

THE POSITION OF FATHER DUMITRU STANILOAE ON THE THEOPHANIES AND MARIAN APPARITIONS OF HIS TIMES

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ABSTRACT. During the interwar period, as well as the communist dictatorship, a number of miraculous apparitions occurred in Romania – both theophanies and Marian apparitions. They generated “spiritual awakening” movements among the members of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Such instances were the visions of shepherd Petre Lupu of Maglavit (1935), the visions of Mother Veronica of Vladimirești Monastery (1937), and those of Sister Virginia, respectively, which resulted in the establishment of the “New Jerusalem” Monastery at Pucioasa (1955). Like similar phenomena within the Roman-Catholic world, theophanies and Marian apparitions in Romania divided the lay and ecclesiastic elites by generating divergent opinions. This study presents the position of Father Dumitru Stăniloae on these unusual phenomena and their adherents. It is a very difficult issue, generally avoided by theological research as it presupposes a nuanced interpretation, like the one offered by the great theologian on the grounds of his vast erudition and deep theological insights, as well as his personal religious experience.

Keywords: Dumitru Staniloae, Theophanies, Marian Apparitions, Romanian Orthodoxy

On 31 May 1935 – a Friday, shepherd Petre Lupu from Maglavit (a village in southern Romania, close to the Danube) claimed to have seen a white-bearded Old Man, who commanded him to tell people to repent, observe the feast days, attend the Church and stop sinning. The apparition occurred three times, and on Saturday, 15 June 1935, Petrache Lupu first described his visions to the village people, also announcing the priest and the mayor. A pilgrimage began immediately, gathering tens and later hundreds of devout people from the neighboring villages, all seeking to obtain a first-hand, detailed account of the wondrous event¹.

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¹ On Maglavit see Prof. dr. Petre David, *Invasia sectelor. Asupra creștinismului secularizat și intensificarea prozelitismului neopăgân în România după decembrie 1989*, vol. II (Constanța: Europolis, 1999), 155-158; Radu Petre Mureșan, *Atitudinea Bisericii Tradiționale Europene față de prozelitismul advent. Impactul în societatea contemporană* (București: Editura Universității din București, 2007), 573-576.

However, its impact would have been limited, of merely local relevance, but for the major daily newspapers with wide readership (*Dimineața*, *Curentul*, and *Universul*) which attached such importance to the event that they offered it national coverage. Reporters sent by these publications described the magnitude of this pilgrimage (20,000 believers were said to visit Maglavit every day), quoted the shepherd's account and interviewed the village priest, and very importantly, made known the unexplainable healings among the pilgrims².

Between 22-25 September 1935, Father Dumitru Stăniloae visited Maglavit, as one of the prominent ecclesiastical figures who felt compelled to travel to this "site of miraculous happenings" in order to witness the events taking place there. At the time, the great Romanian theologian was 32 years old, had been a priest since 1932, an editor of the periodical *Telegraful Român* [*Romanian Telegraph*] since January 1934, and a professor at the Theological Academy "Andreiana" in Sibiu (professor at the Chair of History and Pastoral Theology since 1 July 1932, and a tenured professor at the Chair of Dogmatic Theology and Apologetics, since 1 October 1936)³.

According to his own declarations, Father Stăniloae had an unexpected, astonishing personal experience at Maglavit, to which he attested truthfully: "*I professor and priest D. Stăniloae, testify before God and the people, about the following miraculous healings, which I myself witnessed at Maglavit, in full awareness and control of my faculties*". Father Dumitru Stăniloae goes on to enumerate nine "wondrous facts" he had witnessed himself at Maglavit, where he had the opportunity to talk to the people who claimed being cured of various diseases, illnesses or infirmities⁴.

Beside the miraculous healings he witnessed and to which he testified, Father Dumitru Stăniloae himself had a strange experience, while he was listening to Petrache Lupu. We quote the testimony of Father Dumitru Stăniloae: "*I also confess that, in addition to the miraculous healings I have witnessed myself, and*

² Among the newspaper articles, we mention: "Un om care a vorbit Vineri cu... Dumnezeu. Sate puse în mișcare de mișcarea unui cioban" newspaper *Dimineața*, June 27, 1935, 13; "Viața omului care a vorbit cu Dumnezeu", *Curentul*, (July 3, 1935): 2; "Cum s-a arătat Dumnezeu ciobanului Petre", *Curentul*, (July 4, 1935); "Mănăstirea lui Dumnezeu", *Curentul* (July 20, 1935): 3; "Maglavitul-loc de pelerinaj", *Curentul* (July 29 1935): 3.

³ Florin Duțu, *Viața Părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae, 1903-1993* (București: Editura Floare de colț, 2015), 16-17.

⁴ Pr. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Vindecările Minunate văzute de mine la Maglavit", *Telegraful Român*, LXXXVIII, no. 41 (29 September 1935): 2-3, article also included in the volume *Cultură și duhovnicie*. Book published with the blessing of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Edited, introduction, notes by Ion-Dragoș Vlădescu (Bucharest: Basilica Publishing House, 2012), 712-717; Pr. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Vindecările Minunate văzute de mine la Maglavit", *Renășterea* XIII, no. 47 (6 October 1935): 40.

saw with my own eyes, I experienced another miracle: I did see, without any doubt, but keeping my calm and critical thinking, a strange figure behind Petrache Lupu, while he was standing on the platform, around 11 a.m. It looked like a big-sized bust, of a blue-greenish hue, that could be seen against the horizon. It was not a cloud, for it moved to the right or left, following the movements of Petrache, and it did not dissipate gradually, but it appeared and disappeared all at once. Neither was it the shadow of Petrache, because others were standing on the platform next to him, but nothing could be seen behind them. I had heard many people speaking about this bust, but I did not know what to think of it. Now I saw it myself, as did many people who were around me: father Mocanu, his wife, my wife, and other persons”.

Father Stăniloae’s account of his visit to Maglavit ended abruptly, without any conclusions or commentaries: *“These are the wondrous things I witnessed at Maglavit. I take full responsibility before God and my fellow people, in that I am declaring nothing but the truth. I will not recount here any of the miracles described by others. I can only say that many occur every day, more than anyone can count. I conclude without any commentary. This article contains mere facts.”*

The January 1936 issue of *Gândirea [Thought]*, an important cultural journal of traditionalist orientation, published two articles on Maglavit. One was authored by Nichifor Crainic, the journal’s director and professor of Mystical Theology at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest, and the other was written by Father Dumitru Stăniloae. Nichifor Crainic had visited Maglavit on 23 October 1935 and portrayed the man (Petrache Lupu) whose humbleness had generated *“this huge wave of mystical devotion”*. His account followed three directions: an assessment of the shepherd’s mental health; his manner of praying for the people; and his religious psychology, respectively⁵. What he witnessed at Maglavit was a collective movement, engaging the souls of millions of people. As this movement was prompted by a lonely, illiterate shepherd’s spiritual experience (which was inward and personal, hence uncontrollable), it followed that the phenomenon was essentially mystical. Nichifor Crainic also attested to the *“strange figure”*, and concluded that the phenomenon *“requires extensive theological research, in order to ascertain its true nature. We have merely provided a descriptive presentation, with no other claims than the complete honesty of recorded facts. If we are wrong, which is quite possible, time will tell. It is only time that can offer any certainty, either to disprove or to confirm our perceptions. Actually, this is the method employed by our Church, which proclaims and acknowledges saintliness only when appearances have become certainties”* (p. 11).

⁵ Nichifor Crainic, “Vizită la Maglavit”, *Gândirea*, XV, no. 1 (January, 1936): 1-11.

The article published by Father Dumitru Stăniloae in the journal *Gândirea* was a comprehensive theological study entitled “Încercare despre teofanii. Interpretarea vedeniilor lui Petrace Lupu” [“On theophanies. Commentaries on the visions of Petrace Lupu], containing many insights into matters of psychology and psychoanalysis⁶. The study aimed to demonstrate the error of those who claim that God cannot show Himself to the people, based on the text of the Gospel according to John: “*no one has ever seen God*” (John I, 18). Father Dumitru Stăniloae explains this by the antinomic manner of speaking in the Scriptures, which employ contradictory expressions concerning God’s accessibility, or inaccessibility respectively, in relation to men. This issue was partially settled by 14th -century hesychast debates, which clarified the fact that God is inaccessible by His essence, but His energies and works descend to us; the idea was further developed by modern Russian theologians, especially Bulgakov and Berdiaev.

According to Father Dumitru Stăniloae, the highest step along one’s ascensional path towards God lies in feeling Him close to oneself and within oneself, as a person (p. 16). It is very difficult to relate to God as to a person, with the only difference that He is invisible to bodily eyes: “*We think of God in deistic terms – based on the effects of His works in the past, and we feel Him in pantheistic terms – as acts emanating from some impersonal force, but we fail to perceive Him as a person, in personalist terms. This is the truth, most of the times. How difficult, how rarely do we really make our prayer into a conversation with God - our neighbor!*”.

Following this logic, our great theologian asks how is it possible that God should show Himself to people, in a sensorial (material) way? Father Dumitru Stăniloae enumerates several theophanies mentioned in the Holy Scripture, when these were perceived by a single person but not by the others around (the martyrdom of Holy Archdeacon Stephen; the shepherds, on Lord’s Nativity), then he concludes that such situations were similar to Petre Lupu’s visions, for the respective apparitions were not seen by the shepherds accompanying him, although they could hear him talking to someone (p. 18). Moreover, the case of this shepherd corroborates the assertion of Saint Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, who stated about the Taboric light that the apostles did not see that light with their bodily eyes, but most likely they contemplated it mentally.

⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Încercare despre teofanii. Interpretarea vedeniilor lui Petrace Lupu”, *Gândirea*, XV, no. 1 (January 1936): 14-29. The study is based on a series of articles published in *Telegraful Român*: “Încercare despre teofanii (I), *Telegraful Român*, LXXXIII”, no. 40 (22 September 1935): 1; “Încercare despre teofanii (II), *Telegraful Român*, LXXXIII”, no. 40 (20 October 1935): 1; “Încercare despre teofanii (III), *Telegraful Român*, LXXXIV”, no. 2, (5 January 1936): 1; “Încercare despre teofanii (IV), *Telegraful Român*, LXXXIV”, no. 3 (12 January 1936): p. 1-2; “Încercare despre teofanii (V), *Telegraful Român*, year LXXXIV”, no. 4 (19 January 1936): 1-2; The five articles are included in the volume *Cultură și duhovnicie. Articole publicate în Telegraful Român*, vol I (1930-1936), 705-711, 718-722, 759-768, 769-778, 779-787.

At this point, Father Dumitru Stăniloae undertakes a thorough analysis of apparitions (visions) produced by imagination or by hallucinations, in various instances: delusion, nightmare, delirium, dementia, and he refers the readers to the works of reputable specialists of his times. In his opinion, Petrache Lupu's visions did not belong to the category of hallucination phenomena of any type, since by definition hallucinations are "*projections with a destructive character, harmful to both the individual whose personality they undermine, and to the society at large*" (p. 23). On the contrary, Petrache Lupu was mentally healthy, and his visions did not generate anything morbid and unsound but they promoted spiritual health and strength.

With regard to imagination, Father Dumitru Stăniloae states that this is the path followed by everything that comes forth from the depths of the soul, so that we may become aware of it. By "depths of the human soul" he designates not only representations and images from the past or biological urges, but the very source of human life from which stem one's understanding of the world, one's virtues, one's feelings, one's creative power (p. 18). The images that present themselves to our awareness are not exclusively produced by conscious or unconscious imagination. Father Dumitru Stăniloae points out that in many cases, they are produced within us by an external cause which does not have a subjective nature, by an outward agent. We do not always meet that external factor, or agent, by our will or our interest. Petrache Lupu's vision is a case in point. "*There is no reason - Father Dumitru Stăniloae points out - to doubt that the image seen by Petre Lupu is an instantiation of the reality it expresses: God*" (p. 26).

It is known that God, when He chooses to reveal Himself in such a way that no doubts can exist concerning His revelation, shows Himself in a human form. Acting on the human soul - Father Dumitru Stăniloae goes on to say - therefore acting on created "matter", God kindles a light there and provides an image of Himself; and the image of a human being is somehow the most natural form in which God appears (p. 28). His dogmatic, psychological and psychoanalytical arguments lead Father Staniloae to a categorical conclusion: "*As we can see, there is nothing to prevent us from inferring that Petrache Lupu has indeed seen God. His vision has all the attributes of a theophany*".

The interwar period was marked by sustained efforts to define the Romanian identity. Outstanding thinkers such as Nichifor Crainic, Nae Ionescu, Constantin Rădulescu Motru or Lucian Blaga endeavored to describe the relationship between Orthodoxy and "Romanianism", that is, the "Romanian spirit", or specific character. Because debates on this issue tended to downplay the role of Orthodoxy in the making of the Romanian spirit and as integral part of it, Father Stăniloae developed an "ethnic theology" by which he postulated a close relationship between the two, going as far as to equate Orthodoxy and Romanianism.

From 1933 onwards, Father Stăniloae published a series of articles in “Telegraful român [The Romanian Telegraph]” journal, praising the group known as *Oastea Domnului [The Lord’s Army]*, a well-known “spiritual awakening” movement emerged within the Romanian Orthodox Church, According to Father Stăniloae, *Oastea Domnului* had the merit of re-establishing the bond between Christ and “the soul of our peasants” and contributing to the “emergence of a new type of peasantry, truly belonging to our future”: a peasantry not dominated by alcoholism, by hopelessness, by roughness towards children, not deceived by the promises of politicians, but instead loving the Church and ready to help those in need, interested in reading devotional literature and above all the Holy Scripture. “*It is a new peasantry*, Father Stăniloae wrote, *because it stands on new 3spiritual grounds; it is the peasantry belonging to our Lord Jesus Christ*”⁷. By asserting the vital role of the Romanian village, Father Stăniloae developed a true “theology of the Romanian people” as a theological counterpart to the political discourse of the times (which described peasantry as the representative and the holder of the true values of the Romanian people)⁸.

In February 1935, Father Stăniloae published the article “Ortodoxie și națiune [Orthodoxy and Nation]”⁹, and in October 1935, he reiterated the same ideas in the article “Românism și Ortodoxie [Romanianism and Orthodoxy]”¹⁰. Petrice Lupu’s visions occurred in the summer of 1935, that is at a time when Father Stăniloae was diligently constructing a theological edifice, intended to express the complex relationship between faith and nation, between Orthodoxy and the Romanian specific character, or spirit. This is why Father Stăniloae’s position on “the theophany at Maglavit” can only be understood and considered in the context of his “ethnocentric” theology, which he developed during his huge polemic both against Catholicism and Protestantism, and against some great thinkers of interwar Romania, especially Constantin Rădulescu Motru and Lucian Blaga.

His arguments are based on his perception of the nation as a living organism, and of ethnicity as expression of a life community. If an ethnic group fails to be spiritualized by religion (in this case, Orthodox religion), then it is threatened by dangerous deviations and pathological excesses. Father Stăniloae

⁷ Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, “O țărănime nouă”, *Telegraful român* LXXXI, no. 15-17 (18 February 1933): 1-2.

⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ilie Moldoveanu, “Actualitatea gândirii Părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae cu privire la etnic și etnicitate” in Persoană și comuniune. Prinos de cinstire Părintelui Profesor Academician Dumitru Stăniloae la împlinirea vârstei de 90 de ani, ed. Ioan Ică jr. (Sibiu, 1993), 120-130; Lecturer George Enache, PhD, “Biserica-societate-națiune stat în România interbelică. Explorări în orizont liberal”, *Revista Teologică*, no. 2 (2010): 166-202.

⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Ortodoxie și națiune”, *Gândirea* XIV, no. 2 (February 1935): 76-84.

¹⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Românism și Ortodoxie”, *Gândirea* XV, no. 8 (October 1935): 400-409.

considers that Orthodoxy has pervaded and has left its imprint on the Romanian people, and this two-millennia symbiosis “allows us an almost aprioric belief – that the Romanian soul has been shaped and fashioned by Orthodoxy”. He analyzes the spiritual and social practices of the Romanian village, and points out that “this mystical bond with the extra-human world, that is, the animal and vegetal realms, has been created under the influence of Orthodoxy” (p. 405), then concludes that “the people most pervaded by, and infused with the Orthodox spirituality is the Romanian people. It was born Christian. It never knew any other religious structure to undermine the Orthodox one...” (p. 407)

Accordingly, Father Stăniloae as the founder and champion of a true “mystical theology of the nation”, could only salute the massive pilgrimage to Maglavit, in which he saw the beginnings of a movement of spiritual reawakening of the Romanian people¹¹. His visit to this “site of miracles” reinforced this conviction, and this led him to the theological justification of Petrache Lupu’s visions, which he did in complete sincerity and taking full responsibility.

The tribulations of history (dictatorship, war, the communist regime) hindered both collective religious manifestations and mystical thought in its various expressions. Between 1937-1939, a former member of Oastea Domnului [The Lord’s Army] group, Vasilica Gurău (later Mother Veronica) claimed she had witnessed a number of theophanies and Marian apparitions, which prompted her to establish a convent at Vladimirești (Galați county), during the war years. The remarkable spiritual evolution of this monastic settlement posed a great challenge to the recently installed communist regime, which decided to close it down in 1955, while Mother Veronica and other nuns were sent to the infernal communist prisons. In his turn, Petrache Lupu was imprisoned during the communist dictatorship, and after his release he maintained complete silence, until his death in 1994.

I could not find in the writings of Father Stăniloae published after 1938, any mention of the “Vladimirești phenomenon”, whose magnitude was similar to that of the “Maglavit phenomenon”. However, the theological literature of the early years of the communist regime contained several articles which, in the words of a Romanian theologian, demonstrated how “researchers into *Fundamental Theology* were allowed to work in their field, but could never contradict the *postulates of militant atheism*”¹². In this context, we note an entire 1949 issue of “*Studii Teologice* [Theological Studies]” journal (no. 5-6, July-August 1949), where several professors of Theology provided arguments derived from the discipline

¹¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, “Exagerări”, *Telegraful Român* LXXXIII, no. 39 (15 September 1935): 1.

¹² Rev. Prof. Constantin Drăgulin, “Părintele Petru Rezuș, un apologet de seamă”, *Lumina* newspaper, 31 March 2011, (<https://ziarullumina.ro/documentar/parintele-petru-rezus-un-apologet-de-seama-13182.html>).

they taught, against superstition, occultism, witchcraft, magic. The stereotypical manner in which these articles open and end, leads me to believe that this special issue of “*Studii Teologice*” journal was actually commissioned by the communist authorities. Two articles were signed by Father Professor Petru Rezuș, who very harshly denounced the “Maglavit phenomenon” of the interwar times, as well as the events at Vladimirești, dating from the same period¹³.

In 1952, Father Dumitru Stăniloae published an extensive study condemning the “false mysticism” with general statements on such phenomena, but without any explicit mention of Maglavit or Vladimirești¹⁴. False mysticism, placed in the category of “religious counterfeit”, is “*a disposition of the soul which expects or sees miracles everywhere, which seeks visions and attaches a supernatural quality to any person who is less ordinary*”. Father Stăniloae classifies miraculous phenomena and visions into three categories, pertaining to occultism (magic, witchcraft and superstition), to pathological conditions, and to fraud, and analyzes the manifestations of each. The conclusion of his study is that promoters of false mysticism are persons with certain disorders of the soul, who find themselves at various points in-between health and a medical condition. They live in society, and so their obsessions and so-called visions have an impact on the religious disposition of a great number of people. Their fixed ideas become visions of purely terrestrial origin, are manifest in material forms, and bring about nothing new.

The true visions, expressions of the divine revelation, are above any material form and they receive only a symbolic one, to indicate spiritual significance, as do the Book of Revelation or the Book of Daniel. Moreover, true visions are rare and they serve lofty missionary goals: “*When a person claims to have visions, even on a daily basis, and on the other hand that person is unable of conducting serious missionary activity, then that individual is certainly mentally deranged or a fraud, or else a victim of ignorance... Ignorance is the most important vehicle spreading false mysticism. The epidemic forms of false mysticism are a sad tell-tale sign that a people is religiously backward and cast a shameful light on the religious shepherds of a nation*”.

One might think that by these general considerations, Father Stăniloae actually makes a critical hint to the Maglavit phenomenon and thus he contradicts his own statements made 30 years earlier, on Petrache Lupu’s visions. Indeed, Father Stăniloae was forced to comply with the policy of the communist authorities, as were all professors of Theology at the time. Actually, in an “Activity Report”

¹³ Rev. Prof. Petru Răzuș, “Criteriologia falselor teofanii, *Studii Teologice*”, no. 3-4 (May-June 1949): 226-237; idem, “Criteriile revelațiunii divine și combaterea falselor teofanii”, *Studii Teologice*, no. 5-6 (July-August 1949): 345-364.

¹⁴ Rev. Prof. Dumitru Săniloae, “Formele și cauzele falsului misticism”, *Studii Teologice* no. 5-6 (May-June 1952): 251-271.

he submitted to the Department of Religious Affairs, again in compliance with the regime's requirements, he noted that in the previous year he had published, among others, the study entitled "Formele și cauzele falsului misticism [Forms and causes of the false mysticism]" in "Studii Teologice", No. 5-6, 1952; there, he states, "*I denounced and criticized a number of morbid or ill-intended manifestations and acts in the realm of religious life*"¹⁵.

In my opinion, this "compliance" with the communist policies was carried out in the same delicate, discreet manner that was characteristic of Father Stăniloae, and did not necessarily deny his position taken in 1935-1936 on the events of Maglavit. Better said, in the terms of Teodor Bakonsky, the biography of Father Stăniloae contained two Stăniloae, different but not necessary antagonistic¹⁶. In the first, interwar part, there is the young nationalist, educated in the spirit of the journal "Gândirea", there is the right-wing, philo-Orthodox and anti-Catholic, pro-European and anti-Marxist professor. This "first configuration of the self" reacts to the horizon of reality, and prompts him to take a stand on Petrache Lupu phenomenon, or on the "heretical gnosticism" of Lucian Blaga. Then the young romantic was succeeded by the grown-up man persecuted by the "unjust history" and by the old Stăniloae. These later experiences, constituting the "summer and autumn of a patriarch of Romanian religious thought" led him away from any political stance and spiritualized him, helping him to revisit his ethnocentric position. The second Stăniloae is the philocalic champion, the patristic exegete who translated thousands of pages, and above all the man in possession of certainties. All these biographical and spiritual (st)ages render him all the more valuable and trace a rich and complete, fully responsible destiny.

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¹⁵ The report can be accessed on the current website of *Studii Teologice* journal, (http://studiiteologice.editurilepatriarhiei.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=40&Itemid=49&lang=en).

¹⁶ Teodor Bakonsky, Bogdan Tătaru Cazaban, eds., *Dumitru Stăniloae sau paradoxul teologiei. Centenar 1903-2003*, (București: Editura Anastasia, 2003), 13-14.

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