

Aspects of Political Theology in the Spiritual Autobiography of Nicolae Steinhardt

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Abstract: Important personality of the Romanian space, the Jew Nicolae Steinhardt that will discover the Christianity in prison and will be baptised in Jilava prison, will be not only an intellectual with ecumenical vocation, but also a writer that offers a rich testimony about the way how Communism from the Romanian space can not only ruin a life, but also make one to come closer to God and arrive to a deeper consciousness of the real values of life and spirituality that will therefore be connected to the cultural space, seen as an alternative and a form of survival in the Prison life. Both the experience that he had as an imprisoned for political reasons, like the one after his release will be emphasized in his discontinuous journal and therefore aspects like political theology will come as outcomes of his experiences or as forms of presenting the conclusions of his lectures.

Contribution: Based on The diary of happiness, the most important and the most translated work of Nicolae Steinhardt (translated in 20 languages), that constitutes also an important part of the samizdat literature from Romania during the Communist period, the present research emphasizes the way how Steinhardt's spiritual autobiography comes in contact with the political theology, bringing into attention the pillars of his conception.

Keywords: *Diary of happiness; prison; communist period; Romania; Zimoviev.*

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Introduction

With the *Diary of happiness* (Steinhardt, 1999), Nicolae Steinhardt wrote a complex page of the spiritual autobiography from the contemporary space and in the same time managed to enrich the samizdat literature from the Romanian Communist space. The Jew imprisoned for the refuse of declaring fake things about his friends that will embrace the Christianity will discover God in an inter-confessional context (Mureşan, 2020, p. 32) and will become, after his release from the prison, not only a brave monk, but also an important name in the cultural space. His references will not only be related with culture and spirituality, but also with the philosophical field, the historical, sociological or the political one.

Despite of the restrictions imposed by the censorship, he will manage to spread his ideas both in the publications of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, but also in the cultural ones and in different books, initially under the pseudonym Nicolae delarohia (literaly “from Rohia,” the name of the monastery where he lived, from Maramureş Department, Northern part of Transylvania), and later under his real name, N. Steinhardt. Using his spiritual autobiography, written in three versions of manuscript due to the fact that it was twice confiscated by the Romanian Securitate, we will try there to speak about the aspects of political theology that can be found in this work, meant to describe his prison experience and what he learned from it. Methodologically, the narrative and deductive methods will be the ones mostly used and the question that we will try to answer is: which are the aspects of political theology that can be found in this discontinuous diary, where there can be found rear and coded information about the topic and more often references related with the philological or the philosophical area?

N. Steinhardt (1912-1989)– bio-bibliographical landmarks

Before bringing into attention the *Diary of happiness* and emphasizing the main aspects that define Steinhardt’s conception on political theology, we consider it important to bring into attention the landmarks of his life and activity. This short introductory part will help a reader who comes from a cultural and social context that is different from his one, to have a deeper understanding and probably also a better reception of his ideas, that will be therefore easily to place in the context where he lived and worked.

Born on 19th of July 1912 in Pantelimon, nearby Bucharest, the Freud’s relative, as will be called in different documents (Morariu, 2022,

p. 317), was a Jew, son of Oscar, the director of a factory of furniture and lumber. He studied both in particular at „Clementa school” and in „Spiru Haret” college from Bucharest from 1919-1929, where he will have as colleagues’ important personalities of the Romanian culture from the 20th century, such as Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica or Alexandru Paleologu. After the graduation from 1929, he will receive a BA in Law in Bucharest University in 1934 and, two years later, a PhD, with a thesis dedicated to the work of Léon Duguit (Steinhardt, 2008). With this and another book of chronicles he will make his debut as a writer. Later, he will work for the Romanian Royal Foundations, publishing several books. During the Legionary Movement government, he will be excluded and later reinserted in the system.

After the instauration of the Communism, he will be also restricted and avoided. This will force the young Jew to seek for different employments that were under his qualification. Later, in 1958, the philosophical group of Constantin Noica that he was part of, will be imprisoned and accused in the basis of the 209th article from the Romanian Penal Code (that allowed in fact to imprison everybody without any reason), for activity against Romania. One year later he will be called at the Securitate and asked to denounce his friend. The refuse will bring him a condemnation of 12 years of forced labour, 7 years of civic degradation and the total confiscation of personal property (Morariu, 2020, p. 62). Here, in the prison of Jilava and later in the others one that he will be forced to pass thorough, Nicu Aureliu (as it was his birth name) will discover, little by little the Christianity that he will convert to. He will not be the only Jew doing that. Richard Wurmbrand (Hulber, 2018; Wurmbrand, 1975; Wurmbrand, 1993; Wurmbrand, 1969), for example will be another Jew that will chose for Christianity in the Prison. While Steinhardt will become an Orthodox, the other one will become a Lutheran. All of them will be part of a complex assembly of people with ecumenical configuration.

About this aspect, Steinhardt will talk in his memory, when he describes his baptism. The event will take place on 15th of March 1960 in Jilava Prison and will be realized by the Orthodox hieromonk Mina Dobzeu. While the catechisation will be made both by Catholic and Greek-Catholic priests and most probably also some Evangelical pastors. The baptism will be fulfilled after his release when he becomes a fervent Christian and due to the same clergyman (for more information about his life and activity and his relationship with Nicolae Steinhardt see also: Dobzeu, 2002; Petcu, Luchian, & Buțcu, 2021; Roșca, 1997), will arrive in the Northern part of Romania, in Maramureș county, as a monk. Here, he will start by preparing the rich

library of the monastic place and will end by becoming a monk. He will live there almost for two decades until his death that will come in 1989.

Little by little he will be accepted again to publish and therefore, will release valuable books for the Romanian culture, but also for the universal spirituality, both thanks to the books released during his life, but also for the posthumously published ones (see for example: Steinhardt, 1976; Steinhardt, 1980; Steinhardt, 1983; Steinhardt, 2000; Steinhardt, 2001; Steinhardt, 2001a; Steinhardt, 2002; Steinhardt, 2006). He will therefore be notorious as a literary criticist, philosopher and also as a theologian.

The diary of happiness and the political theology

It must be mentioned from the beginning that compared with authors of spiritual autobiography from other confessional backgrounds like Dag Hammarskjöld (Hammarskjöld, 1972; Erling, 2009; Morariu, 2018, p. 1) for example, Steinhardt's *Diary of happiness*, a work with a huge relevance for the memorialistic dedicated to the Romania of the Communist period, is not a work that articulates a complex conception regarding political theology. Although it was considered by the author himself as being his „spiritual testament” (Ciomoş, 1999, p. 5), the author speaks about aspects like the cultural ones, references to the political aspects can be found there¹, the author will rather insist there on aspects like spirituality, the resistance that can take place thorough culture or the way how faith and love can change your life. Ecumenist thorough his vocation, as it can be seen from its baptism and his later life, both as a writer and as a monk, Steinhardt will consider the dialogue as being the landmark of a Christian life. In prison, he will insist on the fact that prayer is the tool that one has in front of the ones who try to persecute him and that culture represents a form of resistance.

The three solutions

When one wants to investigate the way how his spiritual autobiography deals with political theology, he or she must for sure investigate carefully its beginning. There the author of one of the most translated books from the Romanian culture speaks about the three solutions that he sees in front of any form of unjust persecution. All of these solutions can help a political imprisoned like him to resist in front of the

¹ There is such an example: "As in the case of G. B. Shaw's play, the issue of the novels *The Birds* by Alexandru Ivasciuc and the *Gallery of Wild Vine* by Constantin Țoiu raises questions about the legitimacy of a totalitarian political regime and the functionality of a system based on lies." (Mureşan 2020: 52).

investigations, beatings and all forms of pressure. He even offers examples by showing that his ideas were inspired by writers like Solženicyn (Solženicyn, 1997; Solženicyn, 1998), Zinoviev (Zinoviev, 1981), Churchill and his attitude towards the Second World War or Bukovskij (Bukovskij, 1998; Bukovskij, 2006). Three of the four ones are notorious for their attitude against communism and its ideas, while Churchill remains a personality of the global political theology that changed the history of the world in the 20th century.

Steinhardt even offers a detailed presentation of each of the three solutions offered, showing which are the strong points of each of them. First of them, enounced, as he underlines, in the first volume of Solženicyn's *Gulag Archipelag* consists in the fact of considering yourself dead in the moment when you are called to the investigation or imprisoned. He therefore shows about it:

"It consists (the method) for anyone who steps over the threshold of the Securitate or another analogous investigative body, to say with determination: at this moment I am really dying. He is allowed to speak consolingly: sin of youth or woe of my old age, of my wife, of my children, of me, of talent or of goods, or of my strength, of my beloved, of the wines that I will not drink them again, the books I won't read anymore, the walks I won't do anymore, the music I won't listen to anymore, etc. and so on and so on. But something is certain and irreparable: from now on I am a dead man". (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 6).

In his „political testament” (Ciomoş, 1999, p. 5), the Romanian monk even insists on the fact that if one thinks in this way, is saved. Why? because he can no longer be blackmailed, threatened or put under pressure.² Despite of some humoristic notes, his approach is interesting and says a lot about a potential way to fight against the injustice and against the ideologies that can stay behind it.

The second is a personalised one. It is related with a certain social profile, the one of the rattler, that is pictured in some of Zinoviev work (Zinoviev, 2002). Being a man without a domicile, a kind of a defrocked, he has nothing to care about and therefore, there is no element that can be used

² "If he thinks so, reluctantly, the man is saved ... He has nothing to be threatened, blackmailed, deceived, emboldened ... He no longer has, because he no longer hopes, because he left the world, after longing, what he kept or regain, on what sells his soul, peace, honor". (Steinhardt 1999: 6).

against him in the accusation process. Moreover, there is nobody that can be use as to testify against him. Realizing a characterisation of such a typology that, in his conception is for sure meant to survive to the prison universe in areas like Romania that were considered by some voices as „penitentiary republics” (Gheorghiu, 2008, pp. 11-12), Steinhardt shows that:

"He lives from today to tomorrow, from what is given to him, from what falls, from what you wonder. He's dressed in rags. He works hard, sometimes, when and if the opportunity arises. He spends most of his time in prisons, or in labour camps, sleeping wherever he can. Wander. For nothing in the world does he enter the system, not even in the most insignificant, most sinful, most unemployed job ... Such a man, on the fringes of society, is also immune: they have no place to exert pressure on him, no they have something to take from them, they have nothing to offer. (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 7).

Moreover, he shows that such a profile is able to offer a resistance due to his or her easiness and to the fact that, the lack of education stops him to have certain borders in expressing the truth that an educated man, under the social pressure will have it. Therefore, he compares it with the child from *The Emperor's new clothes* of Andersen or with the clown from Lear king³.

For the political theology these ideas are relevant. They attract attention on some social dangers, emphasize the way how when they are based on ideologies, the political regime can be destructed and offer solutions. They show how somebody can resist in front of the fake accusation. If we take a look on his biography and on the prison experience that he had, we will understand why. Imprisoned for the fact that he refused to declare something against his friends and denied the political content of the discussions that they had (fact that was, in a big measure, true), he will have to face both the Securists that will punch and beat him, but also some of his friends that were convinced, on the basis of some so-called „classical methods” to testify against him. How did he resist? Most probably adopting one of the solutions presented in his spiritual autobiography. If one takes a

³ "He frees his mouth, talk until exhaustion words, gives voice to the most dangerous anecdotes, does not know what respect is, takes everything from above, says what comes to mind, speaks truths that others can not afford to whisper to them. He's the child in Andersen's fairy tale. It's King Lear's jester. It's the wolf in La Fondaine's fable - and she's bold: she has no idea about the collar. It's free, free, free. " (Steinhardt 1999: 7).

careful look on it, he will most probably be tempted to say that most probably the first one was the one that defined him.

But let us see the third solution too. This one is related with Churchill and Bukowski. It is based on something that can be placed in the neighbourhood of the adrenaline if it is not even this one, and it consists in the following aspects:

"It can be summarized as it follows: in the presence of tyranny, oppression, misery, misfortune, plagues, calamities, dangers and not only do you not give up, but on the contrary, you get out of them the crazy urge to live and fight." (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 7).

In order to illustrate the main aspects that define such a way of thinking and understanding realities, Steinhardt says:

"In March 1939, Churchill told Martha Bibescu⁴:" It will be war. Dust and powder will be chosen from the British Empire. Death lurks around us all. And I feel like I'm twenty years younger. " (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 7).

Of course, as he will later underline, this solution is an exceptional one and means bravery, still wish and an extraordinary state of the spiritual health.⁵ It is not something often encountered and therefore is rather related with the idea of heroism than with the one of survival. Is a kind of next level, fact determines the author to place it in the queue of his essay.

All the three situations emphasized by Nicolae Steinhardt come not only to summarize a rich literary content and the work of three novelists and a politician that can be surely considered relevant for the global cultural and socio-political landscape, but also to realize a transposition of some complex vision in an universe that he was forced to live in. In the same time, they come to emphasize the situation that he was forced to face and to provide

⁴ Martha Bibescu (1886-1973) or Marthe Lucie Lahovary, who will become thorough the marriage Bibesco, was a Romanian princess and writer known also under the pseudonyme Lucile Decaux. It is considered a french writer with Romanian origins, that was famous especially during the interwar period. For more information about her life and activity, see also (Rujan, 2003; Sutherland, 2004).

⁵ "This solution, of course, presupposes an exceptional strength of character, a military conception of life, a formidable moral stubbornness of the body, a will of ennobled steel and an adamantine spiritual health. It probably also involves a sports spirit: to like the battle itself - the fight more than the success." (Steinhardt 1999: 8).

solutions for the ones that, in a certain moment of their lives could be forced to pass thorough.

Prison and the confront with the others

An interesting aspect of Steinhardt's spiritual autobiography is also related with the investigations. It is known the fact that during the first part of the communist period the political imprisoned people were treated in a hard way. They were forced to say what the regime wanted to hear from them, either it was true or not. If they were part of the resistance (Jurju & Budeancă, 2022) they were sure related with the Americans and therefore they had to say all about this aspect. If they were part of a cultural movement, as in this case, they surely plotted to overthrow the social rules and therefore this aspect must be testified and punished. When they could not determined the imprisoned ones to speak about this, they confronted them with their friends that, after persecutions, have failed and did it. The encounter that they had with them had such a big emotional impact (both due to their physical aspect, as also for other reasons like the the fact that they were convinced to abjure from their principles), that will almost destabilish him emotionally. He describes it as it follows:

"And she? She's with them - simple as hello. It's on the other side. Yes, they did something not yet done. They brought, it is true, something new in the world: until now, if you wanted to lose a man, you addressed his enemies: the wife he divorced, the friend he broke up with, the associate he dragged to court; the contribution of the new, the most important innovation is that in order to destroy a man they do not go to quarrels, but to his friends, to his wife, to his children, to his mistresses, to those he loves and in whom he has put, human, stupid, trust and thirst for affection." (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 16).

All these encounters will make him to look very tired and will even determinate his guardian that, at the moment of his arrival in Jilava prison, to look carefully after him. Still, he will find the possibility to be happy under these conditions⁶, applying most probably one of the three models presented and using culture as a factor of survival.

⁶ "I must look very ruined, because the famous platoon leader Ungureanu, who welcomes me at the *Reduit's* gate, almost smiles at me (how, for example, the lover of selected dishes in

The inquiries and the prison

About the inhuman methods of inquiry used by Securitate it has been already written, both in the Russian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish or Serbian space. There is a rich memorialist literature approaching this topic. Some of the sources were even part of the samizdat literature of their countries. Among them, Steinhardt's *diary of hapiness*. The converted Jew will therefore speak about a dark practical side of the „political life” in Romania of the Communist period. He will describe his sufferance as it follows:

"Most of the time, I come back from the investigation terrified. Lieutenant-Major Onea, among the "simple security methods" with me, preferred it to the long repeated blows to the walls; other times I am trampled on (wearing boots). There is also Comrade Major Jack Simon, mustachioed and cold, with a crystalline voice, who reminds me that he decided, as a legionary Jew, to kill me with his hand. For now, I am put on the line, a solution disproportionate to the threat, but also unpleasant." (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 35).

It is also interesting the way how the guardians see the politics and their approach to it. As he underlines, he is considered a Legionary Jew, fact that is a flagrant contradiction, due to the far-right orientation of the Legionary Movement. Of course, this says a lot about their education level, about how they were taught to think and about the perception created to them. All these in order to create fear. Like him, Wurmbrand (Wurmbrand, 1969, p. 32) and other political imprisoned will have to face different fears. But what is this feeling? The author himself come to define it inside his notes:

"The fear of a real and immediate danger - located in time and space is called fear and is a normal feeling. The fear aroused by a simple virtuality (often aroused by an imagination that caught wings) is

front of a well-tendered game hunt would improve!) and entrusts me to the head of the room, recommending that he give me a single bed and take care of me. I am placed in the bed next to the door, like a suspect and looked at carefully by the head of the room. a Bessaranian with a Russian name, a gloomy, grumpy-eyed matahal; I soon find out that it is dangerous, it is said that it is a defrocked priest ...

In this almost unreally sinister place I would know the happiest days of my life. How absolutely happy I could be in room 34! (Neither in Braşov, with my mother as a child, nor on the endless streets of the mysterious London; nor on the proud hills of Muscel, nor in the blue illustrated setting of Lucerne; no, nowhere)." (Steinhardt, 1999, pp. 30-31).

called cowardice. Fear: I run away from the car coming towards me at high speed, it's natural to run away from the madman who rushes at me with a knife. I'm such a mad dog. Major Jack Simon nods at me: fear shakes me. The catastrophic abjection begins with the formula: Let it not be said that ... Let it not be called that ... But if somehow, it is better for me to go and denounce it ... ” (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 220).

His happiness is not disturbed even by the selfishness of the others⁷ or by different aspects from the daily life. Convinced that the faithful must be happy, despite of all the problems, as he testifies⁸, he therefore tries to maintain himself in a good state of heart.

Culture, spirituality and politics

As a personality with polyvalent formation and multiple concerns, Nicolae Steinhardt is conscious of the relevance of culture. He sees it as a form of resistance (Mureşan, 2020, p. 9) and is interested in cultivating it inside the prison experience. This is a fact often encountered in the prison universe, where the cultural fact was cultivated among the imprisoned people, especially due to the fact that some of them were intellectuals, professors, engineers or writers.

Like others, the Romanian Jew is interested in discussing with his colleagues of the cell cultural aspects. Sometimes he even arrives to conclusions regarding the political realities starting from books like Wilde's (Wilde, 1994) *Picture of Dorian Gray*:

"The portrait of Dorian Gray narrated by engineer Rosetti. It tells a very good story, but like a fantastic story.

I believe that it is a Christian novel with a moral thesis: namely that we cannot escape reality. Somewhere, she's signing up. There is no process - art, lie, hypocrisy, illusion - that can prevent it, to the point

⁷ Fact that does not means that this disturbs him: "Selfishness is natural. From the two ranges, I choose the fullest. Free wickedness is not from clay, but from the devil. There are forty of us in the cell and we only have three ruined spoons that we can barely use. After the head of the room is taken out of the cell, I find about ten good spoons under his mattress. Evil combined with stupidity gives a denser product than steel enriched with tungsten, tungsten, manganese ... ” (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 222).

⁸ "The believer is happy, so defended, but he is also vulnerable, exposed as a convalescent, as a living skinner. He is in the glass house, you see, and in the most intimate situations. ” (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 223).

of death, from manifesting itself on one of life's planes. Dorian Gray and the portrait cannot be beautiful at the same time: either in the living being or in the image, reality is recorded.” (Steinhardt, 1999, p. 258).

Conclusion

As we have tried to show there, Steinhardt's *Diary of happiness* represents not only one of the most representative memorial works from the Communist period, that offers a testimony about the way how the injustice and sufferance can bring one to the knowledge of God, but also a book that can be used in the historical, philological, philosophical or political field. Defined by the author himself as his „political testament” (Ciomoș, 1999, p. 5), the book also offers interesting information about the political theology. Thus, the three solutions suggested there by him summarize his perception on this area and speaks about the way how the ideologies can influence in a negative way the world and about the potential modalities of surviving to the injustice in areas like the prison. Conscious of the complexity of the phenomenon, he also tries to offer a solution to the problems and to be prophetic under certain aspects, to define the social realities, to describe some social mechanisms starting from the experiences that he had and also to bring into attention in an interdisciplinary way the spiritual experiences creating bridges among spiritualities and different areas from the socio-humanistic sciences. For this reason, like for many others, his book, already translated in more than 20 languages shall be discovered by all the readers who want to know more about Communism and its dark influences on the ones considered as not being politically correct, or to understand the complexity of a problem emphasized in a very plastic way. With a PhD. in law, but also with a rich lecture background, the Romanian monk offers a well-written text, complex but also relevant for the theological field and for the Christian spirituality.

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