the Secretary-General in their relations with the Governments as representatives of a secular "church" of ideals and principles in international affairs of which the United Nations is the expression. (Hammarskjöld 1953a, 7)

Urquhart reports that Hammarskjöld would often joke, defining the role of the SG as that of a "secular Pope". (Urquhart 1984, 51) This intuition of an analogy between church and UN was, in fact, more than a joke and was suggested by the Pope himself in a meeting with the SG, when Pius XII referred to Hammarskjöld as his "lay counterpart". (Lipsey 2013, 153)

The analogy between the church and the UN shows that Hammarskjöld saw the organization as founded on secular principles - hence the reference to the *secular* or *lay* institution - but these principles could be interpreted by Hammarskjöld as the expression of his faith or as an embodiment of his religious community, i.e. the church. The oxymoron of a "secular church" is indicative of an unsolved tension between Hammarskjöld's religious sensibility and the secular foundations of the UN, showing that he did not simply embrace an instrumental division between a private

religious conscience and a public secular institutional role. Instead, he made himself the interpreter of a religious commitment to the mission of the UN.

This aspect was dictated by his deep conviction that individuals, in order to be loyal to others, could not be driven by a circumstantial appreciation of principles and values. On the contrary, relations should be informed by principles. As Hammarskjöld said in a speech at Johns Hopkins University, “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.” (1955)

How, then, did Hammarskjöld keep his Christian ethics united with the values and principles of the UN if he did not share fully the secular proviso of a split between the inner religious self and the public institutional role? The rich literature on Hammarskjöld and his publications has reflected abundantly on that matter but one case has a special heuristic value when juxtaposed to the idea of institutional translation.

In the address before the Indian Council of World Affairs in 1956, Hammarskjöld gave a talk that epitomized his interpretation of religious ethics as the source of his UN activity and somehow enacted what can be interpreted as a process of institutional translation, whereby religious semantics were used as the interpretative framework of the UN Charter. This speech is peculiar because Hammarskjöld did not have time, as he acknowledged, to prepare it in advance; therefore, its form and content are particularly direct. He began by asking where the UN stood after twenty years from its foundation. In answering this question, he stated that he would speak “frankly, simply, and in very personal terms.” (Hammarskjöld 1956, 569)

This “informal” Hammarskjöld then discussed the matter on two grounds. Firstly, he described what he called the “UN ideology” (a term about which he was himself skeptical) and secondly, with regard to its practical action. What matters for our discussion is the reference to the interpretation of the UN principles that he proposed with a reference to Paul the Apostle:¹⁸ some of his ideas, according to Hammarskjöld, are universally accepted in all philosophies and religions. He continued:

I refer to the famous words of Saint Paul about the need for faith, hope, and charity, and I should like to try to define in those terms what I mean by United Nations ideology as I experience it in the Secretariat, in contact with representatives and, perhaps especially, in meeting the public wherever I go. I think that is proper to say that the man deeply concerned about peace, about world affairs, in simple human terms the United Nations stands as a symbol of faith. It is also an instrument for actions inspired by hope, and in many corners of the world, it stands as a framework for acts of charity.¹⁹

This discussion presents the UN foundations as the embodiment of three principles of Christianity. Hammarskjöld used the New Testament and Paul the Apostle in particular, as lenses through which he read and interpreted the foundations of the organization he governed. In the following parts of this speech, he further deepened his explanation of the UN Charter as reflecting faith, hope and charity. He clarified that he understood the UN as an “embodiment of the faith of man”, “a realistic faith that peace is possible, that peace is within reach, given the simplest of all things, good will - good will, of course, also to make the personal sacrifices which are necessary to reach understanding and to find the common denominator.” (Hammarskjöld 1956, 659)

The UN, then, is also “an instrument of action inspired by hope”. (Hammarskjöld 1956, 660) In this case, Hammarskjöld explained that the hope he referred to was the alternative to war. He claimed that the conception of war as the ultimate resort of diplomacy, (or perhaps “as politics by other means”, as in the trite Clausewitzian adagio) was not acceptable now that the UN represented an unprecedented structured context for the peaceful resolution of disputes.

We have seen in the previous section how relentless was the diplomatic activity into which Hammarskjöld engaged in his role of SG, establishing new diplomatic patterns, and eventually paying with his life in his attempt to reach out to the parties involved in the Congo conflict. Hammarskjöld’s conception of diplomacy as hope - an alternative to the ineptitude of war - established a solid connection between his religious credo and his professional practice.

Thirdly, the UN stood for Hammarskjöld as a framework for charity. Hammarskjöld explained that by this he meant support for genuine and cooperative development among nations and not an act of patronizing benevolence. The UN is, in this view, an instrument to iron out unjustified and unacceptable differences on social and economic levels in a cooperative sense. Hammarskjöld referred to the UN and its group of auxiliary institutions for development as the “framework for sharing”. (Hammarskjöld 1956, 662)

In addition to these considerations, one last instance of the connection between Hammarskjöld’s religion and his activity is the case of the UN Meditation Room. At the UN headquarters in New York there was, during Hammarskjöld’s time, a small space to host personal reflection and perhaps prayer, but Hammarskjöld’s sense and those of other members of staff must have been that this space was insufficient.

Hammar skjöld led the initiative to restructure this space and the Meditation Room eventually became a multifaith space “where the doors may be open for the infinite lands of thought and prayers.” (Hammar skjöld 1957) The room still stands as a tangible sign of how, in Hammar skjöld’s view, the UN should not be a place remote from religion but, instead, should be a place of peaceful convergence among faiths.

The cases aforementioned show how Hammar skjöld interpreted the role of SG of the organization not as a departure from his religious commitment, but as an interpretation of it. Hammar skjöld thought that the UN ideals could be read through the lens of religious commitment. (Lyon 2007)

The fact that Hammar skjöld established unprecedented diplomatic practices; introduced the executive use of UN forces on the ground; and formulated the idea of the civil servant who has a strong moral emphasis; can hardly be explained as commitment to a merely secular and liberal ideal of international peace and justice; instead it can be understood as a translation of religious morals into the principles of the UN.

Conclusions: International Normative Agency beyond the Religion-Politics

Divide?

Let us try to bring together the components of the above discussion. I have said that there is increased awareness in the International Relations debate that the dichotomy between the secular and the religious is somewhat misrepresentative of a reality in which religion and politics are more intertwined than secular theory can capture.

There are ways, postsecular theory claims, in which religious principle can substantiate in political action not necessarily undermining the foundations of a political order and in fact maybe even contributing to its development. This has

prompted reconsideration of the domestic and international political theory debate on the possibility of establishing the conditions for a more comprehensive approach to religions in politics. Habermas, from a normative perspective, has advanced the idea of institutional translation in this respect.

With this in mind, I have presented Hammarskjöld as an innovator of the role of the SG; a norm entrepreneur who, through diplomatic skills but also having “history on his side” on at least a few occasions, was capable of changing the UN and possibly steering international politics away from the most obvious causes of conflict. Indeed there was opportunity to highlight, selectively, how he created instruments such as the Peking Formula; how he arranged for the first UN peacekeeping and observatory operations; and how he was a pioneer of preventive, quiet diplomacy. These innovations required boldness. Hammarskjöld was not a neutral steward of the member states; instead, he acted as an autonomous actor, enacting the directives of the UN Charter with unprecedented originality. (Lash 1962, Cox 1969)

It is in this sense that we can consider his role as that of a normative agent. Contrarily to what would be a merely “structural explanation” (Wendt 1987, 340) of norms diffusion, this essay has highlighted the role of Hammarskjöld’s individual agency in shaping normative change at the international level.

Thirdly, I have illustrated that a factor explaining the norm entrepreneurship of Hammarskjöld is that, beyond the skilled international civil servant, there was a man of faith, with a deep, complex, and occasionally troubled²⁰ religious conscience. His official and unofficial political discourse opens a window on the religious sensibility that guided Hammarskjöld’s normative agency in the Secretariat. I have reported

about few of the most telling and relevant examples from his public discourses in this respect.

By bringing these aspects together, I have observed that agency, when also motivated by a religious commitment, does not necessarily entail a privatization of the religious self to serve secular institutions based on a thin liberal humanitarianism.

Hammar skjöld was an international political actor who predicated neutrality but did not advocate for a split between private commitment and public service. We have seen this with regard to how he addressed the UN staff when he said that it is not recommendable to separate one's personal belief and commitment from being a civil servant. As Lyon observes, "morality for Hammar skjöld goes beyond the public private distinction. It is best explained as a three-way exchange between one's own personal communion with God, God's influence on the mundane world (manifest in public service), and the personal divinity that one applies there as well." (2007, 117)

His experience of SG was an interpretation of his will to serve a cause that he considered the enactment of his religious commitment. His reference to the medieval mystics, or perhaps even more clearly, his interpretation of Paul the Apostle discussed above, were examples that can hardly fit a merely secularist interpretation of the role of SG.

Rawls's proviso that a comprehensive religious doctrine should be put aside to prioritize "proper political reasons" (2005, 462) does not seem to apply to Hammar skjöld who did not refrain from making direct reference to religion. Instead, Hammar skjöld epitomizes and anticipates the idea of postsecularism as a functional relationship between politics and religion, advancing the diffusion of key norms and practices of the UN Charter. In the previous pages, a few key instances have shown

how Hammarskjöld institutionally translated his religious faith in guiding principles for his normative action.

Hammarskjöld made of his religiosity a resource and a driving force of his international agency. He succeeded in this not by regressing into an exclusively intimate religious life, but in translating his credo into the UN ideal. The semantics of religion (Barbato 2010, 550) have been transferred by Hammarskjöld into the language of the UN Charter and its principles.

A secular perspective on international politics would be insufficient to account for the normative agency of Hammarskjöld, and perhaps similarly for other figures as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, or Lech Wałęsa for example.²¹ The case of Hammarskjöld shows that religion, as per the postsecular thesis, can be a source of criticism and a cause of transformation for international politics throughout a process of institutional translation.²²

We cannot fully understand the international normative agency of Hammarskjöld through the lens of a merely secularist theory; instead, the category of the postsecular sheds light on the interaction between religion and international politics or, at least, explains why Hammarskjöld carried in his briefcase in Ndola both the UN Charter and the New Testament.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2015 ISA Annual Conference, the author is grateful to the members of the public and the panel who have provided valuable comments on the paper, in particular Gregorio Bettiza, Manuel Fröhlich, Catherine Goetze, Daniel Philpott and Nukhet Sandal. I am also grateful to Guido Dotti for drawing my attention to the personality of Dag Hammarskjöld. The feedback of the reviewers and editors of this journal has been very constructive and helpful, I am grateful for their contribution. This research was possible also thanks to the support of the Leverhulme Trust and the LSE Middle East Centre. The usual disclaimers apply.

² See also the work of Manuel Fröhlich, which is not a biography but studies in detail the relationship between religion and politics in Hammarskjöld's career as SG. (Fröhlich 2007)

³ For an analysis of Gandhi's thought regarding religion and secularism see for example (Fernée 2014). The influence of religion on Martin Luther King's activism is commonly accepted; see for example (Baldwin 2002). For a more specific analysis of King's thought on social justice and religion related to

Rawls's theory see (Franklin 1990). The fact that religion and Catholicism in particular plays an influential political role in Poland is not a matter of dispute. Nevertheless, regarding Lech Walesa and the more specific influence of religion in his political activism there does not seem to be a systematic study. In his autobiography Walesa discusses in depth his religious views. (Wałęsa and Rybicki 1992, 208-207)

⁴ Note that I subscribe to Habermas's distinction between secular and secularist (Habermas 2008, 27)

⁵ For an account emphasising the more specific influence of Lutheran tradition on Hammarskjöld see (Huls 2006).

⁶ See also Fröhlich discussion of neutrality and impartiality in Hammarskjöld's activity (Fröhlich 2007, 29-30).

⁷ In conceptualizing agency, and in particular normative agency in international organizations, the author has benefitted from discussions of the concept in (Oestreich 2012, 1-25) (Chesterman and Annan 2007) (Hawkins and Jacoby 2006, Wendt 1987). A relevant discussion on collective moral agency is in (Erskine 2003).

⁸ For a discussion of the SG as norm entrepreneur see (Johnstone 2007, Traub 2007).

⁹ As regards the capacity of international actors to operate in autonomy through a strategy of norms interpretation see the principal-agent approach to international agency as discussed by (Hawkins and Jacoby 2006, pp. 206-207).

¹⁰ For a less sympathetic account of the events and the role of the UN, see the account of Ludo De Witte (Witte 2001a) and the exchange between De Witte and Urquhart in (Witte 2001b) as concerns the role of Hammarskjöld in the context that brought to the death of Patrice Lumumba.

¹¹ To be noticed is that Hammarskjöld was intellectually engaged also with other religious confessions as Judaism, Islam and Confucianism as Fröhlich reports. (Fröhlich 2007, 88-90) In several of his talks and declarations there are references to Confucius, Rumi or Tagore among others.

¹² There is a vast literature commenting on *Markings* to which the reader is invited to refer to in case of interest. See among others (Aulén 1969, Fröhlich 2007, 60-74, Lipsey 2011, Lipsey 2013, 53-94, Huls 2010, Stolpe 1966).

¹³ With regard to Hammarskjöld's emphasis on the importance of reconciliation as a function of the UN see (Fröhlich 2007, 37-38 and 43-44) and Lipsey (Lipsey 2013, 124). It is interesting to juxtapose this idea of reconciliation as the mission of the UN to Daniel Philpott's work on justice and reconciliation in IR. (Philpott 2012)

¹⁴ The declaration and audio recording is available on line <<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/16608/>>.

¹⁵ As Lipsey reports the mystic writers to which Hammarskjöld refers to are Meister Eckhart, Jan van Ruysbroeck and Thomas a Kempis. (Lipsey 2013, 179) For a discussion of the influence of mystic thinkers and theologians see also (Fröhlich 2007, 75-90). Also the work of the progressive Christian thinker and social activist Albert Schweitzer and the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber had an important influence on Hammarskjöld's religiosity and ethics, Hammarskjöld had direct contacts with both of them and commented in his scripts on their inspirational intellectual role. (Fröhlich 2007, 91-115, Lipsey 2013, 69-70)

¹⁶ UN Press Release SG/360 (22 December 1953).

¹⁷ See the work of Catherine Goetze (forthcoming) in this respect and the analysis by Fröhlich (Fröhlich 2007, 164-174)

¹⁸ See in this respect also the analysis of Alynna Lyon the interpretation of the UN Charter by Hammarskjöld. Lyon emphasises a more specifically Lutheran reading of the SG religious ethics. (Lyon 2007)

¹⁹ He then explains that he does not intend charity as a "handing out operation with the benevolence of the "haves" in relation to the "have-nots". I mean charity in the sense of mutual cooperation in a well-understood common interest" (Hammarskjöld 1956, 659)

²⁰ See (Lipsey 2013, 71-84) for a discussion of how Hammarskjöld's religious life has gone through also phases of doubts.

²¹ See note 3 above.

²² On the importance of a successful institutional translation for norms diffusion as compared to failed institutional translation see (Bettiza and Dionigi 2015).

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