

### **III. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**

## **THE FREEDOM OF GOD AND THE FREEDOM OF MAN IN FATHER DUMITRU STĂNILOAE'S THEOLOGY**

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**ABSTRACT.** God is the supreme Mystery of existence, He *is* by His own power above existence. God is the tripersonal super-essence of spiritual nature, above all spirituality that we may understand or imagine. He is the one Who brings everything into existence and that is why there is a fundamental difference between God and creation; the origin and the existence of the creation depend on the will and the creative work of God. As personal super-essence and super-existence, God is completely free because He cannot be closed into a reference system; He is the ultimate instance of all His decisions and acts.

Man, *created in the image* of God reflects at the level of creation the freedom of God. As created existence, he is part of a reference system of the created world, which depends on God in its existence and becoming. As personal existence, in the image of God, the human person is capable of an existence that is not entirely enclosed into the reference system of the created nature; he is called to the free communion with God and it is the ultimate instance that decides his thoughts, acts and words. Man guards and increases his freedom or loses it according to the manner in which he professes it. For within the freedom of man the possibility to state the freedom is involved, at the same time renouncing it. The paradox of the freedom of man consists of the fact that man gives up his freedom through his own freedom because of pride or because he leaves the communion with God, Who offers him the true freedom.

**Keywords:** God, communion, creation, existence, freedom, man, reference system, Dumitru Stăniloae.

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*God in Himself.* God reveals Himself to Moses as “Who He is”: “I am Who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. I am has sent me to you” (*Exodus 3:14-15*). *Ego eimi ho on* means that God *is* above all existence. Dionysius the Areopagite says to this respect: “The existence itself belongs to *Who I am*. And He does not belong to the existence but the existence belongs to Him. And He is not into existence, but the existence is into Him”. “For God is not in a random manner but simple and undetermined, comprising existence in Himself from before”<sup>1</sup>. God is the super-existing essence (from *esse*). And since the essence is given for real only in subject or hypostasis one may say that the support of all the attributes of God is the hypostatic reality, or the threefold hypostatic reality (D. Stăniloae)<sup>2</sup>. The attributes of God themselves have as support the threefold hypostatic essence, beyond any characteristic or Self attribute of God. The Self existence of God is above all the other Self attributes.

“I am” means the absolute existence that is not opposed by non-existence. God does not receive the existence from outside, He does not own it by participation, that is why His essence, since it is not brought from non-existence to existence, has nothing antithetical. “I am” is not a static essence, but the One who reveals Himself as presence, in vision or hidden, but His nature is completely incomprehensible, because God has no beginning and is above all existence. He is the One that brings everything into existence. The One for Whom all the things come to existence and to Whom they return<sup>3</sup>.

*The fundamental difference between God and Creation.* There is no *analogia entis* between God and creation, between Creator and creature. That is why the distinction between essence, hypostasis and energy does not mean Emanationism or Modalism. Gregory the Theologian speaks about the fundamental distance (*diastema*) between two different natures. The origin and the existence of the creation depend on the Creator, on His creating will, that brought it into existence. The creation has a beginning in time and space, the time and space are structures of the creation. Hence, the creation is exposed to evolution, change, disappearance. But the divine essence has its origin in Itself, it is divine transcendent plenitude, it is not subjected to temporality and spatiality. Consequently, God does not let Himself spatialized, localized, limited by a place. God cannot be inserted in the sphere of immanence, in a pantheist or idolater manner<sup>4</sup>. Only His apophatic

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<sup>1</sup> St. Dionysius the Areopagite, *De divinis nominibus*, *Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca* (Paris: Migne, 1857–66), chap. V, coll. 818.

<sup>2</sup> Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1978), 1:151.

<sup>3</sup> Pr. Ion Bria, *Tratat de Teologie Dogmatică și Ecumenică* (București: România Creștină, București, 1999), 81.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-85.

infinity and incomprehensibility may be understood, but not His essence: "Who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To Him be honor and might forever!" (1 Timothy 6:16).

As the One who truly exists, by the fact that He is through Himself, or the support of the Self existence, and consequently He is super-existence or super-essence, God is the supreme personal reality. By indicating Himself as the One who is truly existent, or super-existent, also reveals Himself as a personal reality: *I*. He is *I* par excellence. The Self super-existence can only be personal. As a super-existent personal reality, God is the undetermined origin of all the features that are determined to a certain extent through the fact that they originate from Him. The divine personal reality is undetermined in an eminent manner, for it is the hypostatization of the super-essence, from each all the created existences originate. God is the tripersonal super-essence, or the super-essential tripersonality<sup>5</sup> of spiritual nature, a spirituality which is above all spirituality that we understand or we can imagine: "God is spirit and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

The impersonal essence is not super-existent. It falls in all respect into a reference system. And the essence which is subjected to a reference system does not exist through itself neither in form, nor in its reality. It belongs to the order of the existence determined by the super-existing subject. The reality which is for the other, receives its existence or form from the other. It is inferior to the person, hence it is not super-essence. An essence or a nature subsisting as object, exists for a subject different from it, for a person and based on this fact it receives, in relationship with the human person, the form from it; and in relationship with God, it receives its existence from Him<sup>6</sup>.

*God-Existence through Himself – the origin of all the existence.* Only God, as a super-existent personal reality and as a support of the Self existence, may produce, without emptying Himself, the existence from all the available plans. Only because there is God as a personal reality and supreme super-existent support of the Self existence, there is existence everywhere. The existence in the accessible plan, being the voluntary result of the super-existent personal reality, cannot be its cause, nor the final cause of every existence. That is why the existence in the accessible plan is an argument for its origin in the creating work of a super-existent personal reality, which exists through Itself<sup>7</sup>.

Our direct experience and knowledge cannot go further than the works that originate from God's super-essence, distinctive but unseparated from it, works which create existence, support and fulfil the created existence; until

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<sup>5</sup> Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, 1:152, 158.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:159.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

the communion with the attributes of God manifested in these works. All the works or attributes of God are infinite because He never empties Himself in giving them, because the creatures will never reach the end of their communion and the works and attributes of God will never cease to irradiate from the super-essential hypostatic Divinity. But the Divinity, the threefold hypostatic support is beyond their infinity, since it is their origin<sup>8</sup>.

Only the *super-existence of the threefold hypostatic Divinity*, unframed in the reference system of nature, may explain *the existence of the human person*, capable of an existence which is not entirely framed by the reference system of nature and called to the communion with such an absolute, perfect and eternal existence that is in a free relationship with God, the supreme Person. Only the transcendence of the divine Person provides the existence of the human persons which are not completely into the reference system of nature, because only God can provide this freedom. Otherwise it would all fall under the senseless laws of nature and death.

The world of nature is created for man that is to be an environment and a means of communication between the human persons and the divine Person, in order to be thus framed through the human persons into the plan of the personal divine-human relationship. For not only the created and definable existence can be explained exclusively in a personal supreme super-existent reality, but the human persons as well, that take part to a certain extent to its super-existence, its absolute and its opophatism<sup>9</sup>.

*The absolute freedom of God.* God, as a personal existence, super-essential and super-existent is by Himself, through Himself and for Himself. He is absolutely free, because the reality of the supreme Person is completely free from every reference system. He is in a complete manner the supreme instance of all His acts and deeds. The One who exists through Himself is an existence free from all relativity and determination. He is the existence not only in the superlative manner, but a super-existent existence. He does not support the existence in a passive manner and is not subjected to passions. The entire life of God is an act of power. He has all the attributes in Himself and not shared from another. That is why He has everything incomparably superior to the creatures, because all the created existences have their attributes by communicating with the attributes of God, through His works<sup>10</sup>.

*The mystery of creation.* All things were created by God, but in a progressive order and in a certain conformity and relationship between them.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 159-160.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 152.

That is why, one may say that on the one hand they were created “in the beginning”, on the other hand, that the creation ends with the bringing into existence of man. Because creation is not complete until God reveals its meaning in man. The creation culminates, fulfills and reveals its meaning in man, and man in the communion with God. This fact is expressed in the biblical account on creation since it describes the creation of the world as taking place gradually, in six days, and in the end God creates man through a special act (*Genesis 2:7*), in His image (*Genesis 1:27*), man being, after creation, in a permanent dialogue with God.

When it speaks of the bringing to existence of a new order within creation, the biblical account shows that they were created through the word of God, which is also expressed by: “And God said”. In the light of the complete Revelation of the New Testament, the Word of God, through which all were created, is the Son or the eternal Word of the Father: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... Through Him all things were made; and without Him nothing was made that has been made” (*John 1:1-3*). “He is the image of the invisible God, ... For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things hold together”. (*Colossians 1:15, 16, 17*).

Thus, the speaking of God must not be identified with the absolute power of the Almighty, Who creates from nothing, from His transcendental distance, but with the Word of God Who incarnated “when the set time had fully come” (*Galatians 4:4*). That is why everything that is created is brought to existence through the Word of God and is testimony or sign of the Word and has a logotic character. Everything that is created, is created in the Spirit of God (*Genesis 1:2*: “and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters”) that is in and according to the sense and the Spirit of God. From the fundamental relationship of love and communion of the Father and the Son and the Spirit of love, unity and personal communion, the love of God is expressed through Logos in the things that are created. Seen in this perspective, every creature is in its final logotic and pneumatic foundation. The creation is the manifestation of the intra-Trinitarian relationship of love of God threefold in Persons and bears in itself the personal signs of God in His vivid relationship with the creature, in general, and especially with man, created in His image<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Pr. Valer Bel, *Unitatea Bisericii în teologia contemporană. Studiu interconfesional ecumenic* (Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2003), 167-168; see also the literature indicated there.

*Man created in the image of God.* As a crowning of the creation, God, as personal God creates the man out of love to be His partner in dialogue. He does not create an object in the person of man, a simple ornament to reveal His almightiness and to praise His glory, but based on the foundation of the plenitude of His communion, He brings to existence a personal creature that is in a conscious relationship with Him that is why, God creates, firstly, the space for life, the grounds of the existence within it and the possibility for all the creatures to dialogue with Him. And these creatures can participate to His life through His creative activity. Nature, time and this bodily matter have an ineffable value because they are created in in such a manner that God carries on through them the direct dialogue or communion with people. Hence, the world is both God's gift of love and the environment and the place of meeting Him<sup>12</sup>.

If man was created by the personal God out of love, as a created image of His, it means that besides love there is within creation the freedom that man has as an essential feature of his quality of "image of God". The basis of the entire greatness of the divine image in man consists of his freedom.

However, this freedom must not be understood as emancipation or independence from the Creator, since all are fulfilled through love. Love creates and supports the authentic relationship between creature and Creator: in freedom authentic communion. God's love is shown in the freedom of man with all its absolute power because it allows the impossible, meaning that it gives the creature the possibility to reject the relationship with God in its quality of communion with Him. None of the human actions can reject the fundamental divine grace. In the same time, man is able through his alienation from God, to transform the communion with Him into a simple interpersonal relationship of survival<sup>13</sup>.

As image of the super-essential God, the human person has to a certain extent the quality of being on its own. It is the ultimate instance that decides his thoughts, deeds and words. Many actions act upon it. But it stops them and decides on its own whether it wants to transmit them forward and the form in which it wants to transmit them. Man is not a simple piece in a gearing through which passes a movement started somewhere else. On the one hand, man is part of the reference system of the created reality, depending on God in its existence and becoming. On the other hand, the human person is not for the general system to which it belongs, "*ci este de sine*", for it may be to a certain

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>13</sup> Nikos Nissiotis, *Die Theologie der Ostkirche im ökumenischen Dialog. Kirche und Welt in orthodoxer Sicht*, (Stuttgart, 1968), 93-94.

extent above this system. It reflects to the manner in which it can use an action professed upon it, which in this way appeals to its adhesion rather than pass through it without asking<sup>14</sup>.

*The rationality of creation and the freedom of man.* Brought to existence through the Word or Logos of God, the entire creation has an inner rationality that is a unity a dynamic inner order and unity and a meaning that God gave it and towards which it moves. This rationality manifests as inter-relationship: all the parts of the universe are in an interior relationship with one another and support each other. In the same time, all of them are open to the Logos of God. The rationality of the creation culminates in man, and man completes and perfects himself in the communion with God, being a personal being, created in His image. Bearer of the same rationality, man is in an organic relationship with the whole nature, so that his ascension to God coincides with the final aspiration of the faith.

Man's rationality is more than the rationality of the creation in general. In man, this rationality is manifested and becomes self-aware, awareness of the order, sense and finality of the creation. Through this awareness, God comes into dialogue with man and leads him to completion and perfection. That is why man is responsible for the creation that God entrusted him with to work with it and guard it<sup>15</sup>: "God blessed them and said to them: Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (*Genesis 1:28*). "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (*Genesis 2:15*). Through this awareness, man stands in relationship with God and with the world to produce in himself and into the world transformations wished by God. The progress of man towards the "likeness with God" or the regression through the alienation from Him towards unlikeliness, affects positively or negatively the entire creation. "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (*Romans 8:20-22*).

By virtue of the rationality open to the Logos of God, creation has multiple alternative virtualities. Through the enriched thinking and through common work, accompanied by an increased responsibility which they apply to nature, people rise to higher stages of understanding it. Man starts to discover the rationality of the

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<sup>14</sup> Stăniloe, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, 1:153.

<sup>15</sup> Pr. Dumitru Popescu, Diac. Doru Costache, *Introducere în Dogmatica Ortodoxă*, (București: Libra, 1997), 196-197.

creation by discovering its material benefit and in the same time through the search of the higher meaning of things.

Creation has this rationality with a double purpose: to serve man for his existence and biological support, but also with the purpose to grow spiritually through the knowledge of the senses of creation and of the increasing compliance of the creation with man, through the knowledge of the ultimate purpose of creation that is God, Who answers the infinite aspiration of man for perfection<sup>16</sup>.

Man is transcendent to himself as origin however his existence is entrusted to him. Man is not entrusted to other creature as a passive object, as in the case of the nature. God created the world and put in it multiple virtualities and passive alternative possibilities, for man to profess a creating role within the creation of God. Man can update and develop freely some of the world's virtualities or the other. Since God helps man in this updating, God remains in a relationship of freedom unto the world, and man in a relationship of free collaboration with God<sup>17</sup>.

Thus, in the world God's freedom meets the freedom of man, not in a confrontation or competition, but in a creative collaboration, when man follows the sense and the rationality of the external nature and of his own nature and walks on the path of growth in communion with the Creator. If man uses the external nature and his own nature against rationality and its meanings, he destroys both nature and himself<sup>18</sup>.

*The paradox of the freedom of man.* Thus, the man is free, but the freedom of man is not God's freedom. God's freedom is absolute, because He is above all the created existence and He is also its Origin. Image of God, man is a personal created being, aware of itself and of the world that participates to God's attributes. That is why, on the one hand, he belongs to the reference system of the created world, but on the other hand he rises above this reference system, being able to decide and act freely in the world and upon the world. The freedom of man reflects God's freedom at the level of the created world. The flexible rationality of the world, full of multiple alternative virtualities, corresponds to the indefinite virtualities of reason, imagination and of man's creative and progressive power. But this flexible rationality receives a complete sense through the actualization of this flexibility, only if man guides himself in this work by ethical principles, responsibility towards the human community and towards God.

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<sup>16</sup> Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, 1:354.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>18</sup> Pr. Valer Bel, "Raționalitatea creștinei și libertatea omului", in *Medicii și Biserica*, ed. Mircea Gelu Buta (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2007), V:95.



Man guards and increases his freedom depending on the manner in which he professes it. For in the freedom of man there is also involved the possibility of the fall or the ability to state his freedom renouncing it in the same time<sup>19</sup>. The paradox of the freedom of man consists of the fact that man renounces his freedom, through his own freedom, because of pride. The devil impels but cannot force. Without the wish for self-aggrandizement and independence against God, man would not have fallen, despite of the devil's conspiracy. On the contrary, through the opposition against the evil, man strengthens himself in good and walks on the path of righteousness. The essence of the sin of all the people, who do nothing else than to repeat the original sin, consists of the insubordination towards God, distrust and ingratitude towards Him, originating from pride, which determines the wish for autonomy. Dominated by pride and the wish for autonomy, man wants to fulfil the meaning of his existence through himself and using his own means, without God's help, forgetting his condition of creature and setting God aside. That is why, the divine Revelation says that "Pride is the beginning of sin" (*Jesus Sirach 10:13*).

Forgetting about God, man becomes the slave of his own utopic projects, and even worse, he becomes the slave of his own passions, renouncing the "freedom and glory of the children of God" (*Romans 8:21*) precisely through the stating of his freedom. This because man is a theonomical creature, and so he finds the fulfilment of his existence only in the communion with God who grants him this fulfillment and the true freedom: "The Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (*2 Corinthians 3:17*).

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<sup>19</sup> Pr. Dumitru Popescu, *Iisus Hristos Pantocrator* (București: Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2005), 177.

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