

The Anthropology of Dumitru Stăniloae: Philosophical Contours in the Context of the Socio-Psychological Actualization of Religiosity

Mykola Skriblyak ¹ * • Serhiy Busygin ²

¹ Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (Ukraine). Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, Doctor of Science (Philosophy), Associate Professor.

² Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (Ukraine). Postgraduate Student at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, PhD Candidate in Religious Studies.

* **Corresponding Author**, e-mail: m.shkriblyak@chnu.edu.ua

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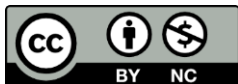
ABSTRACT

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The article presents the results of a comprehensive study of the theological legacy of one of the most renowned Romanian theologians of the 20th century. Special attention is drawn to his anthropological discourse, which, thanks to the intellectual and spiritual quests of the Christian thinker, emerged as a completely natural and accomplished synthesis of Patristic and, specifically, Neo-Palamite ideas. It has been proven that Dumitru Stăniloae developed a relevant anthropological paradigm with significant axiological potential and, in many respects, can serve as a response to contemporary philosophical-anthropological challenges. Focusing research efforts on the problem of the human person in their inseparable connection with Divine being and the community, the author generalizes the significance of the doctrine of freedom, which is an integral attribute of human existence, theosis (deification), and assimilation to God. At the same time, the assertion is made that the thinker bases his moral-dogmatic system on the biblical and general Christian anthropological concept of man as the Image of God, by virtue of which he is called to theosis and to likeness to the Creator. The central construct of the article's author is the accentuation of anthropological concepts, definitions, ideas, and established assertions formalized by Dumitru Stăniloae within the synthesis of Neo-Palamism as an evolution of modern Christian theology, which is acquiring new circulation within the structure of the Orthodox ecclesiastical-religious tradition of the post-secular era and the socio-psychological actualization of religiosity.

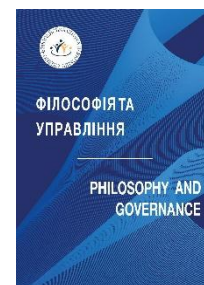
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anthropology, grace, theology of the person, Neo-Palamism, theosis, Image of God, post-secularity, religiosity, religious-theological synthesis.



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Антропология Димитру Стенілоє: філософські контури в контексті соціально-психологічної актуалізації релігійності

Микола В. Шкрібляк ¹ * • Сергій Л. Бусигін ²

¹ Чернівецький національний університет імені Юрія Федьковича (Україна). Доцент кафедри філософії та культурології, д-р філос. наук, доцент.

² Чернівецький національний університет імені Юрія Федьковича (Україна). Аспірант кафедри філософії та культурології, здобувач наукового ступеня доктора філософії зі спеціальності «Релігієзнавство».

* Автор-кореспондент, e-mail: m.shkriblyak@chnu.edu.ua

СТАТТЯ

АНОТАЦІЯ

Дослідницька

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Стаття містить результати комплексного дослідження богословської спадщини одного із найвідоміших румунських теологів ХХ ст. Особливу увагу звернено на його антропологічний дискурс, завдяки інтелектуальним духовним пошукам християнського мислителя постав цілком природним і довершеним синтезом патристичних і, зокрема неопаламітських ідей. Доведено, що *Dumitru Stăniloae* / *Думитру Стенілоє* (інша вимова повного імені – *Думітру Стенілоаїє*) вдалося сформувати актуальну антропологічну парадигму, що має вагомий аксіологічний потенціал і багато в чому може бути відповіддю на сучасні філософсько-антропологічні виклики. Фокусуючи дослідницькі зусилля на проблематиці людської особистості в її нерозривному зв'язку з Божественним буттям і спільнотою, автор узагальнює значення вчення про свободу, що є невід'ємним атрибутом людського буття, обоження та Богоуподібнення. Водночас артикулюється твердження про те, що власну морально-догматичну систему мислитель ґрунтує на біблійній і загальнохристиянській антропологічній концепції про людину як образ Божий, завдяки якому вона покликана до обоження та уподібнення Творцю. Центральним конструктором автора статті є увиразнення антропологічних понять, дефініцій, ідей та усталених тверджень, формалізованих Думитру Стенілоє в синтезі неопаламізму, як еволюції сучасного християнського богослов'я, що набуває нової циркуляції в структурі православної церковно-релігійної традиції постсекулярної доби та соціально-психологічної актуалізації релігійності.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

антропология, благодать, богослов'я особистості, неопаламізм, обоження, образ Божий, постсекулярність, релігійність, релігійно-богословський синтез.

1. Introduction

The theological legacy of the priest and scholar-theologian Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993) – a prominent representative of 20th-century Orthodox religious-theological thought – is a vast compendium of sources of Christian religious-theological thought, representing a synthesis and complex generalization of the liturgical experience of the Orthodox ecclesiastical tradition. At the same time, the author of the article touches only the surface of this source of the theory of Eastern Orthodox theological reflection (*theoria*) and contemplative practice (religious experience) of the Knowledge of God, deep as a sea abyss, accumulated within the bosom of the Patristic spiritual-intellectual tradition and thoroughly assimilated by the Church and holistically reinterpreted by D. Stăniloae [14–19].

In 1922, the future theologian and saint was granted a scholarship to study at the University of Chernivtsi. After a year of studying theology at the Faculty of Theology, he enrolled in the Faculty of Philology at the University of Bucharest (Romania). In 1927, he studied again at the University of Chernivtsi, where he defended his diploma thesis on the topic “Baptism of Infants” under the scientific supervision of Professor Vasile Loichiță. And in the autumn of 1928, with his guidance, Dumitru Stăniloae successfully defended his doctoral dissertation on the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Dositheos, and his connections with the Romanian rulers [2].

We should incidentally note that the Patriarch to whom the future saint of the Romanian Orthodox Church dedicated his research participated in the machinations regarding the incorporation of the Kyiv Metropolia into the Moscow Patriarchate in 1686, so to speak, by the grace of God, “adjusting” the canonical basis for its resubordination [11], but in fact – facilitated the situation where the Patriarch of Constantinople, Dionysius, by his reckless decision, pushed the Ukrainian Church into more than three hundred years of spiritual captivity under the Moscow colonial yoke [10].

In July 2024, Dumitru Stăniloae and fifteen other individuals were canonized as saints of the Romanian Orthodox Church of the 20th century [13]. He was recognized as a Confessor of the Faith. It was decreed that his memory be commemorated on October 4. Yet, surprisingly, this caused a mixed public reaction, particularly within the ecclesiastical environment of the Romanian Orthodox Church itself. Many raised the question of exactly for what merits his name was included in the calendar of saints. After all, the theologian and pastor in his work and missionary activity expended much effort on the propaganda of Romanian nationalism and the anti-ecumenical movement, while tolerating the ideology of the Nazi regime and its attitude towards representatives of non-Aryan nations. Leaving this facet of his activity and ministry aside, we will attempt to analyze the leading ideas and anthropological aspects of his spiritual-intellectual legacy. The actualization of this problem is primarily due to its distinct demonstration of a deep and natural synthesis of Patristic and, in particular, Neo-Palamite ideas, which, on the whole, possess significant axiological potential, especially in the context of contemporary philosophical-anthropological challenges.

As Yuriy Chornomorets rightly noted, Dumitru Stăniloae came closest to realizing the design that many Christian thinkers of the 20th century aspired to. He laid the foundation for the creation of a grand and holistic dogmatic compendium of the structural-logical system of Neo-Patristic theology, in which Christian anthropology would occupy a prominent place. The scholar emphasizes explicitly that the style of theological thinking of the Romanian theologian is analogous to the Patristic one [5]. Hence, the importance of the religious studies examination of the creative legacy of Dumitru Stăniloae, who, in essence, largely solved those tasks set by his associates and contemporaries, albeit with different approaches and theological visions. According to the observations of Yu. Chornomorets, the advantage of D. Stăniloae lies primarily in the fact that he created his “own dogmatic theology,” which takes into account the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann, Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and others [5].

In this context, a clear definition of the theological and philosophical-religious contours of Dumitru Stăniloae’s anthropological system, in which Palamism and the Neo-Patristic interpretation of human freedom occupy a prominent place, remains a relevant issue not only for theology and religious studies but for all humanitarian thought of the era of post-secular philosophical discourse.

2. Literature Review

Even though Dumitru Stăniloae went down in history as one of the most talented theologians of the 20th century, his religious-theological legacy has still not found a comprehensive religious studies objectification, analysis, and interpretation that could become a locomotive for the development of theology and, in particular, Christian anthropology, in the conditions of post-secular humanitarian discourse.

Among Ukrainian scholars, particularly religious studies scholars, philosophers, and theologians, H. Khrystokin [7; 9] and Yu. Chornomorets [5–7] paid the most attention to the anthropological and dogmatic constructs of the thinker. Actively researching the theological legacy of the Romanian theologian, they concluded that Dumitru Stăniloae is “the only modern Orthodox theologian who managed to create a full-fledged dogmatic system that corresponds to the norms accepted in contemporary Christian discourse regarding theological theories” [7].

The value of scientific works, particularly those of Yu. Chornomorets, lies primarily in the fact that he substantiates a new trajectory for the development of theology at the beginning of the third millennium, according to which a cardinal turn of “Neo-Patristic theology” towards the “Radical Orthodoxy of the Eastern Church” takes place [6]. At the same time, the accentuation of the specifics and development trends of the latter direction is most comprehensively presented in the works of Roman Soloviy [12]. Meanwhile, they are both inclined to believe that the transition to Radical Orthodoxy (in both Protestant and Catholic discourses) is accompanied by sharp discussions raging between theorists of liberal theology and representatives of fundamentalist theological thinking. Conversely, Orthodox theologians perceive the ideas and values of Radical Orthodoxy as something entirely natural. Given this, the main authorial assertions that we substantiate in this study largely follow the fairway of the connotations of these two philosophers.

Thus, despite the obvious scientific interest in Neo-Patristic theology and Radical Orthodoxy, there is still a range of issues requiring attention and religious-philosophical objectification. For instance, how to preserve the balance between the Patristic tradition and non-orthodoxy or Radical Orthodoxy, or how to implement the achievement and value orientations of the theological legacy of representatives of the synthesis of Patristic thought, particularly Neo-Palamism and contemporary philosophical-anthropological challenges, among whom Archpriest Dumitru Stăniloae, and since this year also a saint of the Romanian Orthodox Church, can be considered the brightest representative.

3. Problem Statement

The aim is a comprehensive scientific study of the theological anthropological system of Dumitru Stăniloae in the context of the modern actualization of the Neo-Patristic tradition and the post-secular worldview paradigm.

The following tasks are subordinated to the research aim:

1) to provide a concise general characterization of Dumitru Stăniloae as a Christian thinker of the 20th century, who not only made a significant contribution to the development of the Neo-Patristic approach in theology but also laid reliable foundations for the formation of dogmatic and moral theology in their inseparable connection under new conditions;

2) to analyze the content and leading ideas of the scholar’s dogmatic system and determine the specific features of the theological construct of D. Stăniloae, which gives grounds to speak of the thinker’s achievement in this realm as a “Neo-Palamite synthesis,” and not some revolutionary paradigm of 20th-century theological thought;

3) to interpret the axiological potential of Dumitru Stăniloae’s anthropological concept in view of the actualization of the achievements of the Neo-Patristic tradition and its modern religious-philosophical and theological reflection.

4. Methods and Materials

The research is based on the comprehensive application of general scientific and special methods, among which are: the philosophical-hermeneutical and comparative methods. Their use enabled a thorough investigation of the origins and genesis of Dumitru Stăniloae’s theological-anthropological

system and the interpretation of its leading ideas and value potentials in the context of the modern actualization of the Neo-Patristic tradition and the post-secular worldview paradigm.

Relying on the potential of rationalistic and dialectical, as well as metaphysical and formal-logical methods, we have attempted a systemic generalization of the main factors and specifics of the formation of dogmatic and moral theology under the influence of the intellectual and spiritual-pastoral activity of Dumitru Stăniloae, as well as to substantiate the assertion that he made a significant contribution to the development of the Neo-Patristic approach in theology, thereby laying solid foundations for the formation of radical theology.

In general, the use of this theoretical-methodological toolkit enabled the fulfillment of the main tasks of the study: a) analysis of the content and dominant constructs of D. Stăniloae's dogmatic system; b) clarification of the axiological potential of his anthropological concept; c) determination of the role and place of the thinker's theological legacy in the structure of contemporary post-secular theological discourse and religious-philosophical thought in general.

5. Results and Discussion

At the center of D. Stăniloae's theological system, and in particular dogmatic anthropology, is the doctrine of the human person as the Image of God. Man was brought into the world for constant and unceasing theosis through real participation in the uncreated Divine energies, which stands as the cornerstone of the theologian's thought [1]. He distinguishes between the essence and the uncreated energies. Therefore, the ideological-dogmatic semantic construct of his theological anthropology is not turbulent revolutionary impulses, but a synthesis of Neo-Palamism, to which the thinker assigns a leading place in the system of modern theology and the socio-psychological revitalization of the Christian religion.

The theologian sees the main idea of religious-theological thought in cultivating a special culture of communion with God, a conscious and responsible attitude towards the search for and encounter with the Creator. According to D. Stăniloae's convictions, without a deep understanding of the content of the instruction outlined by him, these relationships will, at worst, be impossible altogether, and at best, too distorted. Ultimately, such an experience will lead to final destruction [1].

Systemically substantiated personalism serves as the methodological support for his theological reflection and anthropological discourse. He accentuates it with a special definition – communitarian personalism [3], which is intended to articulate an exclusively Orthodox interpretation of the human person, whose true self-realization is possible only in communion with God [14]. The theologian resolutely rejects not only Western individualism but also communist ideology, which promoted a community with emasculated individualities and inner capacities for honoring God and His creation. He asserted that absolute human value is expressed only in communion, for man, being created in the image of the Holy Trinity, acts as a reflection of Its inner community and love. On this basis, the thinker builds the concept that human life cannot be reduced merely to internal subjectivity [3].

D. Stăniloae proved that the personal character of man is not an ordinary philosophical category, but a fundamental ontological reality, rooted in God as the Source of being and the Absolute Subject. Therefore, he emphasized that the genuine guarantee of human existence lies only in the One Tri-hypostatic God [8; 14]. Proceeding from this instruction, the thinker interpreted salvation and theosis as “the extension to conscious creatures of such relationships as exist between the Divine Persons” [14], emphasizing at the same time that the human person is also a great mystery, which, like Divine apophaticism, does not lend itself to complete conceptual definition. Its revelation is possible only in communication with other people, and primarily with God [16].

The most important construct of D. Stăniloae's anthropology is the concept of the Image of God, which is imprinted in human nature to such an extent that it can never be destroyed by anyone, not even by the Fall [8]. The Image of God is hidden in the human soul, which on the one hand relates man to God, and on the other makes him capable of conscious communication with the Creator. It permeates the entire being: both soul and body, because man is truly a holistic personality.

The Image of God is simultaneously a “gift” and a “task” of soteriological weight [15]. If the gift lies in the ontological structure of man, with his inherent ability to communicate with the Subject, then the task is to achieve perfection, approaching likeness to God. All this is a dynamic, ongoing process of spiritual sanctification and theosis. At the same time, the thinker warned that this likeness is achieved

not by the ability to go beyond the limits of human nature, but thanks to the constant striving for spiritual improvement and growth [18].

However, this approach and thinking are not new in theological discourse. Therefore, it cannot be considered innovative, nor can its development be attributed to D. Stăniloae. It is unnecessary to prove that the main idea of Eastern Patristic theology is “theosis” (deification). It was and remains the starting point of the spiritual and moral life of Orthodox Christians. Even to the naked eye, it is evident that this is the axis around which all other questions and problems revolve, encompassing dogmatic, moral, and pastoral theology, asceticism, and ascetology. Ascetic life, faith, piety, Christian wisdom, and pragmatism in the axiological paradigm of the Church Fathers do not act as ideas or distant notions of perfection, nor as a theory or concept, but as factual evidence of the inner life of a person.

Obviously, it was precisely on this foundation that D. Stăniloae relied in his theological connotations and generalizations. Therefore, it is no coincidence that he resolves disputed issues of theological anthropology in the vein of the synthesis of Neo-Palamism [18], which acted then as one of the evolutionary forms of Christian theology contemporary to him and, in particular, the system of anthropological teachings of the late 19th – first half of the 20th century.

The fundamental metaphysical and epistemological means by which D. Stăniloae built his own anthropological and soteriological systems became the distinction between the Divine essence and uncreated energies discovered by St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) [1]. Without this distinction, it is impossible to understand the nature of the Divine being, His relation to and encounter with both man and the world as a whole. To this end, the theologian aims to overcome the intellectual division that dominated Western philosophical-theological rationalism at the time, between the absolute transcendence of the Divine essence and immanence in the world.

In this regard, he argued that the nature of God encompasses both the incomprehensible Essence and His fully open (accessible) Energies (Potencies and Acts), which flow from the Being of God without causing any loss to the Essence [19]. This distinction is key in the process of the Knowledge of God, as it allows the created human being to have a direct connection with God. Such an approach forced D. Stăniloae to speak out against the erroneous views that prevailed in the “dialectical” paradigm of Protestant religious-philosophical thought, which, as is known, rejects the idea of union with God, except perhaps for the indirect possibility provided by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

It is noteworthy that D. Stăniloae names the interaction between human freedom and Divine grace as one of the central issues of Christian anthropology. According to the thinker’s teaching, this synergy is based on free cooperation (synergeia) with God [4]. The Spirit of God does not compel and does not abolish the will with which God endowed man in the act of creation. On the contrary, God’s grace restores man’s true freedom, liberating him from the passions that enslave him. Hence, he deduces the assertion that the process of theosis encompasses the entire spiritual life of the believer, beginning with Baptism. D. Stăniloae sometimes describes theosis as the final, highest stage of spiritual life, formalized in the contemplation of Divine light [1], yet despite this, he is aware that the concept of theosis can also be applied to characterize the previous stages, namely, purification and illumination [1]. Thus, the contemplation of Divine light is the culmination of spiritual ascent; it is the “endless end,” which is theosis. At the same time, theosis is not only an eschatological gift but also an objective reality that can be achieved during earthly life. However, its continuous realization is, after all, in eternity.

6. Conclusions

It seems D. Stăniloae realized that neither any dogmatic teaching of Christianity, nor the principles of moral theology and ethics, nor lush or conversely strict liturgical practice with its symbolism, nor even such important forms of religious life as asceticism, monasticism, etc., can be comprehended adequately without deep immersion into the mystical sources of the spiritual life of Christ’s Church of the Patristic period. Having managed to solve the problem in many ways, he succeeded in laying a reliable foundation and breathing new life into Orthodox theological thought of the second half of the 20th century.

The anthropology of D. Stăniloae is an extremely deep and holistic philosophical-religious construct that opposes depersonalization, rationalism, and one-sided agnosticism. The key contours of the anthropological system of the Romanian theologian include the following: a) man as the image of the Holy Trinity – a person in communion, not an individual who seeks an ontological foundation for himself and finds it in Divine interpersonal love; b) the union of man with God occurs through

participation in uncreated Divine energies that proceed from the incomprehensible Essence of the Divine Being; c) the dynamics of theosis appear as an ever-lasting and continuous process that originates in Baptism and continues in other Sacraments; d) true freedom lies in voluntary cooperation with uncreated grace, which does not abolish the human will but only liberates it from sin; e) man is a sacred creation, and therefore called to sanctify himself and the surrounding world, to reveal and testify to its inner sacramentality and harmony.

Thanks to these concepts, D. Stăniloae managed to create a theological system that is not only deeply rooted in the spiritual heritage of the Church Fathers but has important axiological potential in the context of modern challenges and the socio-psychological actualization of religiosity in the post-secular age.

Overall, the theological legacy of the prominent 20th-century Orthodox theologian and saint of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Dumitru Stăniloae, is an extremely successful and prosperous in valuable multidimensionality religious-philosophical and theological synthesis of the Patristic tradition and, in particular, Neo-Palamism, formed against the background of challenges contemporary to him and leading trends in the development of 20th-century Christian theological thought. He placed the concept of “communitarian personalism” at the basis of his own anthropological system. This is justified, at least because man as a personality self-realizes only through the fact that he strives for the “other,” something or someone greater, more perfect. Likewise, he knows himself only through the “other.” In an anthropological system centered on “communitarian personalism,” the “Other” is God.

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