

FROM C. S. LEWIS' *JOY* TO NICOLAE STEINHARDT'S
HAPPINESS

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Abstract

The paper highlights common or divergent points in the way in which the concept of "joy" is reflected in two masterpieces of Christian literature: *Surprised by Joy* (C. S. Lewis) and *The Diary of Happiness* (N. Steinhardt)

Key words: *joy, happiness, Sehnsucht, Christianity, Orthodox Christian tradition*

C. S. Lewis (1898 – 1963) wrote *Surprised by Joy* during the latter years of his lifetime and had it published in 1955, eight years before his death. As we are warned from the very beginning, this volume is not an autobiography. On the one hand, the existential intervals under scrutiny are few and incompletely described. On the other hand, the author himself frequently and humorously admits he is not quite sure of the accuracy of his narration (memory can be tricky, and not everything is to be taken ad litteram). In his mnemotechnic effort, the author obsessively pursues one goal: to define the state of joy that visited him, fleetingly but overwhelmingly, in different periods of his life.

The title as such intertextualizes a famous poem by the Romantic writer William Wordsworth, *Surprised by Joy, Impatient As the Wind*. In this poem, joy acquires truly ecstatic dimensions, especially due to the mediation of its ambivalent, paradoxical character: it is both intense and brief, at the same time. To Wordsworth, happiness ineffably adds particular touches of light to the long and painful darkness of earthly existence. It is not by chance that Lewis makes this textual allusion. In his own hermeneutic register too, joy remains a transitory episode (just like "a stab", as he calls it). In his afterword to the 3rd edition of his allegorical fiction, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis gives examples of things that made him feel the stabs of joy, that "inconsolable longing" in our heart for "we know not what": "That unnameable something, desire for which pierces us like a rapier at the smell of bonfire, the sound of hill ducks flying overhead, the title of *The Well at the World's End*, the opening lines of *Kubla*

Khan, the morning cobwebs in late summer, or the noise of falling waves” (Lewis, 214).

The implications of his analysis in the volume under discussion go further than that. We are told that, at a certain point in his academic activity in Oxford and, later, in Cambridge, Lewis becomes acquainted with the German notion of *Sehnsucht*—a relative equivalent for *joy* (closer—but incomplete—terms would be “longing”, “craving”, or “yearning”). From Lewis’ perspective, the German word would best overlap the subtext of the metaphor just mentioned: stabs of joy. The memoirs under discussion thus acquire a new significance. The author tries to define that psychological identity of the individual who finds himself under the spiritual tension preceding the discovery of faith in God (in Lewis’s own case, the re-discovery of faith, after two decades of atheism).

One of the most suggestive definitions given to joy in this volume is that of unfulfilled wish. In Lewis’ implicit theory, an atheist experiences states of incomplete happiness occasioned by his intuition of the divinity (and of the need for God). This, however, is not doubled by the inner strength to embrace the authenticity of such intuition. His joy is relative and unstable. Hence, the fundamental principle of Lewis’ analysis becomes a religious one. During his formative years (when he was an atheist), he grew to be compulsively looking for the state of joy, which he procured from reading and writing. But all of these instances of joy were mere substitutes of the real thing. To parallel this with philosophy: the relationship between joy and faith is that between a syllogism and a concept. While the former is the rationalization/argumentation of an idea, the latter is the final expression/the materialization of that idea. A syllogism is the way to the concept, just like joy is the way to God. Once faith (re)discovered, the obsession for joy comes to an end: the *Sehnsucht* went back to its archetype.

The concept of *joy* is not new to Christianity, but in the Orthodox Christian tradition the word is reserved for something else. Lewis’s *Sehnsucht* has a perfect equivalent in the Romanian *dor*, but in English it is hard to match since it implies mixed feelings of dissatisfaction with life’s imperfection, plus a constant longing for an ideal, indefinite alternative about the existence of which great minds always have an intuition. And this is what Lewis calls by the name of *joy*. In the Orthodox tradition (and not only), joy is an essential spiritual dimension that describes the feeling that accompanies the faithful once they have found out they are not of this world, even if they live in it. Saint Anthony the Great is said to have always been in a state of joy. Saint Seraphim of Sarov used to greet everyone with the formula “My joy!” Joy comes from the certainty of Christ’s Resurrection, so the saying goes “A saint who is sorry is a sorry saint”. Books were written on the subject. I could briefly mention here the two volumes

about the Eastern Church written by the Russian Nikolai Arseniev, in which the author gathers a rich collection of texts of joy.

In this connection and in order to make the transition to the other author in the title of this presentation, Nicolae Steinhardt, I will give four quotations from his book, *Jurnalul fericirii/The Diary of Happiness*, which was translated into six languages, but never in English:

“Old Haydn is asked why his religious music is joyful instead of being ceremonious and solemn. Answer: because whenever I think of God, I rejoice.” (160)

“You, an atheist? Get out of here, you’re much too joyful” (202, taken by Steinhardt from Dostoievski’s *The Teenager*)

“Christianity is joy and prescription for happiness” (258).

“The joy of living, a characteristic of Christianity. Marcel Jouhandeau: ‘The fact that life is a celebration shocked some people. If they chose to be unhappy, suit themselves... I have my share of worries, troubles, disappointments, and yet no one finds out about them, not even myself.’” (251)

In order to better understand what happened to Nicolae Steinhardt (1912 – 1989), I will briefly outline the historical conditions that led to his incarceration. In 1927, “Archangel Michael’s Legion” (also known as “the Legionary Movement”) was created in Romania. This was a nationalistic, anti-communist, anti-Semitic and anti-masonic paramilitary organization. After World War II and the establishment of communism in our country, the legionary members and their sympathizers (real or imagined) were thrown into jails or executed. In 1958, the Romanian thinker and philosopher Constantin Noica (1909 – 1987) is arrested by the Communist regime, together with many other intellectuals, and accused of conspiracy against the social order. As a matter of fact, they had been organizing and attending religious-philosophical meetings. Among the participants was Nicolae Steinhardt, a Romanian writer of Jewish origin. In January 1960, he is accused of the same thing (conspiracy) and sentenced to 13 years of hard labour after he refuses to be a witness for the prosecution. While in prison, this singularly-labelled “pro-anti-Semitic” Jew, a distant relative of Sigmund Freud’s, is secretly baptized into Orthodox Christianity.

Written in the 1970s, *The Diary of Happiness* represents Steinhardt’s literary testament. Confiscated initially by the Securitate organs (and later returned to the author), it is followed by a reconstructed, more detailed version. The book gets to be published after the 1989 Romanian anti-Communist

Revolution, namely in 1992. 1989 is also the year when Steinhardt dies, nine months before the revolution. Since there was no paper and pen in prison, this diary represents a non-chronological, post factum recording of events, thoughts and impressions experienced in jail (but not only).

In the following lines, I will extract from the journal three instances that define and motivate the choice of the title.

1960, the Jilava prison (he was taken there in a van):

Strange sensation of happiness. Reasons: because I am finally done with the investigation. After the Securitate quarters, going to jail is a blessing, an oasis, a heaven. [...]. But I also feel high-flown at recollecting what happened in the van: I shared a kind of cage with another prisoner, Sandu L., an ex-legionary. No sooner are we both crowded in there than he starts talking to me. He says he is terribly sorry he used to be a legionary, he is asking for my forgiveness: I must be awfully uncomfortable sitting there next to him, so close. Am I not terrified? He hardly finishes his word when the roof of the van opens; the blue sky above opens too. I answer that I can't see why he is speaking of forgiveness: if we put it that way, then I am asking for his forgiveness, because I am a Jew and he has to press himself against me: as for the guilt, we are all equally guilty. So now that we asked for each other's forgiveness, I propose that we come to peace, embrace and call each other by name. We kiss in the dim light of the bulb in our wheeled-jail and,—considering ridicule just an empty word and a non-existing feeling—, we suddenly and overwhelmingly go into [...] that state of unspeakable happiness as compared to which any book, any trip, any successful exam, any high dignity in the government is zero, dust and ashes, deception and void... (57-58).

15 March, 1960: baptism in prison by a Bessarabian Orthodox Christian monk-priest, witnessed by two Greek-Catholic Christian priests, two Roman-Catholic Christian priests, and one protestant minister, all incarcerated in the same cell and giving the ceremony “an ecumenical character”, as Steinhardts puts it.

Happiness rushes upon me in ever greater waves. [...]. So it is true: baptism is a holy mystery /.../. Otherwise, this happiness that surrounds me /.../ couldn't be so unimaginably wonderful and perfect. Peace. Absolute indifference. To everything. And sweetness. In my mouth, in my veins, in my muscles. At the same time, a kind of resignation, the feeling that I can do anything, the impulse to forgive anyone, a generous smile not on my lips but everywhere. And a kind of layer of mild air around, an atmosphere like the one you can find in some of our childhood books. A feeling of absolute safety. (84)

1962, Jilava:

After a search, they confiscate a little bottle where I used to keep the black liquid that is served to us as coffee, in the morning. Since I do not eat anything, this 'coffee' is my precious reserve. To me, its confiscation is a catastrophic loss. The search took place in the morning, and I was violently pushed around and threatened for hiding the little bottle. At night, in my bed, right under the blanket, I find a bottle, bigger than the other. The good deed conforms to the strictest Christian precepts, because I don't know who put the bottle there, I cannot ask, I cannot find out. [...]. On my so-called 'pillow', I start shedding sweet, hot tears of happiness. (34)

Steinhardt had his share of "stabs of joy" long before going to jail. He admits he was fascinated with Christianity but lacking the courage to convert. His being incarcerated finally made him decide, since he was convinced he would not survive detention. In 1980, Steinhardt was tonsured and became a monk in the Rohia Monastery. Joy and happiness stayed with him until death.

I will end by quoting the conclusion that marks the end of Steinhardt's diary:

Only because I am Christian does happiness, strange frenzy, visit me, against all reasons. Only thanks to Christianity do I not tread the city high and low, all confused and hurt /.../ and do I not get to be one of those corpses carried away, while still living, by the running river of life /.../. (394)

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