

Theology and Communist Ideology. The Case of Father Dumitru Staniloae (1903-1993)

Many studies concerning the doctrine of the Church were influenced in their content, either by the elements of Western, Roman Catholic and Protestant theology, or by the ideological principles of communism. There were not few Romanian Orthodox theologians, who, in the early years of communism in Romania, wrote studies of Dogmatic Theology or studies regarding the implications of the doctrine of the Church, starting from the false principle of the symbiosis between the essential elements of the doctrine of the Church and the essential elements of the communist ideology. Topics such as peace, work, progress, collectivity were real bridges through which the doctrine of the Church and the doctrine of atheist communism were trying to be brought into harmony. Due to the political influences of the communist state on the Orthodox Church in Romania in its development, the Romanian Orthodox theology records some tendencies specific to the context. Although these tendencies are evident in the theology approach, however, Romanian Orthodox theology has managed to define itself not so much in relation to the pressing context in which it manifested itself, but in relation to the values of the Gospel and of Revelation in general. Viewed in context, the Romanian Orthodox theology has developed on various prospects, having *theology and life* as a general purpose¹.

In this sense, precisely in the difficult years after the establishment of communism in Romania, the case of Father Dumitru Staniloae can be a landmark. Father Dumitru Staniloae, one of the most well known Romanian theologians of the interwar period, represents a landmark in

¹ See the study of Rev. Prof. Ioan COMAN on the radiography of the theological culture development in the Romanian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Justinian. (“Prea Fericitul Părinte Patriarh Justinian și cultura teologică în Biserica Ortodoxă Română”, in: *Studii Teologice*, XXVIII (1975) 1-2, pp. 5-19)

the efforts of the Romanian Orthodox theologians to confess the dogma and spirituality of the Church in the new atheistic context. Although he addressed theological and dogmatic issues in the immediate vicinity of the themes sympathetic to communist propaganda, he succeeded in overcoming the communist language and ideological vision. For example, in the study *Conditions of Salvation*², Father Dumitru Staniloae raises the question of human salvation without avoiding the historical context and shows that salvation does not mean to leave the world and the debts to it, but he does not descend the theological argument in the sphere of the ideology that ruled Romania at that time. At the same time, he expresses the good deeds of man as a condition of salvation, a favourite theme in the collectivism of communist ideology. In this theme of good deeds, Father Staniloae sees the meeting between society, state, and Orthodox doctrine, emphasizing, from the beginning, the quality of good deeds in Orthodox conception. Practically, as we shall see, he proposes for analysis a favourite theme in communist ideology, in order to show the superiority of the Orthodox conception of the good deeds and the relation of man with the world in which he lives and with God. He explains the functionality between the three conditions of salvation: grace through synergy gives birth to faith in man, and from these good deeds are produced. Father Stăniloae does not bypass the inter-confessional approach of the theme. Nevertheless, beyond the classical inter-confessional scheme, we should note the development of a rigorous conception of the role of man world in any historical context, in an apologetic manner and through the patristic method synthesized by Saint Gregory Palama. He bases the Orthodox conception on good deeds not on any sociological or philosophical conception, but on the Orthodox conception of grace seen as a “flow of divine power and love”. After exposing in the Palamite vision the distinction between being, persons, and grace, emphasizing the human experience with the Trinity in the uncreated grace, he expresses the dynamic role of human activity through good deeds in discovering the world and its meaning, to the cohesion of the community and society.

“In activity the different selves become a society, a symphony in continuous progress. The activity creates community and it is

² Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Condițiile mântuirii”, in: *Studii Teologice*, III (1951) 5-6, pp. 245-256.

Theology and Communist Ideology. The Case of Father Dumitru Staniloae

required by community for harmony, the community supports it. And since through each activity of every man Christ opens and becomes clear to his fellow men and manifests his grace unto them, through their deeds the good people show Christ to each other Thus those who regard Him through them magnify their Father in heaven. However, not only man and society are sanctified through moral activity, and not only in him and in it Christ is made clear. Through his activity man also sanctifies the nature he works on and makes the rays of Christ's light appear in its mirror as another sun that embellishes and blushes everything"³.

We observe how he starts from the principles asserted in the ideology of the time - the activity in the community, the society - and goes on to show the functionality of the people's activity through the presence of Christ in the community, in the society and in the cosmos. The distinction between the activity directed toward God and the activity directed toward this world is followed by denouncing the consequences of separating life and human activity in "two halves" which are alien to the spirit of the Gospel. It is a subtle criticism of those who "resign themselves to a life of compromises" without fully engaging in either one or the other⁴. In full process of sovietization of Romania and of atheist materialism, Father Staniloae unequivocally states:

".. Unfortunately, the universe is left organized in different twisted ways. For Christians, the healthy organization of the material universe and the way of living between people, an organization that does not reach its perfection in time, equates with the fullest exploration of the universe and society by the presence of Christ. Through our activity, the incarnation of the Logos is continued on a cosmic plane, the divine penetrates our energies and through them the energies and forms of the world, and more and more it comes out of them as a light that warms all

³ Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, "Condițiile mântuirii", pp. 250-251.

⁴ Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, "Condițiile mântuirii", p. 251.

(...) In the Orthodox conception, matter becomes the medium through which the divine radiates”⁵.

Father Stăniloae’s study reveals not only the confessional differences on the topic, but also the mirror image of a Romanian society that became increasingly distant from the Orthodox view on the human-society-cosmos relationship.

The affirmation of the necessity of Christ’s presence in the world and society, in order to overcome the sacred-profane separation, is also an act of courage and a settlement of the meaning of the concepts with which the communist ideology operates outside the religious realities. In other words, the father shows the role of facts and of human activity in the world and society, and the sense of community, all of these remaining without Christ in a functional and existential poverty. From this spiritual perspective, he affirms the dynamics of Christianity in contrast to the “conservative political spirit”, but also to other ideologies alien of Christ, like communism. Although he does not name it, he disapproves it in the following statement: “Christianity cannot accept to stop the creation to go on and to refuse man to work with God on this continuation, and even more so, a hindrance of God to strive into the world and to unite as closely as possible with the world”⁶.

This page from Romanian theology, in the context of atheist communism, can inspire us to a spiritual and intelligent confession of faith in the new globalized and informational realities of the world.

Rev. Prof. Dr. Cristinel IOJA

⁵ Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Condițiile mântuirii”, p. 253.

⁶ Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Condițiile mântuirii”, p. 254.