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The Relationship between the Natural and the Supernatural of the Iconic Ontology Reflected in the Reciprocity between Reason and Faith. Landmarks of Father Dumitru Stăniloae's Theology

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Abstract

Father Dumitru Stăniloae through his encompassing theology can offer significant reference points on the path of dialogue between theology and science. In my paper, I will emphasize on two suggestive aspects of Father Dumitru Stăniloae's theology that can be correlated by scientific research, thereby contouring the possibility of a dialogue between science and religion. These two aspects are: the internal relationship between natural and supernatural, and respectively the dynamic reciprocity between the world's rationality and man's reason.

The relationship between man and cosmos, between the rationality of the world and human reason, are significant coordinates for Orthodox Tradition and very well expressed in the theology of Father Dumitru Stăniloae. The deepening of the dynamic reciprocity between the world's rationality and human reason could contribute to the articulation of a dialogue between theology and science.

Keywords

natural, supernatural, rationality of the world, human reason, cosmos, anthropic principle

I. Father Dumitru Stăniloae – contemporary confessor in Spirit and Truth of the theology of the Holy Fathers

Father Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993), a theologian of the divine glory and light of the gracious love of the Holy Trinity manifested towards the world, engages in continuity with the spirit of the great Holy Fathers of the Church through his detailed theology. Father Stăniloae did not understand the actualization of patristic landmarks within contemporary theology just as a mere external repetition of the texts of the Holy Fathers, or as an adequate compilation of them. Father Stăniloae creatively generated and deepened a theology of great amplitude faithfully grounded in the spirit of the Orthodox Tradition, a dynamic theology through which he tries to give concrete answers to the specific needs of the world in which he lived.

In this perspective, Father Stăniloae, through a creative faithfulness, assumes the same spirit and a similar manner with that of the Holy Fathers. The great Romanian theologian expresses the wide vocation of Orthodoxy, he highlights the universality of the Gospel manifested in the calling of all the nations made by the Church of Christ. Thus, he continues the line of apostolic mission of confessing the Gospel to all the nations to the ends of the world, showing that the ecclesial experience is not a mere confession, but the fullness of life, lived in the Truth of faith. Also, this universality is not understood as an abstract reality, thought exclusively in conceptual terms and applicable through institutional mechanisms. It is a specific reality in a concrete context.

Having these requirements in mind, Father Stăniloae, by translating and commenting the great fathers of the Church as Saint Gregory the Theologian, Saint Maximus the Confessor, Saint Gregory Palama, continues and deepens their theology and at the same time, and in the same spirit, he develops a specific theology for the problems of the world he lived in. The Romanian theologian surpasses the scholastic understanding of theology, fragmented in different fields of study in the academic setting. Without circumventing the academic requirements, Father Stăniloae surpasses, through spirit and content, the scholastic manner in which a rigid, formalized theology is elaborated in the academic environment, a theology deprived of existential impact and unrelated to life.

Father Stăniloae's confession is not an option for isolationism or a complacency in the invoked Tradition, but a bold assertion of the Truth

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of the Gospel, using the intelligence of the faith and having the capacity for a dialogue with different exponents of science, philosophy, profane culture or of other religious traditions. Thus, he follows the steps of the Holy Fathers of the Church, he himself being a father and a theologian for the contemporary world.

Given that the paradigm of contemporary science offers significant epistemological mutations through top research in various scientific fields, and that the limit of the scientific approach is assumed and recognized, there is the chance of a fair openness of the scientific knowledge towards the theological one. One of the ecclesial responsibilities of contemporary theology is to answer to these honest approaches from different renowned scientists, thus developing the framework for a dialogue between theology and science, but by keeping and valuing their own specific competences. Father Dumitru Stăniloae was interested and open towards the new results in science, especially physics. He sensed that these contemporary scientific researches surpass the ideological position in the relation between theology and science.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae, through his comprehensive theology can offer significant landmarks regarding the dialogue between theology and science. In the present material I will dwell upon two suggestive aspects from Father Dumitru Stăniloae's theology which can be correlated with some results from current scientific research, thus outlining the possibility of a dialogue between science and theology. On one hand, ontologically, it is about the internal relation between natural and supernatural, about the dynamic reciprocity between the rationality of the world and human reason. On the other hand, epistemologically, it is about the deep relation between reason and faith.

II. The reciprocity between the natural and the supernatural, between cosmos and history

A significant contribution of Father Stăniloae's theology is the comprehensive perspective rooted in the patristic Tradition according to which he highlights, from an ontological point of view, the reciprocity between the natural and the supernatural, between cosmos and history. Father Stăniloae's reflection reveals an iconic ontology through which it

is highlighted that nothing is purely natural, and that anything natural is structured on the supernatural. Thus, we can observe the deep connection between cosmos and history, and the organic relation between the natural Revelation and the supernatural one.

In scholastic theology there is a separation between the natural and the supernatural, leading to an opposition between the two. In this sense, any miracle is seen as a violation of the laws of nature. God is seen as being absent and not as an encompassing presence in the world and in history. Scholastic metaphysics, by separating the natural from the supernatural, has developed a type of apologetics which no longer highlights the reciprocity between the Creator Logos and creation. Famous rational arguments of God's existence derives precisely from such a separation between the Logos and creation.

Father Stăniloae starts his *Dogmatics* with a benchmark affirmation through which, from the beginning, he surpasses the scholastic approach:

“The Orthodox Church makes no separation between natural and supernatural Revelation. Natural Revelation is known and understood fully in the light of supernatural Revelation, or we might say that natural Revelation is given and maintained by God continuously through his own divine act which is above nature... Supernatural Revelation unfolds and brings forth its fruit within the framework of natural Revelation, like a kind of casting of the work of God into bolder relief, a guiding of the physical and historical world toward that goal from which it was created in accordance with a plan laid down from all ages. Supernatural Revelation merely restores direction to and provides a more determined support for that inner movement maintained within the world by God through natural Revelation. At the beginning, moreover, in that state of the world which was fully normal, natural Revelation was not separated from a Revelation that was supernatural”¹.

Theologically speaking, the reciprocity between the natural and the supernatural, as well as the fulfillment of the Revelation in the Person

¹ Father Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brooklin, Massachusetts, 1998, p. 1.

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of Jesus Christ, the God-Man, have a particular relevance. It is of great significance that the iconic ontology is rediscovered and valued according to the Patristic tradition expressed convincingly by Father Stăniloae, especially in the current situation, in which the existing mentality is dominated by a way of thinking which has very much separated the natural from the supernatural, leading to the fact that the supernatural can no longer be thought.

It is also significant that Father Stăniloae insists both on the dynamics of the Revelation and its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. The dynamics of the Revelation does not assume that one can think anything beyond the crucified and risen Christ. Christ's acts (Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension) are inseparable from his person, and they are constitutive acts of Christianity and every believer is called to personally assume what the Savior lived in His assumed humanity, which was spiritualized by His acts. Today, when different unconventional languages are sought in order to express the Christian faith, through a logic of un-incarnated thought, typical for the gnostic vision, it is topical to confess the direct link between the Savior's acts and his Person, as well as fulfilling Christ's Revelation in his Person.

In this sense, Father Stăniloae states:

“Revelation is not a mere communication of teachings, but man's new, continuous state, through his closeness to God. Christ's Revelation is a new state of humanity, assumed by the Son of God, and the Revelation of the life to come is a similar state to that of Christ-Man in all that will believe. Thereby, it is shown that the Christian Revelation is given through a person, through the divine-human person of Christ, and that it is the effect of the acts of incarnating, crucifying, resurrecting and ascending as man of the Son of God, of sending His Spirit in the world. In Christianity, Revelation can be understood only this way. An adaptation of Christianity to the world by rejecting these acts of Christ, essential acts of Christian Revelation, is equivalent to an abandonment of Christianity. A theological language which, in the desire to adapt Christianity, would not express the content of these acts of Revelation, would not be a Christian theological language anymore”².

² Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, “Revelația prin acte, cuvinte și imagini”, in: *O teologie a icoanei*, Ed. Anastasia, București, 2005, pp. 18-19.

The internal relationship between the natural Revelation and the supernatural Revelation shows that the whole creation (cosmos and man) is brought into existence, sustained and fulfilled through the one and only God. Trying to explain the reality of the world and of the man, excluding God, is a great deception.

“This separation of God from nature, a nature through which God speaks and works, or rather through which he speaks by working and works by speaking, has easily led to various kinds of conceptions that have sought to explain the world exclusively on the basis of an immanent reality. But natural revelation is inseparable from supernatural revelation and the faithful feel themselves in immediate connection with God... God speaks and works continuously through created and directed realities, by creating circumstances that are always new, circumstances through which he calls each man to fulfill his duties towards God and his neighbors and through which he answers man’s appeal at every moment. These realities and circumstances are so many thoughts of God made manifest hence so many words given concrete shape. Through all things, it is God who is leading us, as in some ongoing dialogue, towards our perfection and opening us to us the perspective of total fulfillment for the meaning of our existence in communion with the infinite God”³.

For St. Maximus contemplating God in creation is a prior step to His immediate contemplation. But the knowing of God through nature has a transient value because the world’s divine rationality remains for the eternity. The rationality of creation, far from becoming useless after God became revealed, will help us deepen even better the fecundity of the divine Reason. Saint Maximus writes: “The one who was raised from the false opinion about things has sacrificed the visible forms, and eating the unseen rationalities, has acquired natural contemplation, in the spirit”. The world is a pedagogue to Christ.

The relationship between man and cosmos, between the rationality of the world and the human rationality are significant coordinates of the Orthodox Tradition and they are very well expressed in Fr. Dumitru

³ Fr. Dumitru STĂNILĂ, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol I, p. 21.

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Stăniloae's theology. Deepening this dynamic reciprocity between human reason and the rationality of the world could help shape the dialogue between theology and science.

The rationality of the world and human reason cannot be expressions of an absurd reality. Both the sense of the rationality of the world and the sense of human reason are fulfilled in the mystery of the Supreme Person, Christ the Logos who structures and fulfills all creation.

“The rationality of the universe cannot be absurd. But it derives its full meaning when it is seen as having its source in a rational person, which uses it for an eternal dialogue of love with others. Thus, the rationality of the world, for its fulfillment, implies the existence of a superior subject. The world as object is only the milieu of a dialogue of loving thoughts and actions between the supreme rational Person and the rational human beings, as between they themselves. The universe bears the mark given by its origin in the creative rational Person, and its purpose of being the milieu of an interpersonal dialogue between that Person and human persons, with the purpose of them becoming eternal in the happiness of communion between them. The whole universe bears the mark of a personal rationality destined in order that the human persons will become eternal. Our being considers that it will fulfill its purpose only in the eternal participation in the infinite of the Supreme Persons”⁴.

III. The relationship between reason and faith

Scholastic theology, based on the ontological separation between the natural and the supernatural, has also transferred this separation from an epistemological point of view, leading to a false perception of antagonism between faith and reason. Using the method of the double truth (the supernatural is known through faith and the natural through reason), both the natures of faith and reason were distorted. Faith was reduced to a certain psychological aspect and reason was assimilated by the discursive capacity to produce demonstrations. Reason has become instrumental,

⁴ Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol I, p. 18.

being uprooted from its religious symbolism. Thus, reason has become autonomous in relation to faith, being reduced to a mere abstract speculation.

Father Stăniloae exceeds this approach, and, in the line of the Fathers, states that there is a deep reciprocity between faith and reason. Harnessing the internal connection between the natural and the supernatural highlighted by the iconic ontology from knowledge, he increased the convergence between faith and reason. Thus, Father Stăniloae opens the horizon of an ecclesial perspective that no longer remains dependent on scholastic schemes through which arguments of an autonomous rationality were meant to make reasonable the realities of the faith. By relating human reason with the rationality of the cosmos, and by showing their common base through the Supreme Reason which is the divine Logos, Father Stăniloae harnesses the potential of reason. This does not remain a mere faculty of the mind capable of generating discursive thought, but is fundamentally open to faith. Following the line of the Fathers (especially the thought of St. Maximus the Confessor), the Romanian theologian points out that in the natural contemplation of the rationality of the world, reason is not canceled, but transfigured. Thus, knowledge, as a spiritual view of the divine rationalities, is not antirational but suprarational. Human reason, engaged in the virtuous way of fulfilling God's commandments, through a consistent exercise, crucifies the selfishness of its own point of views, thus opening to the truth of faith.

In the act of knowledge, all the spiritual powers of man are activated. In this perspective, the Orthodox tradition values the effort of reason on the path of contemplation, without identifying natural contemplation with scientific knowledge, as divine reasons can not be conquered by discursive thought.

“God is beyond discursive reasoning, but He does not lack reason; He is the supreme Reason, the rationale from which all the rationalities of creation starts and also the rationality from our soul, although it is more than this, more than we can ever contain through rational concepts. If God is the ultimate reason why wouldn't it be present in the human contemplation and reason, and contemplation, a reason of what was gathered in this development? Human reasoning is a temporal manner of God's contemplation, while human contemplation is an anticipation of the non-temporal life, above all explanation”⁵.

⁵ Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2002, p. 249

Valuing the relationship between reason and faith, Father Stăniloae emphasizes the reciprocity between cataphatism and apophatism in knowledge. The Romanian theologian shows that apophatism can not be reduced to the negative dimension which expresses the impossibility of knowing God through concepts, proving that God is above all discursive thought. Apophatism is specifically understood as knowledge resulting from the experience of grace, a view of the uncreated light. In this regard, Father Stăniloae in the spirit of the Holy Fathers and particularly following the Fathers of the Philokalia shows that the true knowledge gained through faith is a view above all understanding. Faith is not limited to a particular type of trust or confidence from the psychological sphere, but discovers its ontological basis of confirmation of the unseen, through the contemplation of the light of the One which is unseen.

This distinction is crucial and particularly relevant to current research, especially in the relationship between theology, philosophy and contemporary science. To articulate an honest dialogue between theological thought, philosophical reflection and scientific research is needed to specify distinct competencies. Faith can not be solely the result of a naturalist effort. Father Stăniloae sets significant milestones in this regard, developing an awareness for dialogue and a comprehensive understanding, and, at the same time, emphasizing the specific features of knowledge through faith.

Father Stăniloae, observing specifically upon the theology of Saint Gregory of Palama in the context of his dispute with Varlaam of Calabria, clearly emphasizes the distinction between the knowledge acquired through culture and profane science, respectively the knowledge resulted from spiritual experience, directly shared in the life of the Church. Following Saint Gregory of Palama's conception, Father Stăniloae does not neglect neither the value of science and philosophy nor the one of the culture, but he points out that the long-standing focalization on the issues scrutinized by an indecorum and inquiring mind can obstruct a real contemplation of the divine Reasons. Also, knowledge, as a view through faith and through a spiritual life is above discursive meditation. These distinctions are particularly relevant in the current context for theological research. In this regard, Father Stăniloae states clearly:

“Focusing all of our life on sciences obstructs the possibility of true wisdom to enter the soul. For the soul to be entered by wisdom, man has to have the fear of God from which a grieving, continuous prayer and the keeping of God’s commandments arise. So, by letting God enter our souls, fear turns into love, and the pain of the prayer turns into joy. And so, enlightenment blooms in us like a flower from which the knowledge of the mysteries of God penetrates like an odor. The one who is enslaved by the love of a wisdom in vain, and the one who is fretful because of the theories and the devious sciences can not even hope to acquire the smallest speck of what this wisdom means, for his soul is rapt and immersed in all sets of thoughts. And only after he did pray continuously, clearing his soul of other concerns, will the Holy Spirit let His trace within the soul. Nothing really matters, not even the knowing of the dogmas without a proper Christian life. All that matters is the spiritual wisdom - the one that is born from faith and that is combined with love – this one is redeeming”⁶.

The rationality of things can not be drained through a discursive knowledge. The analytical reasoning covers only a small part from the inexhaustible spectrum of the world’s rationality. This feature derives from the connection between the rationality of the world, the human reason,

⁶ Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, Ed. Scripta, București, 1993, p. 32. Father Stăniloae shows that faith can not be transmitted through impressive culture or science, but it is favored by the specific meeting with a man who expresses the certainty and the power of life of the faith. “The most wonderful thing that can ever happen is the power with which the certainty of the faith is communicated from the man that has it to the man that sees him. Who finds himself around the man that confesses his faith tense or calm, but firm, can hardly resist to become himself faithful. The certainty within the other raises the certainty within ourselves. Does this come from the trust we have in another man? No, because more often, the one who believes is a “lower rank” person in our consideration and in the society’s. Compared to other people that are gifted or to people who we are more connected with, those ones are not relevant to our lives. But, in an indestructible manner we are overwhelmed by the reliability of the fact that the person concerned does not take the certainty of his faith from his own powers. We somehow know that the power of God’s work is beyond that of any man.” Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, Ed. Omniscope, Craiova, 1993, p. 16-17.

and the Divine Logos. The divine rationalities of the world are spiritually contemplated by a view of the mind shunned of passions and enlightened by grace. In this type of knowledge, intuition emphasizes an unmediated knowledge that is beyond the specific process of analytical research. Even the top fields of science admitted their internal limits of analytical knowledge. Hence, the mystery of the world is assumed and it can not be consumed by an analytical way of reasoning.

The cross of the analytical reason is the spiritual view enlightened by faith. The spiritual effort on the path of the faith does not nullify the potential of the analytical reasoning, but it transfigures it by intuiting deeper meanings, incomprehensible for the rationality practiced exclusively analytically. The spiritual contemplation of the rationality of the world develops a unitary knowledge of the world, which highlights the common sense both of the rationality of nature and of the human reason. All of these are fulfilled in the most profound sense by Christ the Logos.