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8th LUMEN International Scientific Conference Rethinking Social Action.
Core Values in Practice | RSACVP 2017 | 6-9 April 2017 |
Suceava – Romania

Rethinking Social Action.
Core Values in Practice

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https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.rsacvp2017.50

How to cite: Morariu, I. M. (2017). Aspects of Applied Ethics in the Spiritual Autobiographies from the Orthodox Space in the 19thand 20th Centuries. In C. Ignatescu, A. Sandu, & T. Ciulei (eds.), *Rethinking Social Action. Core Values in Practice* (pp. 548-557). Suceava, Romania: LUMEN Proceedings
https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.rsacvp2017.50

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Aspects of Applied Ethics in the Spiritual Autobiographies from the Orthodox Space in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Iuliu-Marius MORARIU[1]*

Abstract

Despite its importance for contemporary theology, spiritual autobiography hasn't been highlighted enough in the Orthodox Theology until now. This is the reason why this article's aim is to bring into attention this important genre of the Orthodox Theology and to highlight some of its particular aspects. Thus, in this research, we will emphasise the way in which the most important aspects of applied ethics are presented by authors such as Saint John of Kronstadt, Saint Silouan the Athonite, but also by other authors of memoires and autobiographical works, which contain aspects of spiritual autobiographies. We will try to present how they see the neighbour in their works, their position as to moral and ethical principles, and what they think about social, moral and bioethical issues such as suicide, birth or death. We will also try to compare their ideas with those of other authors of spiritual autobiographies from the same period, but from other confessional spaces (e. g. Catholic or Protestant), in order to create bridges between the Orthodox Christian spirituality and other Christian spiritualties. Then, we will try to highlight the actuality of their thoughts and markings and to see how their ideas can be used in Theological research and in everyday life by a simple faithful. In conclusion, the research will try both to bring into attention an area of research that hasn't been investigated and to offer an interesting and useful approach for the everyday life of the contemporary Christian.

Keywords: Saint Silouan the Athonite, Saint John of Kronstadt, journals and memoires, autobiographies, moral and applied ethics.

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https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.rsacvp2017.50
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1. Introduction

Despite its importance for contemporary theology, spiritual autobiography is not highlighted enough by contemporary research. In the theological space, and especially in the Orthodox one, which will constitute the area of this research, it is not even very clear what spiritual autobiography actually means. The few articles and studies dedicated to this topic [2 p564-668], [9 p997-102] do not contain an explanation of the phenomenon and of its evolution, only some unclear references to it. In some cases, there are even situations when the author encourages the confusion, by classifying as part of the genre some patristic works from the first centuries, which are dedicated to theological questions. This is one of the reasons why, as we have already said before ([15, p11], [16 p113-123], and as other researchers have confirmed [23, p7], today, writing about spiritual autobiography constitutes a difficult demarche, but an important one, with multiple applications. Thus, for example, investigating the aspects of applied ethics from spiritual autobiographies can create links between ethics, theology and literature. It also can constitute a bridge between them, but it can also offer solutions for contemporary problems. All these make this field of investigation internationally relevant.

2. Theoretical Background

Despite all the issues already mentioned, we will try to investigate this important part of theological literature from the Orthodox space and to show how the aspects of applied ethics are emphasised in spiritual autobiographies. For this, we will analyse the books of Saint John of Kronstadt [13], [12], [14] and Saint Silouan the Athonite [22], the most important authors for this topic, but also some autobiographical books of authors who can be classified in this category of writers [7], Calciu, 2007). Their works will be presented and analysed in order to see how they reflect the investigated topic. We will not make a philological literary analysis, but rather an investigation from a theological point of view. Therefore, we will try to highlight the theological background of the two authors' works and their practical usefulness for our field.

3. Argument of the paper

We will try to show in this research why and how some aspects of applied ethics are mentioned in the books of Saint John of Kronstadt and Saint Silouan the Athonite and to analyse the impact of the authors and of their ideas in the theological space, because, even if they present personal ideas, due to the spiritual importance of the authors, many of these ideas have been accepted and promoted by the entire Church where they activated.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

The fact that most of the ideas of the investigated authors are assumed today by the Church confirms their normative value for the Church. Consequently, by analysing the aspects of applied ethics belonging to this genre of Theological literature, we offer an opinion of the Orthodox Church about the social ethics.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

One may say that, because this genre is not present in literature, the ideas exposed are not normative. However, leaving this aside, there are not many theoretical arguments against this approach. The reason, once again, is the lack of research dedicated to this topic, in the Orthodox Theology.

5.1. Structure

5.1. 1. What is spiritual autobiography?

Before emphasising the way in which the aspects of applied ethics are presented in the pages of the aforementioned works, we consider important to explain what "spiritual autobiography" means for the Christian space, and in particular, for the Orthodox one. The reader will not find a definition of the genre even in the pages of encyclopaedic dictionaries [6 p854-856], [3 p83-85], [4, p851].

However, he / she can find important definitions that help him / her understand, at least partially, the meaning of the genre. Thus, for example, the mentioned encyclopaedia defines spiritual autobiography as "the account of an individual human life, written by the subject himself" [6 p854]. Other authors try to offer a definition, starting from its usefulness.

Therefore, for example, Moschella Clarck shows that spiritual autobiography can reach other people' s lives [17 p95] and emphasises the fact that, "the process of writing a spiritual autobiography constitutes a life-giving activity" [17 p96]. Others insist on the fact that:

"Spiritual autobiography is a narrative form with a long history in Western Christianity. Beginning with the experience of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus, holy men and women have sought to capture in narrative their experience with a living God" [20 p139-140].

Nonetheless, perhaps the most complex definition of spiritual autobiography is offered by Adam Smith, who specialises in this research topic. After he shows that the origins of spiritual autobiography can be found in the research of Saint Augustine [21, p2-3] and highlights the fact that, in the English space, the genre has flourished in the 16th and 17th centuries [21 p3], he speaks about autobiography as literature of subjectivity [8 p13] and about the fact that it must be understood as part of a complex process of "self-assertion" [21 p6].

Having noticed all this, we can say that spiritual autobiography is a genre of theological literature that contains the writings of some authors about their selves. Like in the case of Dag Hammarskjöld, where the writer presents his struggle with himself [5 p6], in all spiritual autobiographies from the Orthodox space, the author insists on his inner fight and on his spiritual road to God. Unlike the Catholic or the Protestant space, in the Orthodox one, in most cases, the author speaks about himself, but without using the 1st person and without specifying that "he is the one" when talking about his spiritual performances; by doing this, he is practicing humility.

5.1.2. Aspects of applied ethics in the spiritual autobiographies from the Orthodox space in the 19th and 20th centuries

5.1.2.1. Aspects of applied ethics in the spiritual autobiography of Saint John of Kronstadt

In the former part of our approach, we have presented the meanings of spiritual autobiography. Now, we will try to emphasise the way in which the aspects of applied ethics are presented in the works of Saint John of Kronstadt, an important Russian father from the 19th century (for more information about his biography, see also: [10], [1]). Before starting our demarche, we must specify the fact that, in the works of Saint John, where he presents aspects from his biography and the evolution of his relation with God, applied ethics is a peripheral subject.

He speaks about death when he presents the benefits of faith, about depression when he analyses his spiritual evolution and s. o. From time to time, he emphasises a theological opinion about elements like the soul and its importance for the contemporary world. Without wishing to offer a perspective about the soul seen as a matter of applied ethics, he offers an interesting perspective on it. He says the following:

"The soul, which defines me as man, lives only in God, only in union with him. And, when it is separated from Him, it suffers" [12 p148].

If nowadays, in the discussions about the soul and its importance, specialists started from the idea that the soul is the defining element of the human being, many problems of bioethics would be already solved. Seeing man as a composite structure, where the Divine part is the most important one, would certainly bring new accents into the bioethics discourse. The same can be said about Saint John's conception on sin. He shows that sin is the greatest plague of the contemporary world and he thinks that the way in which sin makes the soul imagine pleasure contributes to the loss of the soul:

"How is sin cheating a man or, in other words, how is sin buying a man? Through the imagination of pleasures, the satisfaction of self-love, love for being honoured, of pride, of envy, of greed; through the passion to possess, to have enough, to be at rest" [13 p65].

If these aspects were analysed in the discussions about transplant, euthanasia or cloning, the answers of specialists and the conclusions of the discussions would certainly be different from the contemporary ones.

Therefore, this is the way in which some aspects of applied ethics are presented in the works of Saint John of Kronstadt. As we will see, there are many common points with the approaches of other authors of spiritual autobiography from the Orthodox space, but also some differences compared to Saint Silouan the Athonite, for example.

5.1.2.2. Aspects of applied ethics in the spiritual autobiography of Saint Silouan the Athonite

Known in the Orthodox Theology especially for the answer received from God to all his questions about the Mystical life ("Keep your mind in hell and do not despair"; [22 p45]), and for being the theologian who promoted the "enlargement of the heart" [25], Saint Silouan is maybe, as his disciple, staretz Sophrony, defined him in the biography that he dedicated to him [19], the only author from the Eastern theological space who wrote a

real spiritual autobiography. In his notes, he often presents his struggle with himself and his road to the rediscovering of God's grace.

After continuous moments of sadness, caused by the loss of it, he feels again the presence of God in his life. Then, he prays that everybody share his feelings, through the work of the Holy Spirit, which represents a real proof of the authenticity of his revelation:

"Merciful God, give your Grace to all the people of this Land, so that they know You, because, without the Holy Spirit, the Soul can't know you and can't understand your love. God, send above us Your Holy Spirit, because everything about You can be known only thorugh the Holy Spirit that you gave at the beginning to Adam, then to the Holy Prophets and then, to Christians... God, be merciful and give us the gifts of the Holy Spirit, to know your glory and live on earth in peace and love" [22 p45].

Yet, how did Saint Silouan, the monk from Mount Athos, present the issues of applied ethics in his spiritual autobiography? Certainly, in a theoretical way and without particularising some problems. For example, in his opinion, knowing God means everything. It means having a moral life and the possibility of Salvation. A great obstacle in meeting Him is pride. That is why he says that:

"Because of their mind's pride, the Lord is not known to many people, and, despite all this, they think they know many things. But what does their science mean without knowing the Lord?" [22 p53-54].

In a complementary way, he says somewhere else that: "people are valuing so much the earthly sciences, or knowing an earthly king, but the real important thing is to know God and His wish" [19 p343].

Therefore, the only thing that really matters in the opinion of Saint Silouan is the wish of God, that brings morality and life principles to the faithful. He never thinks about problems like euthanasia, cloning or anything of the like, but he always sees with responsibility the problems of the contemporary world and always offers the best solution: the acceptance of God's will, which must be followed. For him, death means "life in sin"[2], whereas the source of peace is the practice of humility, understood as a theological virtue[3].

[2]As he says, offering the alternative: "A life in sin is the death of the soul. But the love of God is the heaven of pleasures where our father Adam lived before his fall"[22 p59].

[3]"The proud man is afraid of reproaches, but the humble one is not. The one who touched the humility of Christ even wants to receive the reproaches, he receives criticism with joy and he is sad when somebody praises him. But this is only the beginning of humility. When the soul knows, by the work of the Holy Spirit, how humble and gentle God is, it considers himself the

5.1.2.3. Aspects of applied ethics in other works that contain passages of spiritual autobiography

Unfortunately, as we have already said, there are no other spiritual autobiographies in the Orthodox space of the 19th and 20th centuries. While, in the Catholic and in the Protestant ones, we can often find in this period works from this genre signed by authors like Faustina Kowalska [11], pope John Paul II [18], Dag Hammarskjöld [5] and s. o., in the Orthodox space, the only two works dedicated to this subject can be considered the aforementioned ones. Nonetheless, despite that, we can find parts of the genre in autobiographies written by people who were imprisoned by the Communist regime or who had a strong spiritual life.

For example, Father Gheorghe-Calciu Dumitreasa [24], imprisoned twice during the Communist regime in Romania, describes his life in prison, the investigation and s. o. He presents an aspect of social ethics by highlighting the fact that, once, he refused to eat and drink anything:

"I didn't want to eat, I didn't want to answer, I was doing nothing. I refused even to go to the toilet. I felt that I couldn't handle it anymore, but I still refused" [24 p89].

If somebody read these words, he /she could be tempted to say that he was against his Church's principles. But, if we read carefully, we will see that his attitude was a special one and it constitutes a way of protesting against the prison regime. Through his attitude, he shows that a Christian must be interested in the evolution of the world he lives in and he / she must influence it.

Apparently, his opinion and that of Saint Silouan are in contradiction. However, the fact is that the two writers are the exponents of two different social and cultural areas of the Orthodox life. While the Athonite monk is part of the mystical life of his community, father Gheorghe was an active priest of the Romanian Orthodox Church from the Communist period. Silouan proposes the total obeisance to God as a solution and the same does the other one. Still, for reverend Calciu, this means asking the other to respect you as a human being and influencing the evolution of the world.

Mr. Ioan Ianolide also offers an interesting approach. He was imprisoned during the Communist period and, like father Calciu, he was a victim of the Ploieşti re-education phenomenon. In his memoires, he offers

worst of all sinners and it is happy to sit on garbage like Job and to see people in the Holy Spirit, shinning like Christ" [22 p 77].

an interesting presentation of the secular society he witnesses, synthesising the Orthodox conception about the main problems of the contemporary society:

"An inner hollow is blowing on socialist people. Nothing is Saint in us, we don't have any ideal, there is no limit for our conscience. Every link between people's souls has been crushed. A ferocious selfishness, indifferent and sadist has overtaken us" [7 p292].

We will stop there with the examples, because of the space limits of this research and because these two examples are representative for the investigated genre. As we can see, even in the memoires of the imprisoned Orthodox people from Communist Romania we can find interesting ideas about social ethics. Written as a form of protest against the regime or as a sad ascertainment, they are important for today's society and can help us prevent future problems.

6. Conclusions

As we have already emphasised in our research, in the spiritual autobiography from the Orthodox space of the 19th and 20th centuries, we can find interesting information about social ethics. Even if it is not one of the most important subjects of the genre, the authors (Saint John of Kronstadt, Saint Silouan and s. o.) offer interesting information about it and provide important opinions that also highlight the opinion of the Church they belong to. Moreover, it is interesting to see how, being influenced by the space they live in and by their cultural environment, they offer apparently contradictory solutions to some problems, but, in fact, there is a strong convergence between their opinions.

Their works prove, once again, the interest of the Church and of Christians in the problems of the society they live inand the willingness of the aforementioned institution to provide answers to them.

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