

Charles Miller. *The Gift of the World. An Introduction to the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000. 128pp (£18.95).

Staniloae in Contemporary Scholarship

Dumitru Staniloae (1903–1993) is almost unanimously recognised as the greatest Romanian theologian of all times. Moreover, Olivier Clément and Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia have acclaimed Staniloae to be ‘certainly the greatest Orthodox theologian’ of the present time¹, while Moltmann describes him as "the most influential and creative contemporary Orthodox theologian"². Finally, Rowan Williams suggests that Staniloae is ‘a major interpreter of the patristic tradition... as well as a constructive theologian of great stature’.³

In the centre of Staniloae’s theology stands a trilogy including the *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*,⁴ the *Mystical Theology*,⁵ and the *Liturgical Theology*.⁶ Of these, Staniloae’s *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* is by far the most important, evidenced in being the first (and until now the only) book that has been translated in more than one language (entirely in German,⁷ and partly in Greek, Serbian, French⁸ and English⁹).

¹ Kallistos of Diokleia, Foreword, in D. Staniloae. *The Experience of God*. tr. Ioan Ionita & Robert Barringer. Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross, 1994, p. ix., Olivier Clément concurs with Bishop Kallistos, when he writes: “*Le Père Dumitru Stăniloae est certainement aujourd’hui le plus grand théologien orthodoxe. A mesure qu’elle sera traduite dans les langues occidentales, son oeuvre s’affirmera comme une des créations majeurs de la pensée chrétienne dans la seconde moitié de notre siècle.*” – O. Clément. ‘Le Père Dumitru Stăniloae et le génie de l’orthodoxie Roumaine’, in Ioan I. Ica. (ed.), *Persoana si comuniune* [Person and Communion]. Sibiu: Editura Arhiepiscopiei ortodoxe, 1993. 82.

² J. Moltmann, ‘Geleitwort’, in D. Staniloae. *Orthodoxe Dogmatik*. vol. 1. Zürich: Einsiedeln and Köln: Benzinger Verlag, 1985. 10.

³ R. Williams. ‘Eastern Orthodox Theology’. In David F. Ford. *The Modern Theologians*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997². p. 511.

⁴ Published as, D. Staniloae. *Teologia dogmatica ortodoxa* [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology]. 3 vols. Bucharest: EIBMBOR. 1978.

⁵ Published as, D. Staniloae. *Spiritualitatea ortodoxa* [Orthodox Spirituality]. Bucharest: EIBMBOR. 1981.

⁶ Published as, D. Staniloae. *Spiritualitate si comuniune în liturgia ortodoxa* [Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy]. Craiova: Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, 1986.

⁷ D. Staniloae. *Orthodoxe Dogmatik*. 3 vols. tr. Hermann Pitters. Köln: Benzinger Verlag, 1985, 1990, 1993.

⁸ D. Staniloae. *Le génie de l’Orthodoxie*. tr. Dan Ilie Ciobotea. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1985.

Staniloae's three-volume opus entitled *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* is divided into a Prolegomena and six main parts. The *Prolegomena* discusses revelation, natural and supernatural, and the relation between Scripture, Tradition, and the Church.

The first main section of the book deals with theology proper, discussing three ways of knowing God (cataphatic, apophatic and experiential), the Being and attributes of God, and the Holy Trinity, that Staniloae describes as 'the structure of supreme love'¹⁰.

The next section is concerned with the theology of creation, discussing the creation of the seen and of the unseen world, the Fall, and the doctrine of God's Providence.

The third part contains Christology, discussing the Person of Christ and His three offices (as Prophet, High Priest, and King).¹¹

The fourth section of Staniloae's work is entitled 'the subsequent unfolding of the saving work of Christ', and deals with the doctrine of the Church and the personal appropriation of salvation in the Church, through the work of the Holy Spirit and human co-operation.¹²

The fifth part deals extensively with the Holy Sacraments, discussing first Sacraments in general and then each of the seven Sacraments in particular.

The final section of the book deals with eschatology, discussing particular and general ('universal') eschatology.

With very few exceptions,¹³ most assessments of Staniloae's contribution to theology tend to be unreservedly enthusiastic, falling under the general category of eulogia, although not all agree with the positive evaluations of Staniloae's work. The Romanian ecumenist Ion Bria alludes to some of Staniloae's detractors, when he writes: 'The Faculty of Theology in

⁹ Staniloae. *The Experience of God*. In the Forward, Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia describes this book as 'the first major work of Orthodox dogmatic theology to appear in the English language' (p. ix).

¹⁰ The introduction and the first two sections were published in English under the title *The Experience of God* (see note 1), as the first two of six planned volumes containing the translation of Staniloae's *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*. The translation work was completed a few years ago, but unfortunately, its further publication encounters to this day a series of insurmountable financial difficulties.

¹¹ As Louth rightly points out, Staniloae declares that this theme is patristic, although not giving any references. However, as Louth declares, 'it was only with Calvin's *Institutes* that the notion of Christ's threefold office assumed the structural significance with which he [Staniloae] invests it' (A. Louth. 'Review Essay: The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology of Dumitru Staniloae. *Modern Theology*. 13, 2, 1997. p. 259).

¹² The actual place that Staniloae gives to ecclesiology in his Dogmatics – between the objective work of Christ and its subjective (personal) appropriation by the believer and the theology of sacraments – is significant for the important role that Staniloae gives to the Church (and the Sacraments) in the process of salvation.

¹³ One remarkable example is Louth's concise but very thorough review essay mentioned above.

Bucharest seems to be willing to take advantage of the fall of communism in order to minimise any reference to Fr. Staniloae's *Dogmatics*, and to denigrate the theologians in his "school"¹⁴. Moreover, seemingly negative reaction to Staniloae's staunch conservatism and nationalism, a leading Romanian Orthodox intellectual, Horia-Roman Patapievici, expresses serious doubt concerning Staniloae's originality.¹⁵ Nevertheless, such negative reactions represent the exception rather than the norm.

In spite of the attention attracted and the lip service received, until recently no comprehensive critical analysis of the whole of Staniloae's theology has been produced, either in Romanian, or in English. It is in fact surprising to observe how relatively little has been done in Romanian Orthodox circles in order to assimilate critically the work of Staniloae.¹⁶ At present, it appears that the most serious research on Staniloae is undertaken by Catholics¹⁷ and Romanian Evangelicals¹⁸ rather than by Orthodox theologians. This being said, we may

¹⁴ I. Bria. *Spatiul nemuririi sau eternizarea umanului in Dumnezeu* [The Space of Immortality or the Eternalisation of the Human in God]. Iasi: Trinitas, 1994. p. 43. In the Preface of the doctoral work on Staniloae done by The Mosoiu, that he supervised (see note 15), Bria complains that the appropriation of Staniloae's theological methodology and of his particular themes 'is sporadic and most often nonexistent' (p. 8). Mosoiu himself mentions in the introduction of his work (pp. 16-17) the opinions of a Romanian Orthodox theologian who writes derogatory of Staniloae and other neo-patristic authors as, producers of 'personal and subjective dogmatics, claiming [undeserved] originality' (P. Rezus. *Teologia ortodoxa contemporana* [Contemporary Orthodox Theology]. Timisoara: Editura Mitropoliei Banatului, 1989. p. 642.

¹⁵ Patapievici writes: 'Dumitru Staniloae was an erudite priest, able to reiterate well the tradition, but, in my opinion, a creative theologian he was not' – H.-R. Patapievici. *Politice* [Political stuff]. Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1997². p.225. It is important to mention at this point that the author, a strong advocate of political and philosophical liberalism, is at the same time very conservative in terms of his Christian convictions.

¹⁶ The first doctoral research on Staniloae by a Romanian Orthodox theologian was that of Ioachim Giosanu (*La Déification de l'Homme d'après la Pensée du Père Dumitru Staniloae*. unpublished Ph.D thesis. Paris: St. Sergius Institute of Orthodox Theology, 1994.) The author himself qualifies his work as being 'mystical-dogmatic' (Avant-propos). The discussion begins with a presentation of asceticism and Christian mysticism, as context of Orthodox spirituality. The second section deals with illumination of the person whose life was purified through ascetic practices. The final section of the thesis is a general introduction in Staniloae's doctrine of theosis.

¹⁷ Elias O'Brian, a Catholic, was the first Westerner to undertake research work on Staniloae (*The Orthodox Pneumatic Ecclesiology of Father Dumitru Staniloae: An Ecumenical Approach*. M.Phil. dissertation. Dublin: Trinity College, 1984). The first Ph.D thesis on Staniloae was produced by the Catholic Ronald Roberson (*Contemporary Romanian Orthodox Ecclesiology. The Contribution of Dumitru Staniloae and Younger Colleagues*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1988). Roberson presents a very informed overview of the present day debates in Romanian Orthodox ecclesiology, and responds graciously to a number of contentious ecclesiological issues between the Orthodox and the Catholic traditions.

¹⁸ Besides Emil Bartos and Silviu Rogobete, whose work will be analysed further on, there are at least three other Romanian Evangelicals who are undertaking research on various aspects of Staniloae's theology.

conclude that the time has come for a more in-depth evaluation of the contribution that Fr. Dumitru Staniloae has made to the theological treasury of the Church during the twentieth century. This is exactly what seems to be happening at the present time, as will be illustrated in the rest of this article.

The work of Charles Miller

Charles Miller's book is the first monograph on Staniloae to appear in Great Britain. It contains a series of six short essays, together with a number of helpful study tools (a translation of the table of contents of Staniloae's *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, a select bibliography, as well as subject and names indexes).

The book does not try to offer a comprehensive perspective on Staniloae's theology, not even of his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*. Nevertheless, it provides a necessary and long-awaited introduction to the work of this remarkable theologian. According to his own words, Miller 'seeks to give the reader a taste of Staniloae's deeply integrated approach to the Good News by exploring one of his most distinctive and all-embracing themes – his view of creation and created existence as the primordial gift of God' (p. 3–4). In this sense, the book justifies its subtitle, by providing the English reader a 'prolegomenon', to the theology of Fr. Staniloae.

In the first chapter of his book, Miller deals with Staniloae's life and work, underlying the main influences¹⁹ that shaped his thought. These are: 1. *Orthodoxy in Transylvania*²⁰ developed in a multi-ethnic and multi-denominational environment, unlike the rest of Romanian Orthodoxy; 2. *language* – the unique situation of a Latin language spoken by an Orthodox population; 3. *balance* – the special vocation for tolerance, balance and synthesis that is usually

¹⁹ The author lists seven such influences, but the division is somewhat artificial and there is a large degree of overlap between the categories that he has delineated. Hence, why we will try to distil here the major influences on Staniloae in a synthetic manner.

claimed by Romanians;²¹ 4. *study of the Church Fathers* – Staniloae’s neo-patristic, neo-Palamite challenge of the dry scholasticism of Orthodox theology in the first part of the twentieth century,²² It is surprising that Miller overlooks in this chapter another most important influence on Staniloae’s theological thought – his contact with the Christian Personalism of Mounier and the group around *L’Esprit*.

The second chapter discusses Staniloae’s understanding of Creation as gift and theophany. Miller underlines the integrated way in which Staniloae (in opposition to Barth, treats the relation between natural and supernatural revelation). The Orthodox theologian rejects the idea of the autonomous character of natural revelation. At the same time, he suggests that, even if a distinction between them is legitimate, it ‘pertains not so much to the content of what they reveal as to the circumstance, the power, and the directness of their revelatory roles’.²³

The next essay deals with Staniloae’s understanding of the relation between dogma and theology. Miller suggests that the ‘the freedom of language and conceptualisation’ that characterises Staniloae’s theology comes from two ‘over-arching desires’: 1. ‘to liberate Orthodox theology from all that prohibits it from becoming a genuinely universal expression of Christian faith’, and 2. ‘to re-establish the link between theology and spirituality’.²⁴ As the author suggests, according to Staniloae, the relation between dogma and theology should be

²⁰ The province, situated between the Carpathian Mountains and Hungary, had always in its one thousand years of history a majority of Romanian Orthodox population. Until 1918, it was part of the Hungarian Kingdom and later of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

²¹ Miller calls this, somewhat improperly, *via media* (p. 10).

²² Miller mentions the key role that was played in this respect by the publication in 1922 of Barth’s commentary on Romans. The second, even more important factor discussed in this equation is the impact on Staniloae of his research on Gregory Palamas (his masterly study, *The Life and Teaching of Gregory Palamas*, published in 1938, but never translated into English, preceded with over two decades the standard treatments of the subject by John Meyendorff – 1964 and 1974). This study produced a paradigm shift in Staniloae’s theological thinking (Miller rightly calls this a ‘theological conversion’), with a lasting impact in everything he has written from then on.

²³ Miller, p. 29.

²⁴ Miller, p. 37.

guided by the principles rooted in the Incarnation and the Trinity. The result is a paradoxical model of unity in multiplicity.

The fourth chapter discusses the relevance of Staniloae's theology for the present day ecological concerns. Miller highlights Staniloae's understanding of humanity's solidarity with creation. This, together with many other convictions of the Romanian theologian, is rooted in the Maximian teaching on the *logoi* of creation. It is in this context that Staniloae discusses the 'natural priesthood' of humanity that is based on the creation mandate (Gen. 1:28).

In chapter 5 of his book, Miller considers the way in which Staniloae deals with the Cross of Christ as God's solution for a fallen creation. The essential meaning of this event, according to Staniloae, is that the Giver – God Himself, through Christ Incarnate – is above his gifts – creation itself, humanity, and the hope of freedom offered to them in Christ.

The last chapter of Miller's monograph tries to bring together the various themes he studied under the general subject of 'world as gift'. He does this by analysing the way Staniloae deals with the connection between the concepts of creation, sacrament and Church, in Staniloae's sacramental theology.

Miller's approach is appreciative and enthusiastic. He rarely ventures in criticism, and when he does, he merely points to evaluations made by others. Nevertheless, Miller fills a gap in Staniloae studies and other more in-depth studies will certainly deal with issues he has left untouched.

Other recent works on Staniloae

'World as a gift' is certainly not a singular topic that can give coherence to Staniloae's theology. Concepts like *theosis* (Emil Bartos²⁵, and Ioachim Giosanu²⁶), 'synodality/conciliarity'

²⁵ See note 30 and the discussion around it.

²⁶ See note 15.

(Stefan Lupu),²⁷ ‘supreme personal reality’ (Silviu Rogobete),²⁸ and *perichoresis* (Danut Manastireanu)²⁹ have been suggested as alternative centres of coagulation.

Sometimes, given the impressive richness of Staniloae’s theological legacy, authors find real difficulty in suggesting a central theme. This appears to be the case with the Romanian Orthodox Nicolae Mosoiu,³⁰ who deals quite thoroughly in his study with three different topics: 1. *theognosia* – the way we can know God through his revelation; 2. *Christomorphism* – the way we are transformed into the image of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, in the Church;³¹ and 3. *open sobornicity* – Staniloae’s particular understanding of ecumenicity as unity in diversity, with dogmatic integrity. Mosoiu does not make any apparent effort of linking the three topics into a systematic whole. Their unity is rather presupposed.

The Polish, Catholic author Maciej Bielawski, in his doctoral work,³² of which Miller does not seem to be aware, deals once more with the theme of ‘world as gift’. His approach is thorough and systematic. Bielawski’s topic, Staniloae’s ‘Philocalical vision of the world’, is somewhat similar to that of Miller and the author reaches similar conclusions. He keeps the same appreciative tone, given the less contentious nature of the topic.

²⁷ See note 31 and the discussion around it.

²⁸ See note 31 and the discussion around it.

²⁹ The author of the present review essay is in the process of finalising his doctoral research of the Trinitarian ecclesiology of Staniloae, at London Bible College, an associate college of Brunel University of West London, under the supervision of Dr. Graham McFarlane..

³⁰ *Taina prezentei lui Dumnezeu in viata umana. Viziunea creatoare a Parintelui Profesor Dumitru Staniloae* [The Mystery of God’s Presence in the Human Life. The Creative Vision of Father Professor Dumitru Staniloae]. Pitesti, Brasov & Cluj: Paralela 45, 2000.

³¹ Mosoiu entitles this section, somewhat surprisingly, ‘the Form of the Church’. He precedes his rather short presentation of one particular theme in Staniloae’s ecclesiology with a lengthy discussion of his anthropology and of the various meanings of *morphe* in the Bible.

³² *The Philocalical Vision of the World in the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae*. Bydgoszcz: Homini, 1997.

This is a luxury that two other authors writing on Staniloae cannot afford. The first, Emil Bartos,³³ discusses the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. The author, whose book has been well received in Romanian Orthodox circles, undertakes a thorough analysis of the subject, generally in Orthodox theology and in the theological thought of Staniloae. His study deals with epistemology, anthropology, Christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology, investigating their implications for the understanding of this central theme in Staniloae's neo-Palamite thinking. As Bishop Kallistos states in the Forward of the book, Bartos displays 'an impressive knowledge of his subject' (p. ix). He is of interest in that whilst 'he manifests a 'sincere respect for Orthodoxy' (p. x), he does not shy away from what he considers to be problematic aspects of Staniloae's understanding of deification. Nevertheless, his critical comments are always 'fair and balanced' (p. x).

The Roman-Catholic Stefan Lupu discusses in his thesis³⁴ the concept of synodality, which plays a central role in Staniloae's ecclesiology. The work contains three parts, developed concentrically. The first, an introduction to the life and work of Staniloae, describes him as a 'son of the Romanian Orthodox Church' and a 'theologian of Christian love'. The other two parts discuss Staniloae's understanding of the Church as the mystical body of Christ and of sinodality (or conciliarity) as an expression of the catholicity of the Church. Given the contentious nature of subject and the many critical, and often unjust, evaluations by Staniloae of Catholic ecclesiology, Lupu cannot avoid confrontation, but does so graciously and without falling prey to empty and partisan polemics.

³³ *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology. An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999. Emil Bartos was the first Romanian Evangelical to undertake a Ph.D. thesis on Staniloae's theology.

³⁴ *La sinodalità e/o conciliarità, espressione dell'unità e della cattolicità della Chiesa in Dumitru Staniloae (1903–1993)*. Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1999). Stefan Lupu is the latest Catholic author to publish a thesis on Staniloae, with others in the same tradition in process of finalising their research on Staniloae.

The final doctoral work that we will overview in the present essay is that of the Romanian Evangelical Silviu Eugen Rogobete.³⁵ The background of the author's analysis is constituted by the contemporary debate on the possibility of the co-existence of substantiality and relationality at the level of ontology. The first part of the work discusses the problem of 'person as subject' in contemporary Orthodox epistemology, including that of Staniloae. The second part of the thesis attempts an analysis of Staniloae's Christian existentialism in light of the suggested hermeneutical key of the understanding of God as 'Supreme Personal Reality'. In the process, Rogobete deals in a detailed and somewhat convoluted manner with the implications of Staniloae's Christian Personalism on his understanding of theology proper, of Christology, and of anthropology. The author concludes that 'Stăniloae's reading of the Orthodox tradition as an affirmation of the apophatic-cataphatic continuum within relational metaphysics governed by love provides the ground to affirm an ontology that creates space for both substantiality and relationality'.³⁶

It is clear, in conclusion, that Staniloae studies only begun. There are many topics awaiting study. Among these, we suggest themes like: 1. The essential stages in Staniloae's formation as a theologian; 2. Staniloae's evaluation of the main ecclesiological challenges in the Romanian Orthodox Church during the twentieth century;³⁷ 3. The Trinitarian basis of Staniloae's theology; 4. Staniloae's understanding of the dynamic relationship between Scripture, Tradition, and the Church. The following years will certainly bring new and

³⁵ *Subject and Supreme Personal Reality in the Theological Thought of Fr. Dumitru Staniloae. An Ontology of Love.* London: Brunel University, 1997.

³⁶ Rogobete, *Subject and Supreme Personal Reality*, Abstract.

³⁷ Among these, could be mentioned the renewal movement called 'The Lord's Army', started in Sibiu by Fr. Iosif Trifa, at the time when Staniloae was living in that city, the Cornilescu translation of the Bible, and the revivalist movement initiated by Fr. Tudor Popescu. The challenges mentioned above are analysed in a detailed manner in the research work undertaken by another Romanian Evangelical (Paul Negrut. *The Development Of The Concept Of*

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