

Profession as a road to God – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s and Dag Hammarskjöld’s spiritual autobiographies: A case study



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In this article, the author speaks about how a profession (job) can constitute a road to God and can lead one to a deeper understanding of spirituality as the heart of theology, by investigating the spiritual autobiographies of Teilhard de Chardin and Dag Hammarskjöld. While the former was a Jesuit with important contributions to the historical field, the latter was an important personality in the field of international diplomacy, whose contribution came to light towards the end of the important crises that took place in the 1960s. Both of them left us rich spiritual autobiographies in the form of a last published book (De Chardin) and a manuscript discovered after the author’s death and published posthumously (Dag Hammarskjöld).

Contribution: This article brings into attention two important authors of the 20th century with different confessional backgrounds (Teilhard de Chardin was a Catholic Jesuit who worked as an archaeologist and was recognised for his work by being elected as a member of reputed forums such as the French Academy, while Dag Hammarskjöld, one of the holders of the posthumous Nobel Prize, was a diplomat with economical and law studies and deep theological concerns, which left to the posterity not only works from his activity field, but also an extremely useful spiritual autobiography) by investigating their spiritual autobiographies and showing how the profession they exercised led them to God and helped them deepen their spirituality and theology.

Keywords: Dag Hammarskjöld; *Markings*; Teilhard de Chardin; evolutionism; Christification; death; loneliness.

Introduction

The road to God and mystical experience have their specificity in the life of every human being and in every religious background. Spiritual experience is not something that can be circumscribed by a list of rules or a set of rules or principles, but something defined by unicity. Texts such as spiritual autobiographies (Hammarskjöld 1972:24; Kowalska 2008:15; Morariu 2018a:1–5, 2018b:145), letters of important people who tried to deepen this aspect, research from the theological field, and biographies, besides other categories of writings, speak about this aspect. Aware of this fact, we will try to see how this road which leads to God and to spiritual experience is reflected in spiritual autobiographies. While some of the works from this genre belong to people with a particularly religious vocation (see, e.g., Athos 1995; Avila 1994, 1995; Kowalska 2008), others were written by people strongly involved in the civil and social life of their time (Hammarskjöld 1972) or, even if they also had an active religious behaviour, they were also active in the lay field (see, for example, De Chardin 2013).

The aforementioned Dag Hammarskjöld was not only an important diplomat, the Secretary-General of the United Nations between 1954 and 1961 (Hanley & Melber 2011) and a man with economical, legal or literary competences (Hammarskjöld 2000), but also a Swedish Lutheran who was aware of the religious dimension of life, being influenced by mystical personalities from the Middle Ages such as Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross (Beyschlag 2003:509–512) or Thomas Aquinas (Erling 1987:341). He left a manuscript speaking about all his spiritual concerns, which was found and published posthumously by his disciples (Erling 2010; Hammarskjöld 1972). Hammarskjöld, the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, whose last published books were in fact passages from his spiritual autobiography (De Chardin 2013), and the Russian philosopher Nicolas

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Berdyaev, in exile to France (Berdiaev 1992, 1998; Morariu 2019:1–4), will therefore constitute our sources. Reference will also be made to the works of their exeges, and also to other important works from the genre, in an attempt to see how a profession may lead to God and how this aspect is reflected in spiritual autobiographies.

The author has decided to choose Dag Hammarskjöld and Teilhard de Chardin for several important reasons. First of all, they are representative voices for two important Christian backgrounds, the Protestant (Lutheran) and the Catholic. Secondly, both of them were voices of Christianity in the lay space, the Swede as a diplomat, economist, specialist in law and writer, and the French as a historian and archaeologist, which gives them a certain openness and a special dimension to their notes. In addition, it must be mentioned that the decision was influenced by the fact that the two mostly activated outside their churches, in the lay space (although De Chardin was a Jesuit), but their profession did not lead them outside the Church; on the contrary, it determined both of them to come closer to God.

The overview of their spiritual autobiographies will rather be a historical than a thematic one because of the structure of the presentation. From the methodological point of view, it must be mentioned that we will use historical inquiry, and analytic-deductive methods and the research will be rather qualitative (case study) than quantitative.

Profession as a road to God

People like Nicholas Berdyaev, who were close both to philosophy and Christianity (Cristea 1995:34), or De Chardin and Hammarskjöld had an experience which brought them towards spirituality. A Kantian-Marxist in the beginning, with a moment when he was considered close to Communism (Marange 2009:14), being accepted by the regime (ed. Craig 1998:26; Editor 2006:1187), Berdyaev would be forced to leave his country and become self-exiled to Paris until his death. It was there that his being a philosopher was discovered and cultivated and the road to God became the main pillar of his life (Damian 2010:205; Ivlampie 2001:5). Others, such as Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, had similar experiences; for him, his work as an archaeologist would constitute an important aspect of spiritual life. As a Jesuit, he tried to find a way of bringing together theology and his work in the scientific field and to create bridges among them, which sometimes caused him troubles. However, his work was notable, given its impact and the way it has been perceived to this day.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)

In the rich list of works of the French Jesuit priest (see, for example, De Chardin 1956, 1959, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1973, 1993) who also activated as a scientist, philosopher and teacher and tried to reconcile evolutionism with Christian theology (Baconschi 2016:24), the last of his texts are published under the generically title of spiritual autobiography

(De Chardin 2013). As Marie-Jeanne Coutagne shows, in the last years of his life, when the theologian mostly resided in New York and contributed to the beginning of international organisations such as the United Nations and UNESCO, where he had many friends and where he polished and finished his work *Le Christique*, a few days before his death, on 10 April 1955 (Coutagne 2013:7). In this work, just like he did in *La Coeur de la Matière [The Heart of Matter]*, written in 1950, he presented himself in the beautiful pages of a spiritual autobiography, where he recurrently recalled the moments he experienced during the First World War (Coutagne 2013:9), which touched him, probably because of the death of one of his young friends,¹ moments from his youth or the beginning of his activity as a researcher or as a teacher, and spoke about his spiritual seeking.

As his biographer underlines, the leitmotifs of his notes are optimism and the fragility of the real. Therefore (Coutagne 2013):

Teilhardian spirituality, whose optimism has (too) often been underlined, starts from the constant fragility and inconsistency of the real, subject to the erosion of time, precariousness, death. (p. 10)

The feeling of plenitude (De Chardin 2013:25) seen by the author as a consequence of meeting God in his work and research helped both the researcher and the one who sought for God to find him, and helped the one working in the scientific field to come closer to the recognition of the existence of a superior force, which guides and rules the universe through scientific methods, is accompanied by the force of consistency, the cosmic force, the force of the earth, the human and the Christical force, as he confessed (De Chardin 2013:26). Their closeness in meaning makes the philosopher and the historian to consider them as being synonyms.

Since he was only six or seven years old, he started to think about ‘the heart of the matter’ (De Chardin 2013:27).² This perception helped him, together with material elements which were strong and indestructible. This explains why the geological sphere guided him towards seeking for the spiritual area. On this area, he wrote the following (De Chardin 2013):

First of all, of course, forming the solid and permanent core of the system, the taste of the Geological. The primacy of Material – Material, expressing itself in Mineral and Rock. I will not re-analyze here this primordial modality, already noted above in my Sense of Plenitude. But I would not be able to make heard, nor follow, the adventures of my psychic evolution if I did not insist, once again, on the axial place invariably held by the passion and the science ‘of the Stones’ throughout my spiritual embryogenesis. (p. 32)

¹As he remembers in his notes: ‘My friend, who drank his whole life as if from a holy spring, is dead. His heart was burning inside him. His body disappeared into the Earth, in front of Verdun. – I can now repeat some of the words by which he initiated me into the intense vision which illuminated and pacified his life’ (De Chardin 2013:78).

²All that follows will be nothing but the story of a slow explanation or evolution in months of this fundamental and “Protean” element in ever richer and purer forms’ (De Chardin 2013:26).

The later evolution of his concerns switched his thinking from the material to the idea of Cosmos. Nonetheless, as he confessed, the solid state would influence his perception.³

At the same time, this did not disconnect him neither from the spiritual nor from the material aspects, which were also important elements of his spiritual evolution. His inner universe would therefore be influenced by the investigation of the complex phenomenon which brought together visible, touchable and untouchable aspects, thus leading him to physics and its thorough analysis. Material aspects, life as a form of what gives value and purpose to the former and the energy that is deeply linked with these two, thus formed for him a colonnade which defined his concerns. This was the beginning of a complex and fruitful academic road, which later transformed him into an important scholar and a controversial clergyman, sometimes considered dangerous by the Catholic Church he belonged to. In his spiritual autobiography, Pierre Teilhard noted the following (De Chardin 2013):

For only three years in Jersey – then for three more years in Cairo (1906–1908) I studied (as long as I could), and taught (as badly as I could), quite elementary Physics: Physics before Quanta, and Relativity, and the structure of the Atom. (p. 34)

Guided by studies, and also by the mystical life that he lived, he continued to meditate on the purpose of man (De Chardin 1958:14), the directions of a potential future (De Chardin 1973:45), and he developed a passionate love for the universe, as he mentioned in the last book he wrote:

There was, around the age of 28, the spiritual complex, somewhat confused, within which was fermenting, without yet managing to throw a clear flame, my passionate love of the Universe. (De Chardin 2013:35)

This helped him improve his skills in matters of scientific research and performance in his scholarly approach, and to progress towards knowing God and meeting him. From the exterior universe, the road brought him to the interior one. While the former is personalised by convergence, the latter becomes ‘universalising by radiance’ (De Chardin 2013:43).⁴ This explains his continuous struggle between universal and personal, which was, in his words, part of a complex process with mystical roots:

Christifying matter:

The whole adventure of my intimate existence... A great and splendid adventure, - in the course of which I often continue to

³‘At the centre of my preoccupations and my secret joys, therefore – between 10 and 30 years – the contact maintained and developed with the Cosmic “in a solid state.” But all around already semi-incidentally, the emerging attraction of vegetal and animal Nature; and at the very bottom, one fine day (at the end of the period), the initiation to the less tangible (but how provocative!) magnitudes brought to light by the research of Physics. On either side of Matter, Life and Energy; the three columns of my inner vision and bliss’ (De Chardin 2013:32–33).

⁴‘Here – in my “pagan” ego – a Universe personalizing itself by convergence. The – in my Christian ego – a Person (that of Christ) universalizing by Radiance. That is to say, in one way or the other, the Divine joining, by all matter, to all the Human, towards the infinity of time before... In this confluence, by complementary ways, of the Sky and the World, have not ceased to express themselves, always more clearly and more passionately, with the years, the progress, and, it must be added, the conflicts – of my inner life’ (De Chardin 2013:63).

be afraid, - but in which it was impossible for me not to risk myself: so powerful was the force with which and gradually closed above my head, in a single vault, the layers of the Universal and the Personal. (De Chardin 2013:66)

Therefore, for Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the profession represents an important aspect in the road to God. Thus, in certain situations, spiritual evolution is related to his state of heart, and also to his professional road. The matter later brought him to the spiritual. As he confessed in a prayer which is clearly influenced by Augustin of Hippo in terms of style and message (Augustin 2006:179):

Lord, because with all the instinct and by all the chances of my life I have never ceased to seek you and to place you in the heart of universal Matter, it is in the dazzle of a universal Transparency and a universal Burning that I will have the joy of closing my eyes (De Chardin 2013:76)

Doubtlessly, this complex road to God was sometimes also marked by strange experiences he had with the Catholic Church. However, he remained faithful to it and to its principles and even refused to publish some of his works when the institution considered that they were not in line with its principles and did not grant him the *imprimatur*.

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961)

Another important thinker of the 20th century who found his road to God through his profession, trying to bring them together in a friendly relation, was the Swedish Lutheran diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld. The Secretary-General of the United Nation (1954–1961), who received posthumously the Nobel Prize (Renton 2012:21; ed. Sellström 2021:7), was a scholar in law and economics, but also a man with deep literary concerns (see, for example, Hammarskjöld 2000). Shortly after his premature death, caused by an air crash in Ndola (Beaty 1984:121–129; Kelen 1966:268–271), the manuscript of his spiritual autobiography discovered and published by some of his collaborators would reveal the way in which all these elements interacted under the guidance of spirituality.

In haiku poems, short notes and maxima or longer essays with relevance for the sphere of political theology (Morariu 2018a:1), and also for spirituality or philosophy, he spoke about the meaning of life, the need for spirituality and other similar topics. Leitmotifs such as death, God and eternity are expressed in texts that are often influenced by the Medieval mystics (Van Dusen 1967:179) or by ancient philosophers (McKeon 1947:190). Using words which remind us of the mystical fathers of the first centuries of Christianity anthologised in collections such as *The Paterikon* (Bădiliță 2015), he spoke about death, offering a spiritual perception of it:

There is only one way out of the thick, foggy jungle where the struggle for glory, power, and privilege goes, among the obstacles you yourself have created. And this is: accept death. (Erling 2010:10)

Accepting death does not mean suicide, desire to die or resignation, as it was sometimes suggested even by some of his exegetics. It is rather related with the understanding of the human limits beyond which God can act and with the fact that life is a gift from him. When man becomes aware of this fact, they definitely become more grateful for their daily experiences and try to think in a more responsible way, not only about themselves, but also about others. At the same time, as Anthony the Great, a hermit from the 4th century, showed, if one thinks about death every day, one never again falls into sin (Bădiliță 2015:35). Therefore, thinking about death and accepting it as a part of our earthly life represents an important aspect of spiritual life. It can help those who understand this to love simple things more and to come closer to God. In the same note, the author also formulated the following thought in the form of a haiku poem:

To understand by silence,

Doing – in silence,

To win in silence.

If the eye is made to perceive colour, it must first be devoid of any colour. (Erling 2010:153)

At first glance, the text seems objective. At the same time, it clearly defines his work as a diplomat. Often confronted with leaders such as the Russian Nikita Khrushchev and finding himself in the situation of balancing the Great Powers and increasing the role and prestige of the organisation of which he was the Secretary-General (Urquhart 1972:89), Hammarskjöld did his work in silence, by observing, being objective and negotiating, without popularising his actions, and being silent about his discontent. Therefore, the aforementioned paragraph can definitely be considered as one that defines his work and the principles which guided him. However, at the same time, it speaks about deeper aspects, such as the relationship with the spirituality which influenced these principles.

Short meditations written as haiku poems touch upon relevant political or philosophical topics, describing the way in which a profession can lead one to spirituality. Aspects such as silence, death or sacrifice emphasise his conception on the way in which spiritual life and religious concerns can shift one's daily way of thinking. An element which is mentioned is silence. Dag Hammarskjöld noted the following on this subject:

Silence is the space around every act and every human relationship. Friendship needs no words – It is a solitude freed from the anguish of solitude. (Erling 2009:4)

An element that is mentioned in his spiritual autobiography even more than silence is death. Without being a depressive man or a Lutheran with suicidal thoughts, as one might consider him at first sight, he is concerned about death for moral and spiritual reasons. Sometimes, he speaks about it with a kind of resignation,⁵ insisting on the fact that when

5. For example: 'In the last curve down toward the valley he lost control of the car. When it plunged out over the edge of the road his only thought was: So then I have done my bit – His only, tired, happy thought' (Erling 2009:25).

death comes, this is a sign those who are called to pass through this experience have accomplished their duties in front of God and are therefore called to end their journey on earth. In other situations, he observes the tombs of people he met in his life or just simple graveyards from the cemetery and starts to meditate on the meaning of life and on the fact that death does not represent the end, but the beginning of eternity. Emphasis is also put on the ephemerality of material aspects and on the relevance of living well and enjoying life, which is so short. Despite some apparently pessimistic notes, his writings have a deep spiritual content and are an invitation (Morariu 2018a:3) to reconsider the values of human existence:

Wet dark wool. / Waiting averting glances. / Tired mouths. It is late – / The work proceeds with business-like indifference. / At the polished black marble tombstone of the counter many are still waiting. / The sexless light from white fixtures is reflected in glass and enamel. / Outside there is darkness. / The door slams / – and a draft of raw dampness cuts against the dryness of the chemical-saturated air. / Life, you embracing rich, warm, blessed word –. (Erling 2009:18)

The writer himself often thinks about death and sees its presence as an important encounter. Sometimes, sadness accompanies his notes, in a manner which could make the reader remember the spirituality of the desert fathers (Bădiliță 2015:54) and their understanding of asceticism and of the mortification of the body:

Tomorrow we shall meet, / Death and I –. / He shall thrust his rapier into a man fully awake. / But how painful is not the memory / Of each hour I frittered away. (Erling 2009:2)

Doubtlessly, it is not only death which defines his thinking, marking his spirituality. As a Christian, Dag Hammarskjöld is full of hope and is aware of the fact that he needs to think about his neighbour more than he does about himself. He even underlines that aspect in *Markings* (Hammarskjöld 1972). A passage with a clearly rich spiritual content, which summarises his conception on humility, trust in others and sacrifice, and which speaks about the difficulties of social life and of working in a team, because of the inner constitution of certain people, is the following:

Provide for one's own comfort – and be rewarded with glimpses of satisfaction followed by long, exhausting, ashamed emptiness. Struggle for one's own position – weakly defended against the self-revealing disgust behind the talk about the necessary preconditions for an achievement.

Give oneself to the task – but at the same time in doubt about the task's value and therefore constantly waiting for recognition: perhaps slowly en route to gratitude for not being criticized, but far, far from being ready to accept criticism.

You asked for burdens to carry –. And complained when they were laid upon you. Was it another burden you had been thinking of? Did you believe in the sacrifice's anonymity? The sacrificial act's sacrifice is to be regarded as its opposite.

O Caesarea Philippi: to accept condemnation as the fruit and the presupposition of the endeavor, to accept it when the endeavor is conceived and chosen. (Erling 2009:29)

Here, the Swedish diplomat, who had a penchant for philosophical meditation (ed. Toren 2011:32), thus explaining and, in a certain way, justifying his predilection for peace (Boudreau 1991:18; Jordan & Lenz 2002; Lipsy 2013:15; Morariu 2015), offers a different key for us to see the other. He even suggests that sacrifice can be a key in its understanding and at the same time receiving with resignation his attitude and his way of perceiving your acts regarding him or herself brings you to a higher moral state. It is somehow the element that defines a Christian's life and makes them act according to Jesus's model, as emphasised in the Gospel.

All these aspects contribute to the self-defining of the aforementioned diplomat, philosopher, poet, theologian and thinker as a man who is deeply concerned with introspection. In one of his haiku poems, he proves this skill by writing about the complexity man is faced with when understanding themselves, defining their priorities and, at the same time, setting their priorities for inner life on the basis of spirituality. Topics such as solitudes, distance or respect contribute to the complex image the author tries to bring into attention and comment on, in a way which, at first glance, does not look very optimistic. However, the message is very complex and in direct connection with spirituality, while also calling to a deeper understanding of the self in the context of deepening the relationships with divinity and with the other:

The longest journey / Is the journey inwards. / The one who has chosen his destiny, / Who has begun the trek / Towards his own ground / (does such a ground exist?) / Still among you, / He is outside the fellowship, / Isolated in your feelings / As one condemned to death, / Or one whom imminent departure / Prematurely dedicates / To each person's final solitude. / Between you and him is distance / Is uncertainty – / Respect. / He himself will see you / Ever farther away, / Hear your enticing calls / Become fainter. (Erling 2009:54)

Conclusion

As the author tried to show in the present article, for the Jesuit historian and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin, and for the Swedish Lutheran diplomat, economist, philosopher, lawyer and theologian Dag Hammarskjöld, the road to God was related in many moments of their lives to the way in which they practised their profession and came in contact with other people from their field. Their spiritual autobiographies represent testimonies which are valuable in understanding the dynamics of such a complex road, marked both by spiritual peaks and by moments of crisis and sadness; at the same time, they speak about the way in which spirituality can improve or even shift the relationship with others and transform both one's existence (Clendon 2002:98) and that of others. The Christification of the material and the way in which thinking of death can contribute to the improvement of daily life represent important topics in the writings of the two authors, which also have important practical outcomes and could be used as tools in the pastoral activity, because of the fact that spiritual autobiographies can be part of a complex process of spiritual self-disclosure

(Moschella 2011:96) and can help those who approach this genre to deepen their knowledge about spirituality and the field of theology. Therefore, a pastor or a priest can invite the faithful or the counselled to read these texts and to see the depth of the thoughts they present, and also to stimulate them to write such texts. At the same time, these spiritual biographies help us identify the important spiritual crises of the two authors and see how they managed to overcome them, so that their example can be used in the pastoral work. There are clearly other aspects that could be useful in this field, and also in philological, historical or philosophical research, because of the profile and the impact of the two authors, who were important personalities in the social field (Dag Hammarskjöld as a diplomat and De Chardin as a historian).

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

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