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SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES BETWEEN PHILOSOPHICAL AND SPIRITUAL COUNSELLING

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Abstract: Spiritual autobiographies have represented and still represent an important genre in the theological, literary, historical and philosophical areas. For this reason, they must be discovered and valorised by contemporary research. In the present investigation, we will try to see how they can be used in philosophical and spiritual counselling and to emphasize the elements of complementarity which define them. At the same time, we will see how, through their testimonial dimension, this category of works manages to provide answers to the contemporary challenges faced by a potential reader, being used in processes such as *self-disclosure*, and to cover many potential social categories of readers (from priests and clergyman to young people, workers or the classic faithful, whether they have cultural interests or not). Examples from different confessional backgrounds, such as the Catholics Teresa of Avilla and Thomas Merton, the Orthodox John of Kronstadt and Silouane from Mount Athos or the Lutheran Dag Hammarskjöld, will be provided in order to enhance a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the phenomenon and to see its practical outcomes.

Key words: mystical vocation, spiritual diary, depression, philosophy and spirituality, Russia, Catholic Church.

1. Introduction

Philosophical counselling has gained interest in the last year. In areas, such as Romania, recent works have come to prove its practical value and role (Frunză 2019; Frunză 2020; Frunză, Medveschi, Frunză, Grad 2019:3-17). The same holds true in the case of spiritual autobiographies (Morariu 2018:185-189; Morariu 2019), under the form of books and articles dedicated to their content, their authors or the message their content conveyed.

Dealing with problems which are not related to pathological, but to common life situations, at the border with philosophy (such as moral dilemmas, existential crises, death and the emotions it triggers and s. o.), philosophical counselling is, as contemporary specialists underline (see: Frunză 2019a; Deurzen 2005; Marinoff 2012; Marinoff 2013; Marinoff 2016), a complex profession. Despite being new, it gains popularity day after day and it proves to be useful especially to people who have a reflective apprehension and ask themselves questions about the aforementioned topics. Having clearly defined types and methods, spiritual autobiography is definitely a phenomenon which will influence the future of humankind.

Although it does not have the same scientific background, spiritual counseling is important in the field. In this case, the accent falls on the way in which spiritual experience and spirituality can change one's life and on the way in which understanding your spiritual experiences (Tia 2021:12) can help you solve even daily problems. Personal history and experience are important pillars of the process. The one who becomes part of the process is invited to understand themselves, to speak or write about their experience and to define the history of the problem. This is why spiritual autobiographies can definitely constitute important sources and models for future spiritual self-disclosure endeavours.

Conscious of their relevance for both the area of spirituality and counselling and of the fact that spiritual autobiography can create bridges between the theological and scientific areas, we will try to speak about how the writings which belong to this genre can be used in practice. We will emphasize how works such as those written by the philosophers Nicolas Berdyaev (Berdiaev 1992), Saint John of Kronstadt (Kronstadt 2005), Silouane the Athonite (Athonite 1994) from the Orthodox space, Dag Hammarskjöld (Hammarskjöld 1972) or Thomas Merton (Merton 1948) can be understood and used as parts of the complex process of spiritual counselling and in the philosophical process. The complex training of authors such as the aforementioned Russian philosopher or the Swedish diplomat allowed them to write texts with various valences, while the experience of grace which the mystical vocation of the Russian priests from the harbour neighbouring Sankt Petersburg, the Russian Monk from Mount Athos and the Trappist monk from the United States enabled them

to write texts which not only have a testimonial value, but also a manifold utility.

2. Spiritual Autobiographies – Between Philosophical and Spiritual Counselling

Several books and articles (Morariu 2019; Morariu 2015: 166-174; Morariu 2019a:218) have already written about what spiritual autobiographies actually are. Their practical use has also been emphasized by different specialists from the theological (Moschella 2011:97-98), philosophical (Frunză 2020:17; Casañas 1982: 282-288), literary and journalistic (Lejeune 2000: 14) areas. The interest for the genre is proved, among others, by the fact that works such as the one of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (de Chardin 2013) are currently being reprinted and considered important.

2.1 Spiritual Counselling. The Relevance of the Authors and the Ideas Presented in Spiritual Autobiographies

For spiritual counselling, spiritual autobiographies are clearly sources of primordial relevance. First of all, they are written by authors who, during their life, managed to prove they were important voices in the field of spirituality belonging to different backgrounds of Christianity. For example, Saint Augustine (Augustine 1991), considered one of the founder authors of the genre in the Christian space, due to the fact that he offered the first compact Christian spiritual autobiography, by developing ideas first presented by Saint Paul the Apostle (Morariu 2019: 71-74), is regarded as a Saint by the Catholic space, as a *beato* by the Eastern Orthodox one, and as an important authority by the Evangelical areas. Therefore, he has a status of universal authority in the Christian space. The same holds true for authors such as Julian of Norwich (Norwich 2011; Abbot 1999) or Saint Teresa of Avila (Avila 1995), who were relevant in medieval times. Although the former is a controversial Catholic Abbot, he is considered even today an important mystical writer for other denominations, this being proved by the way in which he is mentioned in the writings signed by relevant authors belonging to these denominations. As to Teresa, she influenced even other authors of spiritual autobiographies from the Lutheran space, such as Dag Hammarskjöld (Hammarskjöld 1972), and it is assumed that she was also the source of inspiration for the journals of Orthodox fathers, such as the Charismatic John of Kronstadt (Kronstadt 2005). The monk Silouane from Mount Athos himself, one of the most important voices of spiritual autobiography in the Orthodox space of the 19th and 20th centuries and an important mystical personality, has been considered a „Saint without borders” (Icăjr. 2001: 7),

due to his openness to dialogue. This is also valid for Saint John of Kronstadt, whose spiritual diary was translated into English immediately after its publication in the Russian space (Sergieff 1897). He is still referred to in the ecumenical field, as an important voice who speaks about common topics and ecumenical values (Clemens 2003: 22). Hammarskjöld's spiritual autobiography, discovered and published posthumously by his disciples (Urquhart 1972: 89), a work containing rich interdisciplinary aspects, which is relevant even in areas such as political theology (Morariu 2018a:1), is also currently used in the Catholic space, although he has a Lutheran background (see, for example: Possenti 2013: 12; Beyschlag 2003: 509). Consequently, we can clearly state that, due to the relevance of their authors and to the impact they had, most of them being mystical personalities of their time, notorious for their ecumenical openness, spiritual autobiographies have a huge relevance for spiritual counselling.

At the same time, we must also mention some aspects, which make spiritual autobiography extremely valuable. On one side, there is a difference in terms of the language used, as compared to other theological texts. Their testimonial value transforms spiritual autobiographies (Morariu 2019:58) in works written with honesty, which provide information about the biographies of their authors, their lives, their concerns and s. o., while focusing on the road towards God and on the dynamics of the authors' relationships with divinity. Without being encomiastic portraits dedicated by disciples to their masters, some aspects being deleted from the texts or even neglected, given that they were considered too irrelevant or mundane, presenting too ordinary daily aspects, spiritual autobiographies, which were often written with the purpose of monitoring the spiritual evolution of their authors and not to be published, speak about the uncensored image of their authors. Thus, there are two elements which define the genre, namely, the witness and honesty. Simultaneously, given that the author and the readers may face similar problems and even present solutions to some of them, this category of texts can be used in the counselling process, but they may also provide answers, practical ones, unlike what the theological writings often offer.

2.2. Social Categories Counselling

If one takes a look at the rich amount of spiritual autobiographies found in the Christian space, they will surely see that they are not addressed only to a particular category of potential readers. The mystical vocations of the various authors from the Catholic, Orthodox or Evangelical backgrounds who write address problems which we can find in many social contexts and speak to people who do not necessarily belong to their social category.

Due to the high number of authors and texts, we will not be able to offer an exhaustive presentation of the subject. In order to show the diversity of the social category which could benefit from spiritual counselling by reading works from the genre of spiritual autobiography, we will offer a few examples, which we consider illustrative.

At the same time, if necessary, we will resort to the works of the ones who have investigated this genre (like, for example: Selawry 2001) and we will also make reference to works dedicated to pastoral and spiritual counselling (like: Tia 2012; Stone 1998; Săndulache 2009).

2.3 The Priests, the Faithful, the Youth

In confessional backgrounds such as the Catholic and the Orthodox, the clerical category is an important target, especially if the author is a priest (Stone 1998:87). Therefore, Saint John of Kronstadt, a famous Russian priest from the second half of the 19th century, will sometimes use his spiritual notes in order to advise priests. On the occasion of a jubilee, he asked them the following: “Servants of God, Priests! Learn to transform, by the comforting power of faith, the abode of sorrow which the Christian suffers, into an abode of joy; learn to transform someone who considers himself the saddest man in the world, the happiest man on earth, convince him that “with a little punishment he will receive a great reward” (Wisdom of Solomon 3: 5). Then you will be friends of men, comforting angels, organs of the Comforting Spirit.” (Kronstadt 2005: 9).

As we can see in the message above, although priests are the main addressees of his words, the primary concern of the priest is the people. Improving their life and work, in the sense of helping them become happier by approaching God, is a real leitmotiv of his life and activity. Not only does the discourse represent the tool which changes lives and attitudes. His interactions with people are also an important aspect of his work. Father John was an active part in the life of his community. He travelled among them, visited the ones who had problems, offered a helping hand and knew the community, with its pains and moments of joy. For many decades, he was also a professor. He taught Orthodox Religion and Catechism at the Kronstadt high school. Regarding this moment, there are rich testimonies on how he offered practical counselling to those who went through moments of doubt. Here is such an example, presented by Alla Selawry: “Once, while teaching a lesson on confession of faith, a sixteen-year-old boy protests and begins to virulently explain that he rejects this dogma. A grave silence is set. “Renegade, unbeliever! “John looks intently at the teenager in a penetrating manner: “Don't you think that God can take away your tongue because of your disorientation? Who created you? - My parents, the young man answers in a muffled voice. - And who created the whole world, all that is seen and all that is not seen?” The child is silent. Father John addresses the whole class: He is called by

Father John into the classroom, and he returns in full exaltation and is completely transformed. The moment when Father John spoke to him face to face, from person to person, he penetrated deeply into his consciousness, leading him to truth, to God.” (Selawry 2001: 94).

In addition, humility remained the main aspect which defined the work, attitude and life of the Russian priest. The speech he gave on the occasion of the Silver jubilee of his priesthood also emphasized this aspect: “Thank you for answering my infirmities with love and kindness. Of course, I am full of infirmities. I know my weaknesses, but the power of God in weakness is perfect. This wonderful power is poured out in me, and it has been fulfilled throughout my 25 years of priestly ministry. I dare say, and it is truly my word, that through me it is fulfilled in many simple believers, in a manifest, discerning way. May His Grace be glorified!” (Botsi 2003: 95).

But his words did not address only priests. As we have already mentioned, people were an important segment to which he spoke. Thus, in his spiritual diaries, there were often general references and short notes with general relevance, addressed to any possible category of readers. Such an example can be considered the following paragraph from *My Life in Christ*, his masterpiece in the area of spiritual autobiography, whose words are relevance for mystical vocations who cultivate the peace of mind, hesychasm or other spiritual practices, but also for simple Christians, interested in deepening their relationships with God: “Keep the name of Christ in your heart, fear not to lose Him, with Him peace will dwell in your heart. If you lose Him, it will be hard for you to take it from the beginning, the effort to it will bind him again in his heart, after he has fallen, he will be very great and many will pay for it by weeping bitterly.” (Kronstadt 2005: 12).

The topical nature and the relevance of the main aspects of spiritual counselling found in the genre we are investigating also have to do with contemporary problems. In their time, they were relevant too, but to a different extent. Depression, for example, is not something new and it was not new when he wrote his notes either. Nonetheless, he offers an interesting approach to this phenomenon, emphasizing that it could be overcome through a positive attitude and by presenting it God as a feeling (Kronstadt 2005: 20).

The attitude towards imminent death is also linked to the way in which God is perceived. The Russian Monk Silouan from Russikon lavra on Mount Athos insists on this aspect when he writes his spiritual notes. He is also influenced by John of Kronstadt, who was considered at that time one of the most relevant Russian spiritual personalities. He therefore writes real exhortations, inviting people to see, discover and understand God’s love for them and to see in this an important element of spiritual life: „Do you see God's love for us? And who could describe His mercy? Oh, my brethren, fall to your knees and pray: believe in God, believe that the Holy

Spirit is the One who bears witness to Him in all the churches and in God. The Holy Spirit is love, and this love is poured out into all the holy souls who are in God, and the same Holy Spirit is on earth in the souls who love God.” (Athonite 1994: 54).

Similar notes in terms of style and content can also be seen in other spiritual autobiographies, written by authors from other confessional backgrounds, such as Thomas Merton, the Catholic Trappist monk. In his diaries, the author of various important theology books, poetry and poetry (such as: Merton 2008; Merton 2018; Merton 1957; Merton 1959; Merton 1963; Merton 1968; Merton 1969; Merton 1985, Merton 2005) puts forward interesting elements for spiritual and philosophical counselling.

Moreover, as a man who was very much socially involved in his time, he was honest in describing different realities and in presenting his opinion on them. Being in love with the Communists, whom he even joined in his youth, the author speaks about the idealized version that he had about them and their universe (Merton 1948: 132). Likewise, he describes himself by speaking about the various solutions which helped him to develop his spiritual skills, such as poetry writing (Merton 1948: 310), about the influences that authors such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross had on him (Merton 1948: 355), and about the war (cf. Săndulache 2009: 34). As to this last topic, he underlines the following: „For a war to be just, it must be a war of defence. A war of aggression is not just. If America entered the war now, would it be a war of aggression? I suppose if you wanted to get subtle about it, you could work out some of an argument to that effect. But I personally could not see that it would be anything else than legitimate self-defence.” (Merton 1948: 311).

Of course, as a pacifist, Merton always wrote against any form of violence and war (Merton 1995: 37), his texts being proof of this (Horan 2020: 72); he offered valuable arguments for his thesis. At the same time, he described the situation he encountered in areas such as American, where spirituality was something of a contemplation discovery. His notes were not limited to the relevance of the topic from a mystical point of view, but also spoke about its relevance for the life of the Church: „America is discovering the contemplative life. There are paradoxes in the history of Christian spirituality and not the least of them is the apparent contradiction in the way the Fathers and modern Popes have looked at the active and contemplative lives. Saint Augustine and Saing Gregory lamented the „sterility” of contemplation, which was in itself, as they admitted, superior to action. Yet Pope Pius XI came out in the constitution „Umbratitem” with the clear statement that the contemplative life was *much more* fruitful for the Church (*Multo plus ad Ecclesiae incrementa et humani generis aalutemconfere...*) than the activity of teaching and preaching. What is all the more surprising to a superficial observer is the fact that such a pronouncement should belong to our energetic times.”(Merton 1948: 414).

Therefore, as we have tried to show, spiritual autobiographies constitute important and necessary sources of spiritual counselling in the contemporary world. Authors such as the ones we presented speak about the Christian who, being faced with problems and crises, reads their notes and can find solutions and answers to some of their problems and is able to discover the beauty of spirituality and to understand it at a deeper level due to the help they offered. Moreover, although some of the texts were written in the past, they still have a topical dimension and many of the problems faced by the authors are at least similar, although they may not be the same we are facing nowadays.

3. Spiritual Autobiographies and Philosophical Counselling

Spiritual and philosophical counselling are definitely similar topics, having many aspects in common (Frunză 2019: 31). Consequently, when speaking about the role of the works belonging to the genre of spiritual autobiography in spiritual and philosophical counselling, one must take into account the fact that, even when written by an author with a genuine mystical vocation, a work of spiritual autobiography can be used in the field of philosophical counselling. Through their role, any theologian is also a philosopher. However, some of them are philosophers through their profession as well. As we could see, John of Kronstadt's writings are relevant for the philosophical area when he approaches life, death, depression or love of God. The same holds true for Silouane from Athos and for the Trappist Thomas Merton, the latter being rather a promoter of a philosophy with a social impact, due to the Communist sympathy he nurtured in his youth.

Writers such as Nikolas Berdiaev, just like Hammarskjöld (Morariu 2018a: 1-5) and Thomas Merton (Morariu 2021: 1-5), offered works which were also relevant for topics such as political theology (Morariu 2019b: 1-4), while being a philosopher through his profession. He also wrote a spiritual autobiography (Berdiaev 1992; Berdiaev 1998). In fact, he wrote a philosophical autobiography, which was reprinted several times and ended up being spiritual, due to the fact that, at least in the latest editions, the author himself insisted on spiritual more than on philosophical aspects. As he confessed (Berdiaev 1998: 12), Berdiaev's spiritual autobiography was intended to be a discontinuous diary, which makes it similar to the works of Nicolae Steindhardt, and explains the genesis of some of his most important ideas, the ones which brought him fame, but also speaks about his life, the trauma he had to face or the influence some of the people he came in contact with had on him and on his later development. With a life marked by illness, the philosopher considered this aspect important, confessing that: "Illness has played a huge role in my life. From this perspective, I have had traumas since childhood ... I was

not the subject of hypnosis, but as a child, I was suggested that life and illness are synonymous” (Berdiaev 1992: 32).

Most probably this closeness to illness transformed the man who would later be known as the philosopher of freedom and the teacher of this philosophy into the theoretician of loneliness. He defined loneliness as an essential theme of philosophical meditation: “Loneliness is an essential theme, the opposite of which is communion. Isolated and in community – this is the centre of all human existence, of all religious life. How to overcome isolation, separation? Religion is nothing but the search for reconciliation and communion. I have never had the feeling of integrating into the objective world, of occupying a space, I felt, in essence, outside the objective world, which touched me only peripherally, the absence of the roots in this world, later determined by my philosophical thinking as an objective world, is the basis of my feeling.” (Berdiaev 1992: 50).

Doubtlessly, his approach was not limited only to such topics. From loneliness, the philosopher went on to define freedom, understood on an eschatological note, and changed from an evolutionist Marxist to a Christian existentialist, as he was known in the second part of his life. He defines his attitude towards freedom as follows, insisting on the defining elements of his thinking: „They called me a philosopher of freedom. An obscurantist prelate even called me a “slave of freedom.” And it's true, I love freedom above all else, I'm born of it, she's my mother. It is my “primordial” being.” (Berdiaev 1992: 65).

By approaching topics such as freedom on an eschatological note, Berdyaev's spiritual autobiography offers solutions to contemporary problems and also speaks about the way in which a philosopher can offer both spiritual and philosophical counselling.

4. Conclusions

As we have tried to show, spiritual autobiographies are important tools in the use and understanding of spiritual and philosophical counselling. By tackling questions which are still topical, by offering answers to contemporary problems, such as depression, freedom, the existence of God and s. o., they show how the theological discourse can remain topical and create bridges among spiritualities and cultures. Similarly, they speak about the complementarity between philosophical and spiritual counselling and about the way in which the two can be used in a therapeutic process in order to help people to overcome contemporary crises, by getting closer to God. John of Kronstadt, Silouane the Athonite, Thomas Merton, Dag Hammarskjöld or Nicolas Berdyaev can therefore be considered examples in this respect. All of them reinforce an important genre of Christianity and speak about its multiple values.

Thus, counseling practices are important. Spiritual autobiographies as tools can offer a model for *self-disclosure* centered around spiritual values; they can also encourage people with a mystical vocation to write such text, which are testimonies, but also parts of the complex phenomenon of knowing oneself and the universe one comes in contact with, hence their social value. In a world where speaking about the self and defining the problems you have can contribute to social progress, we consider it is important to encourage such practices, which go beyond the ecclesial space, being called to create bridges, to answer to contemporary challenges, and to encourage reflection.

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