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THE ESCHATOLOGICAL VISION OF DUMITRU STĂNILOAE:
A COUNTER-ARGUMENT ON THE PLURALIST-UNIVERSALIST VISION
OF JOHN HICK

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Abstract: This text will consider the pluralist-universalist perspective proposed by Protestant theologian John Hick and how it offers salvation and the Orthodox response offered by Dumitru Stăniloae's eschatological theology, which nuances and offers a pertinent response to the universalist disputes of the 20th century. The common ground from which the two theologians build their vision is that every human ontologically falls within the boundaries of the same God. Thus, Dumitru Stăniloae starts from the idea that all mankind of different faiths knows, to some extent, the Son of God, the Logos who created before the Incarnation, since the Logos *"is the true Light that enlightens all man, who comes into the world"* (John 1, 9), and John Hick is of the opinion that all these faiths are nothing but various soteriological spaces in which man can find salvation. What differentiates the two is the way they develop their eschatological vision. John Hick is of the opinion that in today's world a pluralistic consciousness is absolutely necessary, God's love has a universal purpose, He cannot restrict this redemptive encounter with humanity. On the other hand, Dumitru Stăniloae is of the opinion that salvation is acquired through asceticism, since nature is a divine gift that needs to be processed, and the ascetic's effort is also doubled by the love of God that welcomes him. In his conception, man does not acquire salvation as a universal gift, even though God's love desires it, and he is even able, by virtue of his freedom, to refuse this communion.

Key words: Christian universalism, eschatology, universal salvation, redemption, spiritual transfiguration.

1. Introduction

Current theology is called to respond to serious problems caused by the misunderstanding of ecumenism, the rise of Christian universalism and the misunderstanding of eschatology, the decline of faith and the correct practice of asceticism. The beginning of the new millennium has brought with it a series of changes, facilitated by widespread access to information, with universalism becoming an issue in the debate in which the Orthodox Church is also invited to present a position that is as clear and convincing as possible for contemporary man. In this context, the views of two important theologians of the 20th century, John Hick and Dumitru Stăniloae, should not be overlooked, for it is in the way their views are understood that the Christian can strengthen his faith and will not be lost in the current of the times. Christianity must respond to anyone at any time, precisely because it takes all people seriously, fulfilling the words of the Apostle Peter, who say: *"to be ready to answer anyone who asks us about our hope"* (1 Peter 3:15).

Perhaps the most difficult theme to arise in theological thought remains the branch of eschatology, as it seeks to shed light on things that have not yet occurred and on which our language is fragile and limited. In these circumstances, this field for research has been chosen, being convinced, firstly that the topic is actual for the contemporary society (people are increasingly curious to know what the end of the world will be like, where times are heading, the word 'apocalyptic' is used more and more often in the media: apocalyptic times, apocalyptic phenomena, apocalyptic crises, apocalyptic disasters, apocalyptic diseases etc.). Secondly, the opinion that the traditional teaching of our Church does not provide sufficient solid arguments for the society of today will be argued here.

Ab initio, we note that the question of eternal hell and universal salvation has become, at least in the last century, a recurring theme. In the West, the teaching on hell is in noticeable decline. Opponents of Christian hell will increasingly attack this teaching as the weak point of Christian doctrine, the breach through which one can break into the city and destroy it. On the other hand, the sermon on hell no longer reaches the contemporary man, who shares in the earth-shattering experiences of the age, and the belief in the traditional hell collapses (Georges Minois 1998, 187).

In addition, the medieval teaching on the conception of hell in Catholicism has generated an anguished literature with prominent echoes to this day (Spidlik 2008, 149). An admirable change of perspective on hell took place in Catholicism itself in the last century. Henceforth, the Catholic Cardinal Thomas Spidlik emphasized that nowadays hell is no

longer discussed as a place but as a state, indicating more precisely the state of man who has become definitively separated from Christ. The position of the German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who will open the subject which will be spoken of in this study, is also undeniable. He states that: "Eternity as the fruit of time consists in coming before God, either in an absolute determination of love for Him through direct contact and face-to-face approach, or in the definitive character of self-enclosure against Him in the consuming darkness of the eternal absence of God" (Rahner 2005, 618). This view of hell has also been intensely preached in the West.

The 20th century was cataloged by contemporary theologians as *par excellence* the century of universalism (McClymond 2018, 38). Universalism is considered one of the most important themes in current theology (Alfeyev 2007, 256), globalization and permanent contact with various non-Christian religions have led theologians to treat the issue through the prism of religious pluralism (Cameron 1988, 101) and to present a universalism that is believed even by atheists (Rock 2014, 4) since the God of the 21st century must be accepted by the new generation of people without religion.

Furthermore, this eschatological problem was not only manifested at the pastoral level, but it was especially debated at the level of theological ideas. This text will consider the pluralist perspective proposed by the Protestant theologian John Hick and particularly the eschatological theology of Stăniloae, which nuances and offers a pertinent Orthodox response to the universalist disputes of the 20th century.

The most profound treatment of the antinomy of hell is found in the theology of Dumitru Stăniloae. This approach of Stăniloae is also the position we support. He combats both the arguments of the apocatastasis theory and those of metempsychosis: that this temporal life would be insufficient to determine the eternal destiny of man, which is that man would have eternal freedom (so he could choose to turn to God at any time, thus also after the Final Judgment) and that eternal hell would not be reconciled with the love of God. The exposition of Dumitru Stăniloae, which is both dogmatic and spiritual, focuses on the concepts of personal responsibility, communion, and the maximum value of the present life, including highlighting the essential difference between the ontological condition of man in time and that in eternity.

2. John Hick and the Pluralist-universalist View of Salvation

The idea of universal salvation has often been treated through the lens of religious pluralism. This holds that all the religions of the world represent forms or ways of achieving salvation (Patsalidou 2012, 814). The current perspective on pluralism is based on three solid arguments: on the one hand, pluralism is the only way to promote justice in a hostile world,

on the other hand, no religion can claim an absolute position, and from a historical perspective the different cultural and historical contexts necessarily exclude absolutist religious claims. (Okholm 1996, 17).

In his youth, the British theologian John Hick believed the exclusivist theory of St. Cyprian of Carthage which states that all outside Christianity would be damned, so that salvation would be valid only within Christianity (Min 2010, 60). The sudden change was exclusively due to the social context in which he lived, which favoured his contact with different faith movements, thus awakening his curiosity to learn more about different religious beliefs and practices. Theologian Chester Gillis argues that John Hick's religious pluralism was an existential rather than an academic issue (Gillis 1989, 100).

Additionally, since each religion aims at an ideal which it practices in a flawed nature, it makes it impossible to precisely determine a moral superiority of one religion over another. John Hick states that this should not be viewed as equalizing and standardizing all religions, because not every theology about God or the supernatural is valid. From this angle, religious pluralism is exclusivist and is aimed only at major religions which have withstood the vicissitudes of time and had several followers. These specific religions include Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity. All these religious traditions are, in his view, nothing more than varied soteriological spaces in which man can find salvation: "the fact that one religious path leads to salvation does not necessarily imply that another path fails in this respect" (Hick 1983, 489).

Moreover, the conclusion of John Hick is that in the world of today there is an absolute need for a pluralistic consciousness, through which man needs to redefine himself and understand that his own religion is not the only true variant but is amongst one of many religions in the world. Rejection of other religions on the grounds that they are false is, in his view, the main barrier to the development of a productive inter-religious dialogue. His religious pluralism led him to adhere to the idea of Christian universalism. John Hick sees God's boundless love as the basis of Christian universalism: "If the love of God is universal, then God cannot restrict this redemptive encounter with humanity. If God is the God of the whole world, it must be assumed that the whole religious life of mankind is part of a continuous and universal relationship between Him and man" (Hick 1970, 400). John Hick also points out that human freedom is not nullified by God but is conditioned by its very ontological state (Hick 2010, 344).

Regarding the possibility of human perfection after death, Hick believes that the human being was not created as perfect, but immature and susceptible to evil choices, but destined to eventually attain the likeness of God (Hick 2010, 344). Since this process of perfection is slow and various for everyone and, in most cases, does not end with death, the spiritual development of man, including the sinner, can take place after death. In the view of John Hick, this process of purification of the being

has no negative connotations, which is why he rejects the notion of eternal punishment.

3. The ecclesiality of the heterodox - is salvation possible outside the Church?

Dumitru Stăniloae characterizes the union of man with God as the goal of Christian spirituality. And on the road to perfection there are two great stages: the first, which is more concerned with human effort, with self-pity and the acquisition of virtues; followed by the second, more advanced stage, in which the work of man is replaced by the work of God (Stăniloae 1992, 6). It has also been illustrated that the finality of neediness is in the eschatological future. Which is a reason to shift the attention of the contemporary man from now to then and to create an overview through neediness of the whole of life (Stăniloae 1993, 27).

Nature is a divine gift to be processed (Stăniloae 2010, 340). Returning to the definition of asceticism, we see that it involves both abstention and effort. The primordial state was a good state, but not perfect. Man had a mission to strengthen himself for good (Stăniloae 2010, 429). Ascetic effort is seen as a primordial requirement. Strengthening for good is not a duty that belongs to a particular person, religion or cult, but to human nature itself. Vladimir Lossky sees in this renunciation a renouncement of one's own will in order to come into possession of true freedom, the personal freedom which is the image of God in man (Lossky 2010, 140).

Dumitru Stăniloae's ecclesiological vision not only crowns the entire ecclesiological theology of the 20th century, but also nuances and translates the patristic vision of the Church into current terms. Thus, on the one hand, Dumitru Stăniloae's vision updates in terms of current theology the ecclesiology of the heterodox in the vision of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianz, St. Augustine, Nicholas Cabasila, but also crowns the ecclesiological vision at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, complementing theologians such as: Alexei Homiakov, Sergei Bulgakov, Georges Florovsky, John Karmiris, John Zizioulas, Ilarion Alfeyev, John Behr. Highlighting John Hick's view of the possibility of salvation in other religions, Stăniloae states that the whole of humanity "is objectively framed in the rays of the same pre-incarnational Logos, therefore in the phase of the Church before Christ, called to become the Church of Christ. Objectively and subjectively all mankind of different faiths know to some extent the pre-incarnational Logos. And objectively and subjectively the other Christian confessions know Christ, but not fully" (Stăniloae 2010, 176).

Dumitru Stăniloae establishes ab initio a connection of Christ with every human being born on earth, because every human being, Christian or non-Christian, bears within himself the image of God. Putting these points in theological language, John Hick's vision seems to be compatible

with Dumitru Stăniloae's: "Thus, a certain church still exists today outside of Christianity, since there are still certain ontological links between human forces and the divine Logos. Even more does this church exist in the other Christian formations, given their connection by faith with Christ, the incarnate Logos, and given that they have, in part, a common faith in Christ with the Orthodox Church, the full Church" (Stăniloae 2010, 176).

Noting that there is an action of God outside the Church, the question arises: can this action be regarded as salvation? Is that all it takes? Hence Dumitru Stăniloae's vision differs from the universalist vision of John Hick. Dumitru Stăniloae believes that one cannot put barriers to the Church and that is why the Holy Spirit also works beyond the boundaries of the Church. This is why the great contribution that this theologian makes in the 20th century is the introduction of the term "open sobornicity" (Stăniloae 1971, 165).

In current theology, sobornicity means, "The sense of the active participation of all believers in the spiritual goods of Christ in the spirit of full communion, this constituting the Church itself as the body or organism of Christ" (Stăniloae 1967, 516). It is at this point that the concept of the "unfulfilled churches" meets the concept of "open sobornicity".

It is a different relationship that the Church exercises, on the one hand with its members, and another relationship that it exercises with members outside it, so-called unfulfilled churches, called to divine the Church of Christ: "The ecclesial fullness of the full Church of Christ, the Orthodox Church, is open to all, but into this sobornicity enter only those who renounce the excessive emphasis on a part of the Apostles' faith and wish to live according to the whole, in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" (Stăniloae 1931, 446).

The term that the Romanian theologian proposes is that of unity in diversity, implying that the asceticism and the Mysteries of the Church.

4. Dumitru Stăniloae – Dogmatic Perception on the Antinomy of Hell

Grigore - Dinu Moș highlights in one of his articles the large number of pages in the theology of Stăniloae of which he dedicates to eschatology. The most extensive and profound treatment of eschatology in contemporary theology remains that of Dumitru Stăniloae. It consists of 160 pages in total, constitutes Part 6 of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, Volume III, 2nd edition, and in this conclusion, the theme of the Universal Judgment and life everlasting is deepened on nearly 40 pages (pp. 286-305 of actual treatment and pp. 166-183 in which he treats the following related themes: the essence and possibility of eternal hell and combating the theory of apocatastasis). To this is added the topics of eschatology in

his other books and studies, especially in the work "Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, and the Endomimer of Man" (chapter 13. The light brought to conscious creatures by the judgment of Christ and chap. 14. The sure eternity brought to men by the Resurrection of Christ).

Moreover, the point of connection that Stăniloae has with the theologian John Hick is that he claims that the Church of Christ encompasses all creation. In continuity with his predecessors, he believes that the entire creation is "Objectively within the rays of the same pre-incarnation Logos, so in the phase of the Church before Christ, called to become the Church of Christ. Objectively and subjectively, all mankind of different faiths knows to some extent the pre-incarnate Logos. And objectively and subjectively I know Christ, but incompletely, the other Christian denominations" (Stăniloae 2010, 176). In contrast, the view of Dumitru Stăniloae is totally different from the view of John Hick when it comes to the way of salvation.

In the following, the dogmatic apperception of the antinomy of hell in the thought of Dumitru Stăniloae will be described.

4.1. The Prime Horizon of Mystery

The key to the understanding of universal salvation, according to Dumitru Stăniloae, lies in the mystery of human freedom. This mystery that some souls have the possibility of escaping from hell until the final judgment, while others would be condemned forever to eternal hell, represents a possibility of the soul being drawn into a negative freedom that becomes insurmountable (Stăniloae 2010, 275). Being a matter of human freedom, it is beyond the power of rationalization.

God's final judgment contains a great mystery hardly understood by the promoters of Christian universalism: The mystery of the rebellious man who can stand firm in the face of the many signs of love and invitations to a happy eternity with God. The great mystery is that God, in spite of man's negative response to communion with Him, respects man's choice both in his existence and in his freedom (Stăniloae 2010, 279). Neither can man entirely forget God, but neither does God want to entirely forget fallen man, no matter to what degree his perversion has reached: "The two mysteries can no longer be separated. Or God does not want them to be separated after creating man. If God were to destroy sinful man or forget him forever by an act of contempt, man would lose his depth of mystery. Nor can God impose his love by force, for that would also be to empty man of his mystery" (Stăniloae 2010, 280). As you can see, the mystery of hell revolves around two fundamental questions:

1) Why does God's judgement of sinners, by which their state of rejection and denial of Him is challenged, rightly result in the permanence, the sinfulness of this eternal state for eternity? Why do they no longer have the chance to return to communion with Him? Another

strong idea is: since the attributes of power and love of man belong to God, why does He not show Himself to those in the darkness of hell in an amazing, striking way hence making it possible for them to begin their communion with God again?

2) Why does God not annihilate those doomed in hell, rather than leave them to torment themselves terribly in eternal torment? (Perhaps this method would also rid God of the accusation of people who consider Him a sadistic God?) (Lazăr 2020, 177).

The answer to the first question should reveal the essence and possibility of hell. The second question opens us up to the value of eternally unhappy existence and the meaning of eternal torment.

4.2. The Essence and Possibility of Eternal Hell

A first answer to the question of the permanence of the infernal state of the damned, through and after the Judgment of God, is based on divine foreknowledge. On this basis, says Dumitru Stăniloae, "God knows for certain that those will not respond forever to his offer of love, either because they do not want to, or because they have created a state by their total refusal of communion in earthly life, and in the time between private and universal judgment, they can no longer accept communion with God" (Stăniloae 2010, 281).

In addition, St. John Damascene agrees that the permanence of the state of sinners, of the damned, and the lack of any movement towards God is the effect of their "lack of change facing the sin" (Moș 2019,13), from which we realize that the consuming fire in hell is nothing else than the fire of lust that does not find material to satisfy itself, for, "Unsatisfied lust torments by its inability to give the images of pleasure a real consistency, and, as the inability to render is prolonged, they increase their charming appearances, and thereby their tormenting power, given the inability to find the corresponding real hypostases. The lack of materials capable of satisfying the desires is the objective element of the torments of hell. The phantasmagorical effervescence of lust, maintained by this lack, is the subjective element" (Stăniloae 2010, 273).

Furthermore, Grigore-Dinu Moș points out that hell has also been characterized by the inability of man to love, being in the, "outer darkness", therefore, man is alone in a position farthest from God and his fellow man. The desolate state of the one in eternal damnation is further characterized by its "twisted, perverse character, by a contradictory duality, he is not only in opposition to God but also to himself. He is hardened in a demonic self-splitting, the essence of the demonic being the fracture of the original transcendental unity of the angelic self" (Moș 2019, 13). Observing the infernal state from another point of view, Saint Justin Popovich characterizes it both by, "The lack of fulfillment of man in God and by the lack of the pleasures of sin. Into this total emptiness the

thought of man and feeling steadily collapse" (Popovici 1997, 51).

Moreover, the links of man with reality are so blurred that he leads an anemic existence. "His monstrously increased subjectivity prevents him from seeing the reality of others. His existence is haotified into a terrifying absurdity, without consistency, without any way out of this labyrinth of dark thoughts, without hope of escape" (Popovici 1997, 60). For thought is hell if it has not been transformed into Christ thought. Without Christ, "Every thought is a little hell and all together an endless and eternal hell" (Popovici 1997, 59). so much so that thinking ends up in an, "A-logical madness, in that delirium, in that satanic self-deception, thinking for thinking's sake..." (Popovici 1997, 60). Likewise, if there is no sense of God, human feeling is in a process of stagnant death, it is never immortal. In the conception of Justin Popovich, this is the unadorned worm and the eternal unextinguished fire. Lacking stability in divine infinity, souls lacking divine grace move between extremes, always turning in on themselves.

Additionally, the Christocentrism eliminated by man from his life has the effect of possessing his own "I". Accustomed to the fact that man no longer vibrates when he says "you", he no longer vibrates when he is called "you" either. He buries himself in total indifference, in a death to any relationship, shouting only "me, me!". He has become a "shell", a "mask", without any substance, but that is precisely why he only asserts himself desperately. This selfish isolation is a clear sign of the presence of the devil, "the most selfish being in all the worlds". Pavel Florenski's opinion is like that of Dumitru Stăniloae. In his view, evil is nothing but a "kingdom divided against itself" (Lazăr 2023, 169). Sin and hell have only one equation concentrated in themselves: $I = I$, in other words, "sin is the force of self-preservation with the self, which turns the person into a self-idol" (Florenski 1997, 114). If sin closes the person down and makes them selfish, then the answer to this problem is precisely confessed love: "The highest expression of communication is considered love, which, paradoxically, enables the union of the selves, without leading to their identification" (Frunză 2016, p. 27).

The condemned remains surrounded only by the lie he has cultivated and is bitten on all sides by demons and their lusts. Thus, torment will not consist of a simple loneliness, but of a loneliness devoid of interiorization, imposed by a tormenting neighborliness: being always with those you hate and with those who hate you and separated from divine love. In this sense, Dumitru Stăniloae says: "Everyone torments everyone, everyone defends himself against everyone" (Stăniloae 2010, 277) in an inscrutable darkness. Here we see the dead face, the hermetic frame of hell.

We still insist on the original question, "Why does God not show Himself to those in the darkness of hell in an amazing, striking way that makes it possible for their communion with God to begin again?"

According to the explanations of Dumitru Stăniloae, "The presence of God is not an external reality, which imposes itself as such, but offers itself as a loving You, but thus can only be perceived through the humble openness of the soul, in moving towards God, in love. Moreover, he who defends his autonomy is bent on refusing the One who, by the love he offers him, makes him realize that his existence depends on this offer" (Stăniloae 2010, 274). Finally, the man hardened in pride might admit the reality of One who depends on him, but not One who reveals Himself to him as the only chance and joy of his existence. Therefore, the Savior Christ should show Himself to those in hell with an appearance devoid of any light, bland, insipid, lacking the joy of entering into communion with them. St. Isaac Sirus administers such an appearance of Christ, supposing that even in this way Christ does not cease to love the damned, but in this case His love becomes for them fire and suffering. It is a love that hurts and revolts over them, not being able to respond to it. "But does this still give those a true knowledge of Christ? Is it not rather a hiding of Christ, Who comforts, Who enlightens, Who saves when He shows Himself?" (Stăniloae 2010, 280). Does not Christ cover the torments of the conscience of the one dying in sin? Paradoxically, the awareness of the presence of Christ is combined with the inability to see Him in His true reality. It is a manifestation in which divine grace remains absent, a distant manifestation, in which the fire is felt more than the Person of Christ: "In the fire the Person is felt, but as a distance, as wanting to remain outside the relationship, a burning manifestation" (Stăniloae 2010, 254).

4.3. The Value of Eternally Unhappy Existence. The Meaning of Eternal Suffering

Why does God not destroy the damned, but chooses to keep them in their attitude of rejection towards Himself?

The main answer offered by St. John Damaschin is the following: "To be, no matter what, is much better than not to be at all. Existence remains a free and irrevocable gift of God. By the fact that God does not lose the damned, but offers them an eternal existence, he shows the indelible value of the person" (Stăniloae 2010, 277). By the fact that God does not lose the sinner, He wants to show that his love remains forever, even for people who in eternity will not respond to his love. For if a salvation acquired in a constraining way would mean the violation of man's freedom, then the annihilation of those who resist would mean both contempt for existence and freedom. As Berdiaev said, "Through eternal hell the eternal value and freedom of man is affirmed. If man knew that by using his freedom against God he would be destroyed (or hell would someday cease), he would limit himself in his freedom. Only he who knows that he can eternally oppose God is truly free. Only he who knows that the assertion of his freedom has consequences for eternity puts fervor into

this assertion and takes its risks" (Berdjaev 1996, 345).

Regarding the meaning of eternal suffering, Dumitru Stăniloae first reveals the general horizon in which it is reflected. "Hell implies meaning in that it takes us out of the ambiguous fog of earthly life. In hell we know precisely that there is a heaven" (Stăniloae 2010, 282). Secondly, their awareness (even interrupted and perverted) that they are in hell on the basis of Christ's judgment gives their existence a small hope of meaning, which makes it superior to an eternal evolution in relativity. Thirdly, in the attitude of the man who does not want to know God and yet cannot forget Him altogether, there is a heart-rending suffering, the meaning of which we can only observe in passing and with fear. Dumitru Stăniloae states that, "if man were to forget God altogether, he would no longer suffer, but he would no longer be human" (Stăniloae 2010, 282).

Additionally, the meaning of eternal sufferings seems so disturbing to us that approaching their mystery provokes that *mysterium tremendum*, including the whole turmoil of human affection of ineffable depth. We cannot imagine a meaning of suffering apart from the suffering of Christ, who has assumed and tasted all the suffering of the world and of hell. He still asked over this cup, "I thirst." So, we believe that there is at least a Christic side to the suffering of those in hell, and that it will remain, more so when their nature is fully restored and all evil melts into existence (as St. Maximus the Confessor taught). It is the eternal echo of that, "Eli, Eli, lama sabahtani?" (Matthew 27:46). Hell is God Himself seen with the eyes of total solitude, it is Christ Himself crucified, dying, eternalized in an endless moment - the surpassed eternity that those in hell taste. What else this torment is we cannot humanly express, it is beyond man. Even those in hell are overcome by their own suffering, are overwhelmed by the suffering of Christ in them, by the incomprehensibility of it and of his eternal love. They experience His suffering for losing them and something else that is not given to us. Where there is suffering it means there is more mystery, a mystery that wants to be kept at all costs.

5. Conclusion

To illustrate this eschatological issue in current theology, we have presented the opinions of two important contemporary Christian theologians on opposing positions, who have brought pertinent arguments to support their vision: the universalist John Hick, on the one hand, and the supporter of traditional Christian doctrine, Dumitru Stăniloae, on the other.

We consider it necessary to conceive of hell not as a punitive resolution of the relationship between man's offense against the divine and the justice of God, but as the refusal of man and closure in the face of the love of God. In this sense, the understanding of hell as the eternal

rejection of man of the absolute love of God, and not as divine punishment or the impossibility of salvation after death, is a vision compatible with both the love of God and human freedom. From this point of view, the vision of Dumitru Stăniloae remains faithful to Orthodox eschatology and constitutes a powerful argument in the current universalist disputes.

We have pointed out that John Hick believes that all these faiths are nothing but various soteriological spaces in which man can find salvation, so that each religion or subdivision of it can provide man with the necessary resources to save himself. He believes that the rejection of other religions on the grounds that they are false is, in his view, the main barrier to the development of a productive interreligious dialogue. At the other pole is Dumitru Stăniloae. He leaves open the possibility that other religions can also offer salvation since all of humanity is under the incedence of the one pre-incarnate Logos, but emphasises that true spiritual growth and, implicitly, salvation, takes place in the Orthodox Church. It also develops the idea of unity in diversity and proposes the terms "open sobornicity" or "undivided churches" to express the fact that the Orthodox Church does not promote theological exclusivism when it comes to salvation, but leaves the possibility of obtaining salvation even outside its borders. What differentiates the two authors is their expression of the certainty of salvation. If John Hick tells us that God is loving and will save all people regardless of their religion and faith, Dumitru Stăniloae believes that the key to understanding universal salvation lies in the mystery of human freedom. Salvation is not an absolute gift offered by God to all, but is only a desire from God to man. On how man relates to his life will depend his eschatological future.

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