

Peace as a leitmotiv of the spiritual autobiographies of Thomas Merton and Saint Silouan the Athonite

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Abstract: *Based on the spiritual autobiographies written by two important theologians and monks from Catholic and Orthodox space, namely Thomas Merton and Saint Silouane the Athonite, the author speaks in this research about peace as a leitmotiv of their works. Part of a bigger project whose aim is to bring again into attention the aforementioned genre and to underline its actual aspects, this text comes also to show how the spiritual autobiographies could create bridges among spiritualities and contribute to the visibility of the Christian faith in the social field. Influenced by Silouan, but also by important personalities from other spiritualities, like the Buddhist one, Thomas Merton will come close to their ideas and shows how a monk, despite his mystical vocation, can be a militant and one who understands the world, its evolution and the risks that can come with the misunderstanding of the life and of the human purpose.*

Keywords: *spiritual autobiography, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, peace, cold War, Vietnam War.*

1. Introduction

Due to its practical relevance, spiritual autobiography has become a genre that is little by little re-discovered both in the Orthodox space¹, but also in the

¹ Thorough works like: Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Repere ale autobiografiei spirituale din spațiul ortodox în secolele XIX și XX. Ioan de Kronstadt, Siluan Athonitul și Nicolae Berdiaev*, Iassy, Lumen Publishing House, 2019; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Self-knowledge and Theology – studies in spiritual autobiography*, Cluj-Napoca and Gatineau, Argonaut Publishing House, Symphologic Publishing, 2020; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of Applied Ethics in the Spiritual Autobiographies from the Orthodox Space in the 19th and 20th Centuries," in Camelia Ignătescu, Antonio Sandu, Tomiță Ciulei (eds.), *Proceedings Volume: Rethinking Social Action. Core Values in Practice*, Iassy, Lumen Publishing House, 2017, p. 548-557; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "An interdisciplinary genre in the Theological Literature: the spiritual autobiography and its landmarks for the Orthodox space," in *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, 8 (2018), no. 1, p. 145-150. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "An interdisciplinary genre in the Theological Literature: the spiritual autobiography and its landmarks for the Orthodox space," in *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, 8 (2018), no. 1, p. 145-150; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "The relevance of humiliation and body pain in the spiritual autobiographies of Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Silouan the Athonite," in *Studia Monastica*, LXI (2019), no. 2, p. 409-415; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, „The beginnings of spiritual autobiography - 2 Corinthians 12, 2-5. A hermeneutical approach,” in *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, 11 (2020), no. 1, p. 42-49; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, „Nicolas Berdyaev – The philosophical and political relevance of a spiritual autobiography,” in *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 76 (1), a5933, 2020, p. 1-5; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, „Spiritual autobiographies as sources of the ecumenism: Dag Hammarskjöld’s case,” in *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 77 (2021), no. 4, a 6272, p. 1-6; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "The Spiritual Autobiography in the Eastern space in the second half of the XIXth and XXth century", in *Astra Salvensis*, Supplement No. 1/2015, p. 166-174; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, Ștefan Josan, „Elements of spiritual autobiography in the literary works of Virgil Gheorghiu", in *Research and Science Today*, no. 11 (2016), no. 1, p. 83-88; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Saint Faustina Kowalska and Saint Teresa of Calcutta – two authors of spiritual autobiographies from Catholic space of the 20th century" in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 13, p. 231-239; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Educational Aspects in the Spiritual Autobiography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta," *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 14, p. 307-312; „Saint Faustina Kowalska - a Mystical Profile Reflected in a Spiritual Autobiography,” in *Astra Salvensis*, VIII (2020), no. 15, p. 191-198.

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other ones.² Even elements like its relevance for the political theology³ or the pastoral relevance of the genre⁴ are today part of interesting approaches. Still, there are aspects that can be deepened and say more to the contemporary people. Among them there can be mentioned the one that we intend to present in this investigation. We will focus there on the way how peace is reflected in the spiritual autobiographies of two relevant authors, one coming from the Catholic space and the other from the Orthodox one, namely Thomas Merton and Saint Silouan the Athonite. We will try to emphasize the way how the two authors come in one in the neighbourhood of the other thorough their thoughts and in the same time to emphasize the particularities of each one of them.

2. The Peace as a leitmotiv of the spiritual autobiographies of Thomas Merton and Saint Silouane the Athonite

2.1. Thomas Merton

Important personality of the Catholic space of the 20th century,⁵ Thomas Merton was among other, a converted man. He converted first to Communism,⁶ then to ecology⁷ and then to Catholicism, becoming in the end a Trappist monk.⁸ At his premature departure, he left an interesting spiritual autobiography, spread in

² Even in the cultural area, there are interesting texts published in the last decades, that come to create bridges between culture and spirituality. See, for example: Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010; Adam Smith (ed.), *A history of English autobiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016; James Olney (ed.), *Studies in Autobiography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988; M. Paul Raybaut, *Les recits de vie. Theorie et pratiques*, Paris, Editions Presse Universitaire de France, 1983.

³ Cf. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Dag Hammarskjöld," in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 74 (2018), no. 4, a4857, p. 1-5; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Saint John of Kronstadt (1829–1908)", in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 74 (2018), no. 4, a4993, p. 1-5; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Nicolas Berdiaev," in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 75 (2019), no. 4, a5316, p. 1-4; „Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 76 (1), a5932, 2020, p. 1-5; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiographies of the Orthodox space? New potential keys of lecture," in *Astra Salvensis*, V (2017), no. 10, p. 129-133;

⁴ See: Mary Clark Moschella, "Spiritual Autobiography and Older Adults", in *Pastoral Psychology*, LX (2011), Issue 1, p. 97.

⁵ Fact that determined even Pope Francis to mention him during his visit in USA. Cf. Marius Taloş SJ, „Cuvânt înainte la ediția în limba română”, in Thomas Merton, *Muntele cu șapte trepte*, trad. Francisca Băltăceanu, Monica Broșteanu, Bucharest, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Romano Catolice, 2015, p. 5.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Il primato della contemplazione. Scritti Inediti*, Edizione italiana a cura di Francesco Comina, Verona, Editrice Missionaria Italiana, 2018, p. 67.

⁷ For more information about this important aspect of his life, see: Eric Jensen, „Ecological Conversion and the Spiritual Exercises,” in *Way*, 59 (2020), no. 2, p. 7-18.

⁸ Bob Roddy, „What I Am Living For: Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton,” *Benedictines*, 73 (2020), Issue 1, p. 46.

different volumes.⁹ They prove not only his genuine mystical vocation and speak not only about his deep concerns and seeking, but also about the fact that after becoming a monk, he did not cease to be interested in the evolution of the society and the way how this can impact the human life and the common good.

Peace was for him more than a state of soul. It was also important due to the fact that it could influence human life. Conscious of the fact that God guides him, as he will often underline,¹⁰ he will militate for the world peace. During the cold War he wrote some interesting letters where he called to peace, fact that brought him troubles with his superiors.¹¹ Characterising their content, a contemporary writer showed that:

„The Cold War Letters are anything but a single tightly reasoned essay, rarely Merton’s methodology. His observations are piecemeal, fragmented, random. Read collectively, they are a critique, a diatribe, a lament, and one more voice in a long lineage of voices crying in the wilderness. The content of the Letters suggests that Merton didn’t think it enough for people to act on “the better angels of our nature.” They had to know what they were up against. So he chose to expose the demonic nature of his times. He never tinkered with the fine points of the arms race’s rationalizers. Instead, he verbally assaulted the hamster-wheel logic that justified nuclear war because he found the Cold War’s reasoning perfectly insane and infinitely crippling—psychically, spiritually, and morally.”¹²

In the same time, he militated for peace also in his journals. Often, there can be found such pages, where the Catholic monk speaks about this topic.¹³ There he insists on the fact that violence is a failure of vision¹⁴ and speaks even about his

⁹ Cf. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York, Hardcourt, Brace and Company, 1948; Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*. New York, Hardcourt, Brace and Company, 1953; Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands*. New York, USA: New Directions, 1957; Thomas Merton, *Selected Poems*. New York, New Directions, 1959; Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York, New Directions, 1961; Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, New York, New Directions, 1963.

¹⁰ For example: “For it is God’s love that warms me in the sun and God’s love that sends the cold rain. It is God’s love that feeds me in the bread I eat and God that feeds me also by hunger and fasting.” Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 16.

¹¹ „Merton wrote the Cold War Letters because in 1961-1962, the year leading up to and through the Cuban Missile Crisis, his Cistercian Order had silenced him. To his superiors, writing on war was not a suitably pious pursuit for a monk. Told to keep quiet, Merton bristled. He waffled. He obeyed outwardly; he appealed the censure; he skirted the directive as he impishly published political articles under zany aliases like “Benedict Monk.” With the Cold War Letters, he tested an alternative strategy. Because the censorship didn’t ban opinions on war from his personal correspondence, he would collect some of his private letters and—using Sixties’ technology—have them mimeographed, bound, and privately distributed.” Gary Commins, „Cold War Letters to Our Cruel World”, in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 55 (2020), no. 1, p. 59.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹³ Thomas Merton, „Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility,” in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon, New York, Crossroad, 1995, p. 37- 47.

¹⁴ „The idea that we should be nonviolent even in opposition to those who employ violent means is everywhere in Merton’s writings. He believed that violence is a failure of vision, that it comes from an inability to see the oneness of life in God. But he understood that violence is a part of life and that people in power, at whatever level, often use violence to try to get their way. The root of violence, he knew, lies in separation, in forming camps and setting one against another, in crafting “messages” and “morals” and persuading people not only to support your view but also to

„The Peace as a leitmotiv of the spiritual autobiographies of Thomas Merton and Saint Silouan the Athonite,” *Astra Salvensis*, IX (2021), no. 17, p. 183-189. closeness to communism as about a road of seeking peace.¹⁵ Then, thorough later actions he militated against any form that combated peace or brought inequality, fact that transformed him in one of the notorious fighters against racism.¹⁶

But there was also another aspect of peace that Merton considered important, namely the one of the soul. The preference for it brings him closer to the other personality investigated in the present research, namely Saint Silouan the Athonite. He insisted on the fact that this one is related with the general situation of the world and its evolution¹⁷ and asked for the change of the way of understanding of society, based on the spiritual principles. In the same time, insisted on the fact that the real life of peace is the contemplative one¹⁸ and the ideal space for living it is the monastery:

“The contemplative life, in its purest and narrowest sense, is lived in monasteries. But in a broader sense every life can be dedicated in some way to contemplation, and even the most active life can and should be balanced by a contemplative element - that is, supplemented by the peace, order, clarity that can be provided by meditation, from interior prayer and from penetrating deeply into the most fundamental truths of human existence.”¹⁹

For Thomas Merton, peace was therefore a keyword of his thought and life. Landmark of the Christian spirituality, but also of the Buddhist one, that he was also close to,²⁰ become for the Catholic Monk from the United States of America an important aspect of life and work. As a militant, he found in the important conflicts of the second half of the 20th century²¹ topics that should be

denounce the views of others. It suggests rejection of the possibility of shared values, unwillingness to look for common ground, and refusal to compromise.” *Ibidem*, p. 90. Cf. Robert Giroux, „Introducere la ediția aniversară din 1998”, in Thomas Merton, *Muntele cu șapte trepte*, trad. Francisca Băltăceanu, Monica Broșteanu, Bucharest, Editura Arhiepiscopiei Romano Catolice, 2015, p. 9.

¹⁵ „It's a nice, complex universe, the Communist universe: it gravitates towards stability and harmony and peace and order on the poles of an opportunism that is completely irresponsible and erratic. Its only law is, it will do whatever seems to be profitable to itself at the moment. However, that seems to have become the rule of all modern political parties.” Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 145-146.

¹⁶ Cf. Daniel P. Horan, „Racism Is a White Problem: Thomas Merton, Whiteness and Racial Justice,” in *Merton Annual*, 33 (2020), no. 33, p. 63-82.

¹⁷ Therefore, he underlined the fact that: “We mutually prescribe remedies that bring peace to our minds, but we continue to be devoured by anxiety. We develop plans for disarmament and peace between nations, but they only change the modalities of aggression. The rich have everything they want except happiness and the poor are sacrificed to the unhappiness of the rich. Dictatorships use their secret police to shake millions of people under the unbearable weight of their lies, injustices and tyrannies, while those who still live in a democracy forget how to make good use of their freedom. Because freedom belongs to the spirit and we are no longer able to live for anything other than our bodies.” Thomas Merton, *Scelgiere di amare il mondo*, Torino, Lindau, 2008, p. 17.

¹⁸ “The contemplative life necessarily implies asceticism and withdrawal, recollection, inner peace.” *Ibidem*, p. 40.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

²⁰ Marius Taloș SJ, „Cuvânt înainte la ediția în limba română”, p. 6. Cf. Bonnie Thurston, „Murdering Judas: Reconciling the Contemplative and the Poet in Thomas Merton,” in *Merton Annual*, 33 (2020), no. 33, p. 96-97.

²¹ Cf. Paul M. Pearson, „Wearing Our Mitres to Bed: Thomas Merton and the Need for Humor in “This Mad Place”, in *Merton Annual*, 33 (2020), no. 33, p. 221.

presented and criticised, together with discriminative behaviours like the racism. In the same time, he understood that the most important aspect of the peace is the one of the soul and if this is accomplished, the life of the world will be changed at any level.

2. 2. Saint Silouane the Athonite and the peace

Compared with Merton, the Russian monk that will spend an important part of his life in Mount Athos, Saint Silouan, will not be so more interested in the militant dimension of peace and in the way how the political area could be influenced by his ideas, but rather in the mystical dimension of the peace. For him, peace is a state of soul and is necessary for the inner evolution of the Christian. It is linked with the exercise of virtues and among them, mostly with the one of love:

"What must be done to have peace in soul and body? For this you must love all people as you are and be ready to die at every hour. When the soul remembers death, it reaches humility and becomes he completely surrenders the will of God and wants to be at peace with all and to love all people."²²

Influenced by Saint John of Kronstadt and by his ideas, but also having similitudes with other important mystical personalities from other confessional areas, about which, he was most probably not conscious of²³, he will emphasize in his spiritual autobiography the fact that the peace of the soul is related with the listening of God. In the same time, he insists on the fact that love finds its reason in God (fact that in areas like the Romanian theological space will be underlined by authors like Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae).²⁴ The prayer is also a part of the Christian life that, according to him, must be related with peace and the understanding of the love of God. With or without being in peace, man is loved by God, but in order to be capable to offer reciprocity to this deep feeling, man must cultivate himself love and inner peace:

„It is a difficult and very sad thing for a leader if his people do not listen to him, but to keep his peace, he must remember that even if his people are disobedient, the Lord still loves them and died in torments for their salvation. Therefore, he must pray from the heart for them, and then the Lord will give prayer to the one who prays, and he will know from experience how the mind that prays has boldness toward God and love.”²⁵

A consequence of the pride can be the loss of the peace and the sadness of the soul. Like Saint Augustine,²⁶ Silouan will also have the experience of being

²² Siluane the Athonite, *Între iadul dezădejdiei și iadul smereniei*, Sibiu, Deisis Press, 2001, p. 87.

²³ Cf. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "The relevance of humiliation and body pain in the spiritual autobiographies of Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Silouan the Athonite," in *Studia Monastica*, LXI (2019), no. 2, p. 411.

²⁴ See: Dumitru Stăniloae, *Sfânta Treime sau la început a fost iubirea*, Bucharest, Press of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, 1993.

²⁵ Siluane the Athonite, *Între iadul dezădejdiei și iadul smereniei*, p. 99. Cf. Harry Boosalis, *Viața dubovnicească după Sfântul Siluan Athonitul*, Cluj-Napoca, Renașterea Publishing House, 2014, p. 44.

²⁶ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991.

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visited by the Holy Spirit and of losing the presence of grace, fact that will determine him to cry for God and for his presence.²⁷ Its rediscover is related with the finding of peace, as he shows:

„Oh, how evil it is to the soul when it loses grace and boldness; then in the weeping of the heart he cries out to God, "When shall I see the Lord again, and rejoice in His peace and love?"²⁸

Like for Nicolas Berdyaev,²⁹ for the Russian monk arrived to Mount Athos, freedom is an important aspect. It is related with peace, due to the fact that his mystical perception of the topic makes it to be part of a complex of feelings and interior states. According to him, man receives the freedom as a gift from God. In order to be ready to receive it, one must love Him, have humility in his heart and love his neighbour:

"We all struggle on earth and seek for freedom, but few know what freedom is and where it is.

And I want freedom and I seek for it day and night. I understood that she is from God to humble hearts who have repented and cut off their own will before Him. To those who repent, Lord gives His peace and freedom to love Him. And there is nothing better in the world than to love God and his neighbor. In him the soul finds rest and joy."³⁰

The work of grace does not abolish it, but helps the one practicing this important feeling to develop it in a proper way.³¹ Silouan insists on the fact that knowing God means for a man to grow up in love and to feel a great joy.³² The inner peace is therefore related with the complex relationship with Him and comes to speak about its development. In the same time, being part of the complex mechanism of the Church, seen as a body, where each member has its particular function, the peace finds also in the mariological theology a model.³³

²⁷ "My soul longs for God and seeks Him with tears. Merciful Lord, You see my fall and sorrow, but I humbly ask for Your mercy: pour out on me, the sinner, the grace of Your Holy Spirit. His memory draws the mind to find Your mercy again "Lord, give me the spirit of Your humility, that I may not lose Your grace again, and that I may not weep for Him, as Adam wept in heaven and for God." Siluane the Athonite, *Între iadul deznađejđii și iadul smereniei*, p. 53. The text is obviously influenced by the style and the ideas of Augustine. Cf. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Repere ale autobiografiei spirituale din spațiul ortodox în secolele XIX și XX: Ioan de Kronstadt, Siluan Athonitul și Nicolae Berdiaev*, p. 328.

²⁸ Siluane the Athonite, *Între iadul deznađejđii și iadul smereniei*, p. 106.

²⁹ Nicolas Berdiaev, *Essai d'autobiographie spirituelle*, Paris, Editions Buchet Castel, 1992, p. 71.

³⁰ Siluane the Athonite, *Între iadul deznađejđii și iadul smereniei*, p. 123.

³¹ "God's grace does not abolish freedom, but only helps it to fulfill God's commandments. Adam was in grace, but his will was not abolished. So the angels remain in the Holy Spirit, but their free will is not abolished." *Ibidem*, p. 124-125.

³² "The soul that has known the Lord feels the presence of his Maker invisibly, and remains in Him very quiet and happy. And what could this joy be like? It is like that of a beloved son who returns after a long parting from a distant land in the parental home and talking to his father, his beloved mother and his dear brothers and sisters." *Ibidem*, p. 140.

³³ "The heart of the Mother of God, all her thoughts and all her soul were preoccupied with the Lord; but something else was given to her: she loved the people and prayed fervently for the people, for the new Christians, for the Lord to strengthen us, and for everyone, as let all be saved. In this prayer was her joy and comfort on earth.

Author of a complex vision where peace is seen as a part of the complex relationships between virtues and related with the dynamics of the Church life, Saint Silouan develops, therefore, a complex vision on the topic with aspects of actuality.

3. Conclusion

Important personalities of their confessional areas, both Saint Silouan from Mount Athos as well as Thomas Merton, come to speak about the peace as a defining element of the Christian spirituality. While the last one sees it not only as being related with the mystical life, but also with the practical evolution of the state of the society, fact that determines him also to militate for peace in situations with geopolitical relevance, the first one remains consequent to its relevance as a part of the mystical life. Having important similitudes, the two visions are both actual under certain points of view and come to speak about the way how Christian life must be understood as a peaceful one and as a seeking for peace.

We do not fully understand the love of the Mother of God, but we know this:

- the greater the love, the greater are the sufferings of the soul;
- the fuller the love, the fuller the knowledge;
- the hotter the love, the hotter the prayer;
- The more perfect love is, the holier life is.

None of us reach the fullness of the love of the Mother of God; we need Adam's repentance; but in part, as the Holy Spirit teaches us in the Church, we also understand this love." *Ibidem*, p. 147-148.

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