

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY GENRE IN THE THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE: THE SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND ITS LANDMARKS FOR THE ORTHODOX SPACE

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Thesis. Important for all the Christian confessions, spiritual autobiography has so far been insufficiently investigated and highlighted by contemporary researchers.

Concept/Methods. Therefore, using information from sources such as *Confessions* of Saint Augustin, but also recent works such as the one of Saint Silouan from Athos, Saint John of Kronstadt or Nicolas Berdiaev, and using these representative sources for the Orthodox sphere and other volumes, studies and articles, we will try to analyse this genre, to emphasise its interdisciplinary valences, and to show which are landmarks in the Orthodox sphere. We will also try to present its particularities here, its common points with other confessional spheres (Catholic or Protestant), and its practical importance for the Christian life. The information provided by the aforementioned sources will be investigated using deductive, analytic, and inductive methods (and also, the narrative one when the situation will request it).

Results and conclusion. The investigation will show to the reader why, despite of the fact that is a peripheral genre of Theological literature, spiritual autobiography is important for investigation and it helps to create bridges between different spiritualities and investigation domains, but also its potential practical use.

Originality/Cognitive value. The analysis is also important because there we will show that, a long time before the rediscovering of subjectivism and subjectivity in literature (which happened in the 20th century with Modernism), in the theological space this topic was not only known but also valorised in this genre. As methods, we will both use the deductive and the analytic, but we will also not neglect the narrative one.

Key words: Saint John of Kronstadt, Saint Silouan the Athonite, mystique experience, meeting with God, repentance, sufferance

INTRODUCTION

Although it starts with Saint Augustin *Confessions* (Saint Augustin, 2006) written in the 4th century (Dinzelbacher, 1983, p. 82; Coman, 1975, p. 655, Kalaitzidis, 2010, p. 87, Baslez, Hoffmann, Pernot, 1993; Spengerman, 1980, p.3; Morariu, 2015,

p. 166), the spiritual autobiography has its deeper roots in the second letter sent by Paul to the Corinthians, where, in the 12th chapter (Morariu, 2018), he speaks about his spiritual rapture (for more information about this topic and its meaning, see also: Omanson, 2011, p. 307-311; Martin, 1986; Minor, 2009; Vegge, 2008; Barclay, 2003, p. 1352-1370; Ziesler, 1992). As an important genre it can be found in the Christian space from the beginning of Christianity, it offers as not only historical information about its authors, but also details about their interior struggles, their road for meeting God and the situation of the Church in different times.

In a space where almost from the beginning it was the custom to write in the 3rd person, in a detached way and not about yourself, these works are special, rare and important. Therefore, we will try here not only to present the genre, but also to investigate its particularities and to show what its landmarks in the Orthodox faith are.

But before doing this, we consider it important to say a few words about spiritual autobiography as a genre. Despite its importance, there are very few tentative efforts to define it. Almost all the authors start from the premise that it is already known what spiritual autobiography means and nobody tries to emphasise, even briefly some of its characteristics. And when, in special situations, this happens, the definitions are not complete. Therefore, in brief, we must say that this genre, with importance for pastoral psychology (Moschella, 2011, p. 95) and many other theological topics contains description of the spiritual lives of the authors (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English*, 1992, p. 56). In some of the situations, especially in the protestant space and starting from the 19th centuries (but also in Augustin's *Confessions*), it speaks also about the conversion of themselves (Sutton, 2001, p. 39). Also, even if sometimes the author uses temporal and spatial landmarks, the accent is not on them, but on his interior transformation, and on the way how his life is changed by the interaction with grace and with the others, seen as brothers in Christ.

Because of these elements, not all the autobiographical works from the Christian space can be considered spiritual autobiographies. Especially now, when the autobiographical genre has known a great increase in spaces like the Orthodox one, it must be noticed that not all the memories and diaries are spiritual autobiographies, only the ones where these elements are present. Starting from this assumption, we will try here to investigate the genre of spiritual autobiography showing its interdisciplinary valences and landmarks in the Orthodox space.

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As we have mentioned already above, because of the named criteria, not all the autobiographical writings can be considered as part of spiritual autobiography genre. Therefore, when we speak about it in the Orthodox space, we can classify in this area only the works of Saint Silouan from Mount Athos

(Athonite, 1976), the ones of Saint John of Kronstadt (Kronstadt, 2005), and the ones of the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdiaev (Berdiaev, 1979). Memories and diaries like the one of the Romanian monk and writer Nicolas Steinhardt (Steinhardt, 2002) or the correspondence of Vladimir and Olga Lossev from Gulag (Lossev, & Lossev, 2014) also contain interesting passages of spiritual autobiographies, but still they are not part of it. We say that only some parts of them can be considered so. Therefore, when one speaks about the spiritual autobiography from the Orthodox space, he must discern between the spiritual autobiographies and the memorial works that contain passages of spiritual autobiography.

But why is this genre interdisciplinary in the Orthodox space, and in the other Christian ones? This will be a question that we will try to answer it before speaking about the particularities of the aforementioned theological species in the Eastern space. If we take a look into the evolution of literature, we will see that the orientation towards subjectivism and subjectivity has started here with the modernism, in the 20th century. (Lejeune, 2000, p. 12, Lejeune, 1971, p. 7; Lungu, 2009, p. 5). In the Christian space, we can find the roots of this orientation even in the Holy Scripture and, in a much elaborated way, in Augustin's *Confessions*. From this point of view, the Christianity was far ahead of time and literature.

If we go particularly into the Orthodox space, we will see that there, although the genre has not known during the time such a great increase like in the Catholic and Protestant ones, there still are some important spiritual autobiographies that have an interdisciplinary value and can be used from many perspectives. In *Priesthood treaty* of Saint Gregory of Nazianz (Nazianz, 1998) from the 4th century, a work that although is not a spiritual autobiography in the real sense but contains passages of it, we can find interesting theological and philosophical information about the world and the perception of people of those times about some realities. This makes it to be an interdisciplinary approach.

If we come closer, in the 19th and the 20th centuries, where we can find three spiritual autobiographies and some other memorials and diaries that also contain passages of the genre (but where, despite of the presence of some spiritual autobiographies, there cannot be spoken about the increase that the genre has it in Catholic and protestant space through works like the one of Faustina Kowalska (Kowalska, 2005), Saint Pope John Paul the Second (Paul II, 2017), Saint Theresa of Calcutta (Calcutta, 2007) or Dag Hammarskjold (Erling, 2010; Hammarskjold, 1972), we will see how the interdisciplinary value of the genre is more obvious. Therefore, reading for example the diary of Saint John of Kronstadt, important Russian personality of the 19th and first part of 20th century, who has also influenced Saint Silouan from Mount Athos, one of the other important authors of that space (Egger, 2001, p. 3; Sophrony, 1973, p. 352), we will see very interesting historical information about that time, about the history of Russian Church and about political and philosophical concerns of the people. Also, as a narrative, his notes are very interesting and with a certain literary value, which explains why they were so well received. Speaking about the reception of this text its soon translation into English in 1897 and the

writings from the English space dedicated to it, Alla Selawry shows that:

“Alexandre White, PhD in Theology of Edinburgh University, published a work in two volumes about Father John. The first of them entitled *Eulogy to Father John* is dedicated to his biography; and the second contains extracts from his diary. The author remarks: I have read several times very carefully the diary *My life in Christ*; I have read everything that was published about the life and work of Father John. I had the conviction that the author is the most important religious writer of today and he is a real mystic of Spirit and a man of experienced prayer equal to Saint Theresa, Thomas a Kempis and Rutherford. Many of his notes, so sincere, full of force, are ended by this conclusion: “It is my spiritual experience.” (Selawry, 2001, p. 94).

Therefore, in the case of Saint John of Kronstadt, the spiritual autobiography can be used in historical investigation, offering information about his time’s Russia, the beginning of communism there but also in sociological researches because it offers information about the social situation of his time, its problems and the causes of it and even solutions, but also in philosophy and philology because of the ideas expressed there. In the same time, it is a very valuable theological research that can be used in Dogmatic space, catechisms, history of the Church, Liturgics or spirituality and it offers interesting solutions at contemporary life’s problems.

Surely his spiritual experience has a huge contribution to the reception and understanding of the book. But there we must not neglect its literary value and the contribution of the erudition of the author to this. When someone reads the notes of Saint John he is also impressed by his approaches to the Scripture, references to other important Christian writers or by his discernment in analysing Church or society situation. His abilities as a teacher in Kronstadt high school can also be seen in the coherence of his ideas his argumentation and the logical structure of the text. Through all these his work became an interesting piece of the genre and an interdisciplinary one.

The same thing can also be said about the second text, signed by Saint Silouane, monk from Mount Athos. Although he was not as educated as the aforementioned author (classified also between the monks and saints, despite the fact that he was a married man; Behr-Siegel, 1982, p. 159), he has in his notes interesting philosophical meditations about man ,his purpose and the meaning of the world, but also beautiful texts about forgiveness and humiliation, with poetical accents. For example:

“When I have received the Grace of Holy Spirit, I have understood that God has forgiven my sins. His Grace testified to me and I have taught that I didn’t need anything else. But, it was not good to think in this way; even if our sins have already been forgiven, we should remember all our lives about it, and repent. Me, because I haven’t done so, I have lost the purpose of my life and I have suffered a lot because of demon’s work. I couldn’t understand what was happening to me. My soul has known Lord and his love, so why were these bad thoughts allowed? But the Lord had mercy on me and He showed me the wish of humiliation: “Live yourself conscious of hell and do not despair”. And

so, I have defended the enemy" (Athonite, 1976, p. 35).

On the other side, the autobiography of Berdiaev who was a professional philosopher is interdisciplinary because of the interaction between Theology and Philosophy that can be found in its content. Because of the rich content of the latter, some of the researchers and readers of the book have said that "the best introduction to Berdiaev's thought can be found in his autobiography" (Casañas, 1982, p. 282). Through this but also by the interesting analyses of the situation in Russia at his time, similar in some ways with the one of Vasili Krivoşen (Krivoşen, 2016) also a Russian from exile, he offers an interesting interdisciplinary text and an interesting book, useful both for the literary, historical, philosophical and theological space.

CONCLUSION

As we have tried to emphasize above, despite of fact that it hasn't the impact from the other Christian confessional spaces, the spiritual autobiography is important also for the Orthodox one. Reading texts like the aforementioned ones helps us to understand better the Orthodox spirituality and the way it can be implemented in real life. It also shows that, before the discovering of subjective writing in the literary space, the Theological one has already known this genre and was the depository of some interesting treasures and it helps have a deep view into this confessional space and to realize that although sometimes from outside Orthodoxy seems to not have many cultural aspects and values, when we look inside, we discover a rich cultural legacy, rooted in the Scripture, Byzantine culture and other important influences.

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