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Theology of History and Restoration of Man according to Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae

Abstract

The deification of man as restoration of his nature, which has historically fallen under the bondage of sin and death, is possible only in and through the Son of God who became incarnate at the fullness of time (Gal. 4: 4), in our historical context. In this endeavor, history plays a positive role because each human being is born in it. That is, he or she becomes a historical personality. In history, man also continues the sanctifying dynamism of ecclesial life. History is not a prison, as in the Origenist sense, from which man strives to escape, precisely because in it Christ, the God-Man, and the Man-God opens to each believer the perspective of eternity. With such a bold enterprise, an organic synthesis



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between history and theology, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae strengthened the Church's faith in front of the danger of Bolshevik atheism during World War II, promoting the idea of restoring history, Creation, and man through Jesus Christ.

Keywords

history, salvation, restoration, Church, mission, preaching, deification

Published in Sibiu, in the middle of the second world war, Fr. Stăniloae's book, *Jesus Christ or the Restoration of Man* (Sibiu, 1943) is, for postmodern society as well, a Christological challenge in a well-defined historical framework.

The Church's mission as a historical extension of the Kingdom of God has as its direct and immediate goal the fight against the historical prolongation of evil in society. Therefore, the hostile state of being that the unbelievers show is, in fact, a state of deep opposition to Christ our Savior (Lk. 2, 34).

Before the Incarnation, although God did not completely abandon the world of corruption, sin, and death (Heb. 1: 1-2), the history of the human race opened to divine Revelation, in stages, for man to desire and progressively know the soteriological rise. Therefore, it can be rightly stated that history is the beginning of gradual Revelation, and history's end is the beginning of perfect Revelation. History is the interval between A and Ω (Rev. 21, 6). Christ is the beginning of the history of Creation, as One "*through whom all things were made*" (Nicene Creed, art. 2), but he is also its *end* (Matt. 24: 3): the end of historical time. Being Himself these, there is no historical person on earth, from ancient Adam to the end of the ages, capable of equaling His historical dignity and of encompassing the limits of Revelation (from the first day

of Creation to the Second Coming), to *fulfill time*¹ and history in his arms as Christ embraced the Cross at Golgotha.

As Son of God the Father, the Word (Logos, Wisdom) becomes the door through which Revelation enters into the created world, with history's coming into existence. St. John the Evangelist affirms that *through Him* (Jn 1: 3), everything has come into existence as it is. Through Incarnation, the Son of God also becomes the *door* through which history and time, compressing, enter eternity (Jn. 10: 7). The Pauline term is that of the fulfillment of *time* (Gal. 4: 4), and "this expression does not mean *the fixed term* on the line of a formal, unqualified time. It means the general state of the soul, filled by the conditions of receiving the integral Revelation; only as a result of that fact, that moment is also a *fixed term*. If this expression simply meant a fixed term, the question would be legitimate: why did God set it so late?"²

Those who enter through this gate of salvation, dying and being resurrected with Christ at baptism, will also enter through the eschatological door of the Kingdom as some who call themselves *gods by grace* (Ps. 81, 1 and 6). Hence it follows that the Church, through its missionary activity, is responsible not only for the events that take place *hic et nunc* but also for those that were to take place at the Eschaton. "The influence of the present eschatology on us does not want to take us out of history, calling us to withdraw, as if by a reflux, from historical life to its bosom, in a

¹ Having the sense of *full time*, we understand that it requires a certain development, a certain accumulation of experience on the part of humanity, until it suffers from the state of uncommunication in which it is in relation to God, to desire that state ardently and to realize the insufficiency of the law, that is, of one's own powers for its realization. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului* (Jesus Christ or the restoration of man), Craiova, Editura Omniscope, 1993, Craiova, Omniscope Publishing House, 1993, p. 102.

² Ibidem.

state of contemplation. It is a mistake to withdraw from the middle of historical life.”³ The purpose of preparing for the future also falls on the shoulders of the Apostolic Church, even if things are now fulfilled only in *guessing*, and the others face to face (I Cor. 13, 12). Eschatology regards the paschal joy of everyone’s Resurrection because the whole human race also had a common history from Adam to the end of the ages. “Postponing personal Resurrection to the end of the whole world and universal judgment means a confirmation of the value of history, of the collective complex in which every human being has a mission. We will be judged by showing the effects of our deeds until the end of history.”⁴

Starting from the missionary involvement in our time, but with an eternal perspective, the Church imprints in the human being the seal of the true meaning of human existence: the Christian identity, as the Son of God brought it. Through Incarnation the history of the world receives the seal of an authentic Christocentrism without which it would always remain immersed in the autonomy of a purely temporal Arianism. The proof of the immanent pure and anthropocentric historian is provided by the Lucanian text of the Lord’s Resurrection in chapter 24, verses 13-35. The two disciples, Luke and Cleopas, could not overcome the historical events of Jesus of Nazareth: His wonderful works, the capture, crucifixion, and death of Christ during Pontius Pilate. According to their minds and the limited claims of history stripped of the mantle of the Resurrection and eternal life, everything should have ended because a human person enters history through birth and comes out of it through death. Receiving the Revelation of the Resurrection through the Holy Sacraments,

³ *Ibidem*, p. 358.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

the apostles on the road to Emmaus overcame the narrow limits of an autonomous, selfish, and limited history of stories that could easily become myths over the centuries to deceive and confuse the human spirit.

Through His Resurrection from the dead, the Savior does not rule out history but assumes it in a whole and transfigured way with all its problems, turmoil, and failures. "The risen Jesus Christ covers in His resurrected reality more and more parts of historical humanity, being contemporary with its development as a Church."⁵ The mission of the Church demands the same of us, laypeople and ministers alike. According to Christ's model, we cannot be indifferent to the events that take place near us, from the poor and sick of society to the high world rulers. The non-combat attitude towards what is happening in the history of the contemporary world is not from God but a way of spiritual neutrality through which we tacitly support and tacitly approve the evils of everyday history. We cannot agree with this state of spiritual neutrality because not even the devil is spiritually neutral. The missionary attitude of a Christian can only be YES for the affirmative, that is, the divine, and NO for the negative: evil and societal degradation coming from the devil (Matt. 5:37). History is a chain of interpersonal actions and challenges, and neutrality towards their problems can be translated by indifference towards the divine and personal model that the Savior showed and that left us to fulfill (Matt. 25, 45) as self-help to those contemporary with our history. "I have to participate in history as a factor, being seriously aware of its problems. Man does not present himself as detached from any connection with others. He is part of a society and its difficulties, joys, and problems, which are

⁵ Ibidem, p. 392.

caused and supported by it, which also has at all times the content of concrete concerns to establish certain conditions for organizing the community of a given temporal context, which is how the tag of the *propagator of Revelation* forces you to be a factor of history.”⁶

God, through Jesus Christ, descends into history as the perfect factor of Revelation. Through the mission, Christians also become factors in propagating this divine Revelation, through historical involvement as action, and as an effect, through an exit from its narrow framework in an eternal, metahistorical perspective. History is the interhuman relationship as the *me-you* dyad, meta-history is the relationship of the *me-you-Him* triad. God raises us, me and you, from the purely contextual and limited environment of time and space through a relationship of communion in love, not through obligation or any external constraint, because God assists us by grace in our actions with our neighbors based on the acceptance of human free will. “Responding to the call of our neighbor, experienced in the second person, we continue the history and, at the same time, Creation. History, at its living core, is an unaltered continuation of creation”⁷.

Only in an autonomous and exclusivist history, human actions and interpersonal relationships can be considered *ad se*, and unreported to an otherworldly canon, they can be regarded as self-sufficient. Still, they also risk being the cause of passionate initiatives that are no longer capable of stopping by themselves, their initiators considering themselves substitutes for the Godhead. The Church is the fusion of time and eternity. It is the place where the exalted Christ reaches history through the work of His Spirit. Therefore, the mission of the Church in the world is also a

⁶ Ibidem, p. 32-33.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 34.

historical act, starting from the Holy Apostles to the end of the ages, as well as a metahistorical act. Through this intervention, the Savior proves to have a permanent interest in all human beings in all periods of history. “Even until God became man, it was possible to have a certain stubbornness of God’s history and a certain closeness to Him and to remain in that closeness. But by the fact that Jesus Christ is God in human nature, even after his Ascension, His connection with history must be more intimate. That part of history, which is in this more intimate connection with Him and unfolds in this way, constituting a kind of the core of history, is the Church. The consciousness of the presence of Jesus Christ is alive in the Church. It is the community of believers of all time with Him”⁸.

The propagation of faith occurs contextually. Time and space are considered. The apostolic mission is unique in content, different in its forms of implementation, and permanently exposed to a double direction: horizontal and vertical. If its dimension remains anchored in a horizontal and exclusivist plane, “history is entirely sinful and, just as no way out of it is possible, so no elevation above from the pure act of sin is possible. History, however, is the necessary environment in which, in the present conditions, the Revelation to men is made known. Not every person who participates in horizontal history shares in Revelation, but apart from participating in it, no one can reach Revelation.”⁹.

Unlike the Protestant doctrine of a purely horizontal perspective on mission and history, *Orthodox spirituality* also looks closely at the vertical arm of the Holy Cross. From there comes *every good and perfect gift* (James 1:17) through the human nature of the

⁸ Ibidem, p. 374.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 37.

One crucified on it. There is no perfect revelation outside the divine-human Person of the Savior Christ and outside His Church of which He is the Head.

Having it impossible to share full horizontality, Protestantism repressed itself in the doctrine of predestination, which is a doctrine describing the uniformity of all those chosen by God beforehand (Rom. 8:29) and which is in a different history, apart from the current one, a kind of history or world parallel to those that have not been, are not and will not be chosen.

Here is the exclusivity of horizontal history in which human beings are successive and monotonous points, but the same, or perfectly identical, without hierarchy and difference of gifts and qualities. It is not surprising that the communist and collectivist system of total uniformity between persons was generated in this space of the Reformation, then generalized but also ejected as unsatisfactory by Eastern Orthodox spirituality at the end of the twentieth century.

Through the cosmic Church in which God reveals Himself, the world offers the human spirit a purgative possibility based on the ascetic ascent, successive, of vertical trajectory and having an expectant rhythm. "She, in her mission, is a breast through which Revelation is transmitted. There is no incompatibility between herself and Revelation, but no identity either. History does not save, but we can be saved within it. Whoever forces himself in it to faithfully fulfill his legal duties, being a good father, an honest merchant, a worthy official, without being saved by this very fact, does not commit evil, on the contrary, he is an instrument of God's preaching."¹⁰

The Gospel of Christ is fulfilled in history, not outside it, so all those who make an evangelizing mission in the world combine

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 42.

the new law with the old habit of sin so that the latter can abandon through free and conscious assumption corruption and acquire straightening.

The Gospel and the world are not two realities closed to each other, but, interacting theandrically, the latter discovers its true meaning and true direction. Acquired after a good mission and an effective evangelization, faith helps us in our historical elevation, as in the process of spiritual education and guidance towards the goal of true communion with the Most Holy Trinity. The lack of this spiritual dynamism is a sign that God is not present and does not work in my life, or the life of the community in which I live. As such, it is not present in the history lived by me. In the historical process of personal salvation is needed, equally, the horizontal relationship with others, as well as God's help from the vertical plane of the transcendent. There is no authentic revelation outside of history. God descends into history to preach the Gospel to us, to suffer, to die, and to rise for us. The Church does not listen to any news or message that does not go down in history. The Savior is not just a man. He is neither an angel nor a demon. He is not even God alone, but God-Man, a Hypostasis with two natures, Who alone can save the fallen history of the world: a Person with two natures who unites in an unmixed, unchanged, and undivided manner the two planes of existence: Heaven and Earth; God and man; Eternity and history. The Holy Apostle Paul condemns the lack of intersection between the two planes, heavenly and earthly-historical in the context of the Galatian mission, showing, on the one hand, that his message is not strictly historical, that is, it does not come from a simple historical person from Tarsus of Cilicia, an *apostle not from man* (Gal. 1: 1); on the other hand, it condemns any other message without historical implication claimed to be an angelic gospel: *Even if an angel from heaven would preach to you a different gospel than the one I preached to you, let it be anathema!* (Gal.

1, 8), because angels are not historical persons. That is, they are not born with a body because they are spiritual beings, especially since they were created before the historical time of the created world (Fac. 1, 1). However, they can go down in history if God's eternal plan allows them to do so, as in the case of the angelophanies, but not through a message *per se*, but received entirely from God and wholly transmitted to men.

Through my own involvement in the good running of society and my fellow neighbors, I also actively participate in God's cooperation and involvement in world history, in its progress if I do good, or in its regressions, if I promote evil because not everything that happens in history is qualitative. However, the purpose of history is fulfilled by the missionary propagation of the faith. If they do good, the quality of the human being improves because ethics always strengthens the ontic. "History makes us responsible to each other for eternity, and it forces us to take care of our descendants by passing on the faith. A more profound meaning could not be attributed to history than that of solidarity, based on responsibility and gratitude, for all mankind, for all eternity."¹¹

Until His coming into history, God intervened in it in successive and logical stages through intermediaries. Some of them were prophets who had a double but well-determined role, namely, to mediate man's historical connection with God, as well as to prepare history, in our case the Old Testament, for reception, awareness, and acceptance of the Savior within its limits. In other words, the state of human nature outside its center of complete unity, which is the Son of God incarnate, is one marked by the lack of identity, subjectivity, and divine imprint. It is a state inconsistent with the purpose for which we were created, and

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 43.

“man is therefore in an abnormal state before his rebirth by the Christian faith. We call it a state of nature only because the subject was not born in it. But this state of nature is unnatural if we consider the target for which man was destined. Moreover, it is found that the man in whom the subject of communion is not born isn’t in the state of automatic animal biology, but in a state of perversion and wickedness.”¹²

Christian identity, acquired in each individual’s history of salvation, is par excellence the gate that opens to human nature the perspective of communion and interpersonal relationships. It is the One that transforms the individual into a person; selfishness into the atmosphere of communion in love; isolation and depressive loneliness into community life. The lack of Christian identity is assimilated to the lack of spiritual power, of the will to fight for the high and natural ideals of the personal-human dimension. “The incarnation of the Son of God was performed not only for God to come as close as possible to man, but also to give, through substitute suffering, that satisfaction of the moral order which would produce in the souls of men the repercussions necessary for their real restoration.”¹³ In fact, if by the love of the world God becomes man (Jn. 3:16), the history of the world, in anticipation of the Incarnation, opens by an expansion according to its nature and purpose, it follows that history, although subject to its temporality, is an expression of God’s eternal love and it is called, through its response to divine love, to enter into eternity through the sanctification and perfection of his events in time.

History is not crucified by the coming of the Son of God by the Incarnation, but is called, like the Holy Apostles, to do a theandric work; to a voluntary acceptance of the soteriological work in time and not contrary to time, for historical time, in turn, was

¹² Ibidem, p. 90.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 92.

created by God with the possibility of receiving the personal presence of God Incarnate in itself. God does not enslave history, but He frees it from sin by perfecting all created existences that are born and die in their course. As a new anticipated eternal life, Christ does not come to kill by abolition the history of autonomous humanity, which is believed in a secularized society, but by His death and Resurrection to make possible the course of history without a fear that a historical entity ends its existence with his death, that is, to understand that the historical end of a creature, rational or not, is not the same as its entry into non-existence, because non-being belongs neither to history nor to eternity. Therefore it has no rationality. It is not Christ who defiles history by His presence, as the unbelievers feel, but men have defiled the history created by God by their works of hatred and sin (Acts 3, 6; 4, 9, and 15). He restores history, existence, and the created being by deifying it according to its positive will through the rational entities that give their consent and understand the final purpose of their own existence. "He received, for us, who, out of lack of will, would ruin our being, to make Himself like us, to bring back to being (to existence) what had become outside of being (existence). This is God, the only begotten Son, which hath made all things for Himself."¹⁴

History, that is, the history of salvation of humans, as the environment of divine Revelation, has known logical and necessary stages for man to know them and desire their content only as a surrogate of communion with God, before His Incarnation. This is how the Law of the Old Testament and the harsh messages of the holy prophets were given in time. But "the time under the

¹⁴ Sfântul GRIGORIE de Nyssa, *Despre viața lui Moise*, trad. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, colecția *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 29, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1982, p.78.

rule of law is not uniform, but it has a development. Not really time, but humanity. For the time is not an empty scheme in which the deeds and states of mind of man are arranged as objects in space, but it is the very chain of these states and deeds. And since the totality of a man's life is determined and determines others, the complexity of human states and deeds, that is, time, becomes different at every step, competing with the innumerable immanent influences and mysterious transcendent causes."¹⁵

If the history of the world, from a theological point of view, is born with Revelation, we become a means of its propagation, as well as the restless proof of an expectation of the fulfillment of time (Gal. 4:4), finds its fullness from the Incarnation to the Ascension, the tangential point of its encounter with eternity that can be experienced in and through the Church. Here historical time meets eternity. Although philosophy speculates the formal or even empty aspect of time¹⁶ or the contradiction between time and eternity, for Christians, it is filled by the presence of Christ in the world through the Church (Matt. 28:20). Between time and eternity, there is compatibility because time was created by God and is not a product of sin, although sin, like virtue, is committed

¹⁵ Dumitru STĂNILĂOAE, *Isus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, p. 101.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 377: "The resurrected Jesus restored full time by restoring a new content of life. Rather, it led him to the state of perfection He was striving for. The reality of the risen Christ is the new time, that is, not a timeless eternity and a supratemporality radically distant from this world, but a time brought to perfection, a time filled. It follows that we, clothed in our time, have an ability to get closer to the sphere in which the risen Jesus is. And the fact of the resurrection being a continuous present, full of temporality, so in connection with our time, permanent contemporaneity with Jesus is possible. Jesus is not in an eternity without connections with time, and the fact of His resurrection is not exclusively in a past point of time".

in the world, that is, in historical time. "Because the human existence that lives in time has fallen into sin, the time has become a means of punishment for it."¹⁷

The Church is the visible, temporal, and therefore historical side of a Kingdom that will come to the historical end of this world. The stages of Revelation, unfolding on the stages of history, are not faded by the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. Revelation is a closed process. It began in Eden and ended with the death of the last apostle. Orthodoxy does not accept the open character of Revelation in the sense that its content can be completed. Still, following an ascetic and mystical life, under the obedience of the Church, the Christian soul can know in time, in grace, and in an ascending manner the ever-renewing nuances of the same Revelation, from Pentecost to the Second Coming, not as substance, but as form (Matt. 19:28). "Without going out of time, as a creative form, but rising above the sinful experience of time (state of animality, selfishness, hate, fear), which we can accomplish by faith only, we must be able to connect with His reality. He must always be the same, but not careless, not far from us. The reality radiated by Him, clothing those who believe, forms the Church. This is a whole made up of all those who believe in Him, but also of a reality that surrounds them, having Him as their center. It is a temporal-supratemporal whole."¹⁸

The Church is also the place of keeping the Revelation intact in history. If God created time, and therefore history, for it to be effective in the struggle against sin that has penetrated history, and consequently the whole world, He has established a favorable framework for the storage and righteous use of His revelations. That is why the Church is founded in time, at Pentecost,

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 378.

precisely to sanctify the world and its history. "Only through it, Revelation happened in a precise moment of history, which, as a temporal moment that belongs to the past, has a permanent presence. God has spoken at one point in time, but in the Church, he always speaks the same words. Thanks to the Church, Revelation is not carried away into the past by the torrent of time, but it remains continuously present, as a divine act, since God remains present in the Church."¹⁹

As a historical act, therefore visible, of the founding of the Kingdom of God on earth, Pentecost addresses the history of the whole world symbolically by the presence of the twelve nations from all the corners of the world, by all the beliefs and cultures of the ancient world. Preaching was oral. God revealed Himself in history to the elect through a message transmitted directly as a communion experience. The whole of history is an experiential message that initially circulated in oral form. The prophets, the Holy Apostles, and the Holy Fathers recorded in writing only a part of the experiential history with God the Holy Trinity, each according to the power of understanding and writing in writing in the Holy Spirit. St. Luke the Evangelist is a concrete example of this. In the prologue of his Gospel, he states that: *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught* (Luke 1: 1-4). The history of Christian Revelation does not exclude the plurality of sources but focuses on their veracity. The book of Acts, the first history of the

¹⁹ Ibidem.

Christian Church, also written by St. Luke the Evangelist, is also supported by the same methods of searching for historical and spiritual truth as the Gospel, with the same recipient (Acts 1:1). Compared to the traditions of secular history, “(Sacred) Tradition is the permanent presence of the unchangeable God in time and history. If it were not presented as the same will of God, in the form of Tradition, we would lack important support of faith in Him. God cannot be with all generations, with all history, except in the form of Tradition. Revelation itself, as God’s Revelation in time, can only be shared with all people in the form of Tradition. Tradition is the new eternity in the river of the incessant passage of time. Only as a tradition a gesture of God, reaching a certain moment in history, reaches the whole history, has effects on all future times.”²⁰

Father Stăniloae sees in the history of the restoration of human nature the main support of Eastern theology and spirituality. Spirituality is the intertwining between theology and life, between information and the empirical experience of the received teaching. The Church sees dogma and history as a complementary binomial. That is why God does not simply show Himself in the history of the profane world, but He does so to His saints who live in a said historical framework. The Church is, since Pentecost, a historical reality that enters the orbit of the world and in this journey illuminates through its dogma from generation to generation the entire human race. Therefore, it is not just an inner struggle, such as sin and temptation are. Still, through its preaching through Tradition²¹ it constantly conflicts with the things, events and historical personalities outside it, precisely to restore them ontologically, to sanctify them, to deify them, so

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 390.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 390: “Tradition is eternity in time, the only form of eternity that does not cancel time, but capitalizes on it”.

that all through it find their purpose for which they were created, that is, brought from non-being to being in a well-defined historical framework and not as purely fictitious or illusory entities. The world and man are not the products of a simple event but of a God-willed one.

The theology of history is a permanent dialogue between man and God. On the one hand, God reveals Himself in history. On the other hand, man strives to understand Him, to know His will, and to fulfill it. In this effort, he spiritually processes the strict content of Revelation and places it in the orbits of each stage of world development in a concrete historical context. This is how it was generated and how it continues its dynamism until the end of the ages, what theologians call church tradition. "It multiplies, it is oriented according to the needs and problems of each time... it is the reaction of the changeable history to the unchangeable word, but infinite in meaning, of God."²²

Conclusions

In the complete sense, the assumption of historical humanity took place at the Resurrection. Incarnate in space and time, the Son of God begins His historical knowledge. Still, through the Resurrection, the Church, which works as a missionary in history, proposes the transfiguration of said knowledge. There is no transfiguration of the history of the world without the Resurrection, but until this restoration, theological consciousness must be historical. If it is not historical, it cannot be universal either. The Resurrection is the transfiguration of all historical realities into and through Jesus Christ.

²² Ibidem, p. 391.

As a theologian, Father Stăniloae had this sensitivity to history because he had a convincing ecclesiastical conscience. Only in history does the Church prove to be a reality that aims to restore the nature obscured by sin and its openness to eternity. The Church is plenary only in history and is destined for it. Since Pentecost, all its dogmas and canons are historical events. Without this history, Christianity remains a mere humanist morality.