

## IULIU-MARIUS MORARIU

### PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT, SPIRITUALITY AND THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT. A STUDY OF FR. STĂNILOAE'S PUBLICIST WORK FROM THE INTERWAR PERIOD

**Iuliu-Marius Morariu**

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania;  
Academy of Romanian Scientists, New York Branch;  
"Saint Maximus the Confessor" Catechetical, Cultural and Theological Centre of the  
Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Canada, Montreal.  
**Email:** iuliumariusmorariu@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993) was certainly one of the most important Romanian theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This fact explains why his works are until nowadays read, discussed or analysed and constitute the topic of different monographs, studies, articles or reviews. Among the long list of the texts that he published during his life, there still are some that were not enough referred or investigated. Or, when they were, the references almost always suggested his nationalist orientation, or the fact that the scholar placed himself among the Romanian thinkers of the interwar period with far-right orientation: the studies and articles published during the interwar period in journals like *Telegraful Român* from Sibiu, *Luceafărul* from Sibiu, *Gândirea* from Bucharest or *Ramuri* from Bucharest. Being aware of their significance, we will make an effort to consider them and emphasize how topics such as personal development and spirituality in the context of Romania at that time can be addressed. We will also examine the author's unique contributions to their exploration. Compared with the studies and articles published later, during the Communist period, which were mostly theological (in order to avoid the censorship, but also due to the preferences, orientation and formation of the author), these ones have a rich thematic orientation from the historical, ethnographical, theological, sociological, philological or philosophical perspectives.

**Key words:** *Telegraful Român*, nation, homeland, religion, spirituality, suburbs, peace.

## 1. Introduction

Dumitru Stăniloae is a Romanian theologian whose theological, philosophical and cultural work is often revisited, analysed and discussed. Translated and quoted he is until nowadays one of the most important Romanian Theological voices from all the time. Moreover, the fact that he translated into Romanian language and interpreted the *Philocalic* collection, makes him important also for the area of the spirituality. Still, both philosophers (Frunză 2016; Frunză 1996), or theologians (Chirilă 2017; Baconsky, Tătaru-Cazaban 2003; Bielawski 1998; Cristescu 2004; Bartoș 1999; Morariu 2015, 81-100; Cogoni 2010) prefer rather to insist on his later theological contributions, than on the early writings that he published during the interwar period. Those are, similarly to the ones of other interwar thinkers (Morariu 2020, 18), considered as being incriminatory due to their content and avoided, or contested. Despite this, there still are many interesting aspects from his publicist work that can be found there. Some of them are related with the understanding of the historical events of realities, other with different situations or moments, and other with the theological area. Stăniloae manages there already to prove his abilities in debate, polemics, theological analysis or historical approach. Spread in journals like *Gândirea* from Bucharest, directed by Nichifor Crainic (Morariu 2019, 93; Morariu 2015, 29-32), *Luceafărul* from Sibiu, *Telegraful Român* from Sibiu or *Ramuri*, they are, in many situations interdisciplinary approaches. Some of the ideas presented there will be later continued in the ones from the Communist period, after the moment when he is not any more a forbidden author. Noticing their relevance, we will try there to emphasize the way how the relationship between personal development and spirituality can be found in those works dating from the interwar period. The approach will be rather a qualitative one and its purpose is to offer a new perspective on a section of his publications that was not enough valorised in the last years.

## 2. Personal development, spirituality and the Romanian Context. A study of Fr. Stăniloae's publicist work from the interwar period

### 2.1. Nation, individual and personal development

If one takes a look at the publications of Dumitru Stăniloae from the interwar period, he or she will discover a writer and a thinker with a different approach, style or ideas from the ones in the Communist period.

Moreover, as a young scholar with a complex formation, he was updated with social, cultural and religious aspects from his times.

In journals such as *Telegraful Român* from Sibiu, *Gândirea* from Bucharest and Cluj, or *Luceafărul* from Sibiu, he published both theological articles, and also chronicles, philosophical meditations, works of ethnography, polemics or reviews of contemporary books. As a general note, it must be said that at the time he was in touch with the ideas of his time, in dialogue with the important Romanian thinkers from that period (sometimes even arguing with philosophers like Lucian Blaga, see: Stăniloae 1992) and was seen as a voice having important things to say. Most of the journal articles were short, with a message that can be considered nowadays as having nationalist accents. While Christianity or Orthodoxy can be considered the keywords of his discourses, there will be also terms like *nation, person, generation* that will define his ideas.

An element that is important for Stăniloae's way of thinking is the understanding of the dynamics of the relationships between individual and nation. The Romanian theologian insists on the fact that the self-development is deeply rooted in the idea of nation. Moreover, when he speaks about the last one, he emphasizes the fact that the real development of it can be seen only in relationship with its spiritual achievements. Therefore: "A national ideal can only be thought of in a spiritual line, the last *raison d'être* of a nation can only be in the progress and achievements made by its spirit, in the spiritual order. Even when he strives for improvements of a material order, he must not do so in a manner opposed to spirit and morality." (Stăniloae 1940, 417).

Spirit and morality are related with religion. What he suggests as a main element of his thinking is the fact that the progress of a society is related with spirituality, but under the influence of morals. As a theologian who studied in the German space, Stăniloae is not capable to see the development, under any form of it, without being related by an order. In his opinion, this order is the one brought by God himself, the only who is capable to provide the certitude of its stability. In relationship with the divinity, man is capable to become freely, original and overcome instincts that define the species. He therefore underlines the fact that: "In the class of human persons, however, the individual is no longer dominated exclusively by the instincts of the species, but follows a path largely chosen by himself freely. This path is a result of his free individuality, but of a certain originality, and of the eternal order, it is the result of his own kind of relationship and collaboration with that order". (Stăniloae 1940, 417).

## 2.2. Tradition and responsibility

The relationship with the transcendent spiritual order is achieved, in his opinion, thorough the Orthodoxy (Stăniloae 1940, 418). Convinced by

this aspect, the theologian insists in different articles on the landmarks of an Orthodoxy that contributes to the personal development of the individual and in the same time keeps the moral responsibility in the frames of the community without taking out from it its personal dimension (Iloaie 2009, 28). Such an example can be considered an article published in 1941 in *Luceafărul* journal from Sibiu. Entitled: *Christianism and tradition in the national life* (Stăniloae 1941: 42-28) it contains references to the similarities and differences existing between biological transmission of data and national tradition. The theologian insists on the fact that the two ones are very different and should not be confused (Stăniloae 1941:42), speaks about the huge role played by tradition in the understanding of an individual in the context of the nation that he belongs to, due to the fact that it transmits a set of values (Stăniloae 1942, 43; Stăniloae 2018, 269-270), and the way how the continuity between generations can contribute to the development of the idea of nation. Therefore, he underlines the fact that: "Each generation is obliged to correspond to the respect, somewhat cultic, that the generation that follows it gives it. In the teachings, parables, exhortations that it conveys to that generation, it must be guided by an acute sense of responsibility not only for the fate of that generation, but also for all those who will follow them." (Stăniloae 1942, 43).

Another article published in the same year will relate the idea of personal development, the one of nation and country with the one of private propriety. Ideas are not totally new and some of them can be also found in literature, in novels written by authors like Liviu Rebreanu (Rebreanu 2015) or Marin Preda (Preda 2009). Still, there can be found new accents on the topic. Here, Fr. Stăniloae will manage to take into account the aspects defining the psychology of the Romanian people (later, in a different manner, but still with common aspects, Daniel David will discuss this aspect in his book entitled: *The Psychology of the Romanian People*; see: David 2015) while he also puts on the first row the religious experience (Frunză 2016: 32) and the spirituality. The keyword inserted by him in the discussion is the soul. The Theologian defines it as it follows: "The soul element of tenderness - which is not something of a slightly sentimental and peripheral nature in the life of the soul, but a tenderness, a state of openness of the soul, opposed to whirling, a main element of the genuine, deep and total way, of the fundamental way of be of man - rises so high as a clot between man and earth, that it overwhelms the utilitarian." (Stăniloae 1941, 124).

He later shows that he sees it as part of the self-defining process. According to him, soul is the one capable to make the relationship with the homeland as a part of the personal development. The vision of the Romanian peasant, that he offers as an example for his presentation is an idealized one. This renders it currently quite outdated and not in line with contemporary scientific standards. Still, it should be seen in the context of

the developing romanticism encountered in the discourses of all the thinkers with nationalist orientation. Moreover, read in the key of interpretativism and as a part of the qualitative research, the example with the people from Maramureș and Apuseni Mountains can be found as valid. Fr. Stăniloae shows that: “The Maramureșian or the “Moț” (people from Apuseni Mountains, o. n.) does not leave his place no matter how poor he is and even if all the barbarian raids come upon him. Better he dies there, than know his existence and his descendants from generation to generation. If he left, his soul and those of his descendants would lose their happiness, steadfastness, Romanianness, tenderness. Here is the power which, together with the earth, makes a man a wall in the path of the enemy, here is the secret of the superb bravery of the peasant, who cannot be thrown from his furrow. A man who breaks away from the earth is caught in the irremediable vortex of soul corruption. The plowman has roots in his land, but the roots are of a soul nature” (Stăniloae 1941a, 125).

Dimitrie Gusti (Gusti 1998; Gusti 1941; Ispas, Pârvu 2000, 35) will also incorporate such aspects into his research. Of course, there are rather positivist approaches and for the contemporary research would not represent a source to be trusted. The author himself will come back to the ideas in an article published in 1942, when he takes again into attention the threefold aspects that define a nation, namely the community, land and divine order, the relationships between the last two ones and the way how a society can develop based on them. He underlines the fact that: “A nation is a whole made up of a community rooted in transcendence and earth. Community, divine transcendence, and one's own land are the organizing parts of the nation. All these three factors are different for each nation, but their specificity also depends on their mutual influence. The race consists of the threefold rootedness in the whole format of the three realities, of their steadfast union. Each individual has his being determined by the sap ascended through the roots from the three foundations, and is preserved in the clarity of his structure as long as his roots have not been torn from the whole of others.” (Stăniloae 1942, 45; Stăniloae 2018, 313).

Although, to a first glance, his approach is related rather with the sociology of religion or with aspects like the development of a society, a deep read of the text reveals the fact that aspects like the personal development are taken also into account. Moreover, articles like this one are emblematic for the understanding of the way how the topic was seen during the interwar period in the context of the complex mechanism of the society, and not as part of an individualist anthropological understanding (Ralea 1938, 13).

### 2.3. Habits and personal development

Without being a promotor of the routine in the daily life, Dumitru Stăniloae insists in some of the works published in the interwar period on the relevance of the customs and the consistency in the development of self. Therefore, in one theological article dedicated to the period of fasting that accompanies Easter in the Orthodox tradition, he speaks about the importance of the habits, comparing it with a house: “The inner purpose of a habit is like the tenant of a house. When the tenant moves out of the house, the home falls into disrepair. Walls become chambers where spiders spread their webs, doors open, targets rust, and windows break. This is how old customs degenerate when the purpose for which they were invented disappears from people's consciousness. Such dilapidated houses haunt the consciences of the world today.” (Stăniloae 1930, 1; Stăniloae 2012, 87).

Although the aim of his article was a double one (on one side to be a theological speech that opens the journal edited by the Metropolitan of Romanians from Transylvania and on the other to provide a critic to the Occidental society of the time, considered as losing its sacrality by secularisation process), the text can be also read in the key of the personal development. The author therefore suggests an alternative of personal development in the good habits. Then, to demonstrate that social pressure is not always essential for positive human development, he uses the example of hermits. He emphasizes how these hermits, through their solitary lifestyle, carry with them genuine values in their solitude that hold greater significance than the contemporary materialism, which he defines as limited in terms of interest, message, and value. As he emphasizes: “When we examine the lives of people today, we are left wondering why trivial things overwhelm us and big ideas so rarely concern us.

The real explanation is not that we don't want to think, but because our body absorbs all our care and our ego is the center of gravity of our life.” (Stăniloae 1930, 1; Stăniloae 2012, 88).

Still, the isolation is not seen by him as the only solution. Examples of people who found their personal fulfilment in works like the scientific one, like Harnack (Stăniloae 1930a,1-2) or the metropolitan Andrei Şaguna (Stăniloae 1930d, 5), are also presented by him in the aforementioned journal while different polemical aspects are also not avoided by him (Stăniloae 1930b, 1-2; Stăniloae 1930c, 1-2).

Due to the fact that *Telegraful Român* is an Orthodox religious journal, most of the articles signed there by Stăniloae contain references to the theological area. Still, starting from the religious message, he often manages to approach topics like the faith (from the one for faith to the one for the social rights) (see: Stăniloae 1930e, 3), the inter-confessional relationships and the way how, based on them, the Romanians are mis-

understood by the others (Stăniloae 1931, 1), or the need for unity (Stăniloae 1931a, 1) in a sociological key. Therefore, his articles come to take attitude against the ones who want to impose principles that are against to the spirituality, and at the same time, to militate for the need to put the man and his social role in the first row of the discussions. He also speaks about secondary aspects with social relevance, like the suburbs of the cities, where he considers that the spiritual changes can be easier done: “The suburbs of the cities are also in our times, as in Antiquity, the land where new social and religious currents catch on more quickly. While the bourgeoisie and the peasantry are by their nature conservative, having possessions that are dear to them to guard and being linked to the present state through old traditions, the population of the peripheries is more willing for changes, because nothing keeps them bound to the present state and from a change only the best can await him”. (Stăniloae 1931b, 1).

Although it was written as an article whose aim was to militate against the proselytise work of the Protestants in Romania, the research contains interesting references to the way how the social and psychological profile of the man coming from the suburbs can be understood and used. Prophetic accents can be found in some of the ideas expressed and references that will later find a shape in communism. The fact of being part of a perpetual provisory life (fact identified also by other Orthodox thinkers like John of Kronstadt, see: Morariu 2019: 98) makes them a potential victim in front of any promising preacher. The instruction that is also superficial in certain situations has an important word to say in this matter. The Romanian theologian therefore shows that: “The temporary situation, the dynamism of a rising tension, the animosity towards the representatives of the traditional regime creates in the soul of the man from the periphery a slightly irritable, enthusiastic state, capable of embracing with all the warmth the very promising currents and sacrificing his life for them, moreover the only thing he has. Not distinguished from the intellectual simplicity of the villager except by the fact that he has learned to no longer revere certain social and religious principles and customs as immutable, it is obvious that the new sermons will not encounter a critical obstacle raised by systematic knowledge or an exercised judgment”. (Stăniloae 1931b, 1).

For this reason, he insists on an adequately conducted education process and on the intensification of the pastoral work of the priest in such areas. He even suggests a few principles of pastoral interaction, underlining the relevance of the reference to the origins, the home village where those people came to the city, the care and emphatic presence in the midst of the community (Stăniloae 1931b, 2), or the interaction between the social classes based on the principles of the Christian morals (Stăniloae 2012, 130-131).

Due to the fact that, in the interwar period, the Romanian Orthodox Church decided to dedicate a Sunday to the ill people, Stăniloae will write

about it and its meaning (Stăniloae 1931c,1). Here, the discourse will not be only theological, although the appeal to this area will not miss, but will also contain reference to the meaning of the sufferance and its challenges, practical achievements of the medicine, the war and its relationship with the aforementioned topics, and the role of the soul and the spiritual aspects in the healing process. In a world where many of his colleagues from the Theological Academies in Romania would be refractory to sciences like the psychology, he proves to be open-minded and capable to speak not only about topics from his area of work like Mount Athos (Stăniloae 1931d, 1-2), but also about the relevance of these new sciences in the understanding human being and his or her inner concerns. Thus, he shows that: “A number of modern sciences, such as psychology, physiology and psychiatry, have penetrated with their research into the regions of the human subconscious, succeeding in discovering springs of faculties, of which man is unaware. The development of those unused faculties opens up new possibilities for mankind. In an age when the physical sciences have unraveled so many previously unsuspected enigmas, it would be strange to doubt that so many mysteries of our inner being are destined to remain forever sealed.” (Stăniloae 1931 c, 1).

### 3. Mount Athos, spirituality and personal development

Although a small article that will not have a rich influence on his work and on its later message, the one dedicated to the Mount Athos, published in 2 numbers of *Telegraful Român* from Sibiu (Stăniloae 1931d, 1-2; Stăniloae 1931e, 1-3) comes not only to describe geographically and from the point of view of the history of Christianity the relevance of a place such as the Mountain, but also to speak about the alternative suggested by the Christian spirituality. One that proves the fact that there is possible to achieve the self-development outside the world and by being a self-excluded. Thus, the example of the hermits (Stăniloae 1931 d, 1; Stăniloae 2012, 139) is provided and among them the one of the totally secluded hermits. They are described as it follows: “Besides these (hermits, our note), there are also secluded hermits, who have completely broken all ties with people and live, as they say, in the crevices of the rocks under the highest peak of Athos. No one can see them. They are completely naked, with beards and hair grown until they no longer look like human beings, they would receive no food at all or only at intervals of weeks. They mortify their body, in order to no longer feel its desires and free themselves from any memories of this world, so that they can fix themselves with the thought of God, using neither words nor deductive reasoning. In this way, they enter the divine world with their soul, which appears to them like an immaterial light”. (Stăniloae 1931e, 2; Stăniloae 2012, 139).



Later, he will describe monastic life as being marked by the continuous prayer and as being superior to the other ways of life due to the accent that falls on spiritual (Stăniloae 1931e, 2; Stăniloae 2012, 147) and will show that, despite of the appearances, the values that guide their life are the real ones and help them to arrive to the personal development in a different and ascetical way with eschatological end.

#### 4. Conclusions

Although neglected by some of the scholars that investigate Dumitru Stăniloae's life and work, his publications from the interwar period are rich in message and having a diversity in their approach. As shown in the beginning of the present research, they are not exclusively theological, but relevant also for the historical, philosophical, psychological, sociological or philological area. Here, the Romanian theologian speaks about the way how religion, national identity, private propriety and personal development can be used together and can contribute to the development of the human being. His conception about personal development can be summarized by using the two branches: the ascetical one, specifically the monastic life (and more linked to the eremitic spirituality) and the social one. For him, the order is one of the most important aspects of the social life. It cannot be perceived as an emanation from other authority then the divine one. Once accepted and put into practice, it leads to the development on an inner life, related with the spirituality. Here, personal development is linked with the contribution brought by each individual to the life of the community. It has a note of responsibility and it is related to the consciousness of belonging to a society that can be improved. Stăniloae insists on the fact that, in order to develop as an individual, one must take into account aspects like tradition, cultural heritage of a nation and some other similar aspects. On the other side, in case of the monastic life, the values are totally changed and the only thing that really matters is the relationship with the divinity.

Complex and containing elements that are still actual, Dumitru Stăniloae's conception on spirituality and personal development in the Romanian context is reflected in a special way in his publications from the interwar period. For this reason, they should be revisited, discussed, analysed and presented in relation with other important aspects of his work.

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