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Trinitarian and Anthropological Personalism in Father Stăniloae's View and its Significance to the Contemporary Man

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Abstract

This study presents Dumitru Stăniloae's vision on both God's and man's personal nature. Starting from the love present in the world, Fr. Stăniloae postulates the existence of an eternal and perfect love which can be shared only by multiple, divine Persons. Humans are persons due to the image of this living and personal God they bear. As man keeps alive his love and relation with the Triune God, he is constantly discovering and deepening his own personal nature. The image of God inside him is unceasingly prompting him to manifest in a concrete way his relations with God and with his fellows. Following this impulse, man is taken out of the monotony and superficiality of the existence, and put on the vertical spiral of communion with God and with the people, which is always new and creative.

Keywords:

Orthodoxy, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, person, Trinity, Anthropology, contemporary world

The issue of God's and the Man's personal nature is essential for a true, in depth and accurate understanding of the Revelation, both in relation to God and also in relation to human understanding.

For Father Stăniloae to come to the conclusion that God is not just a random reality or a superior substance, but a community and a communion of divine, infinite and immortal Persons, one must have started with the assumption that God is love. Only by understanding God as love we can understand the fact that love cannot exist in an abstract, impersonal environment. On the contrary, in general, persons are the only entities capable of nurturing what we call love. Referring to God as love, Father Stăniloae states that

“Perfect love is paradoxically combining the following two things: multiple selves loving each other while, on the same time, remaining individually separated and maintaining a maximum amount of unity between them. Without perfect and eternal love, the love existing in the world cannot be explained and the very purpose of the world is obscured. The love existing in the world assumes an eternal and perfect love between multiple divine Persons as both its goal and its origin”¹.

Starting with this assumption, Father Stăniloae convincingly argues that human beings share a personal nature as well. This theological statement holds multiple meanings.

First of all, a human being is a person because it is related to the living and personal God, due to its “image” of God. With this quality, mankind feels the need to be in touch with God the Person. Human's personal nature is confirmed by the very fact that he feels the need to be in a constant connection with God, on one hand while, on the other hand, he feels the need to be closely bonded with the entire creation.

Besides, human's personal nature is also revealed by his need to consciously and freely process the creation given to him by God, in order to discover its eternally new virtues, thus getting closer to understanding it

¹ See: Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă (The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)*, vol. 1, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, ediția a III-a, București 2003, p.293.

Trinitarian and Anthropological Personalism in Father Stăniloae's View ...

as it is portrayed in God's "thought" in relation to each creature and to the creation as a whole.

This view of understanding God as a Person and human as personal beings has a multitude of meanings for the contemporary man. This theological understanding is setting straight all the previous unilateral and reductionist views of God and Man. If the contemporary man opens up to this self-related meaning, he will be able to avoid now and in the future, the perils he is exposing himself to today, by rejecting his personal nature and the personal nature of the relationship he should have with his surroundings, in his capacity as God's creation. The mission of Orthodox Theology is essential nowadays, from this point of view.

I. The Self Existence as a Trinity of immortal and perfect Persons

Father Stăniloae starts with the assumption that the issue of self-existence must be a matter of self-conscience. And self-conscience belongs to a plenitude of existence. Since we're talking about this type of existence, it cannot be regarding as an abstract, inconsistent reality. On the contrary, such an existence holds inside it the most concentrated being and it is incubated with a set of values that it is aware of. If it hadn't been aware of them, it would just possess them for no good reason, thus rendering them irrelevant at the end.

"When it comes to the plenitude of the existence that holds all the good things inside it, this must be enjoyed consciously. Or, can we think of an existence plenitude depleted of its spiritual values, comprised of an endless unconsciousness, as it is seen by some, as being the basis of all individual entities, including a human being?"²

Such a plenary existence, seen as described above, would most certainly be irrelevant, deprived of any concrete consequences and, in fact, unthinkable. The supreme existence is the holder of a set of high values

² Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos – lumina lumii și îndumnezeitorul omului (Jesus Christ – The Light of the World and the Divinizer of Mankind)*, Editura „Anastasia”, București 1993, p. 177.

in which it manifests itself. And these values belong to the existence itself that had always possessed them. In other words, such an existence, that was conceived this way, has an obvious personal nature, because only a person can be sentient, related to others and hold a set of values.

II. Almightyness and love – essential characteristic of an everlasting personal Existence

A perfect and everlasting existence, as it is described in the statements above, means that the existence in question has the highest possible level of almighty and love. Thus, these specifications underline the fact that the divine existence has, on one hand, the dimension of eternity and perfectness while, on the other hand, it possesses the capacity and the possibility to bring other realities into existence, even out of nothing. If it hadn't been almighty, it wouldn't be able to generate other beings or existences out from nothing; on the same time, it must be the carrier of a perfect love, so that it can bring other beings into existence, over time.

“Lack of love equates to narrowness, while love equates to generosity shared between people, a generosity that cannot miss from the plenary self-existence. The higher the existence, the higher the features it implies. That's why, a supreme existence means almighty and perfect love, which make all good things possible and make it possible for these good things to overflow into other existences created, at all levels”³.

Starting from the love existing in the world, Father Stăniloae goes beyond the limited plan of creation and he transfers the theological thought via the Revelation, in the plan of divine transcendence. Because, according to this Romanian theologian,

“Without a perfect and everlasting love, the love existing in the world cannot be explained and the very purpose of the world is obscured. The love existing in the world assumes an eternal and perfect love between multiple divine Persons as both its

³ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos – lumina lumii...*, p. 178.

Trinitarian and Anthropological Personalism in Father Stăniloae's View ...

goal and its origin. This love is not the one generating the divine Persons, as stated by the Catholic Theology, but it assumes them. Otherwise, one could also imagine an impersonal love producing and destroying human beings. Divine Persons have been perfect forever, because their love is perfect and it cannot increase the connection between them.”⁴

When we talk about God as the holder of both almightiness and love, based on the divine Revelation, these characteristics are in the Living God, existing in the community of the Three Persons. Without being three different Gods, the one and only God is a Trinity of instances or persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Father Stăniloae specifies that

“the perfect Love in God is between three Persons because a love that limits itself to only two creates a barrier, being indifferent to the third person and even generating jealousy between the first two persons, when one of them becomes interested in a third. On the contrary, when a third person enjoys my second person along with me, my joy for the second person is increased. That’s why, in the sole and supreme existence of a startles God, a perfect love is shared between three persons, which consolidates the unity between them and highlights their endlessness”⁵.

This analogy which can also be applied to inter-human relations is transferred to a trinity level, where we talk about eternal, infinite, perfect Persons.

“In God, there is a Father who gives birth to a Son from endlessness, a Son the He loves and who loves Him and He proceeds a Holy Spirit to spread it as an lighting light over the Son, thus making the joy of the Father be felt by the Son and that of the Son be felt by the Father”⁶.

⁴ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă (The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)*, vol. 1 Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, ediția a III-a, București 2003, p. 293.

⁵ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 179.

⁶ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 180.

III. The Living three-instance God is the personal God

According to the divine Revelation, revealed by the Holy Scripture and by the Holy Tradition, the God of love, of almightiness and unity cannot be pictured as anything else but a personal God. Because an impersonal or mono-personal God, who doesn't have anybody to focus on or to project His love on, is not the God of Revelation. The dogmatic expression of one single God made of Three Persons or Instances represents the acceptance of a faith that redeems humans.

“Because, it is in the eternal community of these three Persons, where lays the unique supra-essence of divinity, that the infinity and the perfection of the life-loving Trinity and of each Person separately, is created. And, consequently, it is the only one that can provide us an eternal connection with God's endless life and to the overlapping community between us, those who are part of this infinity. This way, it insures our persistence and perfection as persons, forever”⁷.

Because God is a personal reality in the love and life community existing within the Holy Trinity, He constantly reveals His personal character, sinking deeper and deeper in the infinity of this personal or inter-personal community, while, on the same time, revealing His nature as a Person, holding inside Him the plenitude of existence, of life and love. Out of this Godly abundance, He “comes out” of Himself via His Godly “care”, thus bringing the visible and the invisible world into existence and, eventually, bringing the man into existence.

IV. The human being, as a person created by the Trinity of Persons image

According to the Christian Orthodox teachings, the man holds a very well determined place in the whole assembly of existences, being different from all the other existences around him, which he loves, processes and

⁷ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 295.

Trinitarian and Anthropological Personalism in Father Stăniloae's View ...

enjoys. He is doing all this because he is somehow connected to them but, on the same time, he is essentially different from them. And this special particularity that the man has within the created universe is based on the fact that the man is a complex being synthesising inside him, both the material and the spiritual world. With this regard, Father Stăniloae starts from the assumption that the man is “brought to existence initially as an embodied spirit or as a combination of body and soul, by way of a special creation act made by God. For this, the world must exist as nature, but the man is not the creation of nature, although he is connected to it”⁸. This theological statement is very important because it places the man above everything else in this universe being superior to this entire universe but, on the same time, being connected to it and having the same cause of existence, which is the Living Personal God.

In this capacity as both body and soul, respectively both matter and spirit, the man is highlighted as a highly complex, conscious and loving being. But the man could not distinguish himself from the rest of the universe like this, if he hadn't been created to as image of the Living and Personal God. Or, as image of the Living and Personal God means is by the image of the Holy Trinity who is not just one Person but a community and a communion of loving and eternal Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Due to this quality of being the image of God, the man is related to God and he is put in a special relation to God, by the act of creation, itself by God. Thus, the man continues to highlight his personal nature, due to the fact that he has been created as the image of the eternal Persons of the Trinity, on one hand and, and, on the other hand, because he maintains alive his love and community relation to God. Via this permanent connection to God, the man reveals more and more accurately, his status of person. In other words, he is becoming more and more personalised, more enriched in the status of person, due to the fact that he keeps receiving from the Personal God, new and new powers and impulses to highlight his personal nature, after the image of the Holy Trinity.

On this could we can understand the value and the dignity of the human person, like holder of an ethos and an impetus which rise the human higher, fulfill and advancing in a more increasingly alive communion with God and fellow man. The human may maintain this relation with God through

⁸ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 405.

increasingly personalize him, through the fact that God made the man related to Him and able to maintain the relation with the Personal God.

Receiving this God image by man occurred according the Church Fathers, by “breath of life” that was given to man by God in creation. For Church Fathers

“through this blowing God planted in man not only the conscious soul related to Him, but also His grace, like their relation expression, which cause in man his answer for the founder act of his relation to God... The image is seen here into participation to the Holy Trinity and, through that, holding the mental and rational soul of human, and the grace, like divine energy uncreated at the Holy Spirit or like an active communion with God”⁹.

So, closely connected with God’s image in human is the “breath of life”, which made him become “living soul”, but, also the God’s grace, which empowered him to be and to remain in his own love personal relation to God.

The God’s blowing planting in man not so much biological life, because this is also had by the animals which don’t receive the God’s blowing, but the life of understanding and communion with Himself that is spiritual life. Through this act of God the human is put into a talk relation to God; the human doesn’t stay alone and alien in the ensemble of creation, but synthesizing the creation with his biological body, he is brought by God into the situation to answer to Him all the time as a result of His calling to dialog. Through this dialog the man is getting perfect, grows up spiritual, is permanently ennobled, because God calls him all the time to remain in a constant and dynamic dialogue with Him and to answer to His call.

As God’s “image” – communion of loving and eternal Persons, man is a little bit from God, according of the Saint Maximus the Confessor. He explains his statement by the fact that we have as cause and principle the divine Revelation and the Logos of God, having to increase through our effort in approaching God¹⁰. The God’s image in man is a great gift, received from God, but which calls brought to light through concrete

⁹ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 407- 408.

¹⁰ St. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Ambigua*, PG 91, 1077 D.

Trinitarian and Anthropological Personalism in Father Stăniloae's View ...

actions in his life. In other words, the God's image man means at the same time *gift and mission*¹¹.

V. The human- personal being by Holy Trinity's image – is constantly searching for absolute

As a God's image man is always looking for God, as a Personal Being, infinite, eternal and absolute. The theologian Vășeslavțev said that man couldn't be conceived without connection with God, perceived like an absolute being. This theologian alternates in his thought between of talking by God and understanding Him like an absolute reality. Starting from here, Father Stăniloae underlines that this absolute is a personal one, because an impersonal absolute doesn't exist.

“And a personal God, which would not be absolute cannot be the full and eternal satisfying source of a man, would not provide the eternal and plenary existence into a full communion... The human cannot remain locked up in relations with finite realities. He needs a relation with the infinite reality which includes in the same time incessant novelty, which is not identifying only with the human's interest always new, but also with the inexhaustible Person's interest always new to him”¹².

And then the human strive to personal divine absolute, because he is also a personal being, endlessness a thirst for life, love and communion with the one whom' image he has been created. In this we have known the nature of human's mystery, created according to full of mystery image of the Personal God. In the aspiration of man for the Absolute resides the whole potation of developing man in multiple plans, starts with spiritual progress and continuing with the other plans of human's life and activities, seen in private plan and also in social plan.

¹¹ About this feature of God's image in human see more in: B. VĂȘESLAVȚEV, “Das Ebenbild Gottes in dem Sündenfall”, in: *Kirche, Staat und Mensch, russisch-orthodoxe Studien*, Genf 1937, pp. 310-311

¹² Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 411.

VI. The human - as a personal being God's image - manifesting plenary into communion

Created by Personal God man aspires much more to highlight his personal character. This insistence of Orthodox Theology on the personal character of man is of an exceptional value and importance. The premises of such a vision of man, of being a person that is constantly aiming to communion, is understood by the Fathers of the Church¹³ and by some orthodox theologians¹⁴, suggested by two statements of Holy Scripture. First of all, from the book of Genesis we can find out that "so God has created man in His own image in the image of God created He him male and female created He them" (Genesis 1, 27). In this verse, it is highlighted that man in the image of God is the man-pair, that is, the being created by God to be, from the beginning of his existence, in connection with communion with this fellow, and here it is the woman brought to life for man as his fulfillment into communion. On the other hand, we also find out that God before he created man, He has been consulted in the mystery of life and of His divine thought, to create man after His image: "And God said: to do man after our own image and likeness" (Genesis 1, 26). This verse highlights the dimension of the dimension of the communitarian aspect of the image in connection with the Holy Trinity. As in the Trinitarian plan we can speak of singular and plural, or of unity and diversity, that is, of One and Three, that is, a unique Being of God existing in the communion of the Three Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, same on a human plan we may speak of singular and plural, one and more, etc. It is right what one of the theologians of the past century states that

"the mystery of singularity and plurality in man reflects the mystery of singularity and plurality in God; as the personal principle in God requires that one nature must be expressed into the diversity of persons, same for the man created after the image of God. Human nature cannot exist in the possession of a monad; it requires not loneliness, but communion, or the good diversity of love"¹⁵.

¹³ Among these we mention: St. Grigorie of Nyssa, St. Chiril of Alexandria, St. Atanasius of Sinai, St. John Damascene, St. Grigorie Palamas etc.

¹⁴ See, mainly: Ciprian Kern, B. Vâşeslavţev, Vladimir Lossky, Paul Evdochimov etc.

¹⁵ Vladimir Lossky, "Théologie Dogmatique", in: *Messenger de l'Exarchat du Patriarcat russe en Europe Occidentale*, Paris 1964, nr. 48, p. 224.

Trinitarian and Anthropological Personalism in Father Stăniloae's View ...

Everything that has the life of communion of the Holy Trinity within itself is also transferred to man by grace as a gift, and which calls upon the human being to update his virtualities that he possesses. This update of the virtualities of the human being that it possesses is equivalent with the manifestation by work of the divine image in man. At the same time, it must be underlined the fact that the manifestation by man of a communion of life has a double direction: the God of Love and the fellows. In this context it must be highlighted that

“if to the endless communion with God and to spiritual growth in Him it only attracts us the mysterious participation of the image from ourselves to the model and the active functions of the divine energies, to the endless communion with our fellows in God without whom we cannot increase in communion with God, draws us not only the common participation in the life of communion of the Trinity and the richness of the divine uncreated energies that communicates to all of us that life of communion, but also our common nature, or the fact that the same nature subsists in many hypostases”¹⁶.

The relevance of this vision of the image that constantly moves man to manifest in a concrete way his relations with God and with his fellows gives us the opportunity to see or grasp a true life program that man has to prescribe all along the course of his life. Life lived in this way is a life carried on a higher step that takes man out of the monotony and superficiality of the existence, keeping him on the vertical spiral of communion with God and with the people, which is always new and creative.

VII. Perspectives

a. It has been rightly said that if the 20th century was the age of ecclesiology, the 21st century would necessarily be the age of anthropology. In view of this perspective, the Orthodox theology and the mission of the Church in our time must be grasped by a keen attention and, at the same time, surmise from the wealth of Christian faith and life those coordinates

¹⁶ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 422.

that can both help them come with a living message in a new way of responding to the questions of contemporaneity regarding man, viewed in all its aspects.

b. The sources of permanent inspiration for Orthodox anthropology at any time and place are those that have been validated over the centuries, namely, the testimonies of Revelation as they have come to us in Sacred Scripture and Holy Tradition. But these testimonies of an exceptional and unparalleled value must be deepened and explained in today's man's language, and respond to the anxieties, queries, and expectations of contemporaneity. This message about man must not only use hermetic cliques, which are not understood by the man of today, but the great theological theories about man must be plainly argued and presented in a new manner without giving up the fundamental data of the apostolic faith.

c. Orthodox theology has the academic and ecclesiastical mission to unleash the coordinates of that anthropology to look at man in all its complexity, overcoming the superficial, unilateral, and reductionist anthropological visions that regard man only in terms of biological, material elements, ephemeral and connected to the senses of its existence, as a kind of exclusive nature, without any connection to divine transcendence, where its existential roots are really.

d. In this context, the richness of Orthodox theology is a source of inspiration and creativity, so that today's man will feel his true meaning and increasingly understand the living coordinates of his existence. That is why the theological approach must emphasize the character of man's person, irreducible to nature, but beyond the monotonous nature and its mechanical processes. Only to the extent that man understands himself more and more as a person will he always overcome himself from the spiritual and spiritual point of view, becoming a factor of both spiritual and material progress in the environment in which he lives.

e. The character of person is related to his understanding as the bearer of the image of God. His personal character, or in other words, is created in the image of the Trinity of loving and eternal Persons. It also imparted to man the dimension of a personal mystery, based on the mystery of the love and communion of the Holy Trinity. Thus, man continually tends to communion with God and his fellows, always emphasizing his character as a person. The more man keeps in relation to God Himself and his fellows; he deepens his personality more and more.

Trinitarian and Anthropological Personalism in Father Stăniloae's View ...

f. Father Staniloae's vision on the theological personality in his double direction: God and man are essential to contemporary man and are the key to deepening the understanding of the human being, viewed in its double dimension: material and spiritual, body and soul. Thus, man can be helped to come out of a vicious circle of a purely material and biological mechanism that deprives him isolates and dehumanizes him. The bright vision of Orthodox theology on man is an increased chance of breaking out of these inadequacies of unilateral and damaging understanding with reference to man and his aspirations.