



# Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Saint John of Kronstadt (1829–1908)

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Project Number: 22153145**Description:**

Rev. Morariu is participating in the research project, 'Political Theology', directed by Dr Tanya van Wyk, Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

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Received: 27 Mar. 2018

Accepted: 31 May 2018

Published: 24 July 2018

**How to cite this article:**Morariu, I.-M., 2018, 'Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Saint John of Kronstadt (1829–1908)', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(4), 4993. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i4.4993>**Copyright:**© 2018. The Authors.  
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It has been often said nowadays that since the fall of Constantinople, the Eastern-Orthodox Church has not been concerned with political theology. In this research, we will try to show that aspects of the aforementioned topic can be found even in works like the spiritual autobiographies from that space. Therefore, our analysis will focus on the diaries of an important Russian Orthodox priest, Saint John of Kronstadt, who lived in the second half of the 19th century and in the first decade of the 20th century. An important personality of his time, he was a great priest who developed the Eucharistic life, highlighting the relevance of the Holy Liturgy in the Christian life, the social life, offering accommodation, food, money and a place to work for the poor people from his parish and abroad. At the same time, he had a political and intellectual life, being in a good relationship with the tsar and his family, and wrote in his diaries, published during his lifetime and translated into English, his spiritual experiences, his daily life ones and his teaching and opinions on different topics and so on. By highlighting and investigating here episodes like his attitude towards the failed attempt for revolution that took place in Kronstadt in 1905, his relationship with the poor ones and his critique directed to the unfairly attitude of the rich people of his time towards the less fortunate ones or even his preaches against the famous contemporary writer Lev Tolstoy, we will try to show how political theology was understood by such a great father as John of Kronstadt and to emphasise the actuality of some of his ideas related to this topic.

## Introduction

An important personality of the Russian Orthodoxy in the second half of the 19th century and in the first decade of the 20th century, praised both before and after his death (Kizenko 2000; Semenov 1903), Saint John of Kronstadt was a man who left for the future generations not only his advices or solutions to the social problems of communities (according to the example of the community that he spiritually ruled for many years) of his time but he was also a great father who wrote an interesting spiritual autobiography. Spread in some different volumes, his diary contains not only interesting advices, descriptions of daily life episodes, information about his temptations, the situation of his contemporary world but also a panorama of his spiritual life and experiences in searching God and his grace.

Describing the history of publication of his spiritual autobiography, a contemporary researcher shows that:

The diary is issued between 1889 and 1908. Its first part (consisting of 830 pages), is entitled *My life in Christ* (Kronstadt 2005). Later, he published: *The experience of knowing God and self-knowledge*, (1900), *Christian philosophy* (1902), *The road through God* (1905), *Considerations and feelings of a Christian* (1905), *Contemplative fervour* (1906-1907) and *Alive ears* (1909). (Selawry 2001:186–187)

Soon after their publication, his notes were translated into English (Sergieff 1897) and were very well received in the Anglican space (Selawry 2001:1994) and later translated into different languages, especially in the Orthodox space. While some spiritual autobiographies like the ones from the Methodist space speak about the conversion of the author (Wesley 1998:123) and his or her experiences as a faithful, or about his or her mystical experiences (Avila 1995; Myers 1993), the one of Saint John contains sometimes both references to the moral situation of his time, his moral life, his Eucharistic experiences and also to the road to God, emphasising sometimes his deep mystical experiences. In some of these notes, we can also find aspects of political theology. If in a previous article we have spoken generally about these aspects that can be found in the spiritual autobiographies from the Orthodox space in the 19th and 20th centuries (Morariu 2017:129–133), here we will try to go deeper into the problem and to focus on those aspects from Saint John's writings. We will analyse his notes; the social, cultural, political and confessional context (when we speak here about the 'confessional context' we understand the context of his time in Russia,

when almost everybody was Orthodox, but they were also some factions like 'nikonists', and protestants: 'Baptists' started to settle there); when they were written; and try to underline, where possible, the similitudes between him and other authors like Dag Hammarskjöld (Erling 2010; Hammarskjöld 1972), to see where he was a visionary and the actuality of his teaching on this topic. In our research, we will not only use his diaries, biographies, studies and articles dedicated to him but also other important publications that speak, no matter how little, about him, his work and his ideas.

## Saint John of Kronstadt: His life and activity

Before speaking about the aspects of political theology that can be found in his spiritual autobiography, we consider important, for the readers who are not familiar with his personality, to present briefly his life and activity. Born on 19 October, 1829, in Pinega land in the Archangelsk region in the family of a church singer Ilie Serghiev and Theodora, he initially studied nearby his home in a village close to his birthplace (Andronic 2013:5; Botsi 2003:111–112; Hopko 2005:4532; Selawry 2001:57) and then he went to the Seminary of Archangelsk, where he graduated as valedictorian (Necula 2005:83). For this reason, he was sent with a scholarship to study at the Theological Academy in Sankt Petersburg, where he graduated in 1855 (Necula 2005:83). Because of the death of his father soon after his Seminary graduation, father John was about to abandon his university studies and go home to help his family. At his mother's insistence, he gave up this plan and worked as a copyist all this period, for sustaining his family. Soon after his graduation, he married Elisabeta, daughter of archpriest Constantin from Kronstadt (Fedcenkov 2007:15) and shortly after, on 12 December, 1855, was ordained as a priest for the Cathedral from that city, by his ex-rector, Bishop Hristofor (\*\*\*, Life and praise of Saint John of Kronstadt 2004:7). All his life, he lived in chastity, as brother and sister with his wife, choosing to dedicate himself entirely to the pastoral and Eucharistic work.

In Kronstadt, he found a mosaic community: poor people, thieves and other social categories. All his life he tried to help them to find God. Initially, his innovative ideas like offering the Eucharist to women during their menstruation (Kizenko 1998:331), daily celebration of Eucharist with more than 5000 people receiving communion every day and the common confessions blessed exceptionally by the Holy Council of the Russian Orthodox Church presented him with problems. While some priests criticised him for this and wrote numerous complaints to his superiors accusing him of changing the rules of the Orthodox Church, his family members, starting with his wife, complained to the Metropolitan that, because of his total care for the poor ones, his family was deprived of the elementary resources for daily life (Selawry 2001:99). He solved this problem by accepting to offer to his wife his entire salary as a teacher at the high school from the city where he lived in. Meanwhile, he solved, little by little, all these problems and had the determined ones who, initially, criticised him, not only to agree with his activity, but to admire him.

Without feeling discouraged by criticism and accusations, Saint John started to celebrate Liturgy daily and, in the first part of his life, to dedicate more than 20 h daily to the ones who needed him (Selawry 2001:59). He also started to think of the poor people from his town and of their integration and this was very useful for decreasing the rate of delinquency and criminality. Therefore, in 1872, he tried to work at some houses for accommodation and professional apprenticeship schools. In 1882, he finished the so-called *House of love for work*, which hosted 7281 people. The complex had a school, library, a house for orphans and many other facilities (Necula 2005:84). In 1891, he inaugurated a house for the pilgrims who started to come in huge numbers to Kronstadt and in 1902 he built the Monastery consecrated to 'Saint John of Rila', his protector (Necula 2005:84). Starting from 1888, he began to travel in Russia in order to help people and there he was also the guest of the tsar (Necula 2005:84). During his travels, he spoke with people about their problems and their spiritual life (Necula 2005:84); he prayed for their needs and also wrote in his diaries. From this period on, there were numerous testimonies about his open mind and his ecumenical way of seeing things (manifested both in his attitude towards people of other Christian denominations, and also towards people of other faiths, like Muslim Tartars, with whom he prayed together in different situations). His miracles were not directed only to Orthodox people but also to Muslim tartarise and towards people of other faiths (Andronic 2013:52, 80). And this made him all the more famous and loved by people with each passing day.

Some of his pastoral or traveling experiences are described in his spiritual autobiography, segmented in his diaries, while others featured in his dialogues with different people (like Taisia 1998). Rooted in the Holy Scripture and Holy Fathers belonging to the first 8 centuries but also to other important Fathers like Nicolas Cabasila (Cabasila 1989; 2009), his teaching is linked with his Eucharistic life and his relationship with God. For this reason, before and after his death, they were very popular, used and frequently quoted.

In 1908, tired and sick but still happy – as it can be seen from his diaries – he left this world. The Russian Orthodox Church from Emigration canonised him on 01 November, 1964, while the Moscow Patriarchate was able to do this only on 08 May, 1990 (Necula 2005:85), because of the political situation.

For the Russian Orthodox Church as for the whole Orthodox Church and for the ecumenical space, where he is sometimes quoted (Clements 2003:22), he is an important personality. While his practical works that he left behind are a living example of loving the neighbour (in a way that maybe only Saint Mary Skobtova have understood it in the sacrament of the neighbour) (Skobtova 1995), his publications are very precious works about the Eucharist and its importance for Christian life, the relationship with God and the way how, through humiliation and perseverance, people can achieve the kingdom of God and the perfection.

## Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Saint John of Kronstadt

After presenting the landmarks of his biography, we now consider it important to speak about the aspects of political theology that can be found in the spiritual autobiography of Saint John of Kronstadt. Like the other authors of the genre, he never intended to write a treatise on this topic. He was not a supporter of the revolutionary movement and his favourable attitude regarding monarchical movement was a moderate one. Moreover, he manifested a lack of interest towards politics and that is why rarely did he speak about it in his works. Therefore, the mentions referred to it are not many and are linked either with the spiritual life or with the political and social context of his times.

From the very beginning, it must be said that, as a man of his time, Saint John was interested in the political situation, about the events that could influence it and about the rulers and their role. If Saint Silouane from Mount Athos, although he was a monk in Greece, came back to Russia in 1904–1905, during the Russian–Japanese war to answer the Tsar's call and serve in the Imperial Guard (Larchet 2001:361), we can easily imagine that Saint John also proved his obedience to the Tsar. He visited him whenever required, praying at his head near his death and praying for the Russian monarchy. But, because of the fact that he had disciples like the archimandrite Mikhail Semenov (who even dedicated him a biography; Semenov 1903), who joined the socialist movement and for some of his philanthropic actions dedicated to the pious, Saint John was considered by some authors as an exponent of Russian socialism (Dixon 2008:700). The fact is far away of being truth.

His attitude from 1905 can be considered a proof in that sense. At that time, a failed attempt of revolution took place in Kronstadt, the purpose of which was the instauration of Communism.<sup>1</sup> Saint John didn't leave the city as did most of the rich people and their rulers, in that moment. He went home and nobody disturbed him. After that moment, he wrote the following words about the failed attempt of revolution in one of his diaries:

But I am wondering, do you know, all of you who have the duty to know it, that our revolution from now is first of all a consequence of apostasy from the faith, from our bellowed to God Orthodoxy, holy, and life giving, which has inside it all the power to bring peace for the ones who believe in it? It can fix our inside and outside world and our family, community and economic life? (Kronstadt 2009:31–32)

Thinking in a simple and clear way, Saint John sees the solution of all the problems in the sincere faith to God and the cause of all the troubles and turbulences as a consequence of lack of it. The roots of his way of thinking can be found for sure in the Holy Scripture, which, according to him, must be

1. For more information about this event and the future ones that will take place there, see Avrich (2014); Hernandez (2001:13–35); Schapiro (1984:298–300); Deery (2012:181).

the source of life of each priest.<sup>2</sup> In fact, like Jesus, he doesn't militate for a regime but for a way of life and for its principles. Therefore, although he disagrees with the idea of revolution, he is not for the huge discrepancy between the poor and the rich. In his life, he tries to improve the way of life of the former, by offering them accommodation, money and work. In his spiritual autobiography, he often speaks against the bad attitude of the rich towards the poor. In one of his notes, where he describes one of his travels, he says:

I have been in the villages and I saw how the peasants are living. What poverty everywhere, how many rags with countless patches! How pale faces because of the hunger! How many sad faces! But why, are they the step children of God? The reach ones refuse to look at them, to dress them, fit or say them a few good words! What a soul has the reach man! How much is this soul against God and people! Do not praise the reach one, do not be invidious on him, but cry for him as for the lowest man! (Kronstadt 2009:120)

Without being a socialist or a militant for their cause, he criticised the bad behaviour of the rich towards the poor. Despite his reach with people, he wasn't friends with another famous contemporary, Lev Tolstoy, who also militated for the poor in some of his novels and pleaded their cause in some of his books (Tolstoy 1922; 1953; 2005; 2008; 2014) and also had an interesting and practical attitude regarding this topic.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, father John criticised and classified Tolstoy as a traitor whenever he had an opportunity (Fedcenkov 2007:178). In public, he spoke against him, criticising not his attitude or talent, but his atheist convictions. The way the writer often spoke against God also made father John sad. In his diaries, Saint John sometimes wrote about Tolstoy. One of these notes is a real imprecation, and it shows how much father John suffered because of the writer's conception about God, Virgin Mary and Church. He says there:

O, Lord, how much have you increased the human race through Thy incarnation, Thy Divine-Humanity, and through the Virgin Mary, Theotokos, who gave you birth ... And how much (a lot!), are scoffing Thy and Thy Church, people like Tolstoy and so-called intellectuality who is lost! Lord, until when will You accept this scoff? Until when will You accept this fake teaching? Lord, come down and broke this mountain of unbelief! Let it be!

Son of God has come on the earth for that through His teaching, miracles, passions and death to recap and save humanity, to enlighten it, to clean it, to make it new, to decorate it with all the beauty and to unite it with himself; and Lev Tolstoy, together with writers like him, an uncountable number of them, they live on the earth to darken and broke through their lake of God, through their unbelief and anarchy, many people that follow them and read their bloody writings. O, Lord, lose them or bring them back to the faith, humiliate their diabolic proudness! (Kronstadt 2009:30)

2. Therefore, he militates for the use of Scripture in pastoral work, showing that: 'Priest, as a doctor of souls, must be himself free of all soul's diseases for being able to advice the others. As a shepherd of souls, he must have been himself on the pastures of the Gospel and of the Patristic heritage, for knowing where to direct his speaking flock' (Kronstadt 2005:251).

3. Because it is beyond the scope of this article, we will not present here in detail Tolstoy's attitude and we will not compare the two thinkers and their attitudes, because of the huge difference in their thinking and actions which would make our work almost impossible. The reader who is interested to find more information about Tolstoy and his attitude towards social problems is invited to see the bibliography recommended in the text.

At a first glance, it seems that father John doesn't have a problem with Tolstoy's political conception, but with his attitude towards the Church. But, as soon as his attitude was linked with his political conception and it comes as an outcome of it, we can surely see also a political accent to it and therefore we can classify the paragraphs dedicated to this topic among the ones linked with political theology. On the other side, his fight with Tolstoy and his ideas show his clear and decided anti-communist attitude, based on his religious convictions. Like in his words against the revolution from 1905, he sees faith as the only solution for all social problems and tries to move the accent from the outside of the human being onto the inside, militating for the interior link with God that brings to the one who has it the gifts of Holy Spirit, peace and capacity to persuade others about what he believes in. Therefore, his ideas on political theology are both linked with contradiction of Tolstoy, the rich and the poor and the social life of his times, and with political context and Communism and its meaning. The author is not speaking only about one of them and is not developing a system of thinking linked with one idea but his writings are, as we have already shown, determined by a situation, an interaction or an event.

Also linked with this interior dimension is the fight of the Russian father against formalism. In a world where nikonists<sup>4</sup> and other sects were fighting for the strict obeisance to some formal rules that kill the soul, he will say to his faithful:

It is important to light candles in front of the icons, but it is much more useful to give to the Lord as a sacrifice the fire of our love to Him and of our love for the neighbour. It is good to do both one and other. If you light a candle in front of the icon and you do not have in your heart love for God and for your neighbour, if you are selfish, you don't live in peace, your sacrifice is useless. (Kronstadt 2005:483)

Although he focuses on spiritual life and social problems in his life and writings, Saint John of Kronstadt offers, as we could see, interesting information about the investigated topic. For him, like for other Orthodox mystic writers of the time, there will be peace in the world when man is capable of totally opening his soul to the presence of God and when the unnatural dominance of body against the soul<sup>5</sup> disappears from human life.

## Conclusion

An important personality of his time, of the Eastern-Orthodox space, but also of the Ecumenical one, Saint John has left us an important spiritual autobiography that has many uses in daily life. Between them, very important are, as we could see, the aspects of political theology. Although he does not speak too much about this topic, preferring to focus on questions like interior life, relationship with God, social problems,

4. For more information about them and their history, see Meyendorff (1991).

5. The unnatural domination of meat against the spirit can be explained, among other reasons, also by the fact that the spirit looks to be 'buried' in meat, strongly linked with it. This can be observed specially in questions related with the ministry of God. Man seems to be close to God more with his mouth, with his body, in a fake way. He doesn't worship him in Spirit and Truth (Kronstadt 2005:38).

Eucharist, Liturgy and confession, he offers some interesting personal reflections on them when he speaks about Tolstoy's ideas, monarchy, social structure of his times or Communism. His attitude against Communism linked with the idea of the importance of interior life that can fix all the problems of a Christian or his criticism against the bad behaviour of the rich of his time against the poor are good examples for that. His attitude against Tolstoy and his atheism linked with his political convictions constitute a good example that should be taken into account. By reading his writings even today, a Christian can surely find interesting information for his or her daily life, historical data and also solutions for his or her problems, even if it concerns with political theology.

His concern for socio-political problems shows not only that he was concerned with these topics but also that he was a realistic man who wanted to know the political situation of his time and to use it for helping the faithful when it was necessary or for the good of the Church.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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