

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae: Portrait of a Public Theologian

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Abstract:

It is the aim of this article to sketch the portrait of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae as a public theologian. Starting with his biography and continuing with his intellectual and spiritual development will become clear that Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae was a theologian profoundly involved in the cultural, intellectual and spiritual life of the Romanian society of the twentieth century. We will observe the fact that the uniqueness of Dumitru Stăniloae in the tapestry of Romanian theological thought is given, among many other things, by his robust interaction with different traditions than his own, an interaction that roots his interdisciplinary, dialogical approach to theology. We will also focus on the way Stăniloae is a theologian who rediscovers the vital connection between theology and spirituality. Moreover, we will understand that there are also many elements in Stăniloae's theological thought that could be taken in account in a formulation of new ways of thinking about the Church and her mission in third millennium Romania.

Keywords: theology, spirituality, culture, society, legacy

Introduction

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993) is considered today the greatest Romanian theologian of every tradition, in the twentieth century. His life, covering almost the entire century, was a witness to all the transformations that the Romanian society in the twentieth century experienced. The aim of this article is to show the portrait of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae as an important public theologian of Romanian history. As will be shown his biography is a witness that he was educated in theology in a dialogical manner, and he was also a theologian concerned with the cultural and spiritual life of the society. The article will underline his unique attempt to make the vital connection between theology and spirituality in a culture that needed the robust affirmations of the truths of theology. Therefore, from his biography, and continuing with his spiritual and intellectual life -long journey, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae constitutes a model for the way a public theologian should develop and for the issues over which a public theologian should reflect, think and write.

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characterized by a crisis of models and spiritual direction, he was in himself a way to be followed towards revival. In the words of one of his disciples: „What Council Vatican II realized at the pastoral and structural level for the Roman Catholic Church, the same Father Stăniloae realized for Orthodoxy at the level of the theological reflection” (Bria, 1994: 43).

Third, part of Stăniloae’s biography is his enormous volume of work: 20 books, 1,300 articles, 30 translations (Constantinescu, 1993: 93). Considered an “Eastern Karl Barth” (Ierunca, 1993: 103), Stăniloae embodied in his writings the unique experiences of his philosophical and theological encounters (Bria, 1994: 8). This dialogical formation is expressed in his writings where the dialogue with philosophy and different Christian traditions is a constant feature. Reading the Bible, the Fathers and also contemporary Catholic and Protestant theology extensively, as well as Eastern Orthodox theology, Stăniloae had no problems using their arguments and ideas when all these were appropriate with his arguments. In this regard Mănăstireanu affirms that „Stăniloae’s theology in general ... was firstly *patristic* ... thoroughly *Trinitarian* ... profoundly *Romanian* ... *dialogical*, characterized by an *ecumenical spirit*” (Mănăstireanu, 2002: 238-239). Even though Stăniloae is often critical and polemical, he proves in most cases at least that he does not suffer from what I call “illiteracy of other traditions”. The way the characteristics of his character and spirituality contributed to the way he was doing theology will be explored in the next section.

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae’ Spiritual and Intellectual Journey

For centuries, the population of the Romanian territories was under foreign domination. While the Transylvanian population and territory were under the domination of the Habsburg Empire since the eleventh century, the Wallachian and Moldavian populations and territories were under the domination of the Byzantine Empire until 1417 and for the next three centuries under Turkish domination (Popescu, 2004: 271). Yet, in spite of these dominations that were political, administrative and ideological the larger population in the territories remains predominantly Orthodox, even though with some positive influences from East and West (Miller, 2000: 8). Explaining the uniqueness of the Romanian ethos that developed under these influences, Dumitru Stăniloae says about the being of the Romanian people:

... his being structured as a border being between East and West. He cannot become unilaterally Western or multilaterally Eastern... Yet the spirit of synthesis of our people is not explained through his persistence from immemorial times in the middle space between East and West, but also through the penetration of the Latin character and of Orthodox Christianity (Stăniloae, 1992: 8, 14).

The development of Romanian nationalism, expressed in the

“cultural regeneration” of the eighteenth century, and the establishment of the United Principalities of Moldavia and Walachia in 1859, culminated with the formation of the Romanian unitary State in 1918, which included Moldavia, Walachia and Transylvania. Yet, even if as a new state, Romania experienced a short period of political stability until 1920 (Popescu, 2004: 271-273), it entered soon a period of 20 years of turmoil before the Second World War, characterized by “a passionate and profound confrontation of ideas” (Miller, 2000: 15), a confrontation that involved political as well as religious thinkers. Miller says in regard to Stăniloae in that period:

Amid the polarities of traditionalism and modernism, nationalism and internationalism, orthodoxy and “western materialism,” we find Stăniloae deepening his appreciation for the Romanian Orthodox cultural and theological tradition. A lasting influence was exercised upon Stăniloae by the militantly Orthodox journalist and poet Nichifor Crainic (1898-1972) who championed attempts to define a specifically Romanian mentality and return natural culture to traditional Christian roots (Miller, 2000: 15).

In fact, the tradition of Romanian nationalism started with the greatest poet of Romanian history Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), he was named by Alexandru Popescu, “the leading political theorist of the nation-State”, having as followers the philosopher Petre Țuțea (1902-1991) and the theologian Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993) (Popescu, 2004: 30-31).

The period between the two World Wars, was also a period of spiritual struggle. For some important Romanian philosophers of those times, the spiritual struggle took the form of a critique of “the political theory divorced from God” that “would lead to the exaltation of power as the only truth.” Petre Țuțea, together with “two distinguished Romanian philosophers, Sorin Pavel (1903-1957) and Nicolae Tatu (1910-2000), produced The National Revolution Manifesto. According to Alexandru Popescu in the Manifesto, “the Orthodox identity of the Romanian people was proposed as the basis for a national policy”. It also “presents the country as being in a sorry spiritual state” and “identifies the real “enemy” as those who undermine the Church” (Popescu, 2004: 16-17). However, the nationalism of this period also took secular forms that tried to promote a secular Romanian ethos, having as one of its representatives “the philosopher-poet Lucian Blaga (1895-1961)” (Miller, 2000: 16). Also, there was an attractive nationalistic Christian ideology, attractive for many intellectuals of the period who were embodied in the extreme nationalistic organization called the Legionary Movement, whose ideologue was one of the famous philosophers of those times, Nae Ionesco (Popescu, 2004: 20).

For Dumitru Stăniloae, this spiritual struggle took the road of what Miller named as “Orthodox Via Media” (Miller, 2000: 10). Miller is right when affirming that Stăniloae’s balanced character was formed in the religious ethos of Romanian Orthodoxy of his native Vlădeni in Transylvania. Miller describes it as:

In its restraint, the discomfort with extremes, in its modest expressiveness; in its light-heartedness as well as its reasoned sensitivity to the mystery of God, the religious ethos of Romanian Orthodoxy is pre-eminently one of spiritual balance (Miller, 2000: 12).

In his search for balance, we find in Stăniloae, says Miller, “a religious sensibility in tune with the notion of *via media* ... understood as a fundamental spiritual disposition whose instinctive preference is for the observances of balance and due proportions”, a disposition that embarked Stăniloae on “a long, at times painful, theological journey” (Miller, 2000: 12).

Due to his spiritual sensibility, Stăniloae found himself from the beginning of his theological studies in Cernăuți (1922) dissatisfied with the way Orthodox theology was taught (Păcurariu, 1993: 3). Radu Bordeianu describes accurately the status of Orthodox theology in those times:

Orthodox theology suffered an unhealthy influence during its “Western captivity.” Its neo-scholastic theology was overly intellectualistic, an academic exercise divorced from spirituality (Bordeianu, 2011: 13).

This state of affairs had a long history with a decline that could be detected in Orthodox theology after the patristic period, culminating during the Ottoman Empire period, with the East turning “rather uncritically to the West”, and adopting Western Neo-Scholasticism. Bordeianu speaks of several reactions to this situation over the centuries. He starts with the philokalic movement of the eighteenth century, with the promotion of the hesychast literature that represented “a spiritual approach to theology in contrast with the rationalism of Neo-Scholasticism” (Bordeianu, 2011: 14-16). Then there was the Slavophil movement of the nineteenth century, with the departure from Catholic and Protestant West, and the movement of the twentieth century to depart from neo-scholastic theology, represented by, Nicholas Afanasiëff, Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, Vladimir Lossky, and Florovsky. However, Bordeianu considers that “Stăniloae was the first Orthodox theologian to successfully break away from manual theology” (Bordeianu, 2011: 19, 27).

For Stăniloae, this break consisted not in its rejection per se, rather he was looking to replace it with a theology that would be a profound

actualization of the Patristic heritage. This started earlier in his theological activity with the discovery of St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). Palamas' thought helped Stăniloae to find balance for the concepts that he learned from theologians of other traditions. For example, Bordeianu signals the fact that after discovering in Karl Barth's theology "the transcendence of God before man," he balanced that view with the Palamite view of uncreated energies, a theology that facilitates an understanding of "God's real involvement with humankind and the world without compromising his essential unknowability and transcendence" (Bordeianu, 2011: 23). Also, through Palamas' thought, Stăniloae found a starting point for what he aimed for, a spiritual theology. Palamas is considered one of the theologians that were instrumental for the full development of Hesychasm (Popescu, 2004: 279) and considered "the theologian of Hesychasm" (Joantă, 1993: 559).

The synthesis of hesychast mystics owed to St Gregory Palamas closes theologically all the efforts, starting with the Alexandrian theologians to Simeon the New Theologian to express in a framework of a biblical and patristic theology, the most authentic Christian experience, proper to the Apostles on the Tabor, to the first martyr, Stephen, to Ap. Paul on the Damascus Road and to all monk – saints or to simple believers along the entire Christian history (Joantă, 1993: 561).

In Romania, the Hesychast tradition was present even from the time when the Romanian Principalities were not united. The presence of "a very ancient monastic tradition of prayer" was in existence in Walachia by the time St. Nikodemus of Tismana (1320-1406) came in these territories. Nikodemus was instrumental for the revitalization of this Hesychast spirituality, which continued and spread in monasteries and caves, from Walachia, to Transylvania, and in Moldavia. Some of the representatives of Romanian Hesychasm among monks, were Daniel the Hesychast (in the fifteenth century), Elder Basil of Poiana Mărului (eighteenth century), Paisy Velichovsky (1722-1794) – the first who translated into Slavonic the Hesychast writings from Greek, a collection that was named Philokalia. Considered "the first to achieve that synthesis of Byzantine and Russian spirituality that is so characteristic of Romanian Orthodoxy, Paisy was followed by disciples as St. Calinic of Cernica, and in the twentieth century by Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) in Transylvania and Ilie Cleopa (1912-1998) in Moldavia (Popescu, 2004: 280-282).

The novelty introduced by the Pysian view of hesychast spirituality, followed by his disciples, was that of opening the practice of Hesychasm outside the monastery to lay believers, something that was a kind of recapture for Nicolas Cabasilas "adapted Hesychast spirituality

for laity” (Joantă, 1993: 561). This Paysian innovation was embodied and revitalized in the “Burning Bush movement” a movement that reunited monks, intellectuals and scholars of Romania at the end of the Second World War. Dumitru Stăniloae, as one who was part of this movement, translated and published the second edition of *Filokalia* (Popescu, 2004: 282-283), to be available for the larger public. Mircea Păcurariu speaks about the diversity of the “Burning Bush” group:

Part of the group were the Archimandrites Benedict Ghiță and Sofian Boghin, the physician Alexandru Mironescu, Professor Constantin Joja, the poet Vasile Voiculescu, the poet and journalist Sandu Tudor, the writer and journalist Ion Marin Sadoveanu, the young assistant Andrei Scrima and others. They met periodically at the Antim Monastery or in one of their houses, and they were trying to keep alive the Orthodox and authentic Romanian conscience in the new condition of the political and social life of our country (Păcurariu, 1993: 9).

Also, in one of his last interviews, 1 April 1992, Dumitru Stăniloae, points out this new way of seeing Hesychasm. He considered that the prayer of the heart is “a gift and a result of a spiritual exercise”. As such it is a gift not to be used only in solitude, but it is communitarian. Therefore, it is not to be limited as a monastic practice, but also as a day-to-day practice. (Dumitrescu, 1992: 82-84). During the Antonescian dictatorship and the beginning of the Communist regime, Hesychasm flourished in political prisons. Later on under the Communist dictatorship of Gheorghe-Gheorghiu Dej, the members of the Burning Bush movement were arrested in 1958 and imprisoned. For them as for others before them, Hesychast prayer was a means for survival “that sustained them through the Soviet experiment of re-education” (Popescu, 2004: 284-285).

Conclusions

It was the aim of this article to sketch the portrait of Dumitru Stăniloae as a public theologian. We did that by exploring his rich biography, influenced as it were, by the spiritual and intellectual context in which Stăniloae was born, lived and developed his theology and spiritual practices. We observed the fact that the uniqueness of Dumitru Stăniloae in the tapestry of Romanian theological thought and intellectual life is given first by his interdisciplinary, dialogical approach. Therefore, we can conclude that Stăniloae, through his theology opens new avenues for the development of contemporary Orthodox theology, especially, on the direction of recovering the interdependency between theology and spirituality. A fertile thinker, profoundly engaging with the culture of his time, he was one of the most important public theologians of Romania in the twentieth century.

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