

Nicu Steinhardt and the Mystery of Freedom

Razvan Porumb

When writer Nicu Steinhardt was released from the vicious Communist gulag alongside thousands of other political prisoners during the general amnesty of 1964, four years into his initial thirteen-year conviction, he didn't exactly walk out into freedom. As his father had warned him when urging him to choose prison over the communists' demand that he should testify against his friend, philosopher Constantin Noica, Nicu was about to walk out from a small prison into a larger one—an apt description for totalitarian Romania between 1947 and 1989, and indeed for the entire Eastern bloc at the time.

Indeed, the *Securitate's* generalized surveillance meant that not only former political prisoners or dissenters but everyone could be followed, watched, listened to, recorded, and photographed. And when technology could no longer serve, there were the potential hordes of anonymous informers volunteering to spy on the system's behalf, in search of the elusive *crimethink*. Indeed, when reading George Orwell's *1984* in the 1980s (the book was banned, of course, by the regime at the time), one was struck by what appeared really to be a rather accurate description of totalitarian Romania. With Ceaușescu's omnipresent portraits and the gaze of the "beloved leader" scrutinising most public places, one really had the

feeling that Big Brother was watching.

In that treacherous world, nothing pained Steinhardt more than people's willingness to collaborate with the regime, their willingness to justify its excesses or to be indifferent toward them, or even to welcome the regime as a kind of corrective to the "immoral" excesses of the time. This was for him not just a sign of human weakness in the face of extreme oppression, but a fundamental betrayal of character and faith, the ultimate abdication of freedom. Freedom was for Nicu (as for many other Romanian thinkers at the time) the most important thing, the most precious possession, to which he was to devote his entire life and work. The fact that, following a thriller-like improvised baptism in prison, where he mystically encountered Christ, Steinhardt returned to the world a Christian only deepened his understanding of the centrality of freedom in Christian life and faith.

Nicu Steinhardt was born in 1912 near Bucharest in a well-off Jewish family. He graduated with a degree in law



S. Cumpătescu,
Portrait of Nicu
Steinhardt.

and literature from the University of Bucharest, after which he completed a Ph.D. in constitutional law. He began writing in the 1930s—mainly essays and literary criticism—displaying an uncommon erudition and stylistic skill. He was imprisoned in the 50s for refusing to become the regime’s accomplice during the great Communist purge of intellectuals and dissidents. He emerged from the Communist gulag a transformed man, cherishing the *metanoia* he was granted there, grateful for the paradoxical joy that prison had brought, in a manner reminiscent of Solzhenitsyn: “In this almost fancifully unreal and sinister place, I was to know the happiest days of my life. How absolutely happy I was in cell 34!”¹ He was subsequently pursued by the Securitate his whole life—not gratuitously, as he continued unabated to irritate the system through numerous pieces of disguised criticism. Eventually, in 1980, he managed to become a monk at the Rohia monastery in Western Romania, much to the chagrin of the secret service.

Today, Nicu Steinhardt (or Father Nicolae as he was known later, as a monk) is a major figure in both Romanian literature and the life of the Orthodox faithful, gaining notoriety through his book *The Journal of Joy*, with its complex stream-of-consciousness prose combining literary, artistic, philosophical and theological reflections. He wrote the book in 1972 but meant it as a prison diary “transcribed” *post factum*. Its impact is very much connected with the period following the fall of Communism when the book could finally be published (having only circulated in *samizdat* before then), revealing Steinhardt’s inspiring testimony about the Communist prison while at the same time describing his journey of faith.

Steinhardt’s quest for freedom was put in practice through constant dissension and resistance, as he opposed the totalitarian world surrounding him with every fiber of his being until the end of his days. This dissension is reflected in his *Journal*, which, despite having only a limited circulation among a handful of friends, caused great concern to the secret police, who confiscated it twice and chased its copies around the country in a paranoid frenzy. Furthermore, Steinhardt was engaged in constant correspondence with the Romanian dissidents of the time and with exiled intellectuals. Most notably, he opposed the regime by constantly subverting the system through the most familiar tool he had at his disposal: his published writings.

Steinhardt scholar Adrian Muresan speaks of “subversion” as a constant implicit “supra-character” or a subversive “meta-discourse” in all of Steinhardt’s writings, which he continued to publish—albeit modestly and via marginal platforms—throughout his life.² In Muresan’s words: “Steinhardt’s gaze obstinately looks out from an assumed marginality, only to find ways of orienting itself to and then of harassing and eroding the totalitarian darkness.”³ Almost all of his published writings, be they on literature or art or apparently “harmless” biography, present the occasional subversive undercurrent, even in the face of impending censorship. Of course, all of these subversions became explicit in the *Journal of Joy*, for which reason the book could not be published during the Communist era. However, by employing a rather free style of essay-writing, often under the pretext of literary criticism or cultural reflections, Steinhardt did slip bits of oblique criticism of the regime into the least conspicuous

¹ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul Fericirii* (Iasi: Polirom, 1992), 82–83.

² Adrian Mureșan, *Vârstele subversiunii. N. Steinhardt și deconstrucția utopiilor* (Alba Iulia: OMG, 2020), 30. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

places of his writings. Any subversion or subtext needed to remain thinly observable but also subtle enough to escape the attention of the censors, and Steinhardt was a master at this game.

His greatest victory in managing to publish a “forbidden” text in Communist Romania—as overtly opposed to the regime as was conceivable in those days—came in 1987, when the magazine *Familia* printed his essay “A Slave’s Soul (or The Mystery of Freedom).” This slip-up by the secret service caused a huge scandal and prompted a nationwide reassessment of the censorship system of the Securitate. It also re-established Steinhardt as one of the main subversive enemies of the state, even among a growing number of dissident voices at the end of the 1980s. So what did Steinhardt have to say against the regime when he finally seized the chance? What was it that caused such ire among totalitarian structures? And, not least, what was the mystery of freedom, as revealed to him in the midst of those troubled days of oppression?

“I will never stop repeating,” Steinhardt wrote in the illicit article, “even at the risk of being seen as maniacal or obsessive—that the mystery of freedom is nothing else but the courage to confront death. . . . The one that comes under attack has always the right (and duty) to defend himself; to give in to aggression or to blackmail means nothing else but to consent to slavery.”⁴ He strongly questions the Romanian popular adage that “a sword won’t cut the head that bows.” Bowing down (in submission, surrender or immediate capitulation) invariably leads to a different outcome: it increases the adversaries’ claims, gives them a surplus of energy, of shamelessness, of audacity. At the same time

it signifies the first step towards an ever-growing enslavement. An inexorable law applies in all instances of surrender: something extra will always be asked of the non-fighter, he will be the focus of further exploitation. Far from ensuring his peace, it will cause him to enter a state of total dependency, just like those addicted to narcotics, and he will end his miserable life as the slave of an insolent and greedy gangster, to the strengthening of whose power he himself—the victim—will also have contributed.⁵

He continues:

Of all the offences, blackmail is the most odious and repugnant (next to the offence of being an informant); to enter its game is synonymous with approving it, disseminating it, becoming a participant in it. . . . Giving in to blackmail or in beginning to negotiate compromises following it is the beginning of the loss of freedom of the nation or person who would not fight back and utter a clear “no.” . . . The blackmailer needs the acceptance, the complicity of the one who is blackmailed.⁶

What if, Steinhardt asks, it is a matter of life and death? What if there is a gun to one’s head? “The rule of the game,” he says, “does not change—just what’s at stake, which has suddenly become *Hamlet*-like, a choice between existence and its opposite. And the winner of this game will only be the one who is not afraid of dying, or is at least strong enough to act as though he is not subdued by fear, another way in which victory can be often obtained.”⁷

The text addresses, of course, those who, having yielded to the Communists’ threats, became collaborators of the regime. Yet its reach is

⁴ Nicolae Steinhardt, “Suflet de rob (sau Taina Libertatii),” in *Monologul polifonic* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1991), 190.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

arguably wider, referring to any coercive system of control, to any invasion by an aggressive state (as is indeed the case of the callous Russian invasion of Ukraine today), and showcasing Steinhardt's view on the dyad of courage and freedom. For Steinhardt, the key to disarming repressive totalitarian systems, the key to freedom, is courage, namely, the supreme courage to confront death. Steinhardt himself defines totalitarianism as "not so much the weaving of an economic, biological or social theory but rather the manifestation of an attraction towards death."⁸ Christ, the Lord of life, the one who has trampled down death by death is the natural adversary of this macabre system. He is the one in whom we find the strength to defy death in defending and proclaiming freedom.

In relation to freedom, "the most extraordinary thought ever read, except for the Gospel texts" is for Steinhardt a Kierkegaardian phrase: "The opposite of sin is not virtue, the opposite of sin is freedom." He quotes this passage again and again in the *Journal*. In writing the *Journal* Steinhardt places himself mentally in the universe of the prison, so that his witness comes, albeit retrospectively, from that paradoxical place of suffering and joy. He quotes hundreds of authors from memory, with lesser or greater accuracy. In his quotation from Kierkegaard he replaces the original "faith" with "freedom," probably a subconscious "unpacking" of Kierkegaard's concept of faith, which, in fairness, was inextricably connected to freedom. Besides the involuntary interpretation, however, this substitution also reveals how, in a sense, Steinhardt viewed faith and freedom as interchangeable realities.

For Steinhardt, freedom implies responsibility and involvement, while

at the same time faith is a profoundly dynamic and active reality. Faith can never be coerced but must always be grounded in absolute freedom. He is annoyed by a tendency of some intellectuals of his day to welcome certain elements of morality-based censorship applied by the Communist state. He is also annoyed with certain priests "who make haste with fiery words of praise in approving the moral measures taken by some totalitarian governments (abolishing prostitution, prohibiting abortion, complicating divorce) . . . [They] have in mind, I believe, more the letter and severities rather than the spirit in which such measures are grounded. For the spirit cannot blow except where there is freedom and where virtue issues from free will."⁹ Sins and temptations are to be vanquished following the faithful's free choice, and not as a consequence of imposition, prohibition, or autocratic official decrees.

Freedom—the essential prerequisite of faith—means ultimately a refusal to compromise, to make any pact with the deceitful autocratic power, a refusal to justify it or accept it in any way. Moreover, freedom cannot coexist with indifference and withdrawal. One cannot be free while ignoring the injustices of the ruling power, nor indeed can faith survive in indifference to wrongs done to our neighbours. Christ exhorts us not only to be brave but also to be awake and engaged: "Ask. Demand. Knock. Dare. Don't be afraid. Don't be frightened. Persevere. Charge. Be awake. Be of sound mind." "It doesn't behoove us to be stupid!" Steinhardt adds wryly. "I didn't know—the answer of those who are told about torture, about concentration camps, about prisons, about the total admission of accusations, about political internments in mental asylums . . . is not a valid excuse."¹⁰ To witness to

⁸ *Jurnalul fericirii*, 49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 537.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

the truth in a place of blatant breaches of human rights means above all else to “scream at the top of your lungs” that people are being discriminated against, oppressed, tortured, or killed. “Blind or indifferent passage through life and through things are from the devil.”¹¹ Our faith in Christ should always keep us connected to the things that matter: “justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23).

It is no surprise that Steinhardt saw his journey to Christian faith starting with his utter refusal, at his father’s behest, to betray his friend, his refusal to accept this ‘harmless’ collaboration with the regime—a symbolic gesture primarily, since his friend’s fate had already been sealed and he was to be convicted at a show trial with or without Steinhardt’s testimony. What was asked of Steinhardt was merely a display of loyalty and consent, to take a small part in the parabolic game of blackmail and betrayal. But one such small gesture can be tantamount to corrupting one’s whole life and faith. “Sometimes . . . the smallest thing,” wrote Steinhardt, “can become essential and terrifically serious . . . a signature placed on a document carrying legal intricacies can grow to become equivalent to the entire universe, to one’s deepest ‘I,’ to one’s very personality and soul, to the sense of the life

that that person is living.”¹² Steinhardt refused to play the game, and willingly chose imprisonment and very likely death (as a thirteen-year sentence was not realistically survivable), and in so doing he chose freedom, paying the price in unspeakable suffering, but grounding his faith in honor and intransigence: the path to acquiring an encounter with Christ and a life in Him.

For a while, it seemed that Steinhardt’s witness was connected strictly to the period of Communist persecutions and the specifics of that particular totalitarian universe. We are crossing again into an age when deceitful, populist movements are gaining ground around the world. They are coming to power against the backdrop of acute social discrepancy, with the support of masses of voters whose justified fear and anger are manipulated, and they are seriously imperiling democracies, which appear increasingly brittle. Steinhardt’s lesson thus re-emerges at the right time. A small thing, perhaps, but the fortuitous forthcoming translation of the *Journal of Joy*, to be published by St Vladimir’s Seminary Press—notwithstanding a few dated political and ideological views on Steinhardt’s part—will make his theological witness available to an expanded audience. ✱

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² N. Steinhardt, *Incertitudini literare (Literary uncertainties)* (Iasi: Polirom-Rohia, 2012), 184.



Razvan Porumb is a lecturer in ecumenism and practical theology and the vice-principal of the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies (IOCS), Cambridge. He earned his doctorate through the Cambridge Theological Federation and IOCS, where he has been as a researcher and a member of staff for more than twelve years.