

Creation as Sacrament: An Orthodox Contribution to the Cultivation of an Ecological Ethos

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Abstract: This article looks at the contribution of Dumitru Stăniloae’s theology of the sacramentality of creation for the cultivation of an ecological sensitivity, attending in particular to his ideas that the entire created reality is God’s gift to humanity and that the cosmos has a mysterious or apophatic dimension. This helps in developing a Christian ecology whose central idea is of non-possession or non-domestication of the world by human beings. Understanding the world thus is seen as world-affirming and a reminder that creation cannot be treated as mere utility, property, or raw material, but is always also a vehicle of grace and spiritualization.

Keywords: Dumitru Stăniloae; theology of creation; apophaticism; theological anthropology; grace; sacramentality

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The sacramentality of creation is one of the defining elements of the Orthodox Christian understanding of the world in relation to God and humanity. As John Chryssavgis has pointed out, “a central feature of the sacramental ethos of the Orthodox Church is the perception of creation as sacrament, a unique and fundamental image in contemporary religious experience.”¹ This is not, of course, to say that the theme of creation as a sacrament is absent from the theological experience of other Christian churches and traditions; it is rather a statement about its centrality in Orthodox Christianity. Given this sacramental dimension of the created world, John Zizioulas preferred to speak of human beings as “priests of creation,” which is a much more useful model to describe the adequate human approach to creation than that of “proprietor,” “steward,” or “possessor.”² The present article revisits the theme

1 John Chryssavgis, “Ecology and Mystery: Creation as Sacrament,” in id., *Creation as Sacrament: Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 85–108, here at 85.

2 John Zizioulas, “Proprietors or Priests of Creation?” in John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Folts (eds.), *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives*

of creation as sacrament in Orthodox Christianity, with particular focus on two of its theological aspects that help nourish the development of an ecological ethos:³ (i) creation as a vehicle of God's grace for humanity and as a gift, which prioritizes a form of interaction with the world that resists egoistic possession and exploitation; (ii) creation as a mystery that escapes control or mastery. In so doing, the article takes inspiration from Dumitru Stăniloae's vision of creation as sacrament, which has much to offer to our concern for an ecological human responsibility towards the world in which we live.⁴

1. Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993): A Sacramental Approach to Creation

Dumitru Stăniloae's academic career at the Faculties of Orthodox Theology in Sibiu and Bucharest in Romania spanned more than fifty years, providing Eastern Christianity with an impressive corpus of work that continues even today to serve as a source of inspiration for many theologians and scholars.⁵ The theme of sacramentality interested Stăniloae as early as the

on Environment, Nature, and Creation (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 163–71. See, also, John Chryssavgis and Nikolaos Asproulis (eds.), *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning and Ecological Ethos* (London: T&T Clark, 2021).

- 3 Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople is widely known for his ecological initiatives, which draw inspiration from the teachings of Orthodox Christianity on creation. See John Chryssavgis, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012); John Chryssavgis (ed.), *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
- 4 For a comprehensive introduction into Stăniloae's theology of the church and creation as sacraments, see Viorel Coman, "The Sacramentality of the Church in Dumitru Stăniloae's Theology," *Pro Ecclesia*, 27:2 (2018), 203–24; Viorel Coman, "Dumitru Stăniloae's Theology of the World: Reflections on the Margins of the Relationship between Humankind and Creation," *Communio Viatorum* 59:2 (2017), 189–209. See, also, the article of Ivana Noble on Stăniloae's theology of creation, "The Common Home," in id., *Essays in Ecumenical Theology II: Conversations with Orthodoxy* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 272–300. For an analysis of the way in which the Orthodox theology of creation could inspire an ecological vision defined by sustainable development, see Viorel Coman, "Sustainable Development: Insights from an Eastern Orthodox Theology of Creation," *Analecta of the Ukrainian Catholic University* 9 (2022), 165–182.
- 5 See, especially, the following doctoral dissertations on Dumitru Stăniloae's theology, which engage with several aspects of his thinking. Anne-Sophie Vivier-Mureșan, *Le dialogue de l'amour trinitaire. Perspectives ouvertes par Dumitru Stăniloae*, Col. Cogitatio Fidei 312 (Paris: Cerf, 2021); Viorel Coman, *Dumitru Stăniloae's Trinitarian Ecclesiology*:

1950s and 1960s, when his first articles on the seven sacraments, as well as on the Church as a sacrament, were published in several Romanian theological journals: “The Nature of the Sacraments according to the Three Main Christian Confessions” (1956);⁶ “The Number of Sacraments, the Relationship between Them, and the Question of the Sacraments Performed Outside the Church” (1956);⁷ “Of the Sacramental Aspect of the Church” (1966);⁸ and “The Mysterious Reality of the Church” (1984).⁹ Over time, Stăniloae’s approach to sacramentality expanded to include a vision of creation as a sacrament or mystery. Although present in his early writings in an embryonic form, the topic of creation as a sacrament found its most elaborated formulation in the 1976 article, “Creation as Gift and the Sacraments of the Church,”¹⁰ as well as in the third volume of his magnum opus *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, which was published in 1978–1979.¹¹

In the strict sense of the term, Stăniloae defines the sacraments of the Church as “holy works, which in a visible form impart to us Christ’s invisible grace or Christ himself in his saving actions in order to make us share in the perfection of his humanity or partakers of salvation.”¹² In other words,

Orthodoxy and the Filioque (Lanham – London – New York: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019); Dănuț Mănăstireanu, *A Perichoretic Model of the Church: The Trinitarian Ecclesiology of Dumitru Stăniloae* (Saarbrücken: LapLambert Academic Press, 2012); Radu Bordeianu, *Dumitru Stăniloae: An Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); Sorin-Constantin Șelaru, *L’Eglise, image du mystère de la Trinité: les accents ecclésiologiques de la théologie de Dumitru Stăniloae*, unpublished PhD thesis (Strasbourg: Faculty of Protestant Theology, Marc Bloch University, 2008); Ștefan Lupu, *La sinodalità e/o conciliarità, espressione dell’unità e della cattolicità della Chiesa in Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993)*, unpublished PhD thesis (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1999); and Ronald Roberson, *Contemporary Romanian Orthodox Ecclesiology: The Contribution of Dumitru Stăniloae and Younger Colleagues*, unpublished PhD thesis (Rome: Oriental Pontifical Institute, 1988).

6 Dumitru Stăniloae, “Ființa tainelor în cele trei confesiuni,” *Ortodoxia* 8:1 (1956), 3–28.

7 Dumitru Stăniloae, “Numărul tainelor, raportul dintre ele și problema tainelor din afara bisericii,” *Ortodoxia* 8:2 (1956), 191–215.

8 Dumitru Stăniloae, “Din aspectul sacramental al bisericii,” *Studii Teologice* 18:9–10 (1966), 531–62.

9 Dumitru Stăniloae, “Realitatea tainică a bisericii,” *Ortodoxia* 36:3 (1984), 415–20.

10 Dumitru Stăniloae, “Creația ca dar și tainele bisericii,” *Ortodoxia* 28:1 (1976), 10–29.

11 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. III, 3rd edition (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe, 2003 [1978–1979]), 7–34; English translation by Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer: *The Experience of God. Vol. V: The Sanctifying Mysteries* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), 1–25.

12 Stăniloae, “Ființa tainelor în cele trei confesiuni,” 4.

a sacrament is “a visible work that represents, contains, and communicates God’s grace. The sacrament appears to us as a symbol, sign, and icon, which not only represents the invisible reality but also embraces it, because whoever partakes of the symbol partakes *eo ipso* of the invisible reality that pervades that symbol.”¹³ However, Stăniloae claims that the notion of sacrament cannot be reduced to the seven sacraments of the Orthodox Church (Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, Priesthood, Confession, Marriage, and Holy Unction). On the contrary, it has a larger meaning than the seven sacraments in the sense that the entire creation, Christ, and the Church should be considered as sacraments or as having a sacramental dimension. In the larger sense of the word, the notion of sacraments refers to the union between human beings and Christ. Or, as Stăniloae emphasizes, “the general meaning of the sacrament is the union of God with the creature.”¹⁴

In light of this, Stăniloae speaks of the entire created world *as the first sacrament*. In so doing, he made an important contribution to the Orthodox discussions on the cosmic dimension of sacramentality, which touches every single aspect of the created existence. Other decisive Orthodox explorations in the field of the sacramentality of creation were made by Alexander Schmemmann, Philip Sherrard, and John Chryssavgis.¹⁵ In Catholicism, a revival of the topic of the sacramentality of creation occurred in the post-Vatican II era under the influence of theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner, Louis Chauvet, and Leonardo Boff,¹⁶ to name but a few. In the Anglican Church, David Brown is one of the most prominent theologians who has engaged with the question of the world as a sacrament.¹⁷ As ex-

13 Stăniloae, “Ființa tainelor în cele trei confesiuni,” 4.

14 Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. III, 8; Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. V, 3.

15 Alexander Schmemmann, “The World as Sacrament,” in Christopher Derrick (ed.), *The Cosmic Piety: Modern Man and the Meaning of the Universe* (New York: P. J. Kennedy and Sons, 1965), 119–30; Philip Sherrard, “The Sacrament,” in A. J. Philippou (ed.), *The Orthodox Ethos: Essays in Honour of the Centenary of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America* (Oxford: Holy Well Press, 1964), 133–39; and John Chryssavgis, “The World as Sacrament: Insights into an Orthodox Worldview,” *Pacifica* 10:1 (1997), 1–24. Chryssavgis has published many articles on the sacramentality of creation.

16 See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Philip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997). The work was published originally in Portuguese: *Ecologia: Grito da terra, grito dos pobres* (São Paulo: Ática, 1995).

17 See David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Id., “A Sacramental World: Why It Matters,” in Hans

pected, the revival of Western interest in the sacramentality of creation is the result of Catholic and Anglican theologians' struggle to overcome the post-Enlightenment gap between the sacred and the profane, acknowledging that there is "a likeness-in-the-very difference between that which sanctifies (God) and that which is sanctified (creation), between uncreated and created."¹⁸ The rediscovery of the sacramentality of creation was instrumental in the post-Vatican II switch in the Western theological understanding of the relationship between the Church and the world. This switch allowed for a more positive approach by the Church to the social, economic, cultural, and political developments of the modern era.

Stăniloae states that the union by grace between God and the created world needs to be broadly understood as "the most comprehensive mystery"¹⁹ or "the first sacrament"²⁰ in the larger sense of the word. Drawing inspiration from the Greek Fathers of the Church, especially from Maximus the Confessor and his theology of divine *logoi*, Stăniloae is of the opinion that both the cosmos and the human person should be regarded as sacraments, as the entire created reality can become a vehicle or channel of the divine presence, without losing its created status. The union between the divine and the cosmos, which is the basis of Stăniloae's vision of the world as an "all-embracing sacrament," "begins at the very act of creation and is destined to find its fulfilment through the movement of creation toward that state in which 'God is all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28)."²¹ The rich theological doctrine of *theosis* or deification so characteristic to Eastern Christianity²² is the framework that

Boersma and Matthew Levering (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 616–30.

18 Chryssavgis, "The World as Sacrament," 1.

19 Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. III, 8; Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. V, 3.

20 Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. III, 13; Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. V, 7.

21 Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. III, 9; Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. V, 3.

22 For an overview of how *theosis* is understood by Eastern Christianity, see Petre Maican, *Deification and Modern Orthodox Theology: Introduction to Contemporary Debates*, Brill's Research Perspectives in Theology (Leiden: Brill, 2023); Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos (eds.), *Faith, Reason, and Theosis, Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought* (Fordham, NY: Fordham University Press, 2023); and Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005); id., *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Emil Bartoș *Deification in Eastern*

shapes Stăniloae's notion of the world as a sacrament: the original vocation of the created world is to be deified by grace and become a vehicle of God's love. Throughout this process of cosmic deification, the human being holds a place apart, as every man and woman is called to deepen the *logoi* of creation and bring the world into God's hand as a gift to be returned to the Creator. Unfortunately, because of sin, the relation of the human being with the rest of creation has been distorted to the extent that the reactivation of the sacramentality of creation needs a new mediator, Christ: "Since God's union with the world has significantly been weakened through the human sin, *a new mystery* [sacrament] comes into being, that of an even closer union between the Creator and his creature. This is the mystery/sacrament of God's Incarnate Son."²³ Therefore, in Stăniloae's theology, the sacramentality of creation is intimately linked with both Christology and ecclesiology.

For Stăniloae, Jesus Christ, in whom divinity and humanity are united in the supreme and most intimate way, is *the new sacrament*.²⁴ This is to say that the communion between the uncreated and the created, which was brought into existence in the act of creation and was wounded by sin, was restored and emerged in God's Incarnate Son in a totally new way.²⁵ Because Christ embodies the perfect presence of God within the created reality, Stăniloae referred to the Incarnate Logos as *the original, primordial or fundamental sacrament*: all sacramentality derives from and expresses the

Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Stăniloae (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

- 23 Viorel Coman, "The Sacramentality of the Church in Dumitru Stăniloae's Theology," *Pro Ecclesia* 27:2 (2018), 203–24.
- 24 Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. III, 12; Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. V, 5.
- 25 Stăniloae subscribes to a Chalcedonian understanding of Christology. Based on the doctrine professed by the Council of Chalcedon (451), divine nature and human nature are united in the pre-existed hypostasis of the divine Logos without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation. Stăniloae developed his Christology in a series of works. Among them, the most important are the following: *Iisus Hristos și restaurarea omului* [Jesus Christ and the Restoration of the Humankind], *Opere Complete* 4 (Bucharest: Basilica, 2013 [1943]); *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. II, 3rd edition (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe, 2003 [1978–1979]). English translation by Ioan Ionita: *The Experience of God. Vol. II: The Person of Jesus Christ as God and Savior* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011); and *Iisus Hristos, lumina lumii și îndumnezeitorul omului* [Jesus Christ, the Light of the World and the Deifier of the Human Being], *Opere Complete* 6 (Bucharest: Basilica, 2020 [1993]). His Christology is also inspired by the theology of Maximus the Confessor.

sacrament of Christ. Said differently, Christ represents the *root sacrament*, the sacrament *par excellence*, or the source from whom all sacramentality comes: “The original sacrament of Christianity is Jesus Christ, who comprises the Son of God under a visible form [...] Christ himself is a sacrament, a mystery, namely the fundamental sacrament and the basis of all other sacraments.”²⁶

In Stăniloae’s understanding, Christ as a sacrament extends his deified body into humanity through the Church, which is a sort of *incarnatio continua*. The Church is, therefore, “the social extension of the Risen Christ”²⁷ or as “the communitarian Christ who has to walk, together with Christ, on the path of the personal Christ.”²⁸ That being so, Stăniloae speaks of the Church as *the third sacrament in the larger sense of the world*, since it “is nothing more than the extension of the mystery of Christ; all of it is filled with the mystery of Christ.”²⁹ The sacramentality of the Church is anchored in the first sacrament (the sacrament of creation), but it is brought into existence through the primordial and original sacrament, God’s Incarnate Son.

After this outline of Stăniloae’s approach to the sacramentality of creation in connection to Christology and ecclesiology, I now turn in this article to the analysis of two key aspects of his vision of the world as a sacrament: (i) creation as a gift; and (ii) creation as a mystery. They both unlock insights into how the theme of creation as a sacrament serves the cultivation of an ecological ethos in Eastern Christianity. It is important to say that Stăniloae’s reflections on the sacramentality of creation were not shaped by the discussions on the ecological crisis that affects our lives today.³⁰ Although his reflections on creation as a sacrament have much to offer to the contemporary

26 Stăniloae, “Ființa tainelor în cele trei confesiuni,” 4.

27 Dumitru Stăniloae, “Sinteza ecleziologica,” *Studii Teologice* 7:5–7 (1955), 267–84, at 267. This article contains one of the first ecclesiological reflections published by Stăniloae.

28 Stăniloae, “Sinteza ecleziologica,” 268. See, also, Coman, *Dumitru Stăniloae’s Trinitarian Ecclesiology*, 134–40. For a more critical approach to the understanding of the Church as a sort of *incarnatio continua*, see the following article by the French Dominican theologian Yves Congar, “Dogme christologique et ecclésiologie: vérité et limites d’un parallèle,” in id., *Sainte Église: études et approches ecclésiologiques*, Unam Sanctam 41 (Paris: Cerf, 1963), 69–104. Stăniloae was equally critical of a theology that tends to identify Christology with ecclesiology.

29 Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. III, 12; Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. V, 5.

30 See Coman, “Dumitru Stăniloae’s Theology of the World,” 193–94. See, also, Charles Miller, *The Gift of the World: An Introduction to the Theology of Dumitru Stăniloae* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

debates on ecology and anticipated a few solutions to them, this was not the main concern of his theological writings. The debates on ecology in Orthodox theology emerged a few decades after Stăniloae's explorations in the field of creation and sacramentality.

2. Creation as A Gift: The World Cannot be Entirely Domesticated

The vision of the world as God's gift to humanity is one of the many ramifications of Săniloae's theology of creation as a sacrament. What stands at the center of this vision is the idea that the whole of creation is a vehicle of God's love and grace, as well as a material and spiritual gift to be gratefully returned to the supreme Creator, the ultimate source of the gift. Three fundamental implications derive from such a claim. The first is that the materiality of the world and its constitutive elements function as a medium of God's presence, that is, as the place of the most real encounter and communication between the divine and human beings. The world becomes a sort of language addressed by God to us. It becomes God's speech to humanity; in other words, a form of revelation. As Stăniloae points out, "[t]hrough the world as a gift and word, God maintains a dialogue with men."³¹

Stăniloae's idea that the world is the medium of God's communication with the world comes very close to what the Anglican theologian, Rowan Williams, emphasized in one of the chapters of his book *Faith in the Public Square*: "creation is itself an act of communication, a form of language... Creation itself is an act of divine self-giving, the bestowing of God's activity in and through what is not God. In other words, despite sin, corruption, and death, the world in all its diversity stands in front of us as a revelation of the Creator's beauty, love, and generosity, and as a means of receiving something of the life of God."³²

The second implication is that the idea of gift implies circularity between the source of the gift (the giver: God), the gift itself (the world), and the

31 Dumitru Stăniloae, "Orthodoxy and the World: An Orthodox Comment," *Sobornost* 6:5 (1972): 297–300, at 298. See, also, the English article by Stăniloae, which represents a synthesis of his understanding of the world as a gift: Dumitru Stăniloae, "The Cross on the Gift of the World," *Sobornost* 6:2 (1971): 96–110. This is one of the very few articles that Stăniloae published in English.

32 Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 177.

one who receives the gift (the human person). The movement is initiated by God, the origin of the gift, who offers the created world to human beings as a sign of love and affection to be shepherded, explored, and transfigured. Humans receive the gift with gratitude and return it to God; but the gift is not returned in its initial state but creatively transformed.³³ This act of transformation does not mean an egoistic and narcissistic interaction with the world that exploits the riches of creation. On the contrary, it is a Eucharistic approach to creation that makes the world reflect in itself the beauty and splendor of the Creator.

The third of the implications is that the world is a gift offered by God to all of us. In this sense, the world is not an individual object that should create competition and antagonism between the receivers of the gift (individuals or nations). If the world becomes such an object, then it leads to countless forms of injustice, discrimination, and even war. The world is meant by God as a common gift to be shared and given in love and respect for the others and the gift itself. It is not something to be possessed and exploited for egoistic purposes. In other words, nature and the entire cosmos, with all their riches and resources, are not a property which human beings can rule over at will. Creation is ultimately a gift to all of us. It traces its source of existence to and is ultimately dependent upon someone who is infinitely higher than all of us.

The vision of creation as a gift of God helps the cultivation of an ecological ethos in the sense that it pushes us to approach the world in a way that is no longer driven by sinful passions such as greed, egocentricity, self-interest, and the instinct of possession. The idea that the world is not an object for exploitation but God's gift to us should motivate people to control their desires so that they do not over-dominate our lives to the extent that our interaction with the world is not driven by our egoistic feelings and intentions.³⁴

33 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. I, 3rd edition (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2003 [1978]), 354–60; English translation by Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer: *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. 2: *The World: Creation and Deification* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), 21–27. See, also, Miller, *The Gift of the World*, 58–64, and Coman, “Sustainable Development,” 171.

34 Purification from passions is the first stage of the ascetical process in Eastern Christianity, which is followed by illumination, and deification. See, for example, Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetica și mistica ortodoxă: Purificarea, Iluminarea, Desăvârșirea*, Opere Complete 13 (Bucharest: Editura Basilica, 2019). The original version of this book was published in 1982. English translation: *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the*

In a way, one can say that the theological vision behind the notion of the world as a gift motivates a praxis of self-questioning of our hidden agendas guided by the appetite for control, exploitation, mastery, and self-interest. The world as a gift and sacrament indicates that, when freed from our egoistic and sinful struggle to possess and dominate the rest of creation, the human person has the capacity and vocation to interact with the world as a steward, guardian, and priest of creation, who imprints the gift with a human creative vision and refers it back to God. When the world is understood as a gift and sacrament, nature or creation is not simply raw material whose use is limitless regardless of the consequences. Nature is not simply a source of exploitation “to produce goods, gain profit, and achieve economic growth.”³⁵ It is also a sacred reality, a palpable mystery of God’s presence, whose beauty and harmony point towards the loving Creator.

The understanding of creation as a gift does not exclude development and the transformation of the world. However, this development treats the world as a gift and sacrament in all its aspects and manifestations. Therefore, it is not a social, economic, cultural, and political development that damages creation and perpetuates its rapacious exploitation by human beings; on the contrary, it is a reconciliatory form of development, which considers and promotes the well-being of creation. Furthermore, it is a development that persuades people to treat creation with respect and thanksgiving, acknowledging the fact that the survival of the gift means the survival of the recipients of the gift and their future generations.

3. Creation as a Mystery: The Preservation of the World’s Freedom

One of the particularities of the Romanian theological language is that its vocabulary includes three terms to express the notion of sacrament: a) *taină*: from the Slavic word ‘*taina*’; b) *sacrament*: a word of Latin origin; c) *mister*: a noun with Greek roots. Although in his early articles on sacraments and the Church’s sacramentality, Stăniloae made use of all these terms without any reservation and distinction, after 1964, he preferred, however, the word

Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar, trans. Jerome Newvile and Otilia Kloos (South Canaan, PA: Tikhon Seminary Press, 2002).

35 Chryssavgis and Asproulis (eds.), *Priests of Creation*, 62.

‘*taină*’ to any other notion.³⁶ The choice made by Stăniloae was not without theological implications, as the notion of ‘*taină*’ denotes both the sacramental dimension of the world and its apophatic contours or mysterious contours. As Stăniloae points out, even though the world has a rationality that the human being is invited to explore, the world remains an inexhaustible ‘light’.³⁷ For Stăniloae, “[t]he cosmos is a mystery (*taină*); the world around us is a mystery; my own person is a mystery and my fellow human beings are a mystery.”³⁸

For Stăniloae, apophaticism is not only a way of approaching the divine, but also an epistemological category that applies to both anthropology and cosmology. The human person and the world are a mystery. As a matter of fact, it is not only God’s existence that is not exhausted by theoretical formulation and conceptualization; the human person and the rest of creation are also irreducible to words and exceed acts of imaginative and conceptual mapping. Therefore, any attempt to understand the world can only be an exercise in approximation, because the reality behind all such talk and conceptualization escapes easy naming and categorization. In other words, the world remains a mystery, irreducible to any system of thought and complete domestication. The relevance of apophatic cosmology for an ecological hermeneutics is manifold.

Apophaticism is, so to say, the guardian of the freedom and mystery of the world, not in the sense that creation is totally and radically unreachable; but in the sense that apophaticism is a form of resistance to any strategy to possess what in this form of otherness, which is the world, should always

36 Coman, “The Sacramentality of the Church,” 212.

37 See, for example, Stăniloae’s rich reflections on the rationality of the cosmos in the first volume of his Dogmatic Theology. His theology of the world’s rationality has been influenced by Maximus the Confessor’s ideas. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. I, 3rd edition (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe, 2003 [1978]), 360–74; English translation by Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer: Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God. Vol. V: The Sanctifying Mysteries* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), 27–43.

38 Dumitru Stăniloae, “The Mystery of the Church,” in Gennadios Limouris (ed.), *Church, Kingdom, World: The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 50–56, here at 50. See, also, the article by Dumitru Stăniloae, “Dinamismul creației în Biserică” [The Dynamism of Creation in the Church], *Ortodoxia* 29:3–4 (1977), 281–91, especially 285. Also, Paul Evdokimov, “Nature,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18 (1965), 1–22. Evdokimov speaks of all creation as “secretly sacramental” and “as a conductor of divine grace, the vehicle of divine energies.” Although limited due to its created nature, the world has an apophatic dimension because of its relationship with God, who makes himself known via the elements of the created world.

escape our grasp, monopoly, and exploitation. What the apophaticism of creation teaches us is that the reality of the world cannot be captured, entirely named, and pigeonholed to fit our restrictive categories and consumerist agendas. The apophaticism of the world is the very condition and possibility of its existence, freedom, and manifestation.

Apophaticism prioritizes, therefore, a form of interaction with the world that destabilizes our habit of fully objectifying the rest of creation and makes room to apprehend it in its own terms and conditions. The mystery of the world serves as a reminder that any interaction with God's creation must be a hospitable encounter, which does not confine the elements of the world in a tight straitjacket that does not allow them to breathe but welcomes and brings out the unexpected and the unforeseen dimensions of creation. The awareness of the apophatic side of the created world is a celebration of the unfamiliar and strange, which invites us to interrupt our old habits of thinking and to destabilize our secured narratives about the world in order to embrace the new, the unthinkable, the uncomfortable, and even the subversive truth the world might confront us with: the world is a mysterious reality that escapes our domination and domestication. The apophatic dimension of creation nourishes an ecological ethos in the sense that it celebrates the mystery of creation and refuses to see the world as a pure raw material for consumption and exploitation. There is something more in creation than its material dimension.

Conclusions

This article has reflected on the contribution of Dumitru Stăniloae's theology of the sacramentality of creation for the cultivation of an ecological sensitivity, particular attention being offered to his ideas that the entire created reality is God's gift to humanity and that the cosmos has a mysterious or apophatic dimension. What a theology of creation as God's gift to humanity and a vision of the apophatic dimension of creation offer to the development of a Christian ecology is the idea of non-possession or non-domestication of the world by human beings. Two main conclusions are worth being mentioned.

When the world is understood as God's gift to all of us, it is primarily the idea that human beings do not have the right of an unlimited exploitation of creation that emerges with great emphasis, which sanctions any human

tendency towards an absolute possession of creation and its transformation into an unexhausted source of goods to satisfy our wants and needs. In other words, a vision of creation as a gift of God to us calls into question all our interactions with the world that are guided by sinful agendas in the pursuit of egocentric and individualistic goal. A theology of creation as a gift to us encourages our liberation from an excessive, destructive, and selfish attachment to this world, which confuses the creation with an unlimited reservoir of resources and riches to satisfy individual pleasures and desires. The understanding of the creation as a gift of God is world-affirming precisely because it defends the right of creation not to be reduced to a passive object to be monopolized by an individual appetite.

When the world is understood as a reality of an apophatic nature, its mysterious dimension is a reminder that the whole of creation cannot be treated as mere utility, property, or raw material. It is also a vehicle of grace and spiritualization. This vision promotes the adoption of a human lifestyle that respects the right of creation to non-domestication and freedom. The mysterious and apophatic contours of the world's sacramentality encourage human persons to control their tendencies to control, manipulate, and domesticate the rest of creation. This is to say that any human impulse to approach creation with greed, selfishness, and obsession of power and control goes against the idea that the world is a mysterious channel of grace, not a place to be arrogantly and stubbornly exploited, devoured, and conquered.

The ecological crisis that confronts our world today is also a spiritual crisis, which requires a radical change in our interaction with the rest of creation, a new and sustainable way of being in the world; no longer as destructive agents of God's creation but as loving and respectful indwellers of a world that has been given to us as a gift, as a mysterious vehicle of God's grace. A theology of the sacramentality of creation and its many ramifications is crucial for the cultivation of a relationship with the world that treats it with dignity and respect. The goal of the article was to identify the way in which Dumitru Stăniloae's understanding of creation as a sacrament can make an important contribution in this direction.

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