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The Reception of Father Stăniloae's Trinitarian Theological Thinking in the German Space and Its Meanings

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Abstract

Father Stăniloae was one of the most representative Christian thinkers of the 20th century. His theological personality became more and more known in his country – Romania – and abroad. This happened because his most representative works were translated into languages of international circulation: French, English, and German. Secondly, for the fact that the Romanian theologian participated in the theological dialogues of Orthodoxy with the Roman Catholics and the Protestants; then, he gave several lectures in various Western university centers.

His theological thinking had an important impact in the German space. What particularly attracted German theologians' attention was the fact that Father Stăniloae's Trinitarian thought encompasses and orders his entire theological thought. Rightly, one of these German theologians stated that Dumitru Stăniloae always thinks in a trinitarian way. His theological thinking inspired the theological thinking of some German theologians, who came to consider, for example, the filioque issue as superfluous and dangerous for the faith. But many other theological themes acquired a different perspective in their thinking through the theological contact with the thinking of father Stăniloae.

Keywords

theological thinking, translation of Father Stăniloae's work, theological dialogue, Trinitarian thinking, reception of theological thinking, promotion of inter-Christian relations

I. Some general remarks

Although several decades have already passed since the death of the great Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993), who marked the Orthodox theology, in general, and the Romanian one in particular for almost a century, the reception of his theological thought still waits in its essential articulations. Although several doctoral theses, studies, articles, commentaries, etc. have appeared, related to his theological thinking and which happily highlighted how Father Stăniloae understood to relate to the faith of the Church and its impact on people and even on the whole creation, there is still much room to highlight this theology and its potential for theological thinking and the mission of the Church in its essential directions.

The impact of Father Stăniloae's theological thinking on Romanian Orthodox theology and its implications in the life of our Church is overwhelming. In many of the theological themes approached by Romanian researchers in the last decades, it was impossible to ignore important references to theology and the thought of the Romanian theologian. This means that the reception of his theological thinking in the Romanian space is happy evidence. However, we cannot speak of exhaustion of his work reception, but more of some coordinates or partial aspects of the reception. This is because Father Stăniloae's theological thinking cannot be easily understood and assumed; on the contrary, this theological thinking has multiple articulations, which can hardly be captured and evaluated, especially in the inner connections of these theological reflections. Every time you look at his theological thinking, you notice that you discover more and more meanings of his thinking, which you could not notice during the first reading of his works. This means that the reception of this theological thought involves considerable efforts on the part of theologians, to rise to the high, entirely exceptional heights of his reflections.

II. Ways and means of achieving the reception of his theological thought

For Father Stăniloae's theological thinking to be received in a cultural space other than the Romanian one, it must be known through the dissemination of his works. This was achieved by translating his fundamental works, and especially Orthodox Dogmatic Theology into languages of international circulation: English, French, German. Therefore, in these theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural environments, Romanian theology realized in its most perfect way, through Father Stăniloae, can be known and received. In the following, we will try to capture some aspects of the reception of this theological thinking in the German space.

a) The German translation of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology¹

The German translation of Father Stăniloae's fundamental work was an exceptional academic, theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural event. It was understood by those in Germany "as a Western Theology discovery of the deep interest in the richness of the Orthodox Tradition ... The ecumenical communion of Churches with different historical Traditions must not remain on the surface, but take solid theological roots and spiritual depth"².

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann sees the mission of Orthodox theology in the dialogue with the other Churches, as a theological effort to reach the common theological knowledge of the truth of faith in God – the Holy Trinity and the discovery of a common spirituality, which develops in the presence of the Holy Spirit³. By translating into German this important work not only for Orthodox theology but also for Western theology, it was

¹ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Orthodoxe Dogmatik*, Zürich-Gütersloh, Band I, 1985, Band II, 1990, Band III, 1995.

² Jürgen MOLTSMANN, "Geleitwort", in: Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Orthodoxe Dogmatik I*, Benziger Verlag Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gerd Mohn, Benziger Verlag, Zürich, Einseideln, Köln 1985, p. 9

³ Jürgen MOLTSMANN, "Geleitwort", p. 10: "Wichtige Aufgaben der orthodoxen Theologen in der ökumenischen Bewegung liegen genau hier: in der Arbeit an der gemeinsamen Erkenntnis der Wahrheit des dreieinigen Gottes und in der Entdeckung einer gemeinsamen Spiritualität, die sich in der Gegenwart des Geistes entfaltet".

possible to fill a great void in the space of German culture, since until this translation appeared, there was no complete Orthodox Dogmatics Theology work, which can be taken into account in the overall theological dialogue between the two great Churches in Germany: The Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church. It was rightly emphasized that “with the German translation of the Orthodox Dogmatic Theology (of father Stăniloae) it was possible to present to the German public, not only some work but one of the best and most relevant general presentations of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology”⁴. As such, for a long time to come, whoever wants to document themselves on Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, will not be able to ignore this fundamental work. German theology perceives the importance of Romanian Orthodox theology not only as a treasure of faith, culture, and spirituality, but it has noticed the importance of the mission of this theology, to be a bridge between East and West, between Orthodoxy and Western Christianity⁵. This function of a spiritual bridge between the two parts of Europe was accomplished masterfully by Father Dumitru Stăniloae.

The translation of Orthodox Dogmatics into German was an event to which the Roman Catholic Church contributed, through the Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops and through that of the Evangelical Church in Germany, which financially supported this diffusion of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology in the German space, as well as through its translation into German by Professor Hermann Pitters from the Faculty of Evangelical Theology in Sibiu.

Rightly so, regarding the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity, the theologian Moltmann states that Father Stăniloae is a theologian who

⁴ Jürgen MOLTSMANN, “Geleitwort”, p. 10

⁵ Jürgen MOLTSMANN, “Geleitwort”, p. 10: “Die rumänische orthodoxe Theologie war immer schon eine geistige Brücke zwischen den griechischen und den russischen orthodoxen Traditionen gewesen. Sie ist auch – durch Sprache und Kultur – eine Brücke zwischen der östlichen und der westkirchlichen Theologie”. In relation to this aspect of the Romanian Orthodox theology, it can be consulted: Ion BRIA: *Hermeneutica teologică. Dinamica ei în structura Tradiției*, Editura “Andreiana”, Sibiu 2009, pp. 139-158; particularly important from this perspective is the volume coordinated by Metropolitan Nicolae CORNEANU of Banat, *Ortodoxia românească*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, (abr: EIBMBOR), București 1992.

always thinks in a Trinitarian way⁶. Father Stăniloae's theological thinking about the Holy Trinity had an important echo in the Western theological space. The Romanian theologian made a particularly relevant contribution in this sense when his theological vision was received positively, for example, at the international symposium in Klingenthal, where the Filioque issue was discussed. There, Father Stăniloae made a particularly important contribution, in the context of the teaching about the Holy Trinity.

b) Father Stăniloae's participation in the theological dialogues of Orthodoxy with the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church in Germany

Father Dumitru Stăniloae was an important presence in the context of inter-Christian relations in the second half of the last century. When the atmosphere of the initiation of some theological dialogues of Orthodoxy with the Western Churches was favorable for such an approach, the presence of Father Stăniloae became indispensable at those events.

The theologian Stăniloae participated in the first theological dialogue meetings between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Evangelical Church in Germany, a dialogue that began in 1979 in Goslar⁷.

Father Stăniloae also participated in the theological dialogue between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church, especially in the second

⁶ Jürgen MOLTSMANN, "Geleitwort", p. 12: "Dumitru Staniloae ist ein durch und durch trinitarisch denkender Theologe. Seine dynamische Formulierung der orthodoxen Trinitätslehre wird bei uns auf eine offene Diskussion treffen und mit grossem Interesse aufgenommen werden. Gerade in einer der ältesten Lehren der christlichen Theologie, seit mehr als tausendfünfhundert Jahre formuliert und dogmatisiert und seither meistens nur tradiert, könnten uns die neuen Entwicklungen unserer Zeit bevorstehen".

⁷ See in this regard, the presentation of the first session of theological dialogue between BOR and EKD: *Die Heilige Schrift, die Tradition und das Bekenntnis. Eine Dokumentation über das 1 Theologische Gespräch mit der Rumänischen Orthodoxen Kirche in Goslar 1979*, Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 42, Verlag Otto Lembeck, Frankfurt am Main 1982; *Die sakramente der Kirche in der Confessio Augustana und in den orthodoxen Lehrbekenntnissen des 16/17 Jahrhunderts. Eine Dokumentation über das 2 Theologische Gespräch mit der Rumänischen Orthodoxen Kirche in Jassy 1980*, Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 43, Verlag Otto Lembeck 1982.

session of this dialogue, which took place in Munich between June 20 and July 6, 1982. The topic of this dialogue was focused on *The Mystery of the Church and of the Holy Eucharist in the light of the Holy Trinity Mystery*. On this occasion, father Stăniloae shed light on the mystery of the Holy Trinity and what it means in the life of the Church and the faithful. The deep, nuanced, and balanced vision of the Romanian theologian held the attention of the participants, and the document of this dialogue contained aspects highlighted by Father Stăniloae, opening the perspective of a theological rapprochement between the two Churches in dialogue. Every time the importance of the Trinity for Theology, the Church, and believers was highlighted, Father Stăniloae was carefully listened and many of the Trinitarian aspects highlighted by him were received positively and retained in the official documents.

c) Conferences of the Romanian theologian in university centers in Switzerland and Germany: Bern, Freiburg, Heidelberg, Bonn

After going through the dramatic moments of prison, the Romanian theologian managed to resume his academic, didactic mission at the Theological Institute in Bucharest. At the same time, in the new, more relaxing Romanian context of the late 60s and early 70s of the last century, he was able to respond to invitations received from abroad, to hold conferences at various Western university centers.

Thus, the Romanian theologian participated in an important event within the Old Catholic Church in Switzerland, on which occasion he held a conference at the Faculty of Old Catholic Theology in Bern⁸. Also, the Romanian theologian held several conferences in Cologne, Heidelberg, Imshausen, etc., presenting topics specific to Orthodox theology and spirituality⁹.

⁸ See more about this at: Dumitru STĂNILOAE, "Relațiile ecumenice ale Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în ultimul sfert de veac", in: *Ortodoxia*, XXV (1973) 2, p. 174; Irimie MARGA, *În dragoste și în adevăr. Dialogul teologic oficial ortodoxo-catolic, de la Rodos la Balamand*, Editura Paralela 45, Pitești-Brașov-Cluj-Napoca, 2000, pp. 55-63.

⁹ See about these in: "Conferințe ale Pr. Prof. D. Stăniloae în R.F. Germania", in:

In almost all the conferences he participated in, father Stăniloae highlighted the importance of the deep, complex, and antinomian understanding of the Church's faith truths, and, first of all, of the fundamental truth of Christianity – the Holy Trinity. The mystery of the Holy Trinity and the way Christians understand it came up frequently in Father Stăniloae's dialogues with his interlocutors, within these conferences. Only this way of understanding the Trinity, which Orthodoxy has preserved, can protect believers from doctrinal errors. One-sided meanings in the understanding of faith always lead to sinful errors. For this sin of misunderstanding faith in God, "the antitrinitarian heresies were guilty", some of which reduced the Godhead to the unity of one person, others broke the unity into three Gods. In front of them, Father Stăniloae emphasized that

"The Church affirmed both the unity of being of the Divinity and the trinity of the divine persons, taking into account both the expressions relating to the unity and those relating to the trinity in Holy Scripture, even if they appear conflicting. The antitrinitarian heresies let themselves be led by a simplistic judgment: the Church let herself be led by the supple, complex reality, in which various, complementary aspects are united. Or even contradictory; let herself be guided by the reality in which opposites are held in a balanced unity. But theologically speaking reality has a character of mystery precisely because of this. Because this holding together of contradictory aspects is a mystery"¹⁰.

Father Stăniloae's theology focused on the hypostases, more precisely

"on the attributes of the Holy Trinity persons, therefore, he was able to develop new theological accents. Respect for the world and creation, with all their imperfections; the salvation of people stands and falls with the sacerdotal intercession of Christ, who

Biserica Ortodoxă Română, XCI (1973) 7-8, pp. 802-803; See also about these in: *Studii Teologice*, XXVI (1974) 9-10, p. 775.

¹⁰ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, "Sobornicitate deschisă", in: *Ortodoxia*, XXIII (1971) 2, p. 167.

recapitulates all in God; the coming of the Spirit into the human historical space of which the «temple of God» is a part”¹¹.

III. Some realizations of the reception of Father Stăniloae’s Trinitarian theology in the German space

German theology has often been sensitive to the message of Orthodox theology spread by its representatives, on the occasion of academic, scientific, and ecumenical events. As was shown above, Father Stăniloae’s work and thought evoked a certain echo in Western theological thought, as there were those moments of encounter between Eastern and Western theological thought, in the person of the Romanian theologian. It is not by chance that Western theologians retained certain aspects of Orthodox thought in their works, both in terms of Orthodox theology in general and in terms of the Orthodox teaching on the Holy Trinity, presented so convincingly by Father Stăniloae¹². In his work dedicated to the Holy Trinity, J. Moltmann makes a particularly important contribution to Western theology, because he profoundly changes the way of understanding this fundamental teaching of Christianity. “Moltmann sees the understanding of the Trinity as relations of love that unite the Persons without confusing them, affirmed and expressed appropriately, by the term «perichoresis» of St. John Damascene”¹³.

In this sense, the theologian Jurgen Moltmann’s statement that Father Stăniloae always thinks in a Trinitarian way, caught the attention of this theologian, drawing inspiration from the thinking of the Romanian theologian. The testimony of this theologian is extremely valuable, in the sense that he was influenced and convinced by Father Stăniloae in his thinking regarding the Filioque addition.

¹¹ Ion BRIA, *Teologia ortodoxă în România contemporană*, Editura “Trinitas”, Iași 2003, p. 100; on the importance of the Holy Trinity in the context of inter-Christian dialogue also see: Dan-Ilie CIOBOTEA, “Dorul după Biserica nedespărțită sau apelul tainic și irezistibil al Sfintei Treimi”, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXIV (1982) 4, pp. 586-598.

¹² J. MOLTMANN, *Trinität und Reich Gottes*, Kaiser Verlag, München, 1980.

¹³ D. STĂNILOAE, Review of Moltmann’s work: *Trinität und Reich Gottes*, Kaiser Verlag, München 1980, in: *Ortodoxia*, XXXIII (1981) 4, p. 630

“Stăniloae has convinced me that Filioque’s western addition is superfluous and damaging. If the Spirit proceeds from the Father, the Son is also present, because God the Father is always thought of as Trinitarian, that is, He is always the eternal Father of this eternal Son... The Christological pneumatology presented in the West can be completed by the pneumatological Christology... After the meeting with Orthodox theology in the person of Father Stăniloae, I started working on pneumatology without the addition of Filioque”¹⁴.

In other words, Father Stăniloae’s trinitarian thinking offered the opportunity for some Western theologians to rethink the whole of Theology de facto, and, more importantly, the Christian teaching about God, in the communion of the Trinitarian Persons. The thinking of the Romanian theologian led J. Moltmann to deepen the understanding of the Holy Trinity Persons, and especially of the Holy Spirit, presented in a deficient way by Western theology, due to an accentuated Christomonism.

In another vein, J. Moltmann noted the fact that the “theology of love” that Father Stăniloae promoted so consistently and profoundly, received a response from him with the “theology of hope”. This is since a “theology of love” can only be promoted if this love springs from God-Love, more precisely, from the eternal communion of love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity. And, on the other hand, hope cannot be fully understood either, if it is detached from the eternal and perfect love of the Holy Trinity. The three Persons of the Holy Trinity are not understood unilaterally and in isolation, but always in a Trinitarian context. The reception of the Orthodox Trinitarian theology by the Western theology made the three Persons of the Holy Trinity not to be understood as simply different ways

¹⁴ Jürgen MOLTSMANN, “Vorwort” zu dem Werk von Daniel MUNTEANU, *Der tröstende Geist der Liebe. Zu einer ökumenischen Lehre vom Heiligen Geist über die trinitarischen Theologen J. Moltmann und D. Stăniloae*, Neukirchener Verlag, 2003, p. XVII. J. Moltmann wrote about God’s presence in creation through the power of His love in: *Gott in der Schöpfung*, München, 1985; *Der Geist des Lebens, Eine ganzheitliche Pneumatologie*, München, 1991; *Die Quelle des Lebens. Der Heilige Geist und die Theologie des Lebens*, Güterloher Verlag, 1997.

of their existence, but always the three Persons perichoretically exist in each other¹⁵. J. Moltmann took over the perichoretic meaning of the way of existence of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, to understand the relationship of interiority between them.

The theologian J. Moltmann arrived at the presentation of the Holy Trinity's importance for Theology by the fact that he gave very special importance to the Person of the Holy Spirit¹⁶.

Also, in the context of receiving Father Stăniloae's Trinitarian theology, another Orthodox theologian presented the Person of the Holy Spirit comparatively, between the thinking of the Romanian theologian and that of J. Moltmann¹⁷.

IV. Conclusions

1. The issue of receiving Father Stăniloae's theology represents an important mission, primarily of Orthodox theology, because only through a creative reception of his theology, a living, deep theology anchored to the needs of the Church's life and mission can be realized at any time and place. The treasury of his theological thought requires always to be deepened and its most relevant articulations noticed.

¹⁵ More references regarding the understanding of the Holy Trinity Persons by father Stăniloae and J. Moltmann should be consulted the work: Daniel MUNTEANU, *Der tröstende Geist der Liebe. Zu einer ökumenischen Lehre vom Heiligen Geist über die trinitatischen Theologen J. Moltmann und D. Stăniloae*, pp. 289-302. "Diese den beiden Theologen gemeinsamen Auffassung zeigt, dass die Aufgabe einer zukünftigen ökumenischen Pneumatologie darin liegt, den Vater, den Sohn und den Geist als trinitarische Subjekte darzustellen, die perichoretisch ineinander sind und gleichzeitig zusammewirken" (p. 290).

¹⁶ About this fact, you can see at: Daniel MUNTEANU, *Der tröstende Geist der Liebe*, p. 63: "Der Wandel in seiner Sichtweise kann mit der Tatsache erklärt werden, dass sich Moltmann selbst eine binarische Gefahr für seine Theologie eingestehen musste. Er beseitigte sie, indem er der Person des Geiligen Geistes in zunehmendem Masse Aufmerksamkeit schenkte und durch die Offenheit für die orthodoxe Trinitätslehre ohne Filioque zur Entfaltung einer trinitarischen Pneumatologie gelangte".

¹⁷ Daniel MUNTEANU, *Der tröstende Geist der Liebe, Der Heilige Geist und die Theologie des Lebens*, Güterloher Verlag, 1997.

2. The teaching about the Holy Trinity was a permanent preoccupation of Father Stăniloae, especially in the last decades of his life. His way of theologizing about the Holy Trinity attracted the attention of not only Orthodox theologians but also Western theologians. Among them, the theologians from the German area showed a special openness, for the reasons also cited at the beginning of this intervention.
3. The reception of Father Stăniloae's trinitarian theological vision is particularly relevant also for the fact that it determined the rethinking of the entire theology by the representatives of Western theology. They honestly saw the deficiencies of Western theology through the specific Western understanding of the Holy Trinity, as well as the implications of this understanding in Theology and the life of the Church.
4. Reflecting on the Trinitarian theological vision of the Romanian theologian, Western theologians noticed how Orthodox theology managed to overcome the substantialist vision of the Trinity, existing in the West, distant and cold towards the world and humanity, and to see more and more the personalist aspect of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, the understanding of the perichoretic relationship between the Persons of the Holy Trinity made them overcome the Filioque problem and arrive at the understanding of a pneumatological Christology. Through this, the Person of the Holy Spirit is seen in close connection with that of the Son and then, the connection of Both with the Father.
5. The reception of Father Stăniloae's theology further smooths the way for an in-depth dialogue between Western and Orthodox theology. Sensing the theological convergences and the common points in the understanding of the fundamental truths of faith generates a lot of hope in the perspective of arriving at the confession with "one mind and one heart" of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
6. For this reason, it would be desirable for the process of receiving this Trinitarian theological vision not to stop, but to continue,

not only for Orthodox thought, but also for Western thought, to continuously deepen the understanding of the Holy Trinity mystery of life and love.

7. Through this theological approach, a common Christian vision can gradually develop, through the confession of the Trinity and through the increasingly nuanced understanding of the world concerning the Trinity which created and saved it, urging Christians to value, its cultivation, care, and protection, and, through this, to come to know God its Creator, Savior and Perfecter, i.e. the Holy and Loving Trinity, better and more deeply.