MECHANISMS OF KNOWLEDGE IN N. STEINHARDT`S THEOLOGICAL ESSAYS

Florentina BUCUROIU*

Abstract: *Our inquiry into N. Steinhardt's theological essay („Cuvinte de credință") is mainly motivated by the desire to provide a more consistent picture of the analytical and interpretative approach developed by their author. First of all, we may say that this is the domain that completely defines his conception of life, theology and criticism. These genuine theological essays are eloquent proof that the Sacrament of Baptism has left its mark under the "image of the invisible glory" in N. Steinhardt`s being, and this way it got resurrected "into freedom, joy and calm." The Christianity preached by N. Steinhardt is the one he himself used to practice: maverick, happy and enthusiastic. His essays shall constitute a sort of "mobile guide" of Christendom. N. Steinhardt pleads for a sermon that should be devoid of "word schematization", a symptom that may indicate a "deserted heart". An expressive volcano erupts out of his heart's overflow, and its consequences become uncontrollable and incandescent. His sermon (homily) was not a dull part of a common theological speech in which information flows only one direction and in an authoritative manner. Authority lies in the mixture of styles, approaches, and in the diligence with which he toils in the faith's field completely touched by the psalmist who says "They that sow in tears will reap with songs of joy" (Ps.126: 5).*

Keywords: *essay, Christianity, style.*

N. Steinhardt was, undoubtedly, "an over-learned one"; all those who got to know him acknowledged this, while both his writings and his sermons uttered in the church of the monastery Rohia testify his endowment. Beyond knowledge he was also gifted with a special courage to live and to wholly take the living of freedom under all its aspects and circumstances.

The most remarkable quality with the scholar-theologian was not just the irrepressible cultural "bulimia" but also a kind of total surrender, of "living" in and through the text. He cannot be considered as a mere living scholar, but to him, the phrase is enriched with other meanings, and completely defines him just by reversing the two terms. His interest is never unidirectional, confined to a narrow field, selective: "His intelligentsia is a form of love, for it generously and zealously embraces all the areas of its creative understanding." (N. Steinhardt, 2008: 19)

N. Steinhardt`s scholarly approach is a fully immersive and original mosaic of information, ideologies, philosophies, emotions, experiences of knowledge. His books` reading require clear mind, strong will, sharp attention and vigilance of the heart; not separately, all at once! Imagination plays a significant role; you cannot follow the "restless septuagenarian" to the highest peaks his essays` ideation aims at, without winging yourself with "goodwill" and imagination.

Essays shall constitute a sort of "mobile guide" of Christendom. N. Steinhardt pleads for a sermon devoid of "verbal patterns", a fact that may indicate the symptom of a "dryness of heart". An expressive volcano of an uncontrollable and incandescent force erupts from the Father Nicholas heart`s overflow. The sermon was not a dull part of those speeches in which information flows unidirectional and authoritarian. Authority lies in the mixture of styles, approaches, and in the diligence with which he works in the

* University of Pitesti, florentinabucuroiu@yahoo.com

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field of faith deeply impressed with and aware of the meaning of the psalmist`s saying: "They that sow in tears will reap with songs of joy" (Psalm 126: 5).

In some places, the style has a strong oral character, it is direct and seems totally untrained, while some "words of wisdom" seem uncontrollably released during the frantic public speech. On closer analysis we find, however, passages that come in manifest contradiction to that first impression. The complexity of reasoning and the high level of difficulty (and novelty) of the expression, focusing strictly on scientific arguments in some of the essays makes us understand the elaborate character and, why not, the fact that the manuscript was not meant to be presented to the ordinary people in the congregation. One cannot say precisely how many of the 51 sermons were delivered in the church and how many have been reserved for printing. There is the possibility that the oral form (composed on the spot, based on some drawings) has been added afterwards in order to be published. There are, for example, a large number of verses and passages from de Bible that N. Steinhardt "mobilizes" as argumentative support for every "inconsistency" of Christ (we will see below, the case of some biblical parables interpreted by Father Nicholas). Such detailed structure and the precision of the speech indicates, in these situations, a thorough documentation and drafting (a fact that definitely lies them into the theological essay category).

Time of figs comprises a tense moment from the earthly life of the Savior. Prior to "revealing" the truth contained and transmitted by the biblical parable, N. Steinhardt plays to "judge" and does not hesitate to bring the Master into the box of the ignorant; he splits hairs and "brings to light" Lord`s «injustice» (stemming from a "clenched and sudden" state of mind); effervescence increases, the curse of God falls ruthlessly from an "outburst of anger" that "we cannot deny or disguise." (N. Steinhardt, 2008: 63)

"What can you show more unjust, more ruthless, and more outrageous than punishing and drying a poor tree that is completely innocent? Not guilty, by no means guilty, given that the text itself acknowledges that «it was not the time of the figs». If time was not the right season, why should the fig tree have been condemned? the simple and clean mind of the man of common sense reasons, whether faithful or unfaithful. (*Ibidem*) "After the flood of invectives, the syllogism leads to another meaning, this time" at the level of the allegorical spiritual propositions: "the man (the fig in this encoded language) must be always ready, always available for Christ." (N. Steinhardt, *op. cit.:* 65)

His characteristic nonconformity is not that easy to be overlooked this time. The field to which it is applied is a too sensitive one for the "uninhibited" analysis and "staging" modalities of the preacher. Father Nicholas uses all the available means to bring to light an event, to "justify" the reactions of those involved, to persuade and, even more, to "implant" Christ in the hearts of the listeners. Language, with all its arsenal of possibilities for storage and playback, science, art, practical experience, all together work in Steinhardt sermon`s text in the most unusual way possible.

"Surprises" that such an "open and blunt" speech has in store for us are not few, nor well behaved. The oral character of the sermons invites not only to sincerity, intimacy and familiarity, but also to worrying deviations from dogma, to a larger freedom of valuing the expression in point of the intentionality of suggestion. The evangelical characters are (as we saw) "dragged" in front of the audience, questioned and "judged" in the parishioners` court in a variegated language, where the slang terms and the popular ones coexist with scientific neologisms.

No matter if you listen or browse the preaching with wide-open eyes (of delight or amazement), suddenly, you find yourself trapped in the evangelical parable

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universe, filled with a science of life and death that you have not perceived as possible before. Sermons are the embodiment of one of the N. Steinhardt`s favourite psaltic verses: "You got my right hand. Your counsel leaded me and your glory covered me." (*Ibidem*: 51) Father Nicholas takes our hand, sometimes gently, sometimes passionately, opens new, unimagined and unexpected horizons until we reach the top of that savior "general sense of peace" (*Ibidem*) "Happiness remains the target, which is due to be achieved beyond evil things, troubles and trials. The essence of the Christian teaching is the knowledge of happiness acquirement." (N. Steinhardt, *op. cit*.: 50)

His intentions are among the most noble, deriving from a high fidelity and a happy availability of offering himself. His "declaration" of fidelity is the culmination of a complete, ecstatic experience: "if they indubitably proved me on my deathbed that Christ is not the truth, and the truth is different - if the demonstration were unquestionable and overwhelming - I would not hesitate at all: I would choose to stay with Christ and not with the truth." (*Ibidem*: 46)

Game-of-language, definitely frisky and equally dangerous is but a bet by sliding to irreverent and even to blasphemy-like structures. We`ll watch how the demon of adventure "dwelling inside or hovering about him" deceives him by the temptation of the uncensored speech. The essayist-preacher gives satisfaction to it on several occasions.

The woman of Canaan, "desperately unhappy" (*Ibidem:* 53) begs the mercy of Christ. And He subjects her to a "terrible exam", a reasoning process that is arithmetically structured and followed by the essayist:

"*The first* [step]: disregarding, ignoring". Lord "rejects" her, said N. Steinhardt, He even "mocks" her ("for what offense is more terrible than talking to someone and getting no response ...?") (*Ibidem*)

"*Second*: The rejection of His beloved disciples` interference" (an opportunity for the preacher to throw in front of Him the promises He violates: "They pray, and the Lord does not listen, although once He had said with His own mouth: «The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out». The elders of Israel`s intervention in support of the Roman centurion is taken into account, but that of the disciples for the woman of Canaan is not") (N. Steinhardt, *op. cit*: 54)

"*Third*: declination of jurisdiction («the only case throughout the Gospels where the Lord appeared as a procedurist. Himself, Who put the spirit over the letter, He Who proclaimed the weakness of forms and defamed them with power, Who rebuked the Pharisees particularly for having granted precedence to the outside in relation to the inside (...), He - this time - opposes a strictly procedural and formal exception to the woman of Canaan: your case is not part of my job. As if to say: take the petitioner to another counter, she has nothing to do here»)." (*Ibidem*: 55)

"*Fourth*: insult, offense, reproach (...) He Who stated that whoever is angry with his brother will be worthy of condemnation and whoever says to his brother «raca» [gr. stupid, dumb, bonehead]" will be worthy of the Sanhedrin court (...) He apostrophizes the woman of Canaan and flings her the saying with the bread which is inappropriate to be given to dogs, in other words, making the applicant and her companions dogs – and, consequent to the most elementary logic – He calls her a bitch." (*Ibidem*: 55-56)

After outlining the biblical episode as "totally contrasting with the evangelical spirit", the essayist "saves" the situation by putting everything on any exam`s tribulations: Lord is not the "Lord of mercy," but "the celebrant of the testing

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experience of a faith and of a character." (*Ibidem*) This duality is necessary; it is a "holy «game» of the Lord."

It is also interesting the reference to the intelligence of the language in the answer of the woman; this "must have delighted the Lord - Who is fond of brainy speech." (*Ibidem*: 58) And as she "passes the exam with honors and gets a mark better than the maximum qualification, she takes - as it were - ten plus", the woman of Canaan is rewarded "shaken and stocky, abundantly and plentifully, noble like, royally." (*Ibidem*: 59)

The qualities that ensure the woman`s acquirement of "the crown" are systematized in the same objective spirit of mathematics: "a). By faith b). By unselfishness c). By courage d). By perseverance e). By decency f). By humility." Mathematics and physics are called to support the preacher when he has to "clarify" the issue of "monastic vocation". "The most accurate definition of monasticism" may cause contradictory reactions: from revolt to hilarity, from astonishment to resigned acceptance: " the world of non-A, of the non-Euclidean geometry and antimatter; briefly said: that world which is opposite to the ordinary one, the contrary and contradictory world - if it is permitted me to express myself like this – the world of John Wrongheaded." (N. Steinhardt, *op. cit*: 58)

The language is also the main landmark used by N. Steinhardt to explain the honoring St. Archdeacon Stephen benefits from God. He quotes, in this regard, from *Acts*: "He saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right side of God" (*Ibidem*: 350) and focuses on the verb "to stay" (vertical, standing), whom he distinguishes from "to stay" (to sit). Therefore, the preacher interprets it, Jesus did not greet the martyr Stephen in heaven while *sitting* but *standing* as a sign of "great honor." And the conclusion is "unquestionable": Christ loves the brave, the testifiers of the faith and these ones He receives in heaven in *standing* position and with open arms.

What does Father Nicholas do? we wonder. Does he blaspheme? Is he unconsciously wandering among the evidences without considering the plan of divine knowledge? We`d say not. Language is the only one that takes unbeaten and bold paths. The man is aware of the levels of perception of reality and when he feels helpless with facing the "absurd paradoxes", the mathematics of infinity and other such unexpected solutions come to be of help.

To the rhetoric and lay "What could the fig tree have practically done? Should it have burnt with grief and shame or should it have thrown itself resentful and excited into the sea ..." an answer is offered a few lines below: "Don`t let Christ leave our place while he`s being hungry, thirsty, empty-hearted, and with a contrite soul." (*Ibidem*: 70)

The essayist "goes down" from the height of the pulpit and creeps among the faithful by proposing them for the beginning the contact with the plan of immediate knowledge: simple, talkative, curious. He moots the question, looks all around, collects the expression on the listeners` faces and gets worried; this is the very moment when he turns to the biblical grounds. His intervention is meant to be "a good word" just as that one which saved in a moment the thief crucified at the right side of the Savior ("Today you shall be with me in paradise").

Father Nicholas cannot appease the data of the human condition, but he can offer the faithful who have ears to hear, a word of consolation, encouragement, a "kerchief" for them to wipe the darkness covering their mind's eyes. The warmth of addressing and the meekness («prayer + tears + "outcry"») bring him closer to his

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listeners, and make him more accessible: “May all that I expounded and recounted - maybe in a too personal and loose style – be useful to all of us.” (*Ibidem*: 392)

Jean Paul Sartre, Blaise Pascal, Anton Dumitriu, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Gerardoux, St. Philip Nerri, F. Kafka, Paul Claudel and many others rush to his aid when it comes to explaining the confession that the ill child`s father makes when faced with the reproof received from the Lord: “I do believe, Lord! Help my unbelief.” (*Evanghelia după Marcu*: 9, 24) It's much elaborate work, much inquiry in the explanatory approach of N. Steinhardt, and both of them come from a maximal responsibility that he assumed willingly and happily. Nothing comes by chance. The script is always well done, the director's “puppet master” - no one moves without his will. On a gesture of command the stage becomes vivid and colorful! And no piece resembles any other. The perspective is always different because the attitude of the director-preacher *creates* characters and worlds.

There are sermons that start all at once. Their author abandons any introduction, does not establish any hypothesis, no reasoning but he goes directly to the “conclusion”. We only find out the past that hides a whole evolutionary process: “Zacchaeus was a villain.”

The “praises” that he indirectly brings the Savior in the sermon on the *Stooping woman* pericope are totally unexpected. *Lord of Saturday* chooses to “work” on Saturday; and not elsewhere but in the synagogue, in the very “enemy strength”, where the Pharisees are gathered grinning- teethed. How does He tackle this? In a soldier-like manner!

This is the world of N. Steinhardt`s essays: it soaks with the essence of knowledge, it is categorical, courageous, enthusiastic, surprising, formative, liberated from prejudices, tireless, endless.

The biblical realities that Father Nicholas preaches are not convenient things in the category “Here are your goods. Now pay for them!” There is great seriousness behind each word, the text of the evangelical parables is not always “devised in kind, comforting and shy words” (N. Steinhardt, *op. cit*: 191), so that the interpretation given by N. Steinhardt cannot be but “open and straightforward” (*Ibidem*), made “with vigilant spirit.” (*Ibidem*: 173)

All the mechanisms of knowledge come together in his analyzing “methodology”. No path is left untried, no pebble unshaken from its place. N. Steinhardt wanted to be a “full time” missionary: both in writing and verbally! And he succeeded. He has endeavored to form and shape both the ordinary Christians attending the Divine Liturgy as well as the sophisticated intellectual who would like to meet more elevated spiritual quests. Discernment is, for all the categories implied, the way through which we prove every time that we are truly Christians.

Father Nicholas is a Christian who has chosen the path while being mature, fully conscious, aware of the fact that “he [knows] nothing”, that he has no tangible proof, “no argument and no justification.” (*Ibidem*: 492) And, although Judgment then is expected to frighten everyone, he feels no need to run elsewhere. He remains a Christian and he happily expects “to get mercy” and to be “defeated” by the “hunter” Jesus Christ`s endless love:

“I am grateful to the powers of heaven that I was counted worthy of believing, that I was given this incomparable honor and from the bottom of my soul I cry and say as Marcus: «Good Lord, I do believe! Help my unbelief».”

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