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TOWARDS AN ANTROPOLOGY OF COMMUNION

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**Abstract:** Review of Sandu Frunză, *O antropologie mistică. Introducere în gândirea Părintelui Stăniloae* (A mystical anthropology. An introduction to Stăniloae's thought). Bucureşti: Eikon, 2016. 176 pag.

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The second edition of *A mystical anthropology. An introduction to Stăniloae's thought* written by Sandu Frunză was published in 2016 at Eikon Publishing House based in Bucharest, Romania. This revised edition is an expression of the deeply rooted belief that the cultural redefinition of Christian thought in the Romanian context must be initiated taking into account a modern valorization of Dumitru Stăniloae's work. It is in this respect that Frunză offers a multiperspective analysis of the relation between philosophy and theology. Reorganizing the diverse and vigorous concepts of the sacerdotal universe of Stăniloae, the author successfully establishes the existence of a relational ethics that opens to the Christian experience in the daily life of the postmodern man. Following this assumption, Aurel Codoban describes the endeavor of Frunză "as the route and privileged entrance toward orthodox theology" (Codoban 2016, 12).

For Frunză, Dumitru Stăniloae's work must be perceived as "an initiatory journey, an assumption of an existential approach that engages you with your entire world" (Frunză 2016, 9). According to Codoban, the anthropology presented by the author perfectly resembles Stăniloae's theological traits, with the individual and the communion being placed at the center, whereas love remains the deepest referral (Codoban 2016, 12-13). Structured across five chapters, the book covers a variety of concepts and thoughts found in Stăniloae's work. One of the recurrent ideas of Dumitru Stăniloae is the mystical experience in relation to the idea of the human being, also known as the anthropology problem from an Orthodox point of view. Through the arguments he presented, Frunză succeeded in enhancing a dialogue between philosophical anthropology and scientific anthropology, as part of the larger dialogue between religion and culture.

The first chapter serves as a general introduction and presents the experience of communion from Stăniloae's point of view, indicating how such an experience can help individuals alleviate relationships between each other and between them and God. In his writings, Stăniloae depicts the human being as created in the "image of God" (Frunză 2016; Frunză 2016a) and rests his main theories on orthodox thought. Therefore, orthodoxy is presented as a religion of communication between the human being and God. Placing the human being in the area of communication is possible only as a virtue of his "divine image" (Frunză 2016, 25). Stăniloae's dogmatic synthesis is a combination of the teachings of the Saint Parents and daily experience and his thought helps one understand "what is given and what is refused to the human being in relationship to God" (Frunză 2016, 23). The dogmatic formula "of unique divinity, a threshold in person" (Frunză 2016, 24) represents the main pillar in the communication between human beings and communion with God. In addition, Stăniloae shows the impossibility of disappearance of the image with the fall into sin, because human beings remain into a continuous search and aspiration towards God. Mystical theology is seen as a theology of perfection, an inter-relation in three steps: purification, illumination, and mystical

union. According to Frunză (2016, 32-33), in the orthodox genuine sense, the ascetic is the „image of buried Christ”, and the mystical is the „image of risen Christ”. The direct connection between God and human being is necessary for overcoming the distance that was interposed between the human being and the transcendent reality which calls for communion, the human being feeling a need to be a permanent *imitatio christi*.

The second chapter is structured as a clarification to the issue of the person from the perspective of Stăniloae's work. The concept of person emerges in the context of Trinitarian discussions and is conceived through the paradigm of the relationship between image and archetype. The incursion in the structure of the person helps in explaining three factors: human nature, hypostasis, and subject. According to Stăniloae, the main difference between human beings and the Divine being is that the first exist only as hypostatic nature, whereas the latter is a unique being expressed by the Holy Trinity. Orthodoxy is, *par excellence*, a doctrine of equilibrium because although human nature is impaired with original sin, human beings remain with the image of God. The unity of the world is regained with Christ. At this point, communication is internalized by establishing a dialogue with the transcendent depths of the person. In Orthodoxy, the word represents by itself God's creative power. The words are related to the person, being not only the manifestation of meaning but also the manifestation of the person who pronounces it. Ultimately, words don't exist without a person. Therefore, human beings need to give special attention to their words for they can ruin or kill just as well as they can build.

In the third part of the book, Frunză presents a radiography of the theological accounts of Christian love, with Stăniloae admitting the difficulty of giving a definition that fully encompasses the meaning of the concept, but which can be summarized as “a plus of knowledge producing at the same time a huge plus of life in the beloved and the lover” (Stăniloae 1993a). Only through mutual love can one discover the value and beauty that would otherwise be impossible to find. Love is a mutual wholeness and promotion, the ultimate path towards knowledge, a stage in which the being is not passive, but in fact experiences freedom more than in any other state. Love is the embracing of the human existence in itself, an encounter which Sandu Frunză places not only in the register of feelings but in an existential one. It is in this sense that love gains an ontological dimension (pointing out how the human condition is perceived, where man is seen as a relational being).

Sandu Frunză also describes the meta-ontology known only to God, in which the person remains in an antinomic posture, being both created and uncreated, visible and invisible, mysterious and understood at the same time. From a religious standpoint, the deepest constituent of a person is the heart. Resting on the premise of Saint Gregory Palama, Dumitru Stăniloae claims that the heart represents “the center where all powers,

thoughts, and sentiments of the soul and body are concentrated” (Stăniloae 1993, 36). The heart steers the entire body and when the holy grace overtakes the heart it undoubtedly reigns over all thoughts. The faithful person is the only one capable of receiving the overflowing love of the Holy Trinity, a source of inexhaustible energy. The mystery of the Trinity is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, Son of God, the purpose of His coming being that of restoring the Divine image in the Christian person. God extended His love toward us, not only through the act of creation, but also through the act of restitution of all the love by various sequences: the Incarnation of the Son of God, the image of man through His crucifixion, His Resurrection as a man, as to be a center of radiance of eternal love in unanimity. God in His infinite comes and heals by introducing the Divine Logos in the suffering body of our being.

The thoughts of Stăniloae are reconstructed by Sandu Frunză in terms of an anthropology through chapters four and five. The deification process requires a laborious effort of purification (asceticism), culminating with the likeness of God (mysticism) in order to achieve perfection and contemplation. Stăniloae underlines that “the orthodox mystic has a christological and ecclesial (pneumatological) nature” (Frunză 2016, 109). Purification, illumination and the mystical union represent stages of religious experience as described by Dumitru Stăniloae, phases in the process of the deification of man, regarded by Stăniloae as an authentic fulfilment of man as man.

The ascetic and the mystical suggest a close interpersonal relationship. The aspiration of the human soul to light and knowledge proves the existence of transcendental spirituality and helplessness towards the total subjugation of the materiality of creation. This aspiration can be fulfilled by entering into communion with a personal God. At this juncture, the knowledge comes from the start as attention and curiosity, afterward as a face to face meeting.

Purification, the first stage of spiritual life described by Stăniloae is one of endless struggle, in which the soul longs after reaching perfection, offered by the possibility of sharing the gifts sprung from God. In the purification process, it becomes difficult to distinguish where sins cease to exist and where virtue starts. The latter increases with the steadfastness and courage demonstrated in the spiritual battle against evil. Sins are lost as we recognize the value of good and fulfill it. Following this direction, human beings activate what Stăniloae calls “intentionality towards communion” (Frunză 2016, 110). The second phase of spiritual life involves unraveling the mysteries of existence. The world is a symbol of divine transcendence and was developed in this manner to be discovered, in this way placing the human being on the path to God. In connection with this, man's salvation and cosmic salvation go hand in hand. The entire cosmos urges one to discover it and go beyond materiality towards spirituality. According to Stăniloae, the third stage embodies the contemplation of the

natural affirmation of the divine presence in everything that surrounds us. Here, human beings stand at a point of denial, confirming the imperfections of nature by underlying God's surreality. Through prayer, we succeed a subtle return of the person in itself, in order to locate and recognize the state of unworthiness. From this point, human beings proceed to an improvement stage, achievable largely due to the return of human reason itself. Eventually, man recognizes himself as a mere creature of grace, being eligible to receive spiritual joy. Through his book, the author proves that “the great worthiness of mysticism is to achieve the successful transition from knowledge to experience, from gnoseological initiation to ontological assuming” (Frunză 2016, 111-112).

This book is undoubtedly worth reading, especially for those who want to have a better understanding of Stăniloae's works. It could also be an efficient instrument in studying the relationship between the human being and God, and the need for the uninterrupted communication between the two. This book is an open invitation for theologians, philosophers, anthropologists and last but not least, to specialists activating in the field of personal development.

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