Spiritual and Ecumenical Implications of Fr. Dumitru Staniloae’s Theology

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Introduction

If there is anybody in the present Romanian Christian environment who deserves the title of ‘contemporary Father of the Church’ that is, undoubtely, Fr. Dumitru Staniloae (1903–1993). That is why Fr. Ioan Buga, rightly calls him the ‘’Patriarch’ of our Orthodox dogmatic theology’. Yet, that is true not only in terms of the unique theology he produced, but also because of his remarkable character and his profound mystic spirituality.

In the short biographical list below, I have listed in chronological order what I consider to be the key events and the main published works of this most important Romanian theologian of all times. Lists like these rarely do justice to the rich contribution that Fr. Staniloae made to the current expression of the Body of Christ in my country. I can only hope and pray for the Holy Spirit’s assistance as I attempt to present to you an accurate portrait of this man of God of great spiritual stature. Nevertheless, facts are important; so, here they are.

A Brief Biographical Sketch

I. The formative period – up to age 27

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>Born in Vladei, Brasov</td>
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<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Scholarship to study theology at Chernovtsy (now in Ukraine)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1923–1924</td>
<td>Disappointed, leaves Chernovtsy and studies literature at Bucharest University</td>
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<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>Finishes his degree theological studies at Chernovtsy, with a dissertation on child baptism and receives a scholarship for doctoral studies in Athens</td>
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<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Defends his PhD thesis on <em>The Life and Word of Patriarch Dositeos of Jerusalem and His Connections with the Romanian Principates</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1928–1930</td>
<td>Does research in Munchen, Berlin and Constantinople</td>
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II. The ‘Obscurity’ Period (Sibiu) – age 27 to 43

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1932 – Is ordained as a priest in the Romanian Orthodox Church

1934 – Becomes (for twelve years) editor-in-chief of the *Romanian Telegraph (Telegraful roman)*

1936–1946 – Rector of the Theological Academy in Sibiu

1938 – First major work published – *Life and Teaching of St. Gregory Palamas*

1940 – Creation of the *Burning Bush* group, which he attends when he moves to Bucharest

1943 – Publishes *Jesus Christ and the Restoration of Man*

1946 – Publishes the first volume of the Romanian *Philokalia* – last volume (12) published in 1991

### III. The Maturity Period (Bucharest) – age 43 to 90

1946 – Moved from Sibiu to Bucharest, under pressure from the communist government

1958 – Publishes the *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology*, a textbook for theological institutes, written with 3 other colleagues (yet, his name is not mentioned in the book, as he was already arrested)

1958–1963 – Imprisoned by communist authorities for participation of the *Golden Bush* group

1963 – Reinstalled as professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest

1968 – Travels abroad, in an attempt of the communist regime to present a more democratic image

1978 – Publishes his most important opus, the *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (3 volumes), later translated into German, Greek, French (partially) and English

1981 – Publishes *The Ascetic and Mystique [Theology] of the Orthodox Church*, published in 2002 in English as *Orthodox Spirituality*, by St Tikhon’s Monastery Press

1986 – Publishes *Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy*

1987 – Publishes *The Immortal Image of God*

1990 – Becomes member of the Romanian Academy

1990 – Publishes *Studies in Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*

1991 – Publishes *The Evangelical Image of Jesus Christ*

1992 – Publishes *Reflections on the Spirituality of the Romanian People*

1993 – Fr. Dumitru Staniloae goes into glory

### Major Influences

Only God creates *ex nihilo*; and none of us appeared in the world in this manner. We all stand on the shoulders of giants, whether we admit it or not; and so does Fr. Staniloae. That is why, before talking about the ideas – philosophical, theological, and otherwise – that influenced his life and work, I would like to mention at least one person that played a critical role in his life.

Metr. Nicolae Balan (1882-1955) of Sibiu, who was by no means a perfect person, was one of the first to discern the great potential of the young Dumitru Staniloae. He is the one who convinced him to study Orthodox theology in Chernovtsy (then Romania; presently stolen territory, in Ukraine), and
who convinced him to finish his studies there, after he returned in his disappointment to the University in Bucharest. Balan supported Staniloae’s studies in the West and his appointment as editor at *Telegraful roman* and as a professor at the Theological Academy in Sibiu. It is hard to imagine what his life would have become without this unlikely ‘guardian angel’.

In 1930, Staniloae translated the *Dogmatics* of Christos Andrutsos, and reacted very strongly against the scholastic spirit reflected in this textbook, which also dominated at that time Orthodox theological studies in Romania (that was precisely what disappointed him in Chernovtsy)\(^4\). This realisation became a turning point in Staniloae’s theological career (Charles Miller calls it a ‘theological conversion’) and prompted him to look for a different approach, which he found in the characteristically Orthodox mystical theology of the Church Fathers.

One may rightly ask how this typically Catholic approach to theology found its way into Eastern Orthodoxy. Some authors, like Gheorghe Dragulin for instance, talk about the role played by a number of Orthodox theologians who studied in the West. My conviction, however, is that it all started with the Synod of Iasi (1642) and the publication of the Orthodox Catechism of Metr. Peter Mogila, who borrowed the scholastic tools of the Counter-Reformation in order to counteract the impact of the crypto-Protestant influences brought into Orthodoxy by Patriarch Cyril Loukaris.\(^5\) That is what George Florovsky called the ‘Babylonian captivity of Orthodox theology’.\(^6\)

According to Fr. Ioan Bria, a younger colleague and disciple of Staniloae, we can talk about three main influences on his theology:

a. **Greek and Byzantine patristics** – St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Simeon the New Theologian, and St. Gregory Palamas – he joined the so-called ‘neo-Patristic synthesis’ (G. Florovski).

Charles Miller suggests that the ‘the freedom of language and conceptualisation’ that characterises Staniloae’s theology comes from two ‘over-arching desires’: 1. ‘to liberate Orthodox theology from all that prohibits it from becoming a genuinely universal expression of Christian faith’,

\(^4\) Years later, Staniloae strongly opposed, for the same reason, the publication of the Romanian translation (done by Iustim Moisescu, who was to become a few years later the Orthodox Patriarch) of the *Symbolic Theology* of the same author.

\(^5\) Andrew Louth expresses the same conviction in his extremely dense review article on Staniloae’s theology. See, Andrew Louth. ‘Review Essay: The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology of Dumitru Staniloae’, *Modern Theology*, 13, 2, 1997.


The second, even more important factor discussed in this equation is the impact on Staniloae of his research on Gregory Palamas (his masterly study, *The Life and Teaching of Gregory Palamas*, published in 1938, but never translated into English, preceded with over two decades the standard treatments of the subject by John Meyendorff – 1964 and 1974). This study produced a paradigm shift in Staniloae’s theological thinking (Miller rightly calls this a ‘theological conversion’), with a lasting impact in everything he has written from then on.
and 2. ‘to re-establish the link between theology and spirituality’.

As the author suggests, according to Staniloae, the relation between dogma and theology should be guided by the principles rooted in the Incarnation and the Trinity. The result, he suggests, is a paradoxical model of unity in multiplicity.


Christian Personalism is one of the main characteristics of Staniloae’s theology; this brought him closer to what is known today as ‘social Trinitarianism’, a debated understanding of the relationships between the Persons of the Holy Trinity based on the insights of Personalism;

c. **Cultural forms in which Orthodoxy was incarnated in Romania** – the way in which Orthodox spirituality moulded the culture and the mind-set of Romanians, which was one of the central preoccupations of Dumitru Staniloae.

After the fall of communism, some authors tended to use this latter passion of Fr. Staniloae as a pretext for building an extremist form of nationalism, akin to the one promoted in the third and fourth decades of the last century by the fascist organisation called the Iron Guard. That is why Fr. Bria argues very strongly that ‘the relationship between Orthodoxy and Romanianism [in Staniloae’s work] should not be exploited in a political, nationalist manner.’

In the latest period of his life, especially after the demise of communism, Dumitru Staniloae insisted on the public, critical, and prophetic function of theology. Had he lived longer, he could have guided the younger generation of Orthodox theologians towards a more solid engagement with public and social theology, away from the nostalgia of Christendom that dominates most of the majority Orthodox churches, including the one in Romania.

In relation to this last key influence, it is significant to mention that, during his last visit in the United States, John Meyendorff invited Staniloae to stay and teach there, but he refused, because of his commitment to the Romanian people. Later on, however, he strongly suggested his daughter Lidia and her son to leave Romania, a few years before the fall of communism.

**Spirituality as the defining characteristic of Fr. Staniloae’s theology**

Every one of those who ever met Dumitru Staniloae was deeply moved by his humility and deep spirituality. His genuine love for people, including his enemies, and his interest in the deep meaning of this core theological virtue earned him the title of ‘theologian of love’.

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7 Miller, p. 37.
9 Bria, *Spatiul*, 25
He could not conceive of theology as a dry theoretical effort, not as an individualistic exercise. His theology was thoroughly doxological and ecclesial. We may rightly say that he was first a mystical believer, second a priest and only third a theologian.

He rarely talked about his traumatic imprisonment experience, and never answered, even to his daughter, the question if he was ever beaten in prison (though some of his colleagues gave testimony that he was). Rather, he underlined again and again that his five years as an inmate in the communist prison was the only time when he could practice, continuously, the hesychastic prayer of Jesus.

Ion Bria describes the translation and commentary of the Philocalia as, ‘the most durable part of the work of Dumitru Staniloae’.11 The Philocalic spirituality promoted through these Patristic writings had a lasting impact way beyond the limits of the Orthodox community. Young intellectuals, in search of life’s deep meaning, Catholics, Protestants, and Evangelicals, have been attracted by this offspring of spirituality, to which the name of Fr. Staniloae will always be bound.

**Ecumenism in the theology of Fr. Dumitru Staniloae**

Dumitru Staniloae’s engagement in ecumenical dialogue had an unlikely beginning. Communist regimes use to go, from time to time through what I call ‘cosmetic periods’, when they try to show a more ‘democratic face the free world. In 1968, five years after his return from prison, Fr. Staniloae started to be used by the communist regime in Romania as a show-case of religious freedom in a country that was enjoying a short period of relaxation, before Ceausescu’s ‘little cultural revolution’, in 1971, following his visit in North Korea and China. God’s providence uses sometimes such unlikely mechanisms to promote his kingdom.

Staniloae’s key contribution to ecumenism is the formulation, in 1971, of the concept of ‘open sobornicity’12 – his particular understanding of ecumenicity as unity in diversity, with dogmatic integrity, which he offered as an better alternative to Afanasiev’s ‘eucharistic ecclesiology’, towards which he was very critical, because of its perceived risk of leading to doctrinal compromise.

Lucian Turcescu wrote a very good article on this topic13. He explains that ‘sobornicity’ is Staniloae’s preferred word for rendering the third mark of the Church, understood not some much as referring to the geographic extent of the Church as to her inner life animated by the Spirit. The author argues that Staniloae’s understanding of ‘open sobornicity’ was influenced by three factors:

a. his view on ‘sobornicity’, as unity created by the Spirit ; b. the idea of the complementarity of gifts in the mystical Body of Christ, and, c. the ecumenical concept of ‘spiritual inter-communion’, understood

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11 Bria, Spatiul, 22.
not as eucharistic hospitality, but as 'a form of communion that promotes common prayer, study and action among the Orthodox and other Christians'.

The time does not allow us to develop further these ideas, but it is sufficient to add here that what we have described above and many other ecumenical contributions of Fr. Staniloae earned him an unparalleled prestige and authority in ecumenical circles across the globe.

Yet, not everybody in Romanian Orthodoxy, especially in certain monastic circles, was happy with Staniloae’s ecumenical engagement, which was seen by some as a compromise of the pure Orthodox faith. That is why, especially after 1989, a number of dialogues with Fr. Staniloae were published by some of these hardliners, in which they tried to show that the great theologian agreed with their exclusivist sectarian stance. Fr. Bria points out to this unethical manipulation, stating emphatically that ‘Father Staniloae did not conceive of Orthodoxy as an alibi for anti-ecumenical theses’.

Evaluations of Fr. Staniloae's Life and Legacy

One of the most beautiful succinct presentations of Fr Dumitru Staniloae came from the pen of one of his inmates in a communist prison. He wrote: ‘The most brilliant representative of Orthodoxy was carrying his cross, unto the glory of Christ. He was like a Byzantine saint, stranded among other many fellow prisoners and defendants of the ancestral church and of the nation.’

In the theological world, Olivier Clément and Metr. Kallistos of Diokleia have acclaimed Staniloae to be ‘certainly the greatest Orthodox theologian’ of the present time, while Moltmann described him as “the most influential and creative contemporary Orthodox theologian”. Finally, Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, described him as ‘a major interpreter of the patristic tradition… as well as a constructive theologian of great stature’.

With very few exceptions, most assessments of Staniloae’s contribution to theology done by Romanian Orthodox authors tend to be unreservedly enthusiastic, falling under the general category of

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eulogia. Many times this kind of lip service has been a (not so subtle) to refuse substantial engagement with the thinking of Staniloae.

Not everybody agrees with a positive evaluation of Staniloae’s work. A number of authors testify to negative reactions against the new direction he brought in theological studies in Romania. Furthermore, after he was arrested, his texts were pulled out of theological journals and even burned.

The Romanian ecumenist Ion Bria talks about some of Staniloae’s detractors, when he writes: ‘The Faculty of Theology in Bucharest seems to be willing to take advantage of the fall of communism in order to minimise any reference to Fr. Staniloae’s Dogmatics, and to denigrate the theologians in his “school”’20. In the Preface of the doctoral work on Staniloae’s theology, done by Fr. Mosoiu, that he supervised (see note 15), Bria complains that the appropriation of Staniloae’s theological methodology and of his particular themes ‘is sporadic and most often nonexistent’ (p. 8). Mosoiu himself mentions in the introduction of his work (pp. 16-17) the opinions of a Romanian Orthodox theologian who writes derogatory of Staniloae and other neo-patristic authors as, producers of ‘personal and subjective dogmatics, claiming [undeserved] originality’.

Moreover, in a seemingly negative reaction to Staniloae’s staunch conservatism and nationalism, a leading Romanian Orthodox intellectual, Horia-Roman Patapievici, expresses serious doubt concerning Staniloae’s originality.21 Nevertheless, such negative reactions represent the exception rather than the norm.

**Weaknesses of Staniloae’s Theology**

Before we end this presentation, it is fair that we also list some of the perceived weaknesses we have observed during our engagement with Fr. Staniloae’s theology. Here are four of them.

Firstly, as Fr. Bria rightly underlines, Staniloae was too insistent on the use of the comparatist method in evaluating the theology of other Christian denominations.22 Andrew Louth is even sharper in his criticism: ‘There is, it seems to me, little real engagement with Western theology in Fr. Dumitru’s dogmatics, although there is a readiness to point out its deficiencies.23

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21 Patapievici writes: ‘Dumitru Staniloae was an erudite priest, able to reiterate well the tradition, but, in my opinion, a creative theologian he was not’ – H.-R. Patapievici. *Politice* [Political stuff]. Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1997; p.225. It is important to mention at this point that the author, a strong advocate of political and philosophical liberalism, is at the same time very conservative in terms of his Christian convictions.
22 Bria, *Spatiul*, 41.
As we have argued in our contribution to the Staniloae volume edited by Lucian Turcescu, Staniloae leaves very little space for the role of laity in the ministry church, and almost no place for women, outside of the home.

Thirdly, Bria, with his ecumenical and social sensitivity, argues that Fr Staniloae was not able to ‘transform spirituality into a societal reality… spirituality circulated in parallel with social apostololate, so that they never met in a total symbiosis’. That, however, we have to admit, was almost impossible under communism.

Finally, and very importantly, many times Staniloae has used biblical texts as pretexts, rather than to solidly exegete them. As a result, he may have missed another very important source of theological renewal: the text of biblical revelation.

**Looking into the Future**

Although he was aware of the important contribution he has made to theological studies in Romania and beyond, Fr. Staniloae never pretended to have the last word on anything. He often humbly confessed, ‘that is as much as it has been revealed to me’, and suggested, on certain topics he could not develop, that ‘someone should write about [that]…’.

Fr. Staniloae shared his heart on these matters, in a personal letter written in 1980 to one of his disciples: ‘Moving further the Romanian theological thought; that gives me the greatest joy! A simple list of quotations from my studies would mean no progress; worse, it may even kill what is alive in them.’ One decade later, he added: ‘I am glad to see that others are writing about my theology. However, I would rejoice even more if the reflections of others would enrich this theology; for I would like to see that my thoughts are seminal to the thinking of others, taking thus further our Romanian theology.’

In spite of the attention it attracted, and the lip service it has received, until recently no comprehensive critical analysis of the whole of Staniloae’s theology has been produced in Romania. It is in fact surprising to observe how relatively little has been done in Romanian Orthodox circles in order to assimilate critically the work of Staniloae, complains Fr. Bria. Surprisingly, until about ten years ago,

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28 Bria, *Spatiul*, 44.
30 The first doctoral research on Staniloae by a Romanian Orthodox theologian was that of Ioachim Giosanu (*La Déification de l’Homme d’après la Pensée du Père Dumitru Staniloae*, unpublished Ph.D thesis. Paris: St. Sergius Institute of Orthodox Theology, 1994.) The author himself qualifies his work as being ‘mystical-dogmatic’ (Avant-propos). The discussion begins with a presentation of asceticism and Christian mysticism, as context of Orthodox
most of the serious research on Staniloae was undertaken by Catholics\textsuperscript{31} and Romanian Evangelicals\textsuperscript{32} rather than by Orthodox theologians. Fortunately, that is slowly changing.

The publishing house of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate has finally started publishing the Complete Works of Dumitru Staniloae (six volumes have been published already, including his articles published previously in \textit{Telegraful roman} – in three volumes, and three of his key theological books; and the programmes progresses steadily). This is not yet a critical edition; yet, it is real progress.

A one volume anthology of Staniloae’s theology is still awaiting to be created. It is over twenty years now since I have first suggested this need to the then Metr. Daniel of Moldova, now Patriarch Daniel of Romania. This necessary volume still did not find a courageous author to undertake the project.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the period of serious Staniloae studies have only begun. There are many topics awaiting someone to take them on. Among these, we suggest themes like: 1. The essential stages in Staniloae’s formation and activity as a church theologian; 2. Staniloae’s evaluation of the main ecclesiological challenges in the Romanian Orthodox Church during the twentieth century;\textsuperscript{33} 3. The essential Trinitarian grounding of Staniloae’s theology; 4. Staniloae’s understanding of the dynamic relationship between Scripture, Tradition, and the Church.

The following years will certainly bring new and substantial additions to the understanding of this eminent theologian. We can only hope that Orthodox theologians will bring a much more substantial contribution to such an important effort.

I cannot end my presentation of this remarkable Orthodox author before I add my voice to the hopes expressed by a number of Romanian theologians that some day the Romanian Orthodox Church will canonise the one that is already called by many ‘Dumitru the Theologian’.

\textsuperscript{31} Elias O’Brien, a Catholic, was the first Westerner to undertake research work on Staniloae (\textit{The Orthodox Pneumatic Ecclesiology of Father Dumitru Staniloae: An Ecumenical Approach}. M.Phil. dissertation. Dublin: Trinity College, 1984). The first Ph.D thesis on Staniloae was produced by the Catholic Ronald Roberson (\textit{Contemporary Romanian Orthodox Ecclesiology. The Contribution of Dumitru Staniloae and Younger Colleagues}. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1988). Roberson presents a very informed overview of the present day debates in Romanian Orthodox ecclesiology, and responds graciously to a number of contentious ecclesiological issues between the Orthodox and the Catholic traditions.

\textsuperscript{32} Besides Emil Bartos and Silviu Rogobete, whose work will be analysed further on, there are at least three other Romanian Evangelicals who are undertaking research on various aspects of Staniloae’s theology.

\textsuperscript{33} Among these, could be mentioned the renewal movement called ‘The Lord’s Army’, started in Sibiu by Fr. Iosif Trifa, at the time when Staniloae was living in that city, the Cornilescu translation of the Bible, and the revivalist movement initiated by Fr. Tudor Popescu. The challenges mentioned above are analysed in a detailed manner in the research work undertaken by another Romanian Evangelical (Paul Negru. \textit{The Development Of The Concept Of Authority Within The Romanian Orthodox Church During The Twentieth Century}. unpublished Ph.D. thesis. London: Brunel University: 1994).