

The Concepts of *Christian* and *Patriot* as conceived by Father N. Steinhardt. A Synthetic Approach

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Abstract:

History has presented us on many occasions along the years examples of heroes whose purpose in life was to defend the truth. They were always ready to give their last breath to the confession of their creed, they were always willing to sacrifice thus becoming models for those around them. It is the case of father Nicolae Steinhardt, a Jew converted to Christianity as an adult. For him the concepts of Christian and patriot go hand in hand united into a complete and unique type of love.

Keywords: *Christian, patriot, faith, confession, truth*

Introduction

In a time when human kind chases the so-called means of information which pretend to own the truth and in a society that states clearly the right of each individual to have an opinion, it is somewhat paradoxical that the man of our days proves to be confused most of the times if not unsettled in his decisions and actions. This being the case, we ask ourselves: do we really need everything that circulates around us and if we do where does the truth lie in all this mixture of knowledge and how powerful are we when we possess it?!

History has presented us on many occasions along the years examples of heroes whose purpose in life was to defend the truth. They were always ready to give their last breath to the confession of their creed, they were always willing to sacrifice thus becoming models for those around them. Hence, they knew what truth was and what it meant to find it, but especially, they knew that once they found it, the truth makes you completely free even when, from outside, seemed to come permanent obstacles.

It is not by accident that amongst those who enjoy this privilege of being a model for the others and especially a genuine confessor of the truth we find a personality, who is in fact quite close to our times: father N. Steinhardt. And I say “not by accident” because for this esteemed literate, true patriot and especially, authentic Orthodox, truth meant more than a way of living: it was life itself.

Steinhardt contemplates, in season and out of season, the Romanian people and acknowledges its common sense that it manifested along the years, and he arguments this faith by the fact that the Romanian

never wanted another land but his, never shed blood except to defend his modest needs, his nature (which he never believed to be perfect or superior to the others) and his territory where he never wanted that which was not his, but where he was born and lived with a very precious sense of moderation and wisdom, with a strange and very rare instinct of non-elation. From this approach in two-strokes (good-nature – bravery; wisdom – horripilation), from this contrast embodied in the antinomy *defensive heroism* the history of the Romanians draws its truly original pages (Steinhardt 2010: 494).

Hence, one may clearly observe the admiration and respect that Steinhardt has for the “wisdom” of the Romanian people. He praises out loud the poise of the Romanians which they proved along the years and that is why when referring to his origins he states:

the Romanian spirit seems to have inherited on the Latin line the love for order, and from the Thracians a sense of serenity and twinning with the nature which keeps him distant – in art – both from the sloppily sugariness and from the acid anger, a sort of equilibrium which I’d call heavenly not in a theological sense, but on the contrary in a profound human and terrestrial meaning, a sense of living the life and conceiving the world from a position of wisdom, with a subtle dose of smile and compassion... (Steinhardt 2012: 313-314).

Steinhardt always spoke of this love for the Romanian nation and he always found the power to reveal his noble feelings that lead him to happiness since:

blessed are those who were born in this Romanian paradise; those who looked at it with happy and tearfully eyes; those in whose veins flows the blood of the native fields, hills and mountains; but also those who felt it and loved it through an act of let us call it willingness, or rather of clairvoyance; those who loved it although impure, although late; blessed are those who bear it in their souls although they are far away; those who – no matter what or where or how – never

pull it out of them, where this terrestrial paradise has put its indelible print (Steinhardt 2000: 38).

Here, I think, we can find the great mystery of the unconditional love that Steinhardt had for the Romanian people. It is all paradoxical if we relate to reality. How is it possible that this land means so much for someone like him?!

And yet it is possible; it is, if you want, that joy of the communion between man and his garden, trees or the house that once were the happiness of the childhood that we mentioned before. The same incomprehensible happiness and the same love that conquers all...

His patriotism resembles the wisdom of a tree, which, attached definitively to a place on the planet, struggles to value it to its maximum, instead of denying it foolishly. N. Steinhardt loves his country in the same way he loves his nature, fate and faith (Ștefănescu 2005: 219).

In his perception, the love for his nation is lived and manifested with all its strength, to its deepest places of his being, and he does this in his own personal way, thus succeeding in showing all of us that in order to take it to the highest top, it must be necessarily shaped according to the teachings of the Christian faith.

That is why it is very important to remember the fact that for Steinhardt patriotism and the Christian faith are two feelings that require a permanent and perfect synergy. In his view, these must be tightly linked to one another, for only in this manner they will manage to give birth to a powerful character and a role model for the generations to come.

I. What does it mean to be an authentic Christian in Steinhardt's point of view?

What does it really mean to be a good Christian? Many of us declare such a thing, but how many of us really know what this confession means? Is it enough the fact that in our faith we only confine to the simple act of acknowledging the religion we belong to?

It seems that father Nicolae has a different opinion. As a person who passed through many experiences of life and who converted from Judaism to Christianity only in the second half of his life, he states:

to be a Christian, it is best not to forget this reality, it is a happiness, a sweet mystery, a wonderful secret. To know that Jesus is the Son of God and of Man,

our constant companion, that we can call Him anytime, that we can pray, we can entrust ourselves to Him, we can have Him as example, we can feel that before Him we are responsible for what we do or don't do, that we can betray Him and insult Him with our bad deeds and our ugly thoughts without feeling ashamed deep inside, that we are not alone and deserted at the disposition of hazard or determinism – what greater happiness can there be in our moments of danger, disorientation, temptation and frustration or in those of peacefulness and joy?

The cold and darkness may besiege us, the evil may fight against us but they cannot defeat completely our inner springs, they cannot vandalize our soul because we bear inside us the fire of the Baptism. We are baptized with water, to be sure, but that water is Fire and Spirit, in a visible manner just like the bread and the wine from the Holy Eucharist are not bread and wine but the Body and Blood of Christ (Steinhardt 2008: 270-271).

Hence, here is the point which the mystery of Christianity reaches. The authentic Christian knows that there is not a moment in his life when he is not accompanied, since both in troubles and in joy he has Christ beside him and his life receives a meaning. The true Christian is aware of the fact that no matter how many obstacles pass him by, none of them can harm him as long as Christ resides in his heart. For this very reason, Christianity is a “sweet” mystery and it is joy.

As a matter of fact, happiness characterized the entire life of Nicolae Steinhardt, especially after receiving the Baptism, of which he states that it is not only water, but “Fire and Holy Spirit”.

However, Father Nicolae takes a step further in the understanding and living of the life in true Christian spirit, and after emphasizing the importance of this religion he states:

it is not enough for the Christian to go to church on Sundays and other feasts, to light one or more candles, to worship the icons and, eventually to genuflect once or maybe more than once. All of these are good and beautiful. But I think they are not enough. Christianity is not only prayer, cult and ritual. Christianity means free Christian living, day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment. The Lord did not come on earth to establish a new religion, but to present us *a new model of life*, to call us to spiritualization and deification. Christ came down from heaven and was incarnate so that we can raise ourselves above our animal bodily condition, so that we can become gods (Steinhardt 2008: 310).

Hence, we see what is the significance of the authentic Christianity in father Steinhardt's opinion. Through the words mentioned above, he does not exclude the practices from the cult of the Church, on the

contrary, he proves them to be necessary and he considers them all special because of the distinctive ritual. But, what he wants to emphasize here is the fact that more than this, the purpose of the faithful must be to make Christianity a new way of life, through which he may rise above all the creation and remain there in his quality of crown of the creation that he had at the very beginning. By doing this, not only will he succeed to rise above his bodily condition in which he lived until then, but more important he will acknowledge the fact that the liberty received as a gift must be used for the purpose that it was offered in the first place. Only by freeing himself from the chains of the bodily senses, he will begin to answer to God's calling and only in this way he will manage to become "fellow citizen with God's people and also member of his household" (Ephesians 2: 19).

But a more important thing that we must mention is the fact that for Steinhardt, Christianity also meant *liberty* and *happiness*. As a man who was subjected to the terrors of the jails in the time of the communist regime, he managed, with the help of faith, to find the way which gave him back the hope of life and the will to fight and there is no doubt that for him that way was Christ (John 14:6). After his meeting with Christ, Steinhardt's life gained a new meaning because through the manner in which he now understood to accept sufferance he became, paradoxically, a

confessor of the joy of faith, transforming the humiliation of detention into happiness lived within, intensely, spiritually and culturally. His meeting with Christ Crucified and Resurrected put a profound print on his entire existence (Lemeni, Mihalache, Ionescu, Ioja 2014: 89).

This is probably the reason for which, although at a considerable distance in time after being freed from prison, when he was asked where does God hide so that the world doesn't see Him, doesn't call Him, doesn't recognize Him and doesn't listen to Him, he answered serenely:

He does not hide, my dear, He is here, among us, eternally present. *We* are the ones *who* hide from Him, because we don't see Him. The world is the one that doesn't see, doesn't call, doesn't listen. The kingdom of heaven is not here, nor there, it is within us. It is our duty to look for Him and to find Him. If we think that we will bump into Him in a certain place, at the corner of the street we will never find Him. Our concern, our chance is to open our eyes... open them widely (Sângeorzan 1998: 73).

And he opened his eyes and understood what the joy of meeting Christ really meant. Even there, in those completely adverse conditions, Steinhardt proved that the manifestation of the authentic Christianity cannot be stopped by any obstacle that comes from outside. In those circumstances, he saw Him, called Him and listened to Christ and in the same time felt the Kingdom of heaven inside him, thus managing to transform sufferance into happiness and prison into liberty.

As a consequence of his experience, he understood that:

“Christ is good, gentle, merciful, comforting and sweet. But He is not just that. He is the same person Who gave himself willingly to be crucified and shed His blood for us and died in terrible afflictions. Christ is good, gentle, merciful, comforting and sweet, but He is also terrible, He is the one Who didn't hesitate to offer himself to be crucified. He asks us to take our situation of Christians very seriously. You cannot play with Him. You can lie to people, you can cheat on them, deceive them or palm them off. But if we abandon Him and feel ashamed with Him, He will abandon us and feel ashamed with us at the last Judgement” (Steinhardt 2008: 198).

Hence, this is what Steinhardt thought about being a true *Christian*. In his opinion, Christianity did not mean only to speak *about* God, but developed from this state to that of speaking *with* God, and not only speaking, but more than that, feeling Him and living according to the trajectory traced by Him.

After the struggle which followed him constantly, he became, without a doubt, part of God's kindness. Also, he understood very well the fact that it is not enough just to entrust ourselves to the care of the divine providence, and that is why he only wanted to make us understand that above all it is necessary to *assume* our condition of Christians, with all that it comprises, showing at the same time that this is the only way we will be able to present ourselves worthily before the judgement throne of Jesus Christ and this is the only way we will be able to obtain a place into His eternal Kingdom.

II. N. Steinhardt – authentic model of Romanian patriot

It is important to mention from the beginning the fact that although in the case of Steinhardt culture, faith and patriotism seemed to be manifesting on different ways, each of them in its most authentic way, however, they existed in an indissoluble communion from his early years, supporting and completing one another. Maybe that is why although in his youth some of these preoccupations seemed inexistent, they do not lack completely, but are present in a latent state, waiting to burst together with the finding of the truth he searched for so long.

If this was the case of the meeting with Christianity, an aspect which is very well known because of the profoundness in the act of conversion, regarding his love for our people and our country, the situation was rather similar.

He came from a family with high principles of life and he had the opportunity of forming a moral behavior, learning that amongst the most powerful feelings that a man must have, it is highly necessary to find the love for the land where you were born. For this reason, he always heard the voice of the native places and he always felt their calling, he eulogized the beauty of the landscapes and the history of the Romanian people in season and out of season, but he was especially sensitive to the troubles of the Romanian beside him, he did not neglect him and he was always ready to sacrifice for his beloved.

He always proved his characteristic *modesty*, for although he was much more Romanian than others, he used to say:

it is hard for me, and I think you understand this, to offer categoric answers regarding the appreciation of the Romanian people because the truth is that my blood is not Romanian, I take upon myself the right to speak as a Romanian, but I must be modest and reserved and not issue absolute judgements. I must keep my place (Steinhardt, Pinteá 2009: 202).

However, he never stopped acknowledging the courage of the Romanians along the years:

[...] the very existence of the Romanian people is owed to a long, diffuse and tireless heroism in time. In fact it is worthy to mention the fact that the Romanians have always put the heroic sense above the simple intelligence and handiness (Steinhardt, Pinteá 2009: 138).

And when he looks to the historical past of this country he regrets the fact that our people had to confront alone the hard times, because “he wasn’t lucky like the foreign peoples. He didn’t find friendships, except for the very vague, distant friendships of France and England, which were more theoretical” (Steinhardt, Pintea 2009: 203-204).

He always put in close relationship the love for his nation with the love for Christ and in a simple grain of wheat he saw all the divine wisdom that the Holy Scripture reveals “in the most unexpected places” (Sângeorzan 1998: 46). Of course, he felt this relationship, not as intense as in the second half of his life, even from childhood, when the images of the native places imprinted so deep into his memory that they followed him throughout his entire existence.

Patriotism is by far one of the most powerful experiences that someone can have inside his soul. It arises in our souls that incomparable feeling of endless love that we offer to our nation and to its secular traditions, it helps us maintain the true values that define us as nation amongst other nations, but especially it makes us jump out of joy and emotion each time when, over the years, we hear the names of the parents that gave us birth, or we remember the places where we have lived the most beautiful years, those of our childhood.

Being a convinced patriot for all his life, Steinhardt respected completely each of the aspects we mentioned above. He loved dearly the traditions of the Romanian people and not only did he maintain alive the fundamental values of this nation but he also promoted them within the country and abroad. But most of all Nicolae never forgot the precious memories of his birth places and he always evoked them with love:

every man has a *toby of childhood*. (Trug which ponders in the years of the beginning the original sin). Mine was there, in the common Pantelimon, between Capra and Fundeni – and in the endless yard of a timber factory, maybe the cleanest industry, penetrated by the smell of cut wood and sawdust. (After the rain, the boards and impregnated blocks spread a pungent odour)” (Steinhardt 2005: 56).

He spoke of these places on other occasions as well but with the same love and admiration:

At the beginning there was Pantelimon, a suburban village of Bucharest, where my father was chief-engineer of a timber factory. I was drawn and charmed by the bells of the nearby church Capra as soon as I was able to distinguish their

individuality from the mixture of noises that surrounded me. [...] Besides the bells – the initial trigger of my spiritual destiny – there was also Pantelimon village itself, with his modest acacias (the trees of the ones that never push through) and the small houses, with its people reconciled with life and convinced that nothing really tragic could happen to them.

Then there was the street in the heart of the city, with elegant inhabitants and houses close together, with its patriarchal atmosphere, yards and gardens, good neighbors, decent people, most of them from the middle class or the upper class of the society, affable, helpful and not proud (maybe that is why I found it hard to conform later to the doctrine according to which they were all just a bunch of bourgeois-landlord beasts), honoring the feasts and preserving the tradition of the Christmas Tree to which they invited me and which ravished me and overwhelmed me just as much as the bells (Steinhardt, Pinteă 2009: 171-172).

Written mostly to underline the progressive side of his spiritual development, the words above receive in the mouth of the narrator besides the purpose in itself the power to create a completely different world that we, the people nowadays, could hardly believe existed. Indeed, we speak about a different era but this was the era when people succeeded utterly and completely to maintain alive the moral, social and cultural values. Hence, the native Pantelimon had its mission from the very beginning.

We might be tempted to believe that in this depiction the author contradicts himself when he refers on the one hand to the modesty of the houses and of the trees that surrounded them and on the other hand to the reconciliation that all the people there had with life. But it is only after a thorough research that we will understand that for Steinhardt this was nothing else but the proof of the fact that *for the Romanians equilibrium was an existential state*. They who were easily content with less had the belief that life has its natural course and that nothing can deviate it from the route. Maybe those people simple in existence but powerful in faith were the reason for Steinhardt to state over the years, after having visited so many foreign places, while referring to the Romanian country the fact that it is

sweet, a real blessing, a beautiful country «not only good people, but also amiable» (Eminescu); whose simple features (mercy, hospitality, the power to forgive...) are valuable in times of trouble – and it is in times of trouble that you judge people and things – more than the intelligence of the French, the initiative of the Anglo-Saxon or the handiness of the German; Christianity in all the fields,

at all the corners, in all the hearts; a heaven, I've said it a thousand times. [...] the Romanian world may pierce through the centuries in all the greatness of its charm, announcing even from here, from earth, from the rush of mundane events, the paradise whose nostalgia will never spare us (Steinhardt 2004: 75-76).

However, in antithesis with these places there was also the street in the city centre where suddenly the things received a totally different significance, but where, despite all expectations, people proved to be as open to offer their help when needed. Christians preservers of the traditions, they remained for the rest of Steinhardt's life *the symbol of kindness and of the love for the neighbors*.

Instead of conclusions

Nicolae Steinhardt made a confession that united courage with the intelligence of faith. He showed that "Christ never asked us to be stupid, showing that through his Gospel Christ calls us to be kind, gentle, honest, humble and pure in spirit, but not stupid" (Steinhardt 2005: 26). And courage is the main virtue of Christianity because

Christ did not climb on the cross accidentally: the *courage* to suffer terribly was the only way through which He could show us that He truly and completely became a man; through which He could prove his truthfulness.

Neither intelligence, nor wisdom, neither the healings, nor His teaching and not even kindness or mercy would have been proof enough: only the courage before suffering and death is within His reach. The beating, the blood, the death, these are proofs that don't cheat, that cannot be rigged. Ugly? Barbaric? Tacky? Simplistic? Maybe, but categorical. And having something of the brutal vulgarity and the great effrontery of the done deed that astonishes even Satan (Steinhardt 2005: 190).

In this atmosphere,

Father Nicolae Steinhardt passed, alone, modest in comparison to Saul from Tarsus, on the way to Damascus. The Jew Nicolae Steinhardt found Christ or, better said, Christ found Nicolae Steinhardt. For him, Christ was not a person that existed somewhere distant in time and space, for him Christ was present, close, beside him. Christ was always with him and he worshiped Him with ardour, He adored Him, he loved Him. He spoke to Him, understood Him as no other Christian understood Him. Him, Steinhardt, who came to the Church of Christ in his adulthood through the Mystery of the Holy Baptism, through his own experience found out what it means not to be a Christian and to become a Christian (*N. Steinhardt în evocări*, 2012: 74-75).

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