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### SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY – A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

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**Abstract:** Review of Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Landmarks of Spiritual Autobiography in the Orthodox Space of the 19th and 20th Centuries: John of Kronstadt, Silouan the Athonite and Nicolas Berdiaev* [Repere ale autobiografiei spirituale din spațiul ortodox în secolele XIX și XX: Ioan de Kronstadt, Siluan Athonitul și Nicolae Berdiaev], (Iași: Editura Lumen, 2019).

**Key words:** Russian Orthodoxy; self-disclosure; Romanian theological space; Mount Athos; philosophy.

In his PhD thesis (Morariu 2019), Iuliu-Marius Morariu resorts to three landmark writings in the Orthodox theological space in order to give back to Eastern theology the genre of spiritual autobiography, with its large context. Through the way in which he emphasises (both here and in previous works, such as: Morariu 2019a, 171-175; Morariu 2019b, 218-22; Morariu 2019c, 409-415; Morariu 2015, 166-174), puts into context and establishes connections, on the one hand, he avails himself of the texts of the three spiritual persons in order to support his theses and, on the other hand, through his way of understanding them, he gives them back to the culture of contemporary theology, as the main characters are allowed to speak objectively about their experiences and are not censored when they refuse to limit themselves to simple clichés degraded by repetition.

In the introduction of the book, under the title “terminological clarifications”, the reader is introduced to the issue of the genre. Throughout a few dozens of pages, the author makes a true mapping of autobiographies, journals and memoirs, while also defining them. The general perspective put forward by the author clearly suggests that, between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the Orthodox space, only three works met the conditions of the genre of spiritual autobiography, namely: *My Life in Christ* (John of Kronstadt), *Între iadul deznădejii și iadul smereniei-însemnări duhovnicești* [Between the Hell of Despair and the Hell of Humility – Spiritual Notes] (Silouan the Athonite) and *An Essay in Autobiography*. (Nicolas Berdiaev).

The works of these authors are representative for this genre, as they perfectly match the logical and complex definition of autobiography: having an exclusively autobiographical content and being written by an author who aims to present certain aspects related to his own biography and not to that of others. In particular, the author believes that spiritual autobiography can be distinguished from other memoirs if it revolves around a mystical experience of the author, with all its implications: the battle with himself, the mystical experience of meeting God, of being abandoned by Him and of long pursuits, the honest desire to reach the communion with Him and the presence of elements which have to do with the spiritual intimacy of the author and with the manner in which it emerges in relation to divinity.

The definition of the genre comes across several times throughout the thesis, thus offering the reader the possibility of a clarification and an adherence to a certain position amid so many fronts of debate or of theological openings.

Before analysing the theological background of the thesis written by Maxim Morariu, one must notice his holistic approach to the referenced authors. This approach provides the reader with information on their biography and puts their works in the context in which they were written,

all this against the backdrop of the history of the society in which they were active.

From a theological point of view, the first asset of the book is the thorough, yet discreet manner in which it is built, the entire architecture of arguments being established on the testimonies of the New Testament and of the Church Father. If most specialists invoke Saint Augustine as the founder of the genre, the author moves the beginning of spiritual autobiography earlier on, in the time apostolic era, its founding father being Saint Paul, the Apostle. The Pauline writings would become paradigmatic for the genre of spiritual autobiography, with respect both to the manner in which mystical ecstasy is presented and to the content of ecstasy, that is to the connection between ecstasy-revelation and suffering: “Paul sees the revelation he is blessed with in relation to the suffering which follows. Moreover, he reads suffering in the light of revelation. The former grants a new light, a reading pathway and a meaning to the latter.” (Morariu 2019, 85).

At first sight, the pages in which the author presents the evolution of the genre, starting from Saint Paul, the Apostle, continuing with Saint Augustine and Teresa and up to John of Kronstadt, can seem a pedantic anthology of much chronological information. In reality, the author puts forward a free and lively reflection on certain texts which are fundamental for Christian spiritual theology. Before shedding light on the autobiographical landmarks of Orthodox theology in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the different meanings associated by the three big Christian denominations with the term spiritual autobiography are mentioned. The Orthodox and Catholic spirituality have fully adhered to the Pauline model of presentation. There is no time or space, everything being focused on the relationship between the soul and God or on the message of the revelation. Things are different in the Protestant space, where the accent falls on time and space and “on the testimonial dimension of the author’s conversion and of its valences, but also on the way in which this conversion can be useful to the reader” (Morariu 2019, 148-147). Although the author does not specify it, against the backdrop of the aforementioned distinctions, one can notice the contemplation which is present in the Orthodox and Catholic spiritualities and the ethical way in which Protestantism stands in front of a personal Jesus.

The hard core of the book consists of the three big chapters (“The Diary of Saint John of Kronstadt as Landmark of Spiritual Autobiography in the Orthodox Space in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries”; “Mystical Notes of Saint Silouane the Athonite and their Relevance for Spiritual Autobiography in the Orthodox Space”; “The Spiritual Autobiography of Nicolas Berdiaev and its Relevance for Contemporary Theology”), through which the author sheds light on the genre of Orthodox spiritual autobiography, by presenting significant quotations and by commenting on them. According to Father Maxim Morariu, “whether by chance or not,

all the three authors we will analyse come from the Slavic area. However, the contexts in which they were active were different.” (Morariu 2019, 153). Irrespective of the social context in which the three were active, I feel that it is not by chance that spiritual autobiographical writings appeared in the Slavic area. There are at least two arguments in this respect: a) there are two different contemplation accents in Orthodoxy, namely a theology of logos, explored by Greek theologians, and a theology of sacrifice, of the descending into the heart, an acknowledgement of abyss, which is peculiar to the Russian space – and I would like to mention here Saint Silouan, Bulgakov or Dostoevsky; b) another argument comes from the area of eschatology, in which the theology of the Russian space has been and continues to be pervaded by the feeling of salvation of the entire universe, theologically speaking by apokatastasis. I would like to mention here Pavel Florensky and Fyodor Dostoevsky, among others. Having these two arguments in mind, we can understand more clearly the fascination Russian theologians and saints had with living ecstasy and with delving into the abyss like no others. Yet ecstasy and suffering are two constants of spiritual autobiographical writings.

The reasons why the three authors kept a spiritual diary vary. Due to his honest way of writing about his spiritual weaknesses as well, Saint John of Kronstadt gives the impression that he is indirectly reacting to the sect of the Ioannites, showing them that he was a man and not the embodiment of the Holy Spirit, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Saint John kept a spiritual diary in order to monitor his spiritual condition, his evolution, his failures and the other aspects which made up his daily life and to see how both his spiritual and biographical trajectory changed over time.

On a different note, the diary of Father Kronstadt clearly shows that dogma is the backbone of the Church, for, without a dogmatic coherence, there is no spiritual life. Therefore, Saint John of Kronstadt is a true example of the fact that the intellect and spiritual living do not exclude each other.

The most famous spiritual autobiographical writings are doubtlessly the notes of Saint Silouan the Athonite and the words “Keep thy mind in hell and despair not” represent “a true piece of jewellery of contemporary sapiential literature” (Morariu 2019, 269). Although written in a fathomable language, the work of Saint Silouan overwhelms through its comprehensive theological content. The central subject around which the Saint builds his book is life in Christ, a living which entails instances of abyssal falling and Taboric rising. Speaking about this life in Christ, the Athonite monk tackles the practice of prayer and Hesichasm, humility, the gaining of gift through a patriarchal battle with God – “God, Thou art merciless” –, the loss of the gift, love, but also the relationship between personal salvation and the salvation of the entire world. The writing of Saint Silouan is relevant for Orthodox spiritual autobiography, as it is rich

in theological elements and concrete examples, which answer the metaphysical anxieties of the contemporary man: “The pleasant and personal character of the writing makes it accessible to a large category of readers, more or less familiarised with the theological space, who definitely find here answers to their anxieties and motivations to progress on the path of spiritual life” (Morariu 2019, 367).

Seen either as a philosopher among theologians or as a theologian among philosophers, Nicolas Berdiaev is unique among theologians through the way in which he speaks and writes about German idealism, without being a dilettante. This is something hard to achieve in the world of contemporary philosophers and theologians. His ideas and writings are referential even nowadays and some of his approaches are yet matchless; to argue this, I would like to mention his book on the metaphysics and spirituality of Dostoevsky. The book of the Russian philosopher which Father Maxim studies in his thesis, considering it to be essential for the research of Orthodox autobiography, is a less well-known one, namely *An Essay in Autobiography*. The text is important and useful in understanding the personality of Berdiaev, his works, the genesis and the metamorphosis of his ideas, but also in the historical investigation of the epoch in which he lived in Russia, which culminated with the 1917 revolution and the history of the Russian exile to the French space.

As Iuliu-Marius Morariu also underscores, the subject which consumed Berdiaev was basically a Christian one, namely freedom. Personally, I believe that, by placing freedom upon the Being, he reaches a speculation which is alien to Christianity. If, according to the Russian philosopher, freedom precedes the Being and, at some point, this freedom decides to become a Being, then the being who thus appeared can no longer be absolute.

Going back to the PhD thesis of Father Morariu, which took the form of the volume *Landmarks of Spiritual Autobiography in the Orthodox Space of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, we would like to mention that its pages are well-documented, but inviting, and the book itself is proof of the fact that the author was engaged in a spiritual endeavour for which knowledge meant not only an indexing of reading notes, but a true pathway.

Analysed from a spiritual perspective, the book of theologian Iuliu-Marius Morariu provides the religious scholars with a summary of the peculiarities of the autobiographical genre in the Eastern space and, on the other hand, it creates connection points with the spirituality of other Christian denominations, which should be tackled in further specialised studies. From a dogmatic perspective, the pages written by the theologian from Cluj analyse in a personal way subjects such as grace, freedom, love and suffering.

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