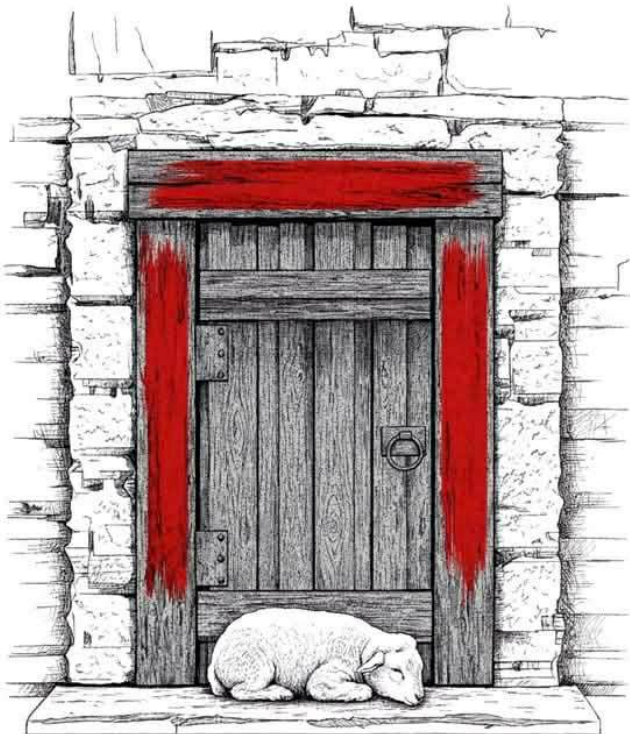


Alexandru Lazăr

Toward the Restoration of All Things

*Theological Essays
on Human Fragility and Salvation*



Presa Universitară Clujeană

Alexandru Lazăr

•

Toward the Restoration of All Things

Theological Essays on Human Fragility and Salvation

Alexandru Lazăr

Toward the Restoration of All Things

*Theological Essays
on Human Fragility and Salvation*

Presa Universitară Clujeană

2026

Referenți științifici:

Lect. univ. dr. Raluca Iulia Bancoș

Lect. univ. dr. Flavius-Cristian Mărcău

ISBN 978-606-37-2985-0

© 2026 Autorul volumului. Toate drepturile rezervate.
Reproducerea integrală sau parțială a textului, prin orice
mijloace, fără acordul autorului, este interzisă și se pedep-
sește conform legii.

Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai
Presa Universitară Clujeană
Director: Codruța Săcelean
Str. Hasdeu nr. 45-51
400371 Cluj-Napoca, România
Tel./fax: (+40)-264-597.401
E-mail: editura@ubbcluj.ro
<http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/>

Contents

Foreword

An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Human Fragility & Salvation – Iulia Medveschi, PhD.....	8
--	---

Author's Foreword

A Word on Fragility and Hope	16
------------------------------------	----

Chapter I – Articles

I. Human Fragility and Theological Anthropology .20

<i>Anthropology in the Hymns of St. Ephraim the Syrian....</i>	20
<i>Anthropo-theological Fragility: Soteriological Excursion and Dogmatic Consequences</i>	44
<i>The Unity of Man and the Cosmos in the Light of the Kingdom of God.....</i>	77

II. Salvation and the Hope of Restoration89

<i>The Actuality of Apocatastasis: Between God's Love and Human Freedom</i>	89
<i>Universal Salvation. New Opinions in the Contemporary Theology</i>	103

<i>Eschatological Fire as a Soteriological Category: Salvation Through Fire and the Hope of Universal Restoration in Patristic Theology.....</i>	<i>129</i>
<i>The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the "century of universal salvation". Possible causes of the development of Christian universalism</i>	<i>143</i>
<i>The Ecumenical and Missionary Importance of Asceticism as a Response to Universal Salvation ...</i>	<i>168</i>
<i>Dogmatic Foundations for Praying for the Salvation of All People.....</i>	<i>190</i>

Chapter II – Book Reviews

Andrew Hronich, <i>Once Loved Always Loved: The Logic of Apokatastasis,</i> Wipf and Stock, 2023, 400 p.	206
Theodor Damian, <i>The Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus: Discovering a New Face of His Personality,</i> Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022, 130 p.	209
Chad Bahl (Ed.), <i>Deconstructing Hell: Open and Relational Responses to the Doctrine of Eternal Conscious Torment,</i> SacraSage Press, 2023, 563 p.	216
Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu, <i>Propovăduire, teologie, spiritualitate și mesaj,</i> Reîntregirea Publishing House, Alba Iulia, 2025, 156 p.....	220

David W. Congdon (Ed.),
*Varieties of Christian Universalism:
Exploring Four Views*,
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing
Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2023, 175 p.223

Robin Parry, Ilaria Ramelli,
*A Larger Hope?, Volume 2: Universal Salvation
from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century*,
Cascade Books, 2019, 326 p.226

Afterword

Afterword on Human Fragility and Salvation
from a Socio-Political and Post-modern approach –
Dragoş Şamşudean, Teaching Assistant, PhD230

Bibliography236

Foreword:

An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Human Fragility & Salvation

The volume *Toward the Restoration of All Things. Theological essays on human fragility and salvation* pinpoints the presence of divine grace as essential for salvation and spiritual growth. Sacred blessings regenerate the human soul and empowers righteous living. The eight texts and five reviews put forward by Father Alexandru Lazăr highlight that human restraint – both moral and bodily – is not merely a flaw but the very context in which salvation occurs. Key themes include: the embracing of vulnerability as a pathway to devotion to God, Christ's identification with human suffering, and salvation as healing (Theosis) rather than a court judgement.

Part I – Human Fragility and Theological Anthropology

Songs of worship often function as a musical, theological anthropology, framing humanity as inherently weak, confined, and inclined to sin (fragility) while

simultaneously enjoying immense dignity as man is created in the Image of God (*Imago Dei*). Hymns bridge this paradoxical situation by focusing on human reliance on divine grace, the Incarnation of Christ as solidarity with human weaknesses, and the hope of restoration. In the first part of the volume, Father Alexandru Lazăr examines the concept of *Anthropology in the Hymns of St. Ephraim the Syrian*. Rich in vivid biblical imagery and metaphors (the Odes) appear as a blend of Doctrine and Devotion, functioning as "musical sermons" to instruct the faithful upon the body-soul unity (while the first is not seen as an infernal penitentiary), the senses of salvation and free will and responsibility. The *Hymns of Paradise* focus upon the Genesis account, considering Eden as an archetype of the final, heavenly Paradise. The theological tradition, prominent in Syriac Christianity outlines that Adam and Eve lost the luminous "Robe of Glory" which can only be restored through Christ (baptism and an ascetic life). After all, according to St. Ephraim the Syrian, life is depicted as a journey between the Primary one – the Lost Paradise and the Eschatological Paradise – the Found one.

Father Alexandru Lazăr assumes that our Lord undertook *human fragility*, transforming it from a source of wretchedness into a means for salvation. Moreover, Christianity interprets this state as an essential condition that, through Christ's Incarnation and sacrifice, man moves from a state of *hopeless gloominess* to a profound opportunity for divine mercy, communion,

and redemption. While fragility often conveys a negative, aging-related undertone in medical/social contexts (weakness or scarce health), in a theological context, *letting oneself be frail*, is often viewed as a form of unveiled honesty. It implies showing the "soft" side, acknowledging that one is easily wounded or exhausted, needing God's care *throughout various and sundry human experiences*. As such, the author proposes a shift toward embracing fragility rather than glorifying self-empowerment, engaging directly with suffering, restraints, and brokenness as Jesus did. In the article, *Anthropo-theological Fragility: Soteriological Excursion and Dogmatic Consequences*, fragility appears as a key element leading to love and receptivity, since God is outlined as a compassionate Father, intimately aware of human being necessities and ready to provide shelter. Christ's Fragility is looked at through four key sub-disciplines of Christian Systematic Theology: *Christology* (Christ's self-emptying when He added humanity to His divinity, assuming human fragility), *Mariology* (Virgin Mary endorses the historical, human, and fragile reality of Christ), *Pneumatology* (the Holy Spirit empowered the Fragility of Christ's flesh), and *Eschatology* (focusing on the Second Coming of Christ, regarded as the final triumph over sin and death).

In the last part of this section, the author analyses-in-depth *The unity of man and the cosmos in the light of the Kingdom of God*. Theological end-times (eschatology) looks upon the world's end as a shift from a transitory

realm, from a tangible world in which complex emotional states of joy and sadness coexist (towards) an absolute, eternal state. It signifies the disintegration of sin-rooted discontent (spiritual emptiness) and the establishment of divine joy (The Kingdom of God). This final state represents total communion with God. According to Saint Symeon the New Theologian the observable universe, when viewed in the light of the Kingdom of God, is beyond being simply material, but rather a dynamic manifestation of God's wisdom. He envisions creation being transfigured by divine, uncreated light—a personal experience of the Holy Spirit's presence that sheds light upon the intellect, ignites spiritual fervor and initiates a living communion. Further, Alexandru Lazăr points within this study the distinction between history and *eschatology*. The first is understood as a *universal process* enclosing all human events side-by-side with non-recurring incidents. At the opposite pole, eschatology is loaded by providential meaning. It puts an endpoint to history, moving straightforward to the ultimate goal: the bodily resurrection of the dead and the Final, righteous Judgment of Christ, resulting in eternal life (Kingdom of God) or separation (Hell). The state of Happiness or Unhappiness shall drift based on the fruits of human actions and deeds – (results) of our behaviors, thoughts, and words. While the Kingdom of God is open toward peace and redemption, Hell may be best set out as an *inner split between man and God*, arising from disobedience, greed, envy, or pride.

Part II – Salvation and the Hope of Restoration

In the second part of the volume, the author tackles an ancient, problematic concept, not a modern invention, known as Universal Salvation. The ambition of the author moves beyond mere description or summaries to uncover underlying themes, biases, and limitations, aiming to understand "why" (it is popular in a postmodern society) rather than just "what" is Universal Salvation. Early proponents like Origen speculated on the restoration of all things, broader heresy (which included pre-existence of souls) and the general idea of universal salvation. The ideas were firmly rejected by mainstream Orthodoxy, remaining a highly controversial, largely non-dogmatic topic in Orthodox Soteriology. Father Alexandru Lazăr evaluates critically the theory of *Universalism* – a multifaceted concept (or best said) a fleeting fad (which) become more accepted, liked and widely adopted by the younger generation since 1980 (notably in the United States of America). Even more shocking/alarming is the fact that this *do-nothing faith* overlooking the necessity of repentance had backing support among Christian theologians since 1960. Bottom line, *apokatastasis*, a Greek term understood as "restoration" or "return" proposes that all *created beings – including humanity, damned souls, and demonic forces* – will be reconciled with God and saved. Nowadays, it is generally appraised as a private opinion, not possessing the status of an official Church teaching. Key tensions encompass the inconsistency between universalist hope – a *delirious fantasy*

and biblical narratives of eternal judgment, the apparent necessity of free will versus a coerced salvation, and challenges to the necessity of Christ's atonement.

Postmodernism, mass media communication channels shaped the younger's generation spirituality by disapproving absolute, universal truths in favor of individual, experiential, and pluralistic beliefs. The rising generation habitually "picks and chooses" religious concepts, viewing faith as a subjective "truth for me" rather than sticking to the essential doctrines, found in Scriptures and Traditions. Thus, superficial or cheap love neglects divine justice and righteousness. Many Americans and Europeans view hell not as a place, but as a "state of self-exclusion" from divinity. A stronger emphasis on God's love and mercy has diminished the appeal of a God who punishes eternally, leading to open questions about whether an omnibenevolent God would allow eternal torment. Father Alexandru Lazăr states that Universalism has historically given rise to significant flows ("houses" or splits) between liberal and conservative branches of Christianity, particularly in 18th-19th century United States of America. Key quarrels arose between Universalists and Calvinists regarding eternal punishment, while internal splits created "Restorationist" (limited punishment) and "Universalist" (no hell). In the article entitled: *The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the "century of universal salvation"*. Possible causes of the development of Christian universalism, Alexandru Lazăr illustrates a *failed consensus* on

universalism upon scholars. As for example, the dialogue between David Bentley Hart and Michael McClymond proved to be just an unproductive exchange characterized by emotional arguments, logical fallacies, or a lack of good faith, leading to polarization, hostility, and wasted time rather than resolution. Both scholars brought up a deep divide over the nature of God, with Hart arguing that a truly loving, omnipotent God cannot allow eternal damnation, making universal salvation mandatory. Conversely, McClymond argues that this view denies human free will, contradicts biblical scripture on judgment, and shares roots with ancient gnostic heresy.

The Adamic and Christological unity of humanity refers to two distinct but tied forms of solidarity: all humans are naturally kindred under Adam in a mutual fallen nature (Ancestral Sin), while believers are spiritually unified under the Son of God, the "New Adam," in a redeemed humanity. Adam – represents our shared wicked nature and death, while our Saviour embodies a shared, renewed life and righteousness. Father Alexandru Lazăr assumes that praying for the salvation of all is an expression of hope and love, not a figurative solution that forces free will. It acts as an intercessory cry for God to soften hearts and lead people to repentance. In Orthodox theology, "salvation through fire" signifies the definitive, public event at Christ's Second Coming where humanity is resurrected and judgment is undergone based on the believer's life (deeds, works, state of their hearts). It is not a

temporary "purgatory" for purification (as in Catholic Theology), but rather the lighted, revealing presence of God that consumes trespass works, while the person is saved "as through fire" – narrowly, through the destruction of their attachment to sins. The Eastern Orthodox Church sees this:

1. trial through a therapeutic, healing lens (Clement of Alexandria),
2. an "eschatological baptism" – that cleanses the soul of evil and sin-based passions accumulated in life (St. Gregory of Nyssa) and
3. the "purifying fire" of God not as ruthless cruelty, but as the intense, transformative experience of divine love and light (St. Maximus the Confessor).

Toward the Restoration of All Things. Theological essays on human fragility and salvation by Father Alexandru Lazăr is a highly coherent, interdisciplinary approach exploring how the human person is transformed through divine encounter. The essays stand at the intersection of fragility and the quest for salvation, which is often interpreted as finding meaning in human limitation. The work highlights that salvation involves both liberation from sin and union with God, grounded in both historical tradition and modern experience. It emphasizes that grace works within the human condition rather than simply eradicating it.

Iulia Medveschi PhD
Babeş-Bolyai University

Author's Foreword

A Word on Fragility and Hope

Behold, I am making all things new!
(Revelation 21:5)

The studies gathered in this volume were written at different moments and in different contexts, yet they share a common theological concern. Each of them, in its own way, reflects on the fragile condition of the human person and on the hope of salvation that permeates Christian thought. For this reason, although they address diverse themes, from patristic anthropology and the relationship between humanity and the cosmos to contemporary debates surrounding universal salvation, they converge toward a single horizon: the mystery of the restoration of all things.

Human fragility has always been a central theme of Christian theology. The human being stands at the intersection of greatness and vulnerability, called to communion with God yet marked by limitation, suffering, and freedom¹. Patristic writers often contemplated

¹ Alexandru Lazăr, *Fragilitatea Ființei. Premisă sensibilă a Îndumnezeirii*, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2024.

this paradox with remarkable depth. In their vision, fragility was not merely a sign of weakness but also the place where divine grace could manifest itself most profoundly. The reflections presented in the first part of this volume attempt to revisit this anthropological dimension, particularly through the theological poetry of St. Ephraim the Syrian and through broader considerations regarding the unity of the human person with the cosmos in the light of the Kingdom of God.

The second part of the volume turns toward the horizon of salvation and restoration. The question of apocatastasis, understood as the hope for the ultimate restoration of creation, has accompanied Christian theology since its earliest centuries. It has been the subject of intense debate, reflection, and reinterpretation throughout history. Rather than offering definitive answers, the studies included here aim to examine the theological foundations, historical developments, and contemporary discussions surrounding this theme. They explore the relationship between divine love and human freedom, the meaning of eschatological purification, and the possibility of praying for the salvation of all people within the framework of dogmatic theology.

The title of the volume, *Toward the Restoration of All Things*, intentionally reflects a direction rather than a conclusion, evoking the biblical hope of the "times of the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). Theological reflection often moves within the space between mystery and hope. It does not claim to exhaust the depth of divine revelation but seeks to approach it with humility, intellectual honesty, and fidelity to the tradition of the Church. In this sense, the essays

collected here represent modest contributions to an ongoing conversation within contemporary theology.

At the same time, theology is never merely an intellectual exercise. Behind every concept stands the living drama of the human person, fragile, searching, wounded, and yet capable of hope. The reflections gathered in these pages were written with the awareness that theological thought ultimately serves a deeper purpose: to illuminate, however faintly, the mystery of God's love for His creation. If there is a thread that silently unites these studies, it is the conviction that no human fragility is beyond the horizon of divine mercy. The Christian tradition has always spoken of salvation not only as a doctrinal affirmation, but also as a promise, a hope that stretches beyond the visible limits of history, rooted in the belief that God "was pleased... through Him to reconcile all things to Himself" (Colossians 1:19–20). In this hope, theology finds both its humility and its courage.

For in the end, every theological word remains only a small step toward a mystery greater than our understanding: the mystery that the God who created the world in love does not abandon His creation, but patiently leads it toward its healing and fulfillment. And perhaps theology itself is nothing other than this quiet journey of thought and faith, *toward the restoration of all things*.

Archdeacon Alexandru Lazăr PhD C.
„Isidor Todoran” Doctoral School of Theology,
Babeş-Bolyai University

Chapter I

Articles

I. Human Fragility and Theological Anthropology

Anthropology in the hymns of St. Ephraim the Syrian

1. Introduction

Working not with concepts but with images, metaphors and comparisons, St. Ephraim embodies in his hymns Siro-Aramaic Christianity, of Judeo-Christian origin, perfectly. Intended for liturgical use, St. Ephraim's "hymns" are grouped into thematic cycles: on Easter, on the Nativity and the Presentation of the Lord, on the Church, on Paradise, on faith and against heresies. Their division is often similar, the same hymn being able to encompass a variety of themes and aspects in a remarkable, polyphonic symbolic coherence: exegetical, theological, liturgical, and ascetical. A specific feature of the Ephraimian "hymns" is their profound intimacy with the world of the Holy Scriptures, both in its literality and in its profound images and symbols.

The reason for choosing this theme is due to the rich theological and poetic experience of the "hymns" of St. Ephraim prove to be extremely topical and

generous. If the genius specific to the Latin West lies in the sphere of law, and that of the Greek East in that of philosophy, then that of the Syriac East lies in the sphere of poetry. The theology that is present in the writings of St. Ephrem influenced worship, liturgical music, the most important connections being in the biblical and exegetical fields. The main features of Syriac Christian spirituality are "asceticism", "symbolism", "individualism" (emphasis on personal experience). The hymns of St. Ephraim capture through their theology a remarkable balance, which is put forward through poetic and symbolic formulas, between the fundamental paradoxical polarities of our Christian faith, which in Greek or Latin Christianity will always tend towards conflictual drifts. The theology of the hymns of St. Ephraim will make him a true ancestor of Roman Melodious, and the greatest poet of the patristic age.

Therefore, the object of the work is to present the theological-symbolic depth of the thought of St. Ephraim. The hymns of the saint express most obviously the astonishing synthesis of the most specific symbolic elements of Semitic-Aramaic Christianity. St. Ephrem assimilates and reinterprets through his theological thought, biblical motifs but also mythical, Jewish, and Judeo-Christian representations.

Regarding the bibliographical material used, it is necessary to specify that this scientific work is inspired by specialized books known in the academic theological environment and argues its content with the statements of established theologians of the Orthodox Church and beyond. In this regard, we mention the

names of some of them: Jean-Claude Larchet, Georgios, Andrew Louth, Tomáš Špidlík, Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, Panayotis Nellas, Dumitru Stăniloae and Ilarion Alfeyev. Professor Sebastian Brock, the Syriac scholar who today dominates the field of Syrian Christian studies, and has a special place in our thesis. In his scholarly work he introduces us to both the theological richness specific to the Syriac tradition and the historical root causes that have caused the Syriac East to be left out of the consideration. Another important work that helped us in the writing of this work is that of Costion Nicolescu, entitled "Christ – the Shelter, the Garment, the Food, the Doctor and the Healer of man and mankind on the path of salvation".

Without claiming to exhaust this topic of great theological significance, we consider that the thesis entitled: "Anthropology in the hymns of St. Ephraim the Syrian" can be characterized as novel in that it addresses topics of great theological depth, trying to develop the theological ideas present in the writings of St. Ephraim the Syrian.

2. The Syriac space, cradle of Christian poetic-musical theology

It is a platitude that we cannot talk about music without mentioning Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, and others. They were not only instrumentalists and composers, but also outstanding theorists. To talk about church music without considering the Syriac space is from the start a seriously incomplete approach.

The 20th century has the great merit of bringing back to life the ethos of a Christianity long ignored. Syriac Christianity, the so-called Syro-Aramaic vein, is of incomparable liturgical richness and of very beautiful poetic expression. Moreover, most of the Eastern Church's melodies (singers, composers) are of Syriac origin. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Church History*¹ limits the interpretation of the history of Christianity to the Greco-Roman world. Since then, this serious amputation of the Syriac Christian tradition has extended to the dawn of modernity. It was the English school (Oxford) and the French school (Paris) that rehabilitated this forgotten tradition².

The Syrian fathers wrote musical compositions, but especially poetic theology. It is enough, perhaps, to mention a few names³: Saint Ephraim the Syrian (celebrated on 28th January), Saint John Damascene (celebrated on the 5th of December), Saint Andrew Chrysostom (celebrated on 4 July), Saint Cosmas the Melodist (celebrated on 12 October), Saint Sophronius of Jerusalem (celebrated on 11th of March) and, last but not least, Saint Roman the Melodist (celebrated on the 1st of October).

¹ Ioannis G. Kourembelis, *Hristologia la Sfântul Roman Melodul și importanța ei soteriologică*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2018, pp. 21-23.

² Françoise Briquel Chatonnet and Muriel Debié, *Le monde Syriaque sous les routes d'un christianisme ignoré* Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2018.

³ Nicolas Lossky, *Teologia muzicii liturgice: o perspectivă ortodoxă*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2013, p. 51.

3. Christian Anthropology – Composite Nature

According to the revelation of God (Acts 2:7; Acts 18:27), and the interpretations given by the Holy Fathers, God created man with a "composite nature"⁴ composed of two elements: body and soul. By virtue of this complementarity that the human being carries within himself, he unites in himself both the material and the spiritual parts of the cosmos⁵. Ancient philosophy also took this reality into account: the existence in the human being of two opposing principles, body, and soul – but nonetheless inseparable. Ancient philosophy was helped at first by the anthropology expressed in the Jewish world, and later by the formulas existing in the Christian world. The nature of the soul was identified in the philosophical world as being spiritual, but the philosophical view of the body was wrong, as it was an evil and hostile matter for the soul⁶. Additionally, from this perspective, Plato in his work called, "The Republic" offers an interpretation of the text: "The duty of the wise man is to flee as quickly as possible from this world"⁷,

⁴ Fericitul Augustin, *Confessiones*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1985, p. 206.

⁵ Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre suflet și Înviere*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, p. 368.

⁶ Lars Thunberg, *Antropologia teologică a Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul: Microcosmos și mediator*, Editura Sophia, București, 2005, p. 115.

⁷ Tomás Špidlik, *Spiritualitatea răsăritului creștin*, vol. I. Manual sistematic, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2005, p. 83.

affirming that "flight" is the natural vocation of every man to resemble God.

The independence of the elements that make up human nature is shown in various forms. Firstly, the Holy Scripture shows us that the soul and the body were brought to life by two different works: the soul being made up by the "breath of life" given to man by God at the same time as the body was made up of "dust and ashes" (Acts 18:27), and the body is the very work that God has done with His hands. Each element is different in its content: the body being created by God from the dust of the earth, belonging to the sensible world, and thus having elements specific to irrational beings. The soul, being of a spiritual nature, invisible and immaterial, is the element which unites man most closely with God and which enables man to "delight" (Psalm 36:5) in the grace God has given man⁸.

St. Maximus the Confessor affirms that the soul can live even if it is not united with the material element, this being his basic argument that the soul by its very nature is indestructible and immortal⁹.

Man is built "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:26). The theme of the "image" that we humans have received from God is one of interest both to Old Testament anthropology and to Christian anthropology. Holy Scripture presents us with the existence of an

⁸ Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1943, pp. 58-60.

⁹ Lars Thunberg, *Antropologia teologică a Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul*, p. 116.

"image of God" in the Book of Acts, but also in the Epistle to the Colossians, whose author is St. Paul. In the book of Acts, the Hagiographer presents man as the only creature created "in the image" of the Creator: "And God said: Let us make man in our image and likeness [...] And God made man in his own image; in the image of God, He made him" (Genesis 1:26-27)¹⁰. In the Epistle to the Colossians, Jesus Christ is defined as the Logos incarnate and "the image of God" (Colossians 1:15).

Holy Fathers such as St. Athanasius the Great, Clement of Alexandria, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, finally arrived at the idea that man is built in the "image" of the Savior Jesus Christ, being therefore "Image of the Image"¹¹.

Pauline anthropology shows us that man must attain to the "likeness" of his Creator, and this is possible to the extent that man is willing to bear within himself, "the image of the heavenly man" (1 Corinthians 15:49). A prominent theologian of the twentieth century, Panayotis Nellas, in his work entitled, 'Man – the divinized animal', in just a few pages, deals with the divine traits that are also present in man. Based on the anthropology of Saint Paul, the theologian Panayotis Nellas concludes that man, created after the "Image of the Image", which is the Savior Jesus Christ, takes on the divine-human qualities that the Savior had in His Person. It is the very nature of man that calls him, "to

¹⁰ Tomáš Špidlík, *Spiritualitatea răsăritului creștin*, vol. I, p. 85.

¹¹ Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit. Perspective pentru o antropologie ortodoxă*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2009, p. 62.

go beyond the limits of the limits of creation and to become infinite"¹², just as the Son of God is infinite by nature. Man has been endowed by God with wisdom, as God is All-Wise: "God has been pleased to impart His wisdom to His creatures, so that He might put a certain stamp of His image on everything, and that all created things might be wise and worthy of God." Saint Athanasius the Great tells us that man, receiving the saving work of Christ, can also become, "all-wise"¹³.

4. The creation of man

God is the King, the Lord, the mighty Creator of all creation including its absolute Judge. All these attributes of God command respect and fear, but he remains full of love for man, manifesting it in His own will to dwell and draw near to man. Man is a corporeal and material being created by God, an aspect that Saint Ephraim places great emphasis on in his arguments against the Manichee and Marcionites.

The destiny that man has is Paradise or dwelling in the light of Divine Glory¹⁴. In the theology of the saint there is an important emphasis on the free will that man

¹² Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit. Perspective pentru o antropologie ortodoxă*, p. 64.

¹³ Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit. Perspective pentru o antropologie ortodoxă*, p. 65.

¹⁴ Ioan I. Ică Jr., „O teologie poetică a misterului pascal”, in *Sf. Efrem Sirianul, Imnele Păresimilor, Azimelor, Răstignirii și Învierii*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2010, p. 17.

must unmistakably assume. The history of salvation is seen as a long succession of either victories or defeats that man bears to earn his salvation. After the fall, man is seen as stripped of his former glory, cast out into Satan's world of temptation, a world subject to death and corruption, ending in the prison of hell¹⁵.

According to Saint Ephraim, the body was created by God for the purpose of being inhabited by Him and to be a temple of God: "do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?" (1 Corinthians 6:19). The body of Adam was created by God to bring him and his soul into the likeness of God. The entire existence of man is a journey between birth and death, and this journey must be spent with great wisdom by man, to succeed in earning his eternity with God¹⁶.

True joy for man is achieved in the harmony of union between his soul and body, and the path of conversion or of deification must be travelled together. After the Fall, man suffered a sickness of both soul and body, and his integral healing is achieved by embracing both body and soul. Death temporarily interrupts the union between soul and body, the body returning to its state of dust that it had before its creation. At the finale of this separation awaits the resurrection, which, in a spiritualized manner, makes it possible to rebuild wholeness for the eternity set before it by God. When

¹⁵ Ioan I. Ică Jr., „O teologie poetică a misterului pascal”, in *Sf. Efreim Sirianul, Imnele Păresimilor, Azimelor, Răstignirii și Învierii*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Ioan I. Ică Jr., „O teologie poetică a misterului pascal”, *Sf. Efreim Sirianul, Imnele Păresimilor, Azimelor, Răstignirii și Învierii*, p. 17.

God created man, He gave him marvelous gifts, making him in His own image and likeness, establishing a privileged relationship that man can enjoy before God. The Fall caused the alteration of the ontological condition, and this was restored by the Incarnation of the Son of God. In the Church there is a recreation of man which God brings about through the liturgical life, through Holy Baptism which heals the ontological illness caused by the sin of our forefathers. It is Christ who healed the sick freedom of man, making him capable of being saved¹⁷.

Saint Ephraim, while referring to the Savior Jesus Christ as the new Adam, wishes to emphasize the ontological character of the Lord's work of salvation:

"But there came another Athlete, the second, unbeatable, and put on the same skirts and arms in which Adam had been overcome. When the enemy saw the cloaks and weapons of the victor, Adam rejoiced, not noticing that he had been deceived. The one inside the shawls would have frightened him, but his appearance gave him courage. He came to conquer, the evil one was conquered and turned back"¹⁸.

It is important to see how this ontological restoration of man was accomplished, Christ putting on the garment of the body through His Incarnation, thus

¹⁷ Costion Nicolaescu, *Hristos – Adăpostul, Hrana, Veșmântul, Doctorul și leacul omului și al omenirii pe calea mântuirii: (conținutul spiritual al nevoilor trupești vitale, la Sfântul Efrem Sirul)*, Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2011, p. 378.

¹⁸ Sf. Efrem Sirianul, *Imnele Raiului*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2010, p. 103.

renewing man. The body of the Savior is made of Eucharistic food, so man is healed when sharing it, and is enabled to attain to deification by the grace of the Holy Spirit¹⁹. The goodness of God shown through His sacrifice on the Cross gives man the possibility of putting on the likeness of the Son²⁰. In the Church of Christ, man has been given innumerable gifts with which to acquire the likeness of God, the Christian having in the Church a privileged space to encounter God in His Holy Trinity. The Church also offers man the liturgical life, blessings, prayers, the uninterrupted assistance of divine grace and especially the Holy Mysteries, gifts which make it possible to fulfill the true mission of man on this earth, namely, to delight in God and have union with Him.

5. The value of the body

Saint Ephraim is far removed from certain trends in early Christianity, such as dualistic or Platonic tendencies, which sought to denigrate the body and its value²¹. St. Ephraim's attitude was because the body,

¹⁹ Costion Nicolaescu, *Hristos – Adăpostul, Hrana, Veșmântul, Doctorul și leacul omului și al omenirii pe calea mântuirii: (conținutul spiritual al nevoilor trupesti vitale, la Sfântul Efreim Sirul)*, p. 379.

²⁰ Costion Nicolaescu, *Hristos – Adăpostul, Hrana, Veșmântul, Doctorul și leacul omului și al omenirii pe calea mântuirii: (conținutul spiritual al nevoilor trupesti vitale, la Sfântul Efreim Sirul)*, p. 379.

²¹ Sebastian Brock, *Efreim Sirul I. Ochiul luminos. Viziunea spirituală a lumii la Sfântul Efreim Sirul. II. Imnele despre Paradis*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1998, p. 59.

being created by God, should not be considered evil or useless to man for his salvation. The author recalls the testimony of Holy Scripture in 1 Corinthians 6:19: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you?" bringing forth the great honor that God Himself provides to the body, making it the dwelling place of the Most Holy Trinity²².

In the, "Hymns of the Nativity and Annunciation," St. Ephraim presents the value of the body, "clothed by God":

"You are the Son of the Creator, who is like your Father. As the Maker made Himself in the womb pure flesh, He clothed Himself in it, He came forth and clothed with glory our weakness through the mercy He brought from His Father²³.

The Eucharist is another one of the testimonies of St. Ephraim concerning the value of the body, combating certain Christians who accepted the Eucharist but referred to the body as unclean:

"If our God had despised the body as something unclean or ugly and evil, then the Bread and the Cup of Salvation must also be something ugly and unclean to these heretics"²⁴.

The life of mankind is a journey between the original Heaven and the final Heaven. The image of

²² Sebastian Brock, *Efrem Sirul I. Ochiul luminos. Viziunea spirituală a lumii la Sfântul Efrem Sirul. II. Imnele despre Paradis*, p. 60.

²³ Sf. Efrem Sirianul, *Imnele Raiului*, p. 7.

²⁴ Sebastian Brock, *Efrem Sirul I. Ochiul luminos. Viziunea spirituală a lumii la Sfântul Efrem Sirul. II. Imnele despre Paradis*, p. 60.

Paradise in the hymns of Saint Ephraim the Syrian. St. Ephraim presents the two paradises in a very free way: the primary paradise – the "lost" paradise – and the eschatological paradise – the "found" paradise. The two paradises are presented by St. Ephraim through the prism of a man who finds the premises in the Bible, and then through spiritual senses, meditation and wisdom rediscovers it, keeping a middle way between fear and love²⁵. The author presents us with a spiritual visit to Paradise, the poet seeing its mysteries through the eyes of the soul, since this Paradise cannot be penetrated by the eyes of the flesh, thus wishing to understand what cannot be understood rationally.

Moreover, concerning the beauty of this Paradise, the author speaks to us in human terms, since human nature, being powerless, cannot comprehend the divine glory and its brilliance. To be able to understand something of the mysteries of Paradise, the author expresses its glory and greatness according to the measure of human understanding:

"Let not your mind be troubled with words alone, for heaven is clothed only in the words of your world; not out of poverty is it clothed in the images of your world, but because your flesh, which is too weak, is not able to touch its greatness, and its beauties are greatly diminished when painted in the pale colors to which you are accustomed"²⁶. Thus, we must always bear in

²⁵ Ilie Frăcea, „Idei teologice în «Imnele Paradisului» ale Sfântului Efreim Sirul”, *Studii Teologice* II, 5-10, 1979, p. 605.

²⁶ Sf. Efreim Sirianul, *Imnele Raiului*, p. 7.

mind that the whole image that the author presents of Paradise is subtle and full of deep spirituality.

6. Original Paradise

Concerning the Garden of Eden, St. Ephraim tells us that there dwelt a beauty without blemish, a peace without anxiety. Thus, Eden is presented as the, 'summit of all good':

"I found in this book both the bridge and the gate to heaven. I passed through and entered. My eye remained out, but my heart went in. I began to walk among things unsearchable. It is a bright, clear, sublime, and proud height. The book gave it the name Eden: the pissoir of all blessing²⁷.

There was an inner paradise where God dwelt, watched over by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and an outer paradise where all created creatures, including man, were seated. After man was created, he was placed in the outer paradise, to make himself well pleasing to God by his priestly obedience and service. St. Ephraim shows us in the "Hymns of Heaven" (XV, 14) that outside the outer paradise, there was an even lower space, where Eve was deceived by the serpent:

"The serpent served as a garment which the wicked one put on. Seeing their innocence, he was filled with cunning, he cooked up a cunning trap for the hearing of the two ignorant children. And in their simplicity, they readily listened to the

²⁷ Sf. Efrem Sirianul, *Imnele Raiului*, p. 48.

words of him who showed his care on his face but hid his cunning within. His face in other times the Iscariot teaches you"²⁸.

Throughout the history of mankind, the devils have acted against man to prevent him from entering the final heaven. Since the Fall of Man, Paradise has been closed to man for a long time: "The cherub and the edge of the sword have fenced off Paradise" (Hymns on Paradise IV, 1). Since the paradise of St. Ephraim is divided into many hierarchical places, the removal has been gradual, increasingly serious, according to the quantity and the gravity of the sins committed by man:

"When Adam sinned, God expelled him from Heaven, but in His goodness, He gave him the lowland outside of it by placing it in the valley at the foot of Heaven. But continuing to sin, men were also expelled from here, and because they were not worthy to border on Heaven, God commanded the Archons to cast them down Mount Qardu"²⁹.

7. The final heaven – reopening and reclaiming paradise

Adam, being bathed in the water and blood of the Savior Jesus Christ, he regains life, he is reintegrated into Paradise. The tomb where Christ was buried becomes a symbol of Eden, where Adam died, which is also suggested in the Crucifixion icon. Through Christ,

²⁸ Sf. Efrem Sirianul, *Imnele Raiului*, p. 125.

²⁹ Sf. Efrem Sirianul, *Imnele Raiului*, p. 28.

Adam regains the lost Garden³⁰. Tanios Bou Mansour emphasizes the existence in St. Ephraim of a salvation which accompanies and precedes the effort of humanity, and which is presented in a virtual way in the Ascension of the Lord³¹. It is Christ who holds the keys to Heaven: "He came and gave us the keys to Heaven; for His treasures await us." Of course, the path of repentance cannot be neglected, as the classic example of King David shows us. This example is also shown by St. Ephrem in his hymns on Paradise (XIII, 8):

"Though he disliked the wild beasts' home, it was necessary for the king to remain there but, despite his folly and wandering, he remembered he was human and prayed to be returned to his former home. And when the Good One returned him, he gave thanks to His mercy. Blessed is He who in him has given us an example of return!"³².

8. The heavenly condition

It is impossible for man, even for a poet or a theologian, to describe the landscape of Paradise:

"What mouth has ever spelt heaven? What tongue has told of its glory? What mind has depicted its beauty? For its inward depths cannot be searched,

³⁰ Costion Nicolescu, *Adăpostul, Hrana, Veșmântul, Doctorul și leacul omului și al omenirii pe calea mântuirii: (conținutul spiritual al nevoilor trupești vitale)*, la Sfântul Efrem Sirul, p. 91.

³¹ Costion Nicolescu, *Adăpostul, Hrana, Veșmântul, Doctorul și leacul omului și al omenirii pe calea mântuirii: (conținutul spiritual al nevoilor trupești vitale)*, la Sfântul Efrem Sirul, p. 91.

³² Sf. Efrem Sirianul, *Imnele Raiului*, p. 63.

I will only marvel at the things seen, the things without, and so know how far I remain from its hidden ones"³³.

Paradise is the place where the glory of God is present. The psalmist David believed in the possibility of the glory of God being established here for a time, among us, in this world: "Yes, His salvation is near to them that fear Him, that in our land He may make His glory His dwelling place" (Psalm 84:10). The Old Testament saints have a concrete picture of the help that the glory of God offers to man: "above all, glory shall be a covering and a foliage to keep shade from the heat by day, a shelter and a cover from storm and rain" (Isaiah 4:5-6). St. Ephraim shows us in the Hymns of Heaven (XI, 2), that everything is in perfect balance in Paradise:

"Neither hurtful frost nor scorching heat is in that place of blessing and delight. It is the shore of joys, the haven of pleasures, the haven of light and gladness"³⁴.

In this sub-chapter we have tried to relate some aspects of the wonderful theological teachings of St. Ephraim and to highlight the combination of poetry and faith, the elements present in all these hymns. The teaching of St. Ephraim concerning the "Lost" and "Found" Paradise is based on the Holy Scriptures and the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the differentiation between the two paradises lies in the relationship

³³ Sf. Efrem Sirianul, *Imnele Raiului*, p. 89.

³⁴ Sf. Efrem Sirianul, *Imnele Raiului*, p. 95.

between Christ and Adam, mentioned in the Epistle to the Romans. Among the holy fathers he is considered to be the first to attempt to systematize an Orthodox teaching on the Last Judgment and on Heaven and Hell. St. Ephraim combats the teachings of the Marcionites and the Docetists, who claimed that the Savior Jesus Christ had an apparent body, insisting in his writings on the reality of the body that the Savior, "clothed". He also insists that the body of the Savior is the body of Christ. Although his teaching on pneumatology is written before the Second Ecumenical Council (381), it is dogmatically correct and assumed by the Church Fathers.

According to the testimony of Blessed Jerome, the hymns of St. Ephrem were read after the reading of the Holy Scriptures. Canon 59 of the Synod of Laodicea forbade the reading of particular hymns in worship without prior verification, so as not to bring heretical teachings into the Christian communities. All hymns were checked by the bishop, not arbitrarily, but according to the dogmatic criteria laid down by the ecumenical synods. Thus, through the hierarchs, the hymn writings were dogmatically related to the ecumenical doctrinal definitions, or to the teaching that the Church preached³⁵. The recitation of St. Ephrem's hymns in worship, therefore, constitutes their being Orthodox.

³⁵ Ilie Frăcea, „Idei teologice în «Imnele Paradisului» ale Sfântului Efreem Sirul”, p. 614.

9. The heavenly state and the "fulfilment of the image" through the likeness of God

According to Holy Scripture, man in Paradise was created with a natural predisposition or vocation towards his Maker. Adam's search for God was specific to his entire ontological structure, so that he could later serve Him. This inclination which man has towards God was and is possible for the human race, thanks to that element of nature which we have mentioned, and which theology calls the 'face'. Man is an icon of God and has the destiny, as St. Basil the Great tells us, to be God according to grace. The Fathers of the Church considered the first state of Adam, and in analyzing it, they concluded that perfection can be accepted only by regarding the spiritual capacities that Adam had at his disposal, with the aim of fulfilling his vocation³⁶. Adam did not achieve perfection to be united with God, but only had ontological capacities which, by their very nature, desired deification. For the human being to be "filled" with divine grace, to be sanctified, it was necessary that all the spiritual capacities that man had at hand be put to work³⁷.

Much has been meditated upon in the works of the Patristic Tradition and in the writings of the Fathers of the twentieth century, not only on the state with which

³⁶ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Terapeutica bolilor spirituale*, traducere de Marinela Bojin, Sophia, București, 2006, p. 15.

³⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2010, p. 427.

man was given by God. Father Dumitru Stăniloae reflected on this heavenly reality in which Adam found himself. The great Romanian theologian captures a relative perfection of Adam, in that he, "Was free from evil impulses and tended towards communion with God and with his fellow men"³⁸. Father Dumitru Stăniloae affirms a very important aspect for Christian anthropology. This statement consists in the fact that the nature of created man did not have in him the substance of sin. Adam was not sinful by nature³⁹, but he had the possibility of sinning, which he used. Because man did not obey the commandment given by God, he felt upon himself the state of sin, the fall in which he stood before God. If Adam had directed his whole will in accordance with the measure of his ontological gift, he would have been strengthened spiritually, and thus removed himself from bodily death and the fall with it of his whole nature, which he had assumed⁴⁰.

Creation played a very important role in the communion of man with God even before the Fall. It represented the divine love shared with Adam and a way of contemplating and getting to know the Creator. The reasons behind the sensible realities were understood relating to God, being seen wholly in God alone,

³⁸ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Terapeutica bolilor spirituale*, traducere de Marinela Bojin, Sophia, București, 2006, p. 15.

³⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, p. 428.

⁴⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, p. 432.

and God manifesting Himself through them by His uncreated energies"⁴¹. It is important to emphasize that the bodily senses were subordinate to the spiritual capacities of man. The inner structure was illumined by the grace of God through the continual communion of Adam with God, and these were what guided his life⁴².

Our forefather Adam used his bodily functions in a healthy way⁴³. He put them at the service of God and enjoyed the gifts of the seen realities of the world by using them. The way of enjoying the gifts received was prudent and devoid of any desire for attachment or idolatry: "The eyes of man in the beginning did not escape covetous and crafty looks, of lust or of preying"⁴⁴.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, and later Clement the Alexandrian, testify that the state of the first people before they came out of obedience to God was one of spiritual immaturity and incompleteness⁴⁵.

The Alexandrian theologian uses the concept of, "perfect incompleteness", wishing to show that the soul capacities of man were without fault as an ontological given, but still could not reach the fullness of their potential⁴⁶. Paradise was full of harmony and peace:

⁴¹ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Terapeutica bolilor spirituale*, p. 42.

⁴² John Behr, *Ascetism și antropologie la sfântul Irineu de Lyon și Clement Alexandrinul*, trad. Adela Lungu, Doxologia, Iași, 2016, p. 181.

⁴³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 435.

⁴⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 434.

⁴⁵ John Behr, *Ascetism și antropologie la sfântul Irineu de Lyon și Clement Alexandrinul*, p. 177.

⁴⁶ John Behr, *Ascetism și antropologie la sfântul Irineu de Lyon și Clement Alexandrinul*, pp. 177-178.

harmony between the created and the Uncreated, between man and the cosmos, and especially harmony between the psychosomatic capacities that man had precisely to reach divinity.

10. Conclusions

From the content of the above thesis, we can see that the subject of "Theology in the Hymns of St. Ephraim the Syrian", occupies a prominent place in the field of Patrology. Assumed by the Patristic Tradition and developed in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the experience of the Church, the tradition of Syriac Christianity has, in its nature, a mystical and symbolic power, through which it deepens theological ideas specific to Syriac Christianity. In presenting the origins of Syriac Christianity in the opening part of the paper, this work wishes to present the theological richness of the hymns, given the context in which they were written, responding to the heresies of the period. Then, in the work, it hopefully develops each theological concept present in the hymns of St. Ephraim the Syrian. Beyond a development of a concept from a dogmatic point of view, it also wanted to bring to the surface the spiritual richness found in the hymns of St. Ephraim the Syrian.

Analyzing the hymns of St. Ephraim, we noticed the deep spiritual experience of the saint, through which the Word of God is deepened and interpreted congenially with the help of exegetical methods. All

this was accomplished within a life anchored both liturgically and sacramentally. The assumption of his writings on our part is precisely the assumption of this way of Christian life both from the liturgical point of view, through the services of the Church, in which the mysteries of God are revealed to man, and from the sacramental point of view.

The Hymns of the Saint are also an extraordinary and virtuosic theological-poetic commentary on the Mysteries of Christian initiation in the order in which they were celebrated in the Old Syrian Church. They are a unique testimony of the sacramental symbolic realism and spirituality of one of the oldest Churches of Christianity, whose incomparable theological voice was Saint Ephraim. His hymns reveal him not only as the most fascinating and fabulous Christian poet of all time, but also as one of the most profound patristic theologians. Here, he practices another theology which is poetic and symbolic, faithful to the revelation of the mystery and open to adoration, a possible alternative to the sophisticated and degraded theologies of the past and a chance of renewal for the discourse of the Church in the future.

Finally, we conclude this scientific work entitled: "Anthropology in the Hymns of St. Ephraim the Syrian", recalling the chance that we possess to encounter the exemplary patristic exegesis in the writings of St. Ephraim and vibrating in a spiritual harmony with the multiple symbolic registers of his "objective". At the end of this work, in which we attempted to develop the

ideas present in the Ephraimian hymns, it is preferable to find ourselves in front of a transformative reading, in which the ancient texts do not remain simple pseudo-scientific speculations but also assist us in the spiritual sphere, as Saint Ephrem the Syrian says: "This Jesus made so many symbols, that I fell completely into their ocean"⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ Sebastian Brock, *Efrem Sirul*, p. 20.

Anthropo-theological Fragility: Soteriological Excursion and Dogmatic Consequences

1. Introduction

The present paper aims to address the notion of fragility from the theological, anthropological and social points of view, each being dimensions experienced and enhanced by the movement into North American space. Contemporary man lives as if he would never die. The idea of death is camouflaged. In the age of carelessness about our eternal future, the author reveals to us that it is necessary to reconsider our fragility in order to begin the road to salvation.

Some theologians have tried to say that man is a micro cosmos within a macro cosmos¹, believing that by doing so they can exhaust the mystery of man created by God, yet the great mystery of man lies in his fragility. When we come face to face with our fragility, we can hardly fully assume it, which is perhaps why today we talk more about power in all its forms, desperately trying to hide our fragility or camouflage it with

¹ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, Colecția Religie, Editura Humanitas, București 2010, p. 113.

various forms of activism. For example, Adam and Eve hid themselves from God among the trees of the Garden of Eden, both walking in the evening breeze through the Garden of Eden, because of their failure to embrace fragility. Seeing that they were nowhere to be found, God calls out to Adam, who timidly replies, "I heard your voice in heaven and was afraid, for I am naked, and I hid myself" (Genesis 3:10). Adam does not recognize his own fragility and blames Eve, his wife. Eve, in turn, blames the serpent. But regardless of man's fatal mistake, God sought out Adam as he was and seeks us out in the midst of our fragility. In this manner, God, in his gentleness, opens for us a path of permanent descent into the depths of our hearts, that sacrosanct sanctuary of fragility in which his presence, itself infinitely fragile, is fully manifested, for the great mystery is not that man stands in the proximity of God, but that God enters *sui generis* into dialogue with man's soul: "know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he who was rich made himself poor for you, that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

According to the defining dictionary of the Romanian language, the adjective *fragile*² means "something that breaks easily, breaks under the action of external stresses, internal tensions, delicate, fragile, delicate, soft". Theological fragility means the very ontological awareness of the human being, in man's

² <https://dexonline.ro/intrare/fragil/21783>, accessed on 14.02.2026.

ability to see himself as God created him recalling that "this gift does not come from us but is the gift of God" as a mixture of the mundane and the angelic (Ephesians 2:8). If man would remember his worldly side in his search for the angelic, his sins and shortcomings, he would learn to be more fragil. And by identifying his own fragility man opens himself to the divine grace and to the epectatic ascent to the holy Kingdom. Therefore, under the image of fragility we seek to unify all these meanings as ontologically planted by God in the human soul. By discovering them, man naturally sets out on his journey towards the Kingdom of God.

Fragility allows for that dwelling together in which one no longer feels that words are necessary, nor justificatory claims, nor justifications for actions. This is why the first dialogue captured in the Book of Acts between God and Adam occurred only after Adam had fallen into sin. Falling into sin, man clothed himself in the garments of skin³, which express biological mortality, an attempt by the fragility of man to create in himself, the attributes of God autonomously, as such "without God, before God and not after God" an exclusive characteristic of God, i.e. life itself⁴. That original fragility was greatly deteriorated with the fall of Adam, who drags the whole cosmos after him, so that St. Paul speaks to the Romans about the cosmic dimension of

³ Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit. Perspective pentru o antropologie ortodoxă*, p. 26.

⁴ Ștefan Buchiu, *Manual de Teologie Dogmatică*, Vol. 1, Editura Basilica, București, 2017, p. 412.

salvation: "For the flesh waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the flesh has been subjected to vanity – not of its own will, but because of him who subjected it – with hope. For the flesh itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of wickedness, that it may be partaker of the liberty of the greatness of the sons of God. For we know that all flesh sighs together and is in pain together until now" (Romans 8:19-22). Hence the popular saying: man sanctifies the place, or, on the contrary, demonizes the place.

In order for man to enjoy eternity, he needs to (re)consider his fragility, for (re)awareness of fragility is the *sine qua non* of entering the Kingdom. Man became aware of his fragility only when he found himself in the midst of real problems: epidemics, the death of loved ones, deadly diseases, etc. Material wealth, fame and the desire for affirmation made this feeling almost non-existent. For example, the theme of the fragility of the human being was often addressed by Italian artists of the 17th century, affected by the black plague epidemic that had ravaged more than 1.7 million of their compatriots, thus Italian painter Salvator Rosa (1615-1673), an important representative of the Baroque style, painted an oil painting called "Human Fragility" ("L'Umana Fragilita"). Having recently experienced the global Covid-19 pandemic we are reminded how fragile man is in the face of illness.

Contemporary man lives as if he will never die. The idea of death is camouflaged. In an age of disregard for our eternal future, of mockery of the Church, of the

loss of Christian values, Christ shows us that it is necessary to reconsider our fragility in order to begin the road to salvation. By becoming man, He shows us that the starting point of our de-humanisation is our fragile nature.

That is why in the next chapter we aim to meditate on the following themes:

- I. Christology: the Incarnation of the Lord – deity in its "fragility".
- II. Mariology: the Mother of God became full of grace precisely because she was full of fragility.
- III. Pneumatology: the Holy Spirit, who dwells only in fragility and has Himself the face of fragility, for He cannot abide in human folly and ignorance.
- IV. Eschatology: the path that human fragility has towards its eschatological becoming.

2. Christology: the Incarnation of the Lord – deity in its "fragility"

"And he begat his Son, the only-begotten, and wrapped him up and laid him in a manger, for there was no place for them to stay" (Luke 2:7). Understanding this nuance, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite gives the incarnation and even the human being of the Son the name of "philanthropy" (love of man)⁵. Hence

⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 149.

the close relationship between Triadological dogma and Christological dogma. The triadic dogma imbues the Christological dogma with deep meaning and significance, and the Christological dogma validates in its essence the Trinitarian dogma. In the Trinitarian dogma we have unity of being and hypostatic multiplicity, while in the Christological dogma the situation is exactly the opposite: we have one hypostasis in the person of the Saviour Christ and two beings/natures: the divine and the human. There is an inversion between the fundamental ontological operators. What does this mean? The divine being expands and encompasses all humanity. Love has expansive and creative power, and God wishes to extend his intra-trinitarian (ad intra) love to all of humanity.

The purpose of creation is the love of God, who wants love and light to expand. Love has expansive power, it wants to be participated in by as many beings as possible, to be an endlessness of expansion, therefore, a definition of love would be: to enjoy the joy of the other. The union of creation, the union of God with man, is independent of Adam's fall. There is the famous statement by St. Maximus Confessor: would the Logos have become incarnate if man had not fallen? The answer is yes, as God since eternity decided to unite through the incarnation of the Logos: the infinite with the finite, the uncreated with the created, heaven with earth, the sensible with the intelligible. It is a logic of expansion of love and the Trinity in the world.

God created Adam by touch. To some extent, metaphorically speaking, the creation of man was the work of pottery⁶. Through touch, God gives man beauty and, at the same time, a special fragility. When God created the world, by word he set all things in their right place: by word he made light, by word he made the sky, by word he made the angels, by word he made all the birds, all the fish, all the wild animals, but only man he shaped and fashioned, giving him a unique meaning through His touch. We are born through the touch of our parents, and immediately after birth we are held and kissed by our parents, after which the priest carries us in his arms and makes us members of the Church through the Holy Baptism. Through touch we express our feelings and sometimes our words, for through touching, we express a state of our soul which transcends from our body into his body through the touch exchanged between us, and from his body passing into his soul, and thus through the touch between two bodies the two souls communicate, and at the end of life we are extinguished in the hands of our loved ones and receive their final kiss.

The Incarnate Word heals the human flesh in Christ Jesus, by touching it. This particularly elegant formulation will have important Christological consequences in the future, firstly because it implies a

⁶ Theodor Damian (coordonator), Mihai Octavian Groza, Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu, Răzvan-Mihai Neagu, Cosmin Constantin Galdău, Alexandru Lazăr, *Istorie și Teologie, valori și modele pentru societatea contemporană*, Editura Limes, Cluj-Napoca, 2022, p. 66.

certain similarity between the assumed humanity of Christ and our own humanity⁷, and secondly because salvation is equated with healing⁸.

Man, when he thought himself stronger, dropped a grain of weight on his soul and broke like a porcelain dish⁹. From here began the newness of God who goes in search of the fragile man until his becoming God-Man. God becomes one with the earth so that we may

⁷ An interesting insight in this regard is offered by Professor Hrysostomos Stamoulis who, recalling this expression of St. Gregory the Theologian, develops a teaching on the necessity of frequent communion with the Holy Eucharist, which constitutes an open invitation to all the baptized to share in the body of the Incarnate Logos. See the material published online on the Pemptousia website at link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/13w7N3jOgnmHmGTJfeXqBcRR2JJ199zzc_jN6WGhsy8M/edit?fbclid=IwAR_3VhYCs_nchASB9av-epb3q_enYvcF8kkE6BhhkPTrljOONZeHXMDWuOA, accessed at 14.02.2026.

⁸ This aspect is recapitulated when speaking of the Holy Eucharist, considered to be the medicine of immortality (*pharmakon tes athanasias*), because "participation in the risen Body of the Lord heals and unites the one who receives Him in faith with the risen One, the Eucharist is the medicine of immortality". See Karl Christian Felmy, *De la Cina cea de Taină la Dumnezeuiasca Liturghie a Bisericii Ortodoxe, un comentariu istoric*, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2008, p. 18. Saint Ephrem presents the Incarnation of the Saviour as a healing brought by the grace of God: "Blessed be the Doctor who came down, cut without pain and healed wounds with gentle healing! His own begotten became the Healer who had mercy on sinners. Blessed be He who came down in the womb and here made Himself a palace to dwell in, a temple to dwell in, a garment to shine with, and a weapon to conquer with" (cf. Sf Efreim Sirianul, *Imnele Nașterii și Arătării Domnului*, p. 35).

⁹ Ernest Bernea, *Îndemn la simplitate*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1995, p. 49.

understand what heaven is. Thus we marvel, says St. Maximus, at seeing how the small and the boundless – realities that repel one another and cannot mix – are found united in Him and mutually reveal themselves in one another. Christ assumes not only human nature, but also that which was contrary to nature, the consequences of sin. He embraced all human fragility as it was after the fall.

Speaking of the Incarnation, St. John Damascene mentions four divine attributes that are manifested at the coming (σαρκὸς) of the Son of God. By putting on the garment of the body, God shows us at the same time His goodness, wisdom, justice and power. Goodness, because he did not overlook the fragility of his creature, but took pity on the fallen one and stretched out his hand. Righteousness, because man being conquered, does not allow anyone else but man to conquer the tyrant, and does not take man by force from death, but he whom death had once subdued by sin, the Good and Just One made him victorious again and saved the like through the like One. Wisdom, because she has found the most suitable unraveling of this impossible thing. The power of God which descends by bending the heavens, that is, humbling without humbling His unmerited height, descends to His servants by an inexpressible and incomprehensible descent¹⁰.

In addition to the four divine attributes which are manifested at the incarnation of the Son of God, as

¹⁰ Sf. Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica*, Editura Scripta, București, 1993, p. 82.

emphasized by St. John Damascene, God's "fragility" is also manifested, in our opinion, the capacity of the divine being not only to "deny Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and being in appearance like a man" (Philippians 2:7), but also to allow Himself to be "fragil", "helpless", "within the reach of man" and "dependent on man".

The point of maximum fragility of the Godhead is shown at the moment of the Incarnation of the Son of God. We know that the Archangel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will give birth to the Son of God, and that this birth will be of the Spirit: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will fill you" (Luke 1:35). God shows his great fragility in a 2 millimeters embryo. He who brought the world from non-being to being and is praised by cherubim and seraphim concentrates the whole of God's being in a fragile embryo. How much God offers in such a tiny form and "blessed is he who will not be humbled in him" (Matthew 11:6).

God also shows immense fragility at His birth. Fragility that matures from birth to the cross. God chooses to show Himself to people in the guise of a child, where He also includes the flesh-like parents. It was not a tragic evening for the Holy family, though they wandered with nowhere to stay. God changes things that settle into a spirit of the world understood as a jungle where the biggest eats the smallest, and the strongest sits at the top of the food chain. This is why God placed at the beginning of his divine iconomy this

fragility of the infant who, without care, and without help, dies. Just as now and then people were pursuing their own interest, their own gain, Christ showed himself to the world as a child in order to awaken in people a sense of fragility. Few were those who understood the mystery of the fragility of the Son of God, for to be able to understand fragility one must be simple and pure at heart, in a word: to be human. You have to be human to understand the God-Man. These include the Magi in the conception of St. Matthew the Evangelist (Chapter 2) and the shepherds in the account of St. Luke the Evangelist (Chapter 2).

Contemplating the fragility of Christ, we awaken to the joy of being loved with a love that is beyond ourselves. Encountering Christ does not arrive by looking for meaning in ourselves, but by looking to the other. Encountering God is going from joy to higher joy to endless joy, finding the face of God, and through God finding all our loved ones. This is encountering eternity. There we find that our small family becomes so large that we become family with all creation, with all the people we have never met in our life, because with God all is light.

We will have trials and anxieties until we come to see ourselves with the same eyes that God sees us with. Christ Himself was born and revealed Himself in the form of an infant who looks at those around him. When an infant looks into your eyes it enters your heart, so that you don't understand what is happening, you simply feel the love that floods your heart – it is love for

the fragility and innocence of the baby. It is terrible to stand before a baby who will become the harsh judge of the eshaton. In His fragility, Christ shows us that we can overcome the world's foolishness.

Meditating further on what happened at Christ's birth, we will learn what enormous confidence the Savior had to surrender to a hostile world. Christ teaches us to read the world through the eyes of a child in Bethlehem. How much trust did Christ have in us to allow himself to be so fragile?

Pride also manifests itself in this way: not trusting the other person. If pride means not trusting, then humility means trusting the other completely. Doesn't this mean that Christ has infinite trust in us? How can He leave Himself like a baby in our hands? An infant who has no strength at all to take care of himself, an infant who lets himself be carried by another, an infant who cannot feed himself, who cannot change his dirty diapers.

Only an all-powerful God can leave himself fragile. We humans, not being all-powerful, seek by all possible and impossible means to control situations so that the end result is favourable to us. Only when we contemplate on these matters have we set ourselves on our own path to salvation. This, then, is the joy we seek, the joy that the Christ child came to bring us: the ability to leave oneself fragile.

Bethlehem in Hebrew means house of bread. Christ is born in the house of bread and offers himself to man in the Holy Eucharist as the Bread of Eternal

Life. But then, in Bethlehem, as now, in the Divine Liturgy, man has before him and in his hands a fragile God who makes himself accessible to humanity. Christ was born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of the birthless, at the most tragic point of humanity's intersection having fallen into hedonism, epicureanism and idolatry, a place where few people have experienced the mystery of his Incarnation. Today, Christ is born at every liturgy, but few are those who feel the mystery of the liturgy and, for reasons of unworthiness, miss the encounter with a God who made himself worthy of our fragility, so that by tasting his Body and Blood our fragility might be clothed.

Fragility, if one wants to understand it and embody it, one has to look at the fragility of others, just as Christ made himself fragile for us and for our salvation.

3. Pnevmatology: the Holy Spirit – kenosis and fragility

It is well known that Christian spirituality unanimously affirms that the main goal of the human being is to become human. All human powers were originally directed towards the attainment of perfection, towards God. Following the fall into sin this natural orientation was distorted and the direction of these powers was reoriented towards man and the world. A "conflict of interests" was thus created between the original human nature and the nature of fallen man. The symbiosis

between archetypal fragility and will is the only way of restoration¹¹.

With man's separation from God, the Spirit did not cease to sustain men and to work with them in bringing forth the next men. For without the Spirit nothing can be born. But they are now born primarily of the "body" and bear in it the imprint of the "body", that is, of the unending and continually ascending being of life in the Spirit¹².

Since the fall, man's relationship with the Spirit has no longer been an inward relationship, the Holy Spirit remaining alien to the human heart. Although deification is the fruit of grace, man has been endowed with the power to assimilate it. Human nature is endowed with the necessary power to turn towards God for the purpose of union. It is dynamically oriented towards this destined end¹³.

In this sense Vladimir Lossky tells us: "From the fall until Pentecost, divine energy (uncreated and deifying grace) remained foreign to human nature and worked on it only from the outside"¹⁴. This explains the fact that although we can observe an action of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, this action remains foreign

¹¹ Alexandru Lazăr, „Redescoperirea valorilor ascetice în contemporaneitate”, *Astra Salvensis*, Vol. XI (2023), No. 21, p. 51.

¹² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1997, p. 39.

¹³ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Inconștientul spiritual sau Adâncul neștiut al inimii*, Editura Sophia, București, 2009, p. 23.

¹⁴ V. Lossky, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii Ortodoxe de Răsărit*, p. 161.

to the heart and has only immediate effect, aiming at a precise purpose.

It took the Incarnation of the Saviour and His immersion in human nature and thus in water, so that we, immersing ourselves in baptismal water, might also immerse ourselves in His divine life, in His Holy Spirit¹⁵.

The communication of the Holy Spirit in His personal coming is quite another. The Spirit imparts Himself to persons, marking each member of the Church with a seal of one's personal relationship with the Holy Trinity, becoming present in each person. God is therefore different, altogether other. But at the same time – a paradox, the cross of revelation – this totally other reveals himself, crosses the distance of difference. This work remains a mystery of the descent, a mystery which Vladimir Lossky describes as the mystery of the kenosis of the Spirit, the only theologian to attribute to the Spirit the expression used in reference to the Son of God.

All the authors speak more of the kenosis of the Son than of the kenosis of the Spirit. It is not only the Son who left himself fragile for man's salvation, but also the Spirit. The Holy Spirit in His coming makes Christ revealed and reveals the common nature of the Trinity, but leaves His person hidden under the deity. "In Him the will of God is no longer external to us. It gives us grace from within, showing itself in our very person, as

¹⁵ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 39.

long as our human will remains in accordance with the Divine will and cooperates with grace by making it ours". "The Spirit also comes to the help of our weakness, for we do not know how to pray properly, but the Spirit Himself prays for us with unceasing sighs" (Romans 8:26). The Spirit's discretion, which insinuates itself into the world disguised as a breeze, is answered by the dance of the step of the one committed to following it – in a counterpoint to the perceptive attention directed towards the reception of signs. Trying to give a name to this counterpoint, it is a wonder that might embody spiritual experience. So wondrously does the Holy Spirit leave himself fragile for us and for our salvation¹⁶. A pedagogy of fragility becomes necessary in order to see in the visible aspects of the world the unseen traces of the Spirit.

The goal of the Christian life thus becomes the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. The doxological movement of the believer and the Church is in a continuous dynamic evolution. It is a continuous movement from glory to glory: "And we all, with un-veiled faces, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are likewise transformed from glory to glory, as from the Spirit of the Lord" (II Corinthians 3:18). Spiritual experience leads, through gestures, words, texts or springs, to the apophatic presence of the Spirit, all-powerful but fragile, present but unapparent, like a

¹⁶ https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/societate/cum-vine-duhul-pe-furis-andre-scrima-621045.html#google_vignette, accessed at 03.03 2025.

"gentle breath of wind" (III Kings 19:11-12). The boundary will clearly remain the divine being. Man is not to touch it. He does not partake of God's being, but is elevated and ennobled by the radiance of God's glory, of divine energies. What we call deification is participation in the energy (grace), the glory, and not in the being of God.

The ascetic fathers teach us that the grace of the Holy Spirit is easy to obtain, so we find in the Patericon the following words: "If anyone wishes, from morning till evening he will acquire the Holy Spirit". Our problem is not that we don't end up acquiring the Holy Spirit, but as soon as we receive the Holy Spirit, we squander it. From this point of view, the Spirit Himself is characterized by amazing fragility. The Holy Spirit does not dwell in crudeness, in cheap jokes, or in pride, but rather the Spirit dwells in fragility: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. So I will rejoice in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Saint Siluan Athonite is a telling example of this. His experiences in the Spirit of God, the acquisition and loss of divine grace, are well known: "My soul yearns for God and seeks him with tears. How could I not seek you? You found me first and gave me the delight of Your Holy Spirit, and my soul loved You. Merciful Lord, You see my fall and sorrow, but with humility I ask for Your mercy: pour out on me, the sinner, the grace of Your Holy Spirit. The remembrance of it draws

the mind to find Your mercy again. Lord, give me the spirit of your humility, that I may not lose your grace again and weep for it as Adam wept for heaven and God"¹⁷.

Founded on the co-working of God and man, life in Christ – which is nothing other than life in the Holy Spirit – is presented to us as a three-step, spiral movement. The first step is the free gift of grace; the second step is the loss of grace (its fragility) and the heart-breaking trial of the feeling that God has abandoned man. The third step is the regaining of grace, after you have gone through the ascetic battle against the passions and learned the lesson of humility. The three moments vary in length¹⁸.

Today, many impostors boast that they have the Spirit of God in them, some of whom insinuate that they have the gift of sight, deceiving believers. By the methodology outlined above we can easily identify such people. The principle is absolutely simple: the more man displays and boasts about the various gifts of the Spirit, the less grace is in that man. The more man tries to hide the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the more they will shine and grow in potency. Paradoxically, the presence of the Spirit implies not in the potentiation of a manifestation, but its diminishment, its attenuation in

¹⁷ Cuviosul Siluan Athonitul, *Între iadul deznădejzii și iadul smereniei*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2001, p. 53.

¹⁸ Maxime Egger, *Să ne rugăm 15 zile cu Sfântul Siluan*, Editura Sophia, București, 2010, p. 40.

order to meet man on the latter's ground, in the context of the finitude, faltering and fragility that runs through creation.

The Patericon refers to an important detail in the life of a saint. Avva John Kolovos said that a spiritual father became a hermit and became known in the city, having much glory. He was informed that one of his brothers was dying, in order to say goodbye to him. The spiritual father thought that if he went out during the day, people would run around him and he would lose peace. So he thought he would go out at night. At night, God sent him two angels with candles to give him light. So the whole city ran to him, seeing his glory. And the more he thought of hiding his glory, the more he was glorified.

Those who become receivers of glory radiate a transfiguring radiance around them. Only those glorified by God's grace can truly glorify God, being themselves bearers of God's glory. The glorification of God is not something that is done by the human mind and human will alone; it is achieved by the power and breath of the Spirit in the Church. We also read in the Patericon an example in this way: For three years, Avva Pamvo prayed to God, saying not to glorify Him on earth. And so much did God glorify him that no one could look him in the face because of the glory shining on his face.

4. Mariology: The Mother of God – full of fragility and grace (κεχαριτωμένη)

The Gospel of St. Luke begins with two pieces of good news. The first good news is addressed to the priest Zechariah, of the priestly band of Abia, and the second, which follows the first, is the Good News addressed to the Virgin Mary. Both actions have the Archangel Gabriel as protagonist. As similar as they are in action, they differ in depth and meaning. Reading the Gospel text, we can easily see the important theological nuances. The Archangel Gabriel appears to Zechariah standing to the right of the altar of incense, while the Virgin Mary appears to him in the house. As harsh as the consequences of the first news are, because Zechariah will remain mute until the day the child is born because of his unbelief, so blessed will be the consequences of the second news to the Mother of God. As tough and concise as Archangel Gabriel was when he met Zechariah, he was as fragile when he met the Virgin Mary. The Archangel Gabriel, in his emotionalism, cries out from afar to the Virgin Mary: "Rejoice, you who are full of grace (κεχαριτωμένη), the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28).

The Archangel, who is only a messenger (as the interpretation of the word ἄγγελος = sent) says, has emotions in front of the Mother of God. The Archangel who, in the Old Testament, "at midnight struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the

slave, who is in prison, and the firstborn – born of the cattle" (Exodus 12, 29) is afraid of disturbing the Virgin. He sees in the youth and fragility of the Mother of God the beginning of the salvation of the human race, the first sensitive premise of the deification of man, as the trooper of the feast of the Annunciation also testifies: "Today is the beginning of our salvation and the revelation of the eternal mystery. The Son of God, the Son of the Virgin is made and Gabriel the Grace announces him well. For this reason we also cry out with Him: Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you!".

Archangel Gabriel suggests to us that the Mother of God is full of grace and fragility, or, in other words, grace dwells and remains only where there is fragility. Thus, the Mother of God becomes *κεχαριτωμένη*, the one who reverberates grace over the whole creature. Through her total receptivity to God, she received in her the Archetype of archetypes, the Paradigm of all paradigms, therefore the Mother of God is at the limit of the created cosmos, both intelligible and sensible, surpassing the angelic hierarchies and being the highest hypostatic image of the receptacle cosmic and of the Church.

The Mother of God through her fragility becomes a receptacle of deification. It is at the active beginning of the Christological work on the human plane. Through that word: "Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum" the very history of humanity is changed and from the fragility of the Mother of God is born the Fragility Itself that will save the world from gross sin.

We understand from the verses how frightening the word addressed to the Virgin Mary can be. Like any man who learns that he is going to have a child, in the soul of the Virgin there were many feelings: Will he be healthy? How easy is it to raise Him? The Virgin Mary was still a child, you can imagine how much she was shaken to hear such news, but nevertheless this child is not a child like all others, but will be a king, who will reign over the house of Jacob, and will not be only a temporary kingdom, but His Kingdom will have no end. Many mothers of that time hoped to give birth to the Messiah, and the Messiah was expected as one who would reign over the house of Jacob, but not necessarily forever, but in the sense that he would free them from the Romans, and the Virgin Mary hears that the Kingdom of her Son will have no end.

At the same time, being of the Jewish descent Mary also had faith that God would send the Messiah who would save them from the oppression of the Gentiles, a political Messiah who would ensure peace from a military, economic and social point of view. And this Messiah will be born from a royal family, under very special conditions, not from a poor family, marginalized by society. God chooses "the weakest of the world" (1 Corinthians 1, 27), thereby showing that the fragility is in simple people, the neglected, even the despised and marginalized. Mary brings to the temple as thanksgiving the sacrifice that poor families were entitled to: if a family can afford it, "let them bring a lamb as a sacrifice, and if the family is poor let them bring two

pigeons" (Leviticus 12, 8). The Virgin Mary and the righteous Joseph brought two pigeons, which denotes that they were very poor. This is the environment in which Christ was born. He, who is the Emperor, was born into a family so poor that they could not afford the maximum level of the law that required bringing a sacrificial lamb.

And the angel said to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will descend upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you (καὶ δύναμις Ὑψίστου ἐπισκιάσει σοι). Therefore, the Saint who will be born from you will be called the Son of God (Υἱὸς Θεοῦ)" (Luke 1,35). The nouns "glory" and "cloud" lead us to think of the Holy Spirit. In the tradition of the older prophets, this becomes much clearer. The cloud that carried the Jews into the desert is, in fact, the Holy Spirit. Saint Demetrius of Rostov affirmed in this regard: "We can ask ourselves why the Word of God delays to descend on earth and become incarnate for the salvation of fallen humanity. But before the middle of the 6th millennium after Adam's sin, no virgin was found on earth who was pure not only in body, but also in soul. There was only one such creature, unique in its spiritual and bodily purity, who was worthy to become the Church and Temple of the Holy Spirit"¹⁹.

The fragility of the Virgin becomes the link between humanity and grace. The verb to overshadow (σκιάζω) is used for the first time in the New Testament

¹⁹ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 141.

as referring to an action of the Holy Spirit on man and refers to the resting of the Spirit on the Virgin Mary at the time of the Annunciation. What is happening is a parallel process: between the Annunciation and the consecration of the temple in Jerusalem. We have many Old Testament texts that talk about the idea of God descending and overshadowing. Namely, the 3rd Book of Kings, chapter 8, in which King Solomon brings the ark of the law to Jerusalem, to the temple he has just built. The priests entered the Holy of Holies with the ark of the law, and after leaving the ark there, they came out, because "a cloud filled the temple of the Lord and the priests could not sit for the service, because the glory of the Lord had filled the temple of the Lord" (III Kings, 8, 10-11). The verb to shadow (σκιάζω) is also used in other scriptural passages in the New Testament. Thus, we have the event of the Lord's Transfiguration, where it is written: While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them (νεφέλη λένητὴ ἐπεσκίασεν αὐτούς) and behold a voice from the cloud saying: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am pleased; listen to Him". (Matthew 17,5). Likewise, after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Spirit penetrates human nature and gives the apostles the opportunity to perform miracles, thus, Peter's shadow has thaumaturgical powers: "The people took the sick into the streets and put them on beds and on stretchers, that when Peter came, at least his shadow (ἢ σκιά ἐπισκίασῃ τινὶ αὐτῶν) would overshadow one of them (Acts 5, 15). However, we see that the Mother of God

virtually receives the Holy Spirit before the Apostles, who have the first virtual contact with the Holy Spirit after the Resurrection of Christ: "Peace be with you! As the Father sent Me, I also sent you. And saying this, he breathed on them and said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20, 21-22), following that both the Virgin Mary and the Apostles will receive the current grace at Pentecost. Through this aspect we observe that the fragility and purity of the Mother of God, practiced and enhanced throughout her life, become epicletic acts. At the temple, the righteous Simeon met her and said to the Virgin Mary: "Behold, this is set for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel and as a sign that will arouse opposition. And a sword will pass through your soul, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed" (Luke, 2, 34-34). These are very heavy words that come as a surprise, in an episode where Simeon finds your release. We who are parents, carnal or spiritual, rather want to suffer ourselves than our children.

These words: "a sword will pass through your soul" (Luke 2, 51) refer to the fact that Christ was born, was blessed, but was also taken out of the temple and crucified. Well, the Mother of God carried the mystery of the wonderful birth in her heart. She also kept in her heart the meeting with the Archangel, the words of the righteous Simeon, the wedding in Cana with direct but discreet intervention, the way she positioned herself in the crowd, following her Son and suffering in silence. When Christ's preaching met the opposition of the Pharisees, Mary was the first to be hurt by the harsh

words: "This Man works with the lord of demons" (Mark 3, 22), this feeling being argued by the close union existing between the Virgin and the Son, a union that goes until identification. We can easily understand why the "Mater Dolorosa" painting does not predominate in the Orthodox Church.

In our iconography she is not the Sorrowful Mother at all, but is always depicted with the infant Son in her arms. The Mother hides her tears, as any mother weeps secretly, and when she turns to her children she smiles, and we see the smile and not the tear. That is why, if we read the text of Scripture, we find that the Apostles did not see her tears. John the Evangelist looked at the Cross and saw the Savior, but Mary remained strong because she hid her tear for our sake. She was aware at every moment who the Son is and what power He has, therefore, from then until the end of the world, her name will be glorified throughout the nation.

Compared to other women in those lands, the Mother of God has an atypical attitude. In that area, women are loud, extroverted, express themselves extremely voluble and, according to Jewish traditions, accompany their words with broad and symbolic gestures, for reasons of persuasion. In accordance with this, perhaps it was a natural gesture for the Mother to tear her clothes and curse those who crucified her Son, but she remains fragile and dignified, silently consuming the last moments of Christ's passion²⁰.

²⁰ Protosinghel Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu, *Maica Domnului – Taina discretei Însoțiri*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2022, p. 57.

The great challenge is to endure all the trials and tribulations that the Mother of God also went through and, nevertheless, to remain fragile. It is a great struggle to remain calm, dignified and not to lose your faith when your son suffers unjustly, when your off-spring is challenged by humanity despite trying to give them His goodness. That is why the Mother of God remains a model for the fragile being.

5. Eschatology and Fragility – the future face of pneumatic fragility

Eschatology opens the way to the transcendent God, overturning any false modern view of the non-existence of life after death. So the origin of everything that exists is God, and the end is all God. Eschatology preserves human identity, giving it a new meaning. The kingdom of God puts an end to the power, autonomy, and self-sufficiency of human fragility. The kingdom meets all human beings and gathers them into an unspeakable communion. Beauty comes from the fact that in this infinity, each one is unique and unrepeatable. Eschatology brings justice and affirms the particular, it affirms justice, as it affirms the crucified person, and affirms love²¹.

If the Kingdom is redemption, then Hell is the meeting place of all violence and evil, being a kingdom

²¹ Alexandru Lazăr, „The Problem of Eternal Life – Some Anti-Universalist Landmarks”, *International Journal of Religion*, Volume 5, No. 8, 2024, p. 709. DOI: 10.61707/2as2cz02

of all that is not desired, in fact, where the very glory of God is associated with the torment of not receiving it by the souls of sinners: "Hell is the experience to the divine glory not as beauty, but as formless sublimity; it is the rejection of any analogical fragility, the isolation of the self (or the cosmos) in an univocal singularity, the upheaval of creation as original violence"²².

Although God's glory penetrates here too, it is rejected, causing harm to those in Hell²³. From the sublime, the glory becomes the chaotic sublime. Here there is an eternal refusal to communicate with God, to receive Him, to participate in His unspeakable beauty. Hell refuses glory, refuses the sight of God, accepts muteness, accepts exteriority. Hell deepens loneliness, loses the outer world, loses light, loses delight, accepts

²² David Bentley Hart, *Frumuseșea infinitului. Estetica adevărului creștin*, coll. Plural Religie, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2013, p. 483.

²³ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Eschatological Vision of Dumitru Stăniloae: A Counter-Argument on the Puralist-Universalist Vision of John Hick", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol 23, Issue 67, Spring 2024, p. 9; Alexandru Lazăr, "Salvarea Universală. Noi Opinii în Teologia Contemporană", *Astra Salvensis*, Vol. VIII, No. 16, p. 255; Alexandru Lazăr, "Actualitatea apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului", *Astra Salvensis*, Vol. IX, No. 17, p. 177; Alexandru Lazăr, "The Politico-Dogmatic Stage of the Apocatastasis' Condemnation. Post-synodal Perspectives", *Teologia*, Vol. 92, Issue 3/2022, p. 154; Alexandru Lazăr, "Maran Atha and the Soteriological Consequence of the Eshaton", *Research & Science Today*, Vol. 26, Issue 2/2023, p. 89; DOI: 10.38173/RST.2023.26.2.9:83-92, Alexandru Lazăr, "Orthodox Response to Christian Universalism: The Theological Perspective of Pavel Florensky", *Khazanah Theologia*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2023, pp. 169-178. DOI: 10.15575/kt.v5i3.21456

eternal superficiality. Hell refuses to become fragile and will turn into a Hell of missed fragility.

The resurrection of Christ is also felt by sinners, because God loves them too. The bodies of the unrighteous, therefore, will rise, but they will not necessarily share in the glory, like the righteous, but the body will be clothed in negative fragility. Nesmelov, a theologian of Russian origin, shows that God resurrects the whole of human nature. Therefore, they also become partakers of eternity, just as the righteous after Adam also became partakers of death. So the resurrection becomes law. And more, through Christ a dignity was given to everyone that could not otherwise be obtained by one's own being, or by one's own efforts. Simply put, human nature became one with Christ, not by Being, obviously, but by grace. But God's grace is also received on the basis of the recipient. If it's good, it abounds, if not, it will be lacking.

After His Resurrection, man receives eternity, not because he is by nature one with God, but because he is of the nature immortalized by Christ. Only sinners will not receive payment at the resurrection, but punishment according to their deeds. Or it can be said that they receive a reward, but directly proportional to what they have done. Only because of the universality of the resurrection do they also receive resurrection and eternal nature. So Christ is the cause for which the world is resurrected together with the cosmos. For Adam brought death, and Christ brought life. Christ brings, therefore, another existence, another "meaning"

for man: that fragility will be eternally in communion with the Fragile.

Resurrection for sinners exists, but it does not mean that happiness is also attributed to it. "Happiness is a matter of personal decision of each one for communion with Christ. Christ does not have in Himself all human persons, but all human nature. If He had in Himself all persons, He would be a plurality of persons and a plurality of liberties"²⁴. But this does not mean that salvation is also guaranteed, only eternity. Because their own freedom was used unfavorably for salvation, they will now be aware and will have received what they wanted: a life without God.

Christ extends to all, but not in all alike, but as each one desires. For the good and faithful, the resurrection will be an act of kinship with God. It is an extraordinary fact! Christ has us all, since He became man like all; we are all His. Only the reward will be given justly, but only to the extent that people have realized their own fragility and cultivated it.

6. Instead of conclusion: "God, I have no man!" or struggle with the current infragility

In the liturgical period after the Feast of the Savior, the Church commemorates several encounters between Christ and man. As a rule, the evangelical pericopes are reproduced from the Gospel according to John, because

²⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 289.

this evangelist has the great gift of presenting the events in the spirit of the Resurrection of Christ. Thus, on the 4th Sunday after Easter, the Church commemorates the healing of the sick man from Vitezda or the Sunday of the diseased that met God. Not just a simple illness, but a long lasting one. After 38 years of illness, you can say that you are exhausted and become at most a being waiting for death, without the joy of life, without the joy of man, without the joy of simple and essential things.

The Vitezda bathhouse was the place where, from time to time, a miracle happened, "because an angel of the Lord would descend at the right time into the bathhouse and disturb the water, and whoever entered first, after the disturbance of the water, became healthy, from whatever disease he had land" (John 5:4). If we sit carefully to meditate, that place was not only a healing place, but also a place of fragility, of human wickedness, the place where sickness does not make you better, the place of selfishness or "I-I-I", where everyone she was attentive if the water was troubled, after which the malice began in its outbreak, the selfishness began, without taking an interest in the other, or what disease and since when he has suffered. In that place, a 38-year-old man was sitting on an old mattress, without anyone taking an interest in him. He was brought there by others promising him that somehow he would get better. Hence another form of malice, a typology of social life, in which we believe that a social system cares about man, because it is one thing to care and another to pass!

The poor man waited in his thoughts, in his pains, in his loneliness. He waits in the selfishness and indifference of his fragile fellows, having the impression that God himself has forgotten him, because, many times, people through their own interest, apoliticalness and perversity instill in us the idea that God himself has forgotten us. The patient lost all his dreams, all hope, all longing in the 38 years. The 38 years were summed up in a few minutes in which Christ enters into dialogue with the human soul.

Very often we observe in this wickedness the people who have lost the image of God in them. But God came and told him to take his bed. We do not know what brought more joy to the sick man: the fact that another Man enters into dialogue with him, the offended and marginalized, affirming and recognizing him as a person, as a being in prosoponic dialogue, or the fact that he receives healing. We could say that the dialogue with the marginalized gave him the power to take his own bed and walk and, implicitly, the forgiveness of his sins. But because he had nowhere to go, because the piece of land at the edge of the bath was his home, his family, and his meaning, he goes to the temple to thank God. In the temple, this man encounters rigid typiconalism, a dry liturgism. They ask him: "It is Saturday and you are not allowed to take your bed. Who is the man who said to you: Take up your bed and walk?" (John 5, 11-12). Certainly, by the time the sick man became aware of his condition, Christ had disappeared into the crowd. His joy was opposed by

the canonical acrivia and typical prescriptions of the Pharisees. No one looked at the sick person in the face to see his immeasurable joy, but they were interested in the canonical rigorism, preparing the due punishment: "It is Saturday and you are not allowed to take your bed" (John 5,10).

In a world full of infragility, Christ meets the human soul and smiles on it with grace. He, the Crucified and Rejected, removed from earthly life as a social outcast, will seek out, identify with, and suffer with the frail. People have waited for years on this bed of infirmity, refusing to see Christ beside their suffering. He left, the poor sick man, rejected by the society that had condemned him, because he carried a bed, but happy to have met God. Regardless of whether people will categorize you as wearing a mat, regardless of what it means, let joy with Christ be a constant way of life. He, who understood the mystery of fragility so much that he became one with it, in order to seek man in his non-fragility and save him, offered us a lesson on how man should relate to his peers.

Break down your walls of infragility and expand your hearts! There are so many people who need Man!

The unity of man and the cosmos in the light of the Kingdom of God

1. Introduction

The present condition of the world will come to an end, and what will take place after the particular judgment will be an increase either in happiness or in unhappiness, the situation and state of the human person being thereby intensified. Likewise, both groups, those who are alive and those who have fallen asleep, will partake of eternity, for at the Second Coming the living will be taken into eternity in an instant. The souls of those who have fallen asleep will await this ultimate framework in order to receive the state proper to eternity, although it seems that only the righteous have awaited it. The state of happiness or unhappiness is determined both by the end of the world and by the fruits of human actions, which are eternalized according to their nature, whether good or evil. Therefore, another judgment is necessary, so that the final outcome may apply to all people, from all times and all places. For this reason, the contribution of every person in the world toward proclaiming God is of utmost importance. The Son is incarnated so that the world may know Him, while the role of human beings thereafter is to become His witnesses.

Those who lived in former times will also undergo judgment in order to assess their contribution to the fulfillment of this plan. Yet it is necessary that all humanity pass into eternity, so that the result may be seen within the broad framework of humankind. Both the deeds and the thoughts of human beings will be examined and revealed, so that no one will be able to keep anything hidden. Thoughts give rise to deeds, and if the former are good, then the latter are likewise good. But just as posterity sees what has been accomplished by its predecessors, so too do the predecessors now see what posterity has done: "Those of old will be judged for what came after them, and those at the end will be judged for the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of what came before them"¹.

Just as the apostles, martyrs, confessors, and saints bore fruit and gave the world what was good, posterity must take heed and strive to bear fruit in its turn, even if to a lesser degree. Yet it may happen that what was left good by predecessors is spoiled by their successors; conversely, what was evil can also be corrected over time and made good:

"All of history will once again be laid before everyone, not only what has occurred on the visible plane, but also what has taken place on the invisible plane, and even what could have occurred or might not have occurred, affecting each person with its weight or joy, in its totality for what has

¹ Gheorghe Anghelescu, „Sensul eshatologic al timpului în scrierile Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul”, *Mitropolia Olteniei*, 1-2, 1995, p. 69.

been done good or evil within it. It will then be seen that the past has not died"².

What occurred in earthly life will be revealed, evaluated, appreciated, or, on the contrary, condemned. Only then will all come to understand the truth and its ultimate meaning. Without this eschatological framework, everything would be meaningless, relative, even futile. But through the Last Judgment, all of creation will be fully valued.

Whether fruit was borne or not will be seen only then. The deeds of history cannot receive a positive or negative verdict from those who performed them, as they are encompassed by the enigma of incomplete understanding of the truth; yet at the judgment, all will be illuminated and revealed in their entirety, so that what seemed good may have been evil, and vice versa. Equally important will be both what was done and what was lived inwardly.

2. The Pneumatization of the World and Its Transparency

Matter will become very transparent after the world is renewed. It will be full of spirituality. As a result, all things will share communion and experience. The uncreated light of divinity itself will pass

² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, Vol. 3. București: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1997, pp. 239–240.

through all things in the renewed and spiritualized world. The uncreated light will serve to bring the world even closer to itself, making all things one.

Saint Simeon the New Theologian believes that paradise itself will be identical with the world renewed by God, being "an immaterial, incorruptible, immutable, eternal, and comprehensible dwelling; and the heavens will be incomparably brighter and more luminous than those we see now, as something new, and the earth will receive an ineffable and new beauty"³. Understanding and words will no longer suffice; everything will become higher than what they can express⁴. Thus, the sensible world unites with the intelligible world, forming one. It will be "entirely spiritual and immaterial, because having now incorporeal bodies, surpassing the senses, and being those circumscribed within the uncircumscribed, they will have a dwelling suited to their state"⁵.

In this way, a parallel can be drawn between the angels and the uncreated God, on one hand, and between the angels and the created world, on the other. Following this example, all things will be renewed. Deification by grace will elevate all of us to

³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 264.

⁴ Alexandru Lazăr, "Maran Atha and the Soteriological Consequence of the Eshaton", *Research and Science Today*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2023, p. 88. DOI: 10.38173/RST.2023.26.2.9:83-92

⁵ Serafim Rose, *Sufletul după moarte. Experiențe contemporane „după moarte” în lumina învățăturii ortodoxe despre viața de dincolo*, Iași, 2006, p. 232.

an apotheotic degree of spirituality, but equally of immateriality. Some matter will remain, according to Father Stăniloae, but it will be maximally transparent. Why does materiality remain at all? Because it pertains to the body, which is part of the human person. In this way, the fully realized human becomes spiritualized, like the angels, but according to merit, not by nature or essence. It seems that matter preserves its structure. Each thing will retain its function and place, yet at the same time exist in an unimaginable state of closeness with others and with the entire cosmos. Only God will continue to be distinct from all creation, even the spiritualized creation. However, in eternity, the openness of creatures toward the Creator continues, receiving ever-greater light and deification, in a continuous, endless ascent.

Christic light will shine over all. Nevertheless, nothing will be absorbed; each thing will retain what is proper to it. In another sense, merit will not be the same for all, but will follow certain gradations according to the mode of individual worthiness. Everything will be apportioned, with virtues and deeds defining the reward. The communion of the righteous will have access to see the King of Glory: "He will be present to each, and each will be present to Him. He will radiate in each, and each will radiate in Him"⁶.

⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 267.

3. The Way to God: Eschatology and the Transfiguration of Man and the Cosmos

When Christ the Savior rose from the dead, He opened a new horizon: that of eternity. Eternal time does not gather within itself the immanent projects of history in order to prolong them. Through the Resurrection of Christ, this new horizon became visible within history. Eschatology, however, comes unexpectedly and brings the immanent to a halt, whether it concerns power, privilege, decline, or success. History has had its causes, but salvific power does not arise from it. History possesses only a universal character, not a providential one. Eschatology "intervenes" within this framework and brings history to an end.

"Timpul este văzut mai degrabă ca o afirmare a slavei divine decât ca un travaliu divin, uman sau ideal ce-și atinge scopul printr-un conflict inevitabil, dar înnobilant"⁷.

The Kingdom that comes with Christ's coming in glory does not set aside the entire logic of the world, but rather comes to confer meaning and reward upon it, thereby in a certain sense overturning necessity.

The eschaton, in fact, illustrates eternity. This eternity is for creation, for the future, for an everlasting existence, such that time is endlessly expanded and thus liberated. Eschatology is justified by the continuity

⁷ David Bentley Hart, *Frumusețea infinitului. Estetica adevărului creștin*, coll. *Plural Religie*, Polirom, Iași, 2013, p. 483.

of creation's existence, not by its cessation; eternity offers what had already been given to the world up to that point, but now in an intensified form. Eschatology opens the way toward the transcendent God, nullifying any false modern notion concerning the nonexistence of life after death. Thus, the origin of all that exists is God, and its end is likewise God.

Eschatology preserves human identity while granting it something new. The Kingdom of God brings an end to human power, autonomy, and self-sufficiency. The Kingdom encounters all human persons and gathers them into an ineffable communion. Its beauty arises from the fact that within this infinity each person is unique and unrepeatable. Eschatology brings justice and affirms the particular: it affirms justice, it affirms the crucified person, it affirms love. The Kingdom may be defined as redemption, where none of the righteous is any longer rejected⁸. At the Resurrection, God will be seen throughout the whole of creation, and creation will be filled with glory and grace. The Kingdom will not be closed in a metaphysical sense. Rather, it refers to the fact that creation itself is the good and constitutes this Kingdom; here there is no silence, but an eternal music, a perfect harmony, in which the voices are distributed and ordered chorally, forming a hymn whose composer is God. Thus, the particular is included within the symphony.

⁸ David Bentley Hart, *Frumusețea infinitului. Estetica adevărului creștin*, pp. 483–486.

In the Kingdom, time is always open toward peace and redemption. By redemption, David Bentley Hart understands the integration of everything into divine peace. Moreover, the Holy Spirit redeems memory itself, our memories, calling all to the feast of the eternal Kingdom. The Kingdom is "an eternal outpouring of beauty, a perfect kingdom of gift that is already returned at the moment it is given"⁹.

The theologian Grigore-Dinu Moș observes that, within eschatology, what the world already contained is in a certain way annulled, so that duality, the place of negation, and indeterminacy will disappear¹⁰, and the Russian theologian Sergei Bulgakov maintains that perfect fragility occurs only in the eschaton, when the act of God's almighty creation will properly come to an end¹¹. In addition to these two ideas, Jürgen Moltmann adds another: the complete transfiguration of the cosmos will become the *imago Dei*, because the salvation of humanity cannot take place without the cosmos, nor can the salvation of the cosmos occur without humanity¹². Thus, this image is the perfect penetration of the human being toward God, for only the Creator is

⁹ David Bentley Hart, *Frumusețea infinitului. Estetica adevărului creștin*, pp. 488–489.

¹⁰ Grigore-Dinu Moș, *Curs de dogmatică. Teologie și știință*, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2019.

¹¹ Serghei Bulgakov, *Lumina neînserată. Contemplații și reflecții metafizice*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1999. pp. 536–539.

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *Venirea lui Dumnezeu. Tratat de eshatologie creștină*, Ediție de Aurel Pavel, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2015, pp. 363–366.

the One in whom deification can be attained, when the human person comes to partake of the uncreated divine energies – that is, of the rays of the Being of the Trinity – a process that never comes to an end. The assimilation becomes ever deeper, so that the human being becomes a subject of these energies in a gradually increasing and expanding manner¹³, which causes the body of glory to vibrate and to grow continuously¹⁴. Archimandrite Sophrony sees deification as an extension, but he also emphasizes the identity between Creator and creature; the human being comes to retain all that is theirs, yet to become entirely like God, except in Being¹⁵.

If the Kingdom is redemption, then hell is the place where all violence and wickedness converge¹⁶, being a kingdom of everything that is unwanted, in fact, where even divine glory is associated with torment because it is not received by the souls of sinners: "Hell is the experience of divine glory not as beauty, but as a formless sublimity; it is the rejection of any analogical vulnerability, the isolation of the self

¹³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2002, pp. 425–440.

¹⁴ Olivier Clément, *Puterea credinței – studii de spiritualitate*, Editura Pandora, Târgoviște, 1999, p. 112.

¹⁵ Nicholas Saharov, *Iubesc, deci exist. Teologia arhimandritului Sofronie*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2008, p. 184.

¹⁶ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Eschatological Vision of Dumitru Stăniloae: A Counter-Argument on the Pluralist-Universalist Vision of John Hick", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol. 23, Issue 67, Spring 2024, p. 11.

(or of the cosmos) in a univocal singularity, the 'misrepresentation' of creation as primordial violence"¹⁷. Although divine glory penetrates even here, it is rejected, causing harm to those in hell. From the sublime, glory becomes chaotic sublime. Here exists an eternal refusal to communicate with God, to receive Him, to partake in His ineffable beauty¹⁸. Hell rejects glory, rejects the vision of God, accepts muteness, accepts exteriority¹⁹. Hell deepens solitude, loses the external world, loses light, loses delight, and accepts eternal superficiality²⁰.

4. Conclusions

The present form of creation will cease with the coming of the Savior Jesus Christ. This present form will be spiritualized; it will become immortal, spiritual, and transparent, so that all things will be known by one another in a perfect harmony of love. If through sin all humanity was affected, these effects will now disappear, leaving only what is best and most beautiful. In every human being there will be a reflection of

¹⁷ David Bentley Hart, *Frumusețea infinitului. Estetica adevărului creștin*, p. 486.

¹⁸ Alexandru Lazăr, "Orthodox Response to Christian Universalism: The Theological Perspective of Pavel Florensky", *Khazanah Theologia*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2023, p. 170. DOI: 10.15575/kt.v5i3.21456

¹⁹ Alexandru Lazăr, "Salvarea Universală. Noi opinii în Teologia Contemporană", *Astra Salvensis*, Vol. 8. No. 16, 2020, pp. 253-272.

²⁰ David Bentley Hart, *Frumusețea infinitului. Estetica adevărului creștin*, pp. 486-487.

Trinitarian perfection – not in essence, but in grace. Thus, the eternal world will no longer undergo change, but will come to know its true purpose.

The purpose for which God created the world is perfection. This means that the world is not left in a relative state. The perfection bestowed by God does not concern only one individual, but all persons, and not only with regard to the soul, but the entire being. In this way, the body too is granted an eternal horizon. Perfection is offered to the human being in his or her wholeness, not merely in part. For this reason, the Son of God became incarnate and rose from the dead, in order to be a paradigm for us. Through what He accomplished, He opened for us the path to eternity.

"Only by bringing it to perfection does God fulfill the plan of the creation of the world and of its deification in Christ, after, with the help given by Him, everything that could be fulfilled on earth in its present form has been accomplished, so as to render transparent within it its divine logoi"²¹.

The purpose for which God created the world is perfection. This means that the world is not left in a relative state. The perfection granted by God concerns not only one person, but all, and not only the soul, but the entire being. Thus, the body too is given an eternal dimension. Perfection is offered to the human being in his or her totality, not merely in part. For this reason, the Son of God became incarnate and rose again, to

²¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 236.

serve as a paradigm for us. Through what He did, He opened for us the way to eternity. "Only by bringing it to perfection does God fulfill the plan of the creation of the world and of its deification in Christ, after, through the help given by Him, everything that could be fulfilled on earth in its present form has been accomplished, in order to make transparent within it its divine logoi"²².

Life has meaning only by passing through death in order to move toward eternity. Yet fullness cannot be perfected unless the human person lives this reality together with the body, which after death becomes free from sin. "For complete human life is life in the body, which gives a specific complexity to human existence and renders the human being capable of imparting to spiritual life a beauty through the richness and harmony of visible forms"²³.

²² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 237.

²³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 237.

II. Salvation and the Hope of Restoration

The Actuality of Apocatastasis. Between God's love and human freedom

1. The contemporary problem

Etymologically, the term *apocatastasis* corresponds to the Greek word "*ἀποκατάστασις, -εως*"¹ and the Latin word "*restitutio*"², meaning restoration, reestablishment, or renewal. The doctrinal implications that this theory generates in the field of Christian eschatology, as well as in Orthodox soteriology, are profound. It overturns the entire structure of the faith and shatters the traditional teachings of the Church as they are found in Holy Scripture and in the masterpieces of the Church Fathers³.

¹ Bărnăuț Daniel, *Dicționar grec-român pentru studiul cuvintelor Noului Testament*, EASY PRINT, Editura Teologos, Cluj-Napoca, p. 30.

² Alexandru Andrei, *Dicționar român-latin, latin-român*, Editura Astro, București, p. 148.

³ Hierotheos de Nafpaktos, *Viața după moarte*, Editura Bunavestire, Bacău, 2000, p. 215.

The established meaning of the term has been that of "*Apokatastasis pantōn*", a phrase meaning the restoration of all things, which commonly designates the doctrine concerning the restoration of all things at the end of the age. This teaching was attributed to Origen, and later to Gregory of Nyssa. Henri Crouzel stated that "Origen was not the inventor of this term, but rather received it from those before him"⁴, among these are Irenaeus of Lyon, but especially Clement of Alexandria⁵, who, according to some scholars, was the first to introduce into the Christian sphere the question of universal restoration⁶.

To define this theological view, beginning with the eighteenth century, the term *universalism* became established, a term that also carries connotations beyond the theological domain; however, when used in theology, it denotes universal salvation⁷.

I found it striking that the idea of universal salvation, rejected by the Church in earlier centuries and often denounced as a heresy, has found increasing support among Christian theologians since the 1960s,

⁴ Henri Crouzel, *Origen: personajul, exegetul, omul duhovnicesc, teologul*, Ediția a 2-a, Deisis, Sibiu, 2014, p. 341.

⁵ Lautaro Roig Lanzillota, "Greek Philosophy and the Problem of Evil in Clement of Alexandria and Origen", *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica*, Vol. 23, 2013, pp. 214–215.

⁶ Vasile Răducă, *Antropologia Sfântului Grigore de Nyssa: căderea în păcat și restaurarea omului*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 336.

⁷ Raluca Mocean Pleșa, *Actualitatea apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului*, Editura Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2021, p.10.

and later in popular Christian literature beginning in the 1990s. For this very reason, Michael McClymond likens this surge in universalism to a hockey stick laid horizontally, with its final section slanting upward⁸.

For many centuries, there was almost no support for this belief within the Christian Church; then, quite unexpectedly, a remarkable surge of interest in and support for universalism occurred over a short period of time. In the 1940s, the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner wrote of universalism as "a doctrine which the Church has recognized as a heresy"⁹. Now this no longer seems to be the case. Christian teaching on matters long regarded, indeed for centuries and even millennia, as unchangeable has shifted rapidly in the minds of many. The book *Love Wins* by Rob Bell¹⁰, has prompted many professing Christians to reconsider universalism, as has the change in thinking of the former African American Pentecostal bishop Carlton Pearson, as well as certain statements by Pope Francis, who said something to the effect that "there is no hell"¹¹ – as was reported in the Italian press during Holy Week of 2018, based on an off the record conversation.

⁸ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16, 2025: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

⁹ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, Dogmatics, vol. 1, Editura The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, U.S.A, 1949, p. 352.

¹⁰ Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, HarperOne, Reprint edition, U.S.A, 2011.

¹¹ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/ue/papa-francisc-iadul-nu-exista-904284>, accessed on February 18, 2026.

I have found no evidence of any significant shift in opinion on eschatology among Roman Catholics prior to Second Vatican Council. After the Council, in the 1970s, there was a debate concerning inclusivism and the idea of the "anonymous Christian" proposed by Karl Rahner. It was only with the emergence of Hans Urs von Balthasar that the contemporary debate regarding a rapprochement between Catholicism and universalism began.

In the Romanian Orthodox context, Father Dumitru Stăniloae is the one who opposes the proponents of universalism who claimed that all souls would attain blessedness, on the grounds that a being always retains the possibility of repentance. Among those who support this theory is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who, "in the name of pantheistic idealist philosophy, replaces the dual end of humanity with an unceasing evolution"¹².

Likewise, Father Dumitru Stăniloae refutes the three arguments that underlie the support for universalism:

- a) the non-decisive character of the present life in determining the eternal destiny of the human person;
- b) the eternal freedom of the human being;
- c) the impossibility of reconciling divine judgment with the goodness of God.

Father Stăniloae's exposition, both dogmatic and spiritual, revolves around the concepts of personal

¹² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1997, p. 165.

responsibility, communion, and the maximal valorization of the present life, as well as the highlighting of the essential difference between the ontological condition of the human being in time and that in eternity. He also maintained that the key to understanding *apocatastasis* can be found in the mystery of human freedom: this mystery, that some souls may have the possibility of emerging from hell until the final judgment, while others may be condemned forever to eternal hell, represents the capacity of the soul to harden itself in a negative freedom¹³.

2. Data on the author and her work

Mrs. Raluca Mocean Pleșa holds a PhD in Theology from 1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia, Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Alba Iulia. She is currently a tenured Religion teacher in pre-university education, teaching at Albești Secondary School, Mureș County.

In Chapter I of the work, the historical development of ideas concerning *apocatastasis* is presented, already discerning from the outset the antinomic horizon of its unfolding. Holy Scripture teaches clearly and categorically the reality of eternal punishment, yet there are also scriptural texts that may be interpreted in the direction of *apocatastasis*.

¹³ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Universal Salvation. New Opinions in Contemporary Theology", *Astra Salvensis*, VIII (2020), No. 16, p. 255.

Building on the above, Origen formulated, under the regime of a guiding theological hypothesis, without any claim to dogmatic status, the theory of apocatastasis, marked by debatable Platonic nuances and much more evident universalist accents. It would have been more interesting had the author continued this investigation along patristic lines. Gregory of Nyssa develops unequivocally the thesis of the universality of salvation, while purifying it of any pantheistic or spiritualist elements. He expresses his hope in the ineffable mystery of reconciling the necessary restoration of all with the freedom of conscious creatures. The Church did not condemn his doctrine, recognizing him as one of its eminent theologians. It did, however, unequivocally condemn the later Origenist teaching on apocatastasis, which proclaimed the return of all to a state of pure spirits.

In Chapter II, entitled *Apocatastasis in History: 9th–19th Centuries*, the author examines the issue of apocatastasis in Western thinkers such as John Scotus Eriugena, Anselm of Canterbury, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Julian of Norwich, among others¹⁴.

Western theologians, less permissive regarding this theme and more inclined toward dogmatism, were not able to generate much enthusiasm for the speculative views emerging from the East. Thus, Jerome,

¹⁴ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Fertile Silence of the Middle Ages: Universal Salvation and the Few Theological Voices That Dared to Dissent (9th -14th c.)", *Research and Science Today*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2026, p. 1-8. DOI:10.38173/RST.2026.1.12

although fully aware of the greatness of Origen as a thinker, was never particularly sympathetic when it came to the question of the devil's redemption. His frequent references to apocatastasis reveal him as wholly unsatisfied, deeply irritated, and at times excessive in his critique of Origen's views, which, once disseminated within Latin Christianity, did little to endear the "Greek Father" of theology to the Western tradition.

Origen is at least sharply censured in *De civitate Dei*, where Augustine of Hippo described it, somewhat ironically, as "a gentle dispute carried on with hearts full of love"¹⁵, for the belief that God will ultimately deliver those who are accursed from their torments and will thereafter turn His wrath upon the "ravisher", as Origen asserted: "after a certain appointed period, they should be released from their sufferings and become once again the radiant angels in heaven, as they were before"¹⁶.

In the new millennium after Augustine of Hippo, the notion of "*apokatastasis*" is rarely mentioned in the West, and then only by theologians such as John Scotus Eriugena, who had been exposed to Greek thought. The immense popularity of Augustine during the Protestant Reformation further reinforced the traditional viewpoint.

The attitude of the Protestant Reformers toward apocatastasis was conditioned by their juridical theory

¹⁵ Constantinos Apostolos Patrides, "The Salvation of Satan", *University of Pennsylvania Press*, Volume 28, Nr. 4, 1967, p. 471.

¹⁶ Constantinos Apostolos Patrides, "*The Salvation of Satan*", p. 471.

of atonement. In this framework, the punitive purpose of divine judgments was emphasized much more strongly, since the work of Christ was expressed in terms of a "contract" between the Father and the Son, a "contract" whose central provision stipulated that punishment would be transferred from guilty humanity to the Son of God, so that the demands of divine justice might "satisfy" the wrath of God. Within such a scheme, the idea of God as the very embodiment of infinite love and mercy loses something of the conception of God as the strict guardian of divine justice: a God who is indeed loving, but loving only after a complete punishment for human transgression.

Since this "contract" excluded the devil, his salvation was automatically removed from the realm of possibility. The most prominent thinkers, as well as the less theological voices of the Reformation, were united in opposing any extension of mercy toward the devil. As the Protestant theologian Theodore Beza emphatically stated, "the devils have fallen without hope of rising again"¹⁷.

In my view, the most substantial part of Mrs. Raluca Mocean Pleșa's work lies in Chapters III and IV. Here, she invites reflection on twentieth-century Protestant approaches: Karl Barth and universal election, the later universalism of Jacques Ellul, the pluralist perspective of John Hick, the inclusivist theory of Clark Pinnock, as well as contemporary approaches to apocatastasis: the

¹⁷ Constantinos Apostolos Patrides, *"The Salvation of Satan"*, p. 471.

inclusivist–pantheistic vision of Carlton Pearson, the evangelical universalism of Robin Parry, the critical position of Michael McClymond, and the philosophical treatment of apocatastasis in the thought of Thomas Talbott and David Bentley Hart.

In my opinion, the work of Mrs. Mocean Pleșa could have included more contemporary authors who have addressed the issue of apocatastasis. I will attempt to present only two of them.

Following the thought of Father Dumitru Stăniloae, one could challenge the insufficient and speculative arguments for universal salvation by first emphasizing the decisive character of the present life in determining the eternal destiny of the human person. One could then identify the meaning (and the eternal risk) of freedom as a movement of free will, either toward a higher, complete freedom established in the good, or toward an empty freedom as the irreversible negation of God. It could also be shown that divine judgment is not incompatible with the goodness of God, since the principal cause of the sufferings of those in hell is their own will. God's judgment, while eternally respecting both the existence and the freedom of the human being, merely seals this infernal state and gives it its meaning.

Likewise, an author who should not be overlooked in approaching this theme is Pavel Florensky¹⁸, who proposes an original theory, solidly grounded in

¹⁸ See: Pavel Florenski, *Stâlpul și temelia Adevărului. Încercare de teodicee ortodoxă în douăsprezece scrisori*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1999, pp. 135-162.

Scripture and the Fathers. According to him, the divine judgment will separate, within the damned themselves, the "holy self" (which will be saved without exception and contemplated with joy by the righteous, though it will exist objectively only for them) from their self-consciousness, that completely independent aseity in relation to God and to the righteous, which will suffer eternally, burning illusorily within its own empty subjectivity. In this vision, hell is a reality only within the self-consciousness of the damned, and nothing within the consciousness of God and of the righteous.

3. The Implications of Apocatastasis in Contemporary Spirituality and Individual Soteriology

A number of chapters of dogmatics, along with fundamental questions and problems, converge in this direction and may be integrated into this discussion of universal salvation: divine love and human freedom (the ultimate meaning of divine love, the ontological level and limits of human freedom), the theology of hope, evil and hell (how was the beginning of evil, and its eternal persistence, possible?), and the relationship between the attributes of God (divine justice and divine love; what is "wrath" from the perspective of divine impassibility?)¹⁹.

¹⁹ Alexandru Lazăr, „The Theory of Apocatastasis: New Theological Opinions on an Old Dogmatic Controversy”, EON, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2025, p. 530. <https://doi.org/10.56177/eon.6.4.2025.art.15>

As for the spiritual stakes of apocatastasis, one may reflect on the meaning of the saints' prayer for the whole world, on the meaning of love for one's enemies, and on the fact that they desired above all the salvation of others and that through this they were perfected. How can they be perfected by a desire and a love which, as they themselves know, will never be fulfilled? How did they "taste" universal salvation for those who will never partake of it? What would have been the qualitative substitute for love toward enemies and the condemned, if these were not to exist? Is suffering an inner necessity of love? From the testimonies of the saints, for example, Silouan the Athonite, we learn that divine grace works love in their souls in an antinomic way: either they forget the world entirely, enraptured by the love of God, or they weep for the whole world and for the condemned, desiring rather to be separated from God than to lose even one of their brethren.

The profound significance of the antinomy of hell was articulated by the theologian Olivier Clément. In his book *The Power of Faith*, he recounts a well-known apophthegm: Anthony the Great is sent by God to learn the spiritual life from a cobbler in Alexandria. Observing that the cobbler lived an ordinary life, dwelling in a humble hut with his wife and giving his modest earnings to the Church and to the poor, Abba Anthony asks him what else he does. The cobbler offers a profound reply: he does nothing else except meditate

each evening on a single thought, namely, that "all will be saved, and he alone will go to hell"²⁰.

Such a singular yet essential exception preserves the teaching of apocatastasis. Through it, the horizon of hope for the salvation of all is opened without limit, while at the same time the possibility of one's own perdition is felt with acute intensity.

Only such an understanding experience makes total love possible, extending even to a substitutive sacrifice; it is itself at the same time the consequence of that love which "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7). For "the one who takes into account the possibility of the existence, outside himself, even of a single soul lost for eternity can scarcely love without hope"²¹ and will scarcely choose "in favor of a patience that never, in principle, gives up, but is ready to wait for the other endlessly. Might not my own eternal unhappiness consist precisely in the fact that I myself lack the patience to await the other's repentance without end?"²², asks Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Only the one who loves truly waits for another. The saints not only possessed this boundless patience, but even desired to take the place of the condemned; they regarded such substitution as their greatest joy.

²⁰ Olivier Clément, *Puterea credinței: studii de spiritualitate*, Editura Pandora-M, Târgoviște, pp. 109–110.

²¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mic discurs despre iad*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1994. pp. 63–64.

²² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mic discurs despre iad*, p 64.

This is the true meaning of apocatastasis as revealed in spiritual experience: "God wills that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). One of the great practitioners of this prayer in our century was Silouan the Athonite. "His spiritual autobiography constitutes an important work for Eastern spirituality and brings back into focus a genre rather rarely encountered within this confessional space"²³.

He stated: "I have compassion for those who suffer in hell, and each night I weep for them, and my soul is tormented to such an extent that it feels pity even for the demons"²⁴. The saint asked another great spiritual elder about this: "Should I pray for the dead?" He sighed and said to him: "If it were possible for me, I would bring them all out of hell, and only then would my soul find peace and rejoice". As he said this, he made a gesture with his arms as if gathering sheaves in the field, and tears streamed from his eyes. After that, I no longer ceased praying for the dead; the tears returned, and I sighed deeply as I prayed for them²⁵.

Knowing from his own experience both the boundless love of God and the hell of despair of the one who resists Him, Silouan the Athonite affirms:

²³ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Repere ale autobiografiei spirituale din spațiul ortodox în secolele XIX și XX*. Ioan de Kronstadt, Siluan Athonitul și Nicolae Berdiaev, Editura Lumen, Iași, 2019, p. 309.

²⁴ Cuviosul Siluan Athonitul, *Între iadul deznădejzii și iadul smereniei: însemnări duhovnicești*, Editura Deisis, 1998, p. 204.

²⁵ Cuviosul Siluan Athonitul, *Între iadul deznădejzii și iadul smereniei: însemnări duhovnicești*, pp. 204-205.

"Glory to the Lord that He has given us repentance, and through repentance all will be saved, all without exception. Only those will not be saved who do not wish to repent, and in this I see their despair, and I weep greatly for them, having compassion on them. They do not know, through the Holy Spirit, how great the mercy of God is. But if every soul were to know the Lord and understand how much He loves us, then no one would despair, and no one would ever murmur again"²⁶.

What will become of the world when these two realities are united in the souls of the saints?

If there is a hell of despair (regarding one's own salvation), characteristic of our age, it can be overcome only by another "hell", the hell of hope in the salvation of all.

²⁶ Cuviosul Siluan Athonitul, *Între iadul deznădejzii și iadul smereniei: însemnări duhovnicești*, p. 109.

Universal Salvation. New Perspectives in Contemporary Theology

1. Introduction

Probably the most difficult theme that stirs theological reflection remains the field of eschatology, since it seeks to clarify realities that have not yet occurred and about which our language is fragile and limited. Under these circumstances, I have chosen to investigate this domain, convinced that, on the one hand, the topic is highly relevant for contemporary society (as people are increasingly curious to discover what the ultimate destiny of the world will be, where history is heading; the term "apocalyptic" is used ever more frequently in the media: apocalyptic times, apocalyptic phenomena, apocalyptic crises, apocalyptic disasters, apocalyptic diseases, etc.), and, on the other hand, I am of the opinion that the traditional teaching of our Church does not provide sufficiently solid arguments for today's society.

Ab initio, we observe that the problem of eternal hell and universal salvation has become, at least in the last century, a recurring theme. In the West, the

doctrine of hell is in a discernible decline. Opponents of the Christian concept of hell increasingly attack this teaching, considering it the weak point of Christian doctrine, the breach through which one may penetrate the fortress in order to destroy it. On the other hand, preaching about hell no longer resonates with the contemporary individual, shaped by the traumatic experiences of the age, and belief in the traditional doctrine of hell is collapsing. Georges Minois illustrates this stark reality on the basis of extensive statistical studies conducted in the Catholic context¹. The medieval teaching on the conception of hell in Catholicism generated an anguishing body of literature, with

¹ Following a sociological survey, Yves Lambert found that, as early as the beginning of the last century, in the province of Brittany, where he studied this phenomenon, believers were no longer moved by the fear of hell. For this reason, certain expressions emerged to mitigate such fears, such as: "No one has returned from there to tell us what it is like", or "If we go to hell, almost everyone will end up there." Eighty years later, the author observes that belief in the possible existence of hell had almost entirely disappeared, and expressions such as "Hell? We don't know if it still exists", or "Nowadays people are no longer accustomed to believing in hell", which has become widespread. If this is the situation in France, we may observe that in other European countries the situation is quite similar. In Germany, a survey conducted by *Der Spiegel* shows a rapid decline in belief: when asked whether hell exists, 78% of Protestants answered negatively in 1967, rising to 83% in 1980, while among Roman Catholics, 47% did not believe in hell in 1967, increasing to 59% in 1980. A similar trend is found in Netherlands, where 28% still believed in hell in 1968, but only 15% in 1981. See also: Georges Minois, *Istoria Infernurilor*, Editura Humanitas, 1998, pp. 354–356.

prominent echoes that persist to this day². A remarkable shift in perspective regarding hell occurred even within Catholicism in the last century. Thus, the Catholic cardinal Tomáš Špidlík emphasized that, nowadays, hell is no longer discussed as a place, but as a state, more precisely, the state of the person who has definitively separated himself from Christ³. Equally noteworthy is the position of the German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who opens the way toward the subject I will address in this study. He states that: "eternity, as the fruit of time, consists in coming before God, either in an absolute decision of love for Him, through an immediate encounter and a face-to-face nearness, or in the definitive closure of the self against Him, in the consuming darkness of God's eternal absence"⁴. This view concerning hell has also been widely proclaimed in the Western world⁵.

² In this respect, the most paradigmatic example remains the most famous work of Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, in which Dante's descent into Hell, his passage through Purgatory, and his ascent toward Paradise are depicted, culminating in the apotheosis of union with the Divine. See *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Eta Boeriu, Editura Casa Școalelor, București, 1994.

³ Thomas SPIDLÍK, *Maranatha. Viața de după moarte*, Galaxia Gutenberg, Târgu Lăpuș, 2008, p. 149.

⁴ Karl RAHNER, *Tratat fundamental despre credință. Introducere în conceptul de creștinism*, Galaxia Gutenberg, Târgu Lăpuș, 2005, p. 618.

⁵ Along the same lines is also T. Rey-Mermet, who argued that a person can stubbornly refuse to love, and that precisely in this possibility the idea of hell can be discerned. See also: Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 353.

Starting from Karl Rahner's assertion, I consider that hell should be understood not as a punitive resolution of the relationship between the offense committed by humanity against the divine and the justice of God, but as the human being's refusal and self-enclosure in the face of God's love. In this sense, hell, as the eternal refusal of the human person before the absolute love of God, rather than as a divine punishment or as the impossibility of salvation after death, represents, in my view, a perspective compatible both with the love of God and with human freedom.

2. David Bentley Hart

David Bentley Hart, a current representative of the Templeton Foundation at University of Notre Dame, is widely recognized as one of the most influential theologians in the English-speaking academic world, alongside John Milbank of University of Nottingham. His interests are diverse, and his works, such as his doctoral thesis, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (2004), have led critics to regard him as being at the forefront of contemporary Christian theology.

In his work published in 2019, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*⁶, the very title announces the thesis: all beings who have sinned against God will ultimately be saved. David Bentley

⁶ David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, Yale University Press, 2019.

Hart argues that this idea is not merely partially true, but entirely certain. He does not present a hopeful universalism, as is done, for example, in the Catholic sphere by Hans Urs von Balthasar⁷, or, in the Eastern context, by theologians such as Paul Evdochimov⁸, Hilarion Alfeyev⁹, Olivier Clément¹⁰, in whose conception the idea of salvation remains problematic, since a complete knowledge of it will never be fully accessible.

David Bentley Hart's book suggests that this universal uncertainty is no longer a view worth following, but that we must orient ourselves toward a decisive universalism. From this perspective, the teaching proposed by this author is of vital importance for the

⁷ He maintains that we do not have the right to affirm apocatastasis, but we do have the right, and indeed the duty, to hope for the salvation of all.

⁸ Paul Evdokimov stated that "God awaits apocatastasis from us". See: Paul Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 205.

⁹ In the view of Hilarion Alfeyev, for whom this issue represents a central point of eschatology, it is heretical to assert that absolutely all people will be saved; however, it is not heretical to hope and to pray for the salvation of all. When expressing these ideas, Alfeyev has in mind the dogma of Christ's descent into hell, which he interprets in a universal and eschatological sense. See: Ilarion Alfeyev: *Hristos, biruitorul iadului. Pogorârea la iad din perspectivă ortodoxă*, Sophia, 2007, p. 256.

¹⁰ Olivier Clément holds that the final word should be that of prayer and hope, for "only Christ can know the mystery of a salvation without constraint". See: Olivier Clément, *Puterea credinței: studii de spiritualitate*, pp. 109-110.

Mystical Body of Christ¹¹. If we accept this idea as fitting for the teaching of the Church, then we may affirm: "If there is universal salvation, then anything is possible".

David Bentley Hart structures his case for a universalist vision along three principal lines of argument. The first is the "argument of the responsible Creator" (namely, that the divine nature of creation implicitly leads toward salvation); the second is the "argument of the good as divine in nature" (that everything that exists can never ultimately negate the goodness of God); and the third is the "argument of human solidarity" (that all human beings constitute a single reality, and therefore either all are saved, or none are).

2.1. The Argument of the Responsible Creator

David Bentley Hart first presented this argument publicly in 2015, in a lecture at University of Notre Dame, on "God, Creation, and the Problem of Evil". In his view, because God created the world, He is in some sense responsible for all the evil within the cosmos: "Thus, every form of evil encompassed by time, whether natural or moral, stands as an indictment of the goodness of God: every child's death, every unforeseen calamity, every act of wickedness; everything that is diseased, broken, pitiless, cruel, or meaningless, until

¹¹ Brad Jersak, *Why I am a universalist (but sound like one). Reflections on David Bentley Hart's: That all Shall be Saved*, in *Clarion. Journal of Religion, Peace and Justice*, 7 septembrie 2019, p. 1.

the end of all things"¹². God will reveal His true identity as a loving and merciful God only at that judgment. Drawing on the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 9, David Bentley Hart holds that all human beings are subjected to disobedience precisely so that God may manifest His righteousness by pouring out His mercy upon all. The appeal to force thus presents a frightening perspective, one that is only temporarily outlined, in order ultimately to be dispelled by an appeal to goodness, radiant and decisive¹³.

The salvation of all, David Bentley Hart maintains, is "a logical consequence of what it means to regard God as the Creator of all things *ex nihilo*"¹⁴. David Bentley Hart insists that, since God's act of creation proceeded from His own initiative, all the ends that follow from it are already encompassed within His decision¹⁵.

If every earthly action is subject to the premise that "all its ends are already included in His decision", and if God has granted us the will that impels us to act, then we may just as well ask: why does evil exist at all? In

¹² David Bentley Hart, God, Creation and Evil: the Moral Meaning of creatio ex nihilo, *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, Volume 3, Nr 1, 2015, p. 4.

¹³ David Bentley HART, God, Creation and Evil: the Moral Meaning of creatio ex nihilo, *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, p. 4.

¹⁴ David Bentley HART, God, Creation and Evil: the Moral Meaning of creatio ex nihilo, p. 5.

¹⁵ David Bentley HART, God, Creation and Evil: the Moral Meaning of creatio ex nihilo, p 7.

his attempt to explain how evil can ultimately be overcome, David Bentley Hart encounters a further difficulty regarding the origin of iniquity, being unable, according to Michael McClymond, to adequately name or develop it: "Is it, then, in this sense, that Hart's God is both evil and good alike, at times doing evil, at times good?"¹⁶ I do not think this is the conclusion that David Bentley Hart intends us to reach, but it is a line of reasoning that can be inferred from the implications of his claims. In Michael McClymond's view, this argument does not appear to be sufficiently well thought out, since "if God is morally responsible for all eschatological ends, then why is He not also responsible for all evil historical acts? And if indeed all earthly choices are gathered into divine decisions, does this not mean that God becomes the author of all iniquities, and that a happy universalist end is no longer possible?"¹⁷

The same Michael McClymond points to an inconsistency in these arguments. The work *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* stands in direct contrast to *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*¹⁸, which clearly distinguishes between

¹⁶ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

¹⁷ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

¹⁸ David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*, Eerdmans Publishing, 2011.

divine and earthly causality, and which also portrays a cosmos strewn with destructive powers, thus raising doubts about the idea of a loving God. In that work, David Bentley Hart rejects the notion of a single will responsible for the course of the entire creation. Instead, he proposes the existence of other secondary wills or powers that manifest themselves in the world¹⁹.

Hart's error, it may be argued, lies in moving from one extreme, the portrayal of a God who does almost nothing, to the other, that of a God who suddenly does absolutely everything.

2.2. The Argument of the Good as Divine in Nature

The second major argument in David Bentley Hart's work, which I have termed the argument of the good as divine in nature, comes as a complement to the one previously discussed. From the premise that the human will always be the result of divine decisions, it follows that "evil can never be the original or final end of the will"²⁰. Therefore, the logical argument that David Bentley Hart advances is that "no rational will can remain forever fixed within the labyrinths of evil"²¹.

Hart argues that choices made in sin can never truly be acts of free will. Since there are no consciously

¹⁹ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

²⁰ David Bentley HART, God, Creation and Evil: the Moral Meaning of creatio ex nihilo, *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, p. 8.

²¹ David Bentley HART, God, Creation and Evil: the Moral Meaning of creatio ex nihilo, *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, p. 8.

made sinful choices, human beings will never be responsible for the sins they commit. From the definitions Hart provides, we can conclude that a person can never truly be blamed. From this perspective, the balance tilts toward universalism, for it becomes easy to understand why all will be saved: ultimately, no one has sins that need to be redeemed in the first place. There are no individuals who, in full awareness, choose to do evil. At this point, McClymond asks whether Hart's argument can still hold when we consider human morality and responsibility²². Farrow, however, challenges Hart's view, stating that "man is made to love God if he so chooses; it is not merely a way for God to love Himself"²³.

2.3. The Argument of Human Solidarity

The third attempt by David Bentley Hart to advocate universal salvation is no more convincing than the others. This argument is based on the way Gregory of Nyssa conceives of creation. In Saint Gregory's vision, both the creation and the final salvation of the world belong to a single unified whole; therefore, everything that unfolds from creation to the

²² See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/> /

²³ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/> /

end represents a staged progression (*akolouthia*) of God's plan in time and through change²⁴.

David Bentley Hart invokes the argument employed by Gregory of Nyssa. Hart writes: "Gregory says that God conceived humanity in the form of an ideal Human Being, an entity created exactly in His image and likeness, neither male nor female, possessing divine virtues: purity, love, impassibility, blessedness, wisdom, freedom, and immortality. This primordial Human Being encompasses every person, of every age, from the first to the last"²⁵. From this it follows that either all of us are led toward salvation, or none at all.

Michael McClymond considers Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of human genesis to be speculative, grounded more in Greek philosophical or mythological patterns than in the biblical text. For Gregory, Adam was not merely an individual human being, but humanity itself (in a way comparable to *Adam Kadmon* in Jewish Kabbalah, a mystical "tree of souls" from which each individual derives, like branches). This line of thought is taken up by David Bentley Hart, who seeks to argue that God created humanity as a whole, and that therefore this humanity, as a unified reality, must ultimately be saved²⁶.

²⁴ David Bentley HART, *Frumusețea infinitului*, p. 490

²⁵ David Bentley HART, *Frumusețea infinitului*, p. 490.

²⁶ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16, 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

The analogy he offers undermines David Bentley Hart's argument at its root: when bread becomes moldy, we can cut away the spoiled part without discarding it entirely. But when milk turns sour, it is no longer good for anything. For Hart, humanity does not resemble moldy bread that can still be partially salvaged, but rather milk that is either wholly good or wholly spoiled.

Yet it cannot be denied that his doctrine differs radically from the biblical teaching, which affirms that each individual has his or her own encounter with God, forming personal decisions regarding whether to believe or not, whether to submit or to rebel²⁷.

Among Orthodox Christians, universal salvation has never been an official or public doctrine, yet the belief has long been tolerated as a personal opinion among the faithful (particularly among those influenced by Origen). A person was not censured for holding such a belief, although no one was permitted to assert it publicly. The universalism of Gregory of Nyssa was generally an embarrassment for Orthodox leaders prior to the twentieth century. At the Council of Ferrara-Florence, when Latin Western theologians attempted to invoke Gregory's writings in support of the doctrine of purgatory, the response of the Eastern representatives was telling.

²⁷ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

They stated that Gregory had not taught the existence of a temporary purgatory after death, but rather had taught universalism, and that, in this respect, he was mistaken. They went on to affirm that their Orthodox faith did not require them to accept everything taught by any Church Father. They thus distinguished between what they considered valuable in Gregory (namely, his contributions to Trinitarian doctrine) and what they deemed erroneous (his universalist tendency).

Therefore, it is a mistake to cite this "uncondemned" Church Father as evidence of support for universalism among Orthodox bishops and teachers prior to very recent times. The historical evidence does not support such an interpretation²⁸.

Another troubling aspect of David Bentley Hart's argument is the attribution of a quasi-divine character, namely impassibility, to the human being. The author thus seems to adopt a Johannine-style idea that could be rephrased, somewhat ironically, as follows: "In the beginning was Man, and Humanity was with God, and Humanity was (almost) God". Such speculative teachings are far removed from the simplicity of the Gospel.

The only thing his argument appears to demonstrate is that, if one adopts a non-biblical understanding of Genesis (in this case, that of Gregory of Nyssa), one will

²⁸ Michael McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption, A new history and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, Vol I-II, Baker Academic, 2018, pp. 38-39.

likewise arrive at a non-biblical conclusion (namely, universal salvation)²⁹.

***2.4. Michael McClymond and His View
of the Universalism Advocated
by David Bentley Hart***

Michael McClymond teaches a course on modern Christianity at Saint Louis University. He has published numerous works on Jonathan Edwards. His book *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (written together with Gerald McDermott) was selected by Christianity Today as the best book in theology/ethics in 2012. Michael McClymond is also the author of a notable work, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*³⁰, in which he offers a historical–theological critique of universalism. The tendency to challenge David Bentley Hart on the issue of universal salvation dates back to the autumn of 2014, when Hart joined the Department of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University, where Michael McClymond was already teaching and where Hart served for a year as an associate professor.

The exchanges between them proved particularly significant with regard to the arguments later developed

²⁹ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

³⁰ Michael McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption, A new history and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, Vol I-II, Baker Academic, 2018.

in Hart's subsequent publication, as well as the ideas he had already articulated in the aforementioned work.

In the summer of 2015, Michael McClymond was invited to teach at the University of Birmingham, while David Bentley Hart remained at Saint Louis University. They engaged in intense exchanges on universalism via email.

Hart was confronted with the observation that the vast majority (perhaps a ratio of 10 to 1) of early Christian authors, whether Greek, Latin, Syriac, or Egyptian, did not adhere to this line of thought. McClymond was then answered that he was more concerned with truth itself than with prior authority, although he still maintained that at least part of that "authority" supported his arguments. He further added that, if an eternal hell is necessary to Christian doctrine, then that doctrine itself would be built upon a falsehood³¹. In the end, this would become his most forceful argument in *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*.

It is impossible to separate David Bentley Hart's arguments in favor of Christian universalism from the pathos and ethos with which he expresses them. Willis Jenkins describes this tone as childish³², while Douglas

³¹ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

³² A se vedea interviu oferit de Michael McClymond și publicat în mediul online în data de 16 iunie 2018: https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/?fbclid=IwAR3es1DpFKtwf9Qm4uDr7XWQ96wD66Cc5Q5ESsaZKC_6oFZKGzzXAdTxIW0

Farrow describes him as "an intellectual who flutters like a butterfly, but stings like a bee"³³. In *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, David Bentley Hart describes his intellectual opponents as "vindictive and aggressive", "immeasurably malevolent", "morally obtuse", "absurd beyond all limits", guilty of "extravagant absurdities", and belonging to a toxic and nonsensical atmosphere. The disheartening aspect is that this list of invectives is far from complete. What Michael McClymond observed is that Hart employed no fewer than 118 derogatory expressions directed at his opponents, their theological perspective, their understanding of God, and their conception of hell³⁴.

Douglas Farrow describes David Bentley Hart's language as "the sort of words people normally utter before they come to blows, exhaustive in their use of the English language's stock of insults"³⁵. From this perspective, Michael McClymond states that "it is difficult to think of another work in theology that could be

³³ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

³⁴ A se vedea interviul oferit de Michael McClymond și publicat în mediul online în data de 2 octombrie 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

³⁵ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/?fbclid=IwAR3es1DpFKtwf9Qm4uDr7XWQ96wD66Cc5Q5ESsaZKC_6oFZKGzzXAdTxIW0

considered equally venomous. A fitting analogy would be the golden poison frog of the Colombian rainforests, which does not exceed two centimeters in size, yet contains enough toxin to kill ten people. Hart's volume seems aimed less at refuting his opponents than at eliminating them altogether"³⁶.

Another curious aspect of David Bentley Hart's work, identified by Michael McClymond, is the following: joy is entirely absent from the book. One who is truly convinced that salvation embraces all (even Calvinists) should manifest peace and joy in anticipation of the salvation of the whole human race. If Hart's position were indeed correct, then he ought to be eager, almost impatient, to demonstrate this when we all stand before God³⁷.

2.5. Hart's Exegesis

The translation of the New Testament forms part of David Bentley Hart's universalist project. Garry Wills argues in his review in *The New York Review of Books* that Hart strives to effectively remove hell from the biblical text, supporting his claims with considerable skill. Hart does not describe the fires of hell as

³⁶ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

³⁷ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

eternal, but instead interprets the term "αἰώνιος"³⁸ as meaning "of the ages" (*aiōn*), rather than "eternal"³⁹. Among specialists, it is acknowledged that the term "αἰώνιος" can sometimes be translated as "lasting for ages", yet David Bentley Hart's rendering is considered excessively rigid.

For example, in a well-known verse, he translates John 3:16 as: "For God so loved the cosmos that He gave His only Son, so that all who have faith in Him should not perish, but have the life of the Ages" (emphasis added). Likewise, in Hebrews 5:6, he renders the text: "You are a priest of the Age", compared to the traditional "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek".

When Christ speaks of the division between the condemned and the saved, Hart translates: "these will go into the chastisement of that Age, while the others into the life of this Age" (Matthew 25:46)⁴⁰. David Bentley Hart's interpretation of the word "αἰώνιος" thus carries a serious consequence: not only divine punishments, but also blessings appear to be temporally limited, both lasting merely "an age".

³⁸ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/aionios.html>, accessed in October 15, 2025.

³⁹ See several useful arguments in this study published online on January 13, 2020: <https://reforminghell.com/2020/02/13/the-actual-words-behind-hell-robin-parry/>

⁴⁰ See, in this regard, the study by David Bentley Hart published online on August 27, 2015: <https://saintsophiadc.org/2015/08/traditio-deformis-part/>

One of the essential characteristics of the final judgment, alongside others articulated in dogmatic theology, is precisely its definitive and eternal nature. These features are expressed by Christ Himself in the Gospel: "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matthew 25:46). Likewise: "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). The fact that the devil will be subjected to eternal punishment is also affirmed in Holy Scripture: "And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10).

Father Professor Grigore-Dinu Moș argues that these passages cannot be interpreted merely as a pedagogical reiteration of threats found in the Old Testament, appealing to the apocalyptic consciousness of the Jews (cf. Isaiah 30:33; Daniel 12:2), but rather as an anticipation of the real and fearsome possibility of eternal perdition. That this possibility is not merely a rhetorical device meant to frighten the weak in faith and lead them toward future good is further demonstrated by the fact that it calls for ultimate sacrifices, even to the point of losing one's life for Christ (cf. Matthew 16:25; Mark 9:43)⁴¹.

⁴¹ Grigore-Dinu Moș, „Judecata universală și viața de veci în teologia ortodoxă contemporană”, Presa Universitară Clujeană, *In honorem Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Valer Bel* (2019), p. 1.

In David Bentley Hart's translation, *Gehenna* is no longer rendered as "hell", but as "the Valley of Hinnom's Fire" (Matthew 5:22). Thus, one might infer that, in His warnings, Christ was referring merely to a refuse pit near Jerusalem, since no transcendental connotation is attributed to the place of the condemned. The term "προορίζειν", which originally means "to predestine"⁴², It is rendered by David Bentley Hart as "to decide in advance". Likewise, he translates "διάβολος" not as "the devil", but as "the slanderer" or "one who speaks falsehood", thereby significantly reducing Satan's role in comparison with how it is presented in the New Testament.

In the Epistle of Jude, a term is used that is not ambiguous and clearly refers to eternal punishment; yet Hart, in a relatively uncommon passage concerning the fallen angels, interprets the text as referring to demons rather than to human beings⁴³. Against this background, Michael McClymond raises a pressing question: are the fallen angels the ones who are punished eternally? And if that is the case, what becomes of David Bentley Hart's argument that no creature can be punished for eternity? In an online response, Hart dismisses Garry Wills's suggestion that there might

⁴² See the view of William Bastingius on the use of the verb: <https://ccel.org/ccel/arminius/works1/works1.v.xvi.html>

⁴³ See, in this regard, the study by David Bentley Hart published online on August 27, 2015: <https://saintsophiadc.org/2015/08/traditio-deformis-part/>

nevertheless be a consistent method underlying his translational choices⁴⁴.

In his latest publication, David Bentley Hart appears to set aside those biblical passages that do not support universalism, arguing that the New Testament is written in an eschatological language that should be understood as a kind of intentional phantasmagoria, meant not to convey literal descriptions. He further states that "the more closely we examine the individual images, the more they dissolve into atmospheric evocations and lyricism"⁴⁵. In Michael McClymond's view, David Bentley Hart contradicts himself at this point: if the biblical authors employed nothing more than symbolic language and imagery, then neither the universalist nor his opponent can claim any certainty about the afterlife on the basis of Scripture. In order to uphold universal salvation, Hart appears not only willing to question the eternal duration of heaven, but also to undermine the authority of Scripture itself⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

⁴⁵ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

⁴⁶ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16, 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesus-creed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

Like other proponents of universalism, David Bentley Hart's reading of Scripture contains a number of logical tensions. In this respect, he resembles the followers of Origen of Alexandria, maintaining that God is fundamentally persuasive rather than coercive in His way of overcoming evil⁴⁷.

However, Holy Scripture, particularly Exodus and Revelation, suggests that evil cannot always be overcome by persuasion alone, but that at times a superior force must act to defeat it. In this regard, Michael McClymond points to several biblical examples: Pharaoh is not convinced by God's power, but is simply crushed by it. Likewise, the Beast, the Devil, and the False Prophet are cast into the lake of fire, not persuaded to repent. In all these cases, the manifestation of divine power serves the good, not evil. The saints proclaim in unison "Alleluia!" when the corruption of Babylon is finally brought to an end (Revelation 19:1–5)⁴⁸.

2.5. Living Beyond Eschatology

The way David Bentley Hart speaks about universal salvation is speculative, abstract, and detached, it is the kind of work a religious intellectual writes without

⁴⁷ John R. SACHS, „Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology“, *Weston School of Theology*, 54, 1953, p. 618.

⁴⁸ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

much concern for the effect it may have on the ordinary Christian or on everyday life⁴⁹.

In Michael McClymond's view, the biblical teaching on eschatology brings together the anticipation of the future with the necessity of spiritual self-discipline. From this, he proposes a different mode of life, one opposed to the universalism of David Bentley Hart, namely, living *beyond eschatology*.

When Christ speaks in Matthew 24, He addresses the end of the age, yet at the same time calls the human person to vigilance in daily life. The chapter speaks not only about spiritual and moral preparedness, but also about the proclamation of the Gospel: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). Likewise, the parable of the bridegroom and the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) emphasizes the need to be prepared for Christ's return. When, after the Resurrection, the apostles ask, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), He redirects them toward evangelization, once again linking His return to the mission of the Church.

Book of Revelation presents the people of the Lord as a bride united with Christ the Bridegroom: "His Bride has made herself ready... she was given fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous

⁴⁹ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16, 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

deeds of the saints" (Revelation 19:7–8). John the Apostle explicitly connects eschatological hope with spiritual purification: "We know that when He appears we shall be like Him...and everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure" (1 John 3:2–3). Peter the Apostle likewise exhorts believers "to live lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of the Lord" (2 Peter 3:11–12). Paul the Apostle connects the "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) with the call "to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives" (Titus 2:12). These passages suggest the need to reassess eschatological teaching in its practical dimension. It becomes difficult to see how such an ethical and spiritual framework could be sustained within a strictly universalist context. In this sense, McClymond raises a pointed question: why should we remain attentive to how we live our daily lives, if salvation is assured regardless?⁵⁰.

Early Christian universalists, such as Origen himself, recognized this problem and suggested that universalism should not be a doctrine widely disseminated among the masses⁵¹. David Bentley Hart, however, offers no indication of acknowledging such an incongruity.

⁵⁰ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

⁵¹ ORIGEN, *Despre Principii*, vol. 8, col. PSB, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1982, p. 17.

Michael McClymond argues that, even if universalism were doctrinally supported by the Bible, which he maintains it is not, and even if it were sustained by solid theological and philosophical arguments, it still could not function as the official public teaching of the Christian Church without coming into tension with its moral, spiritual, and missionary foundations.

The concrete example he invokes, that of the Universalist Church of America, seems to illustrate this point. Its membership steadily declined, eventually leading to a merger with another declining body, the Unitarian Association, forming the Unitarian Universalist Association. Over time, this development went so far that even the term "God" was removed from its doctrinal foundation, so as not to offend agnostics who might wish to participate in its services⁵².

To underscore the negative effects attributed to the implementation of universalism, Michael McClymond offers an illustrative analogy. A farmer, seeking to rid his crops of destructive pests, resorts to powerful chemicals; yet within a few weeks, the very grain he sought to protect begins to wither. In the same way, universalism, driven by the desire to modernize and

⁵² See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

improve the Church's teaching, risks undermining the very Church it intends to preserve⁵³.

The belief in universal salvation will undoubtedly persist over time. Yet the majority of the faithful will not adopt this perspective: "My sheep hear My voice; I know them, and they follow Me...They will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:27, 5). In this way, Michael McClymond considers that universalism will continue to contradict itself, as it has done in the past⁵⁴.

⁵³ Vezi interviul acordat de Michael McClymond și publicat în mediul online în data de 2 octombrie 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

⁵⁴ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on October 2, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/>

Eschatological Fire as a Soteriological Category: Salvation Through Fire and the Hope of Universal Restoration in Patristic Theology

1. Introduction

The concept of salvation through fire occupies a significant place in the history of religious thought, functioning as a major theological metaphor for the process of purification and restoration of the human being and the cosmos. In the pagan religious traditions of Antiquity, fire was often understood as an ontological principle of transformation: an ambivalent element, capable of both destruction and regeneration, through which the cosmic order was renewed¹. Within this framework, fire did not serve exclusively a punitive function, but rather a deeply therapeutic one, being

¹ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Eternal Return. Apocatastasis and its Manifestations in Ancient Philosophies: Pythagoreanism, Stoicism, Zoroastrianism, Platonism and Gnosticism", în EON, No. 4, Issue 4, pp. 218-225 DOI: 10.56177/eon.5.4.2024.art.1

associated with the cosmic cycles of universal purification and restoration².

Early Christianity did not reject this symbolism; rather, it engaged with it critically and reconfigured it in the light of biblical revelation. A key reference in this regard is the theology of the Apostle Paul, who introduces a language of evaluative and purifying fire in an eschatological context. The statement in 1 Corinthians 3:13–15, according to which each person's work will be tested by fire and the individual may be saved "as through fire", opens the possibility of a soteriological interpretation that goes beyond a strictly retributive framework of judgment. Fire does not nullify salvation; instead, it becomes the medium through which salvation is accomplished, even under conditions of the destruction of what is inauthentic or corrupt.

This Pauline insight was systematically developed by certain Church Fathers, particularly within the Alexandrian and Cappadocian traditions, where the theme of apocatastasis acquired a rigorous theological formulation. Clement of Alexandria interprets the divine fire as an expression of God's pedagogy: a rational and purifying fire that does not aim at punishment in itself, but at the correction and healing of the soul³. For Clément, judgment is inseparable from

² Jeff Grupp, *Hyper-Calvinist Universal Salvation. The Systematic Theology of the Unchosen Saved by the Lake of Consuming Fire at the Eschaton*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2024, p. 10.

³ John R. SACHS, "Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology" in *Theological Studies* 54, Vol. 4, 1993.

education, and fire is the instrument through which the Logos guides the human being toward perfection.

Gregory of Nyssa carries this vision to its ultimate consequences, articulating one of the most coherent theologies of universal restoration in patristic Christianity⁴. In his thought, the eschatological fire is the fire of divine love that consumes evil without destroying the personal subject⁵. Punishment is not final but transitory; its role is to eliminate unnatural attachments and to restore human nature according to its original purpose.

In the thought of Saint Maximus the Confessor, the idea of the purifying fire acquires a profound symbolic and metaphorical dimension: the fire reflects the transfiguring presence of God, and passing through this eschatological fire becomes a personal experience of the judgment of conscience. For those who have lived virtuously, the fire is a source of light and joy; for those who remain in sin, it reveals separation from God, yet with a restorative purpose, maintaining the prospect of final communion with the Creator. His vision, which integrates the concept of apokatastasis in an esoteric register after the condemnation of the idea at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, complements and enriches the

⁴ Mario Baghos, "Reconsidering Apokatastasis in St. Gregory of Nyssa's on the Soul and Resurrection and the Catechetical Ora $\acute{\text{t}}\text{i}\text{o}\text{n}$ ", *Phronema*, Vol. 27, Issue 2, 2012, p. 125.

⁵ Alexandru Lazăr, "Human Freedom and the Hope of Universal Salvation: St. Gregory of Nyssa's Theological Dilemma", *Astra Salvensis*, Vol. 12, Issue 24, 2024, pp. 34-44.

understanding of fire as an instrument of universal salvation⁶.

Therefore, the doctrine of salvation through fire, as it develops from its pre-Christian roots through Pauline and patristic elaborations, can be understood not as a theology of condemnation, but as a theology of eschatological hope. This perspective provides a conceptual framework in which divine justice and mercy are not mutually exclusive but converge for the final restoration of the entire creation. The present article aims to analyze this theological dynamic, highlighting the role of fire as the medium of purifying judgment and as an instrument for the fulfillment of apocatastasis.

2. Salvation Through Fire in the Pagan Tradition and the Christian Perspective

The idea of fire as an agent of purification and restoration of the universe is ancient and widespread in pagan thought. In Greek and Stoic cosmologies, fire is not merely a physical element but a divine principle that governs the cyclical destruction and rebirth of the world. The Stoics, for example, believed that the universe passes through a cycle of burning and re-creation, and that the return of the planets to a particular configuration triggers a cosmic fire that engulfs the entire universe. This process is not chaotic

⁶ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Politico-Dogmatic Stage of the Apocatastasis' Condemnation. Post-synodal Perspectives", *Teologia*, Vol. 92, Issue 3/2022, pp. 136-154.

but governed by a divine *Logos* – a "universal reason" that ultimately "dries up everything" and absorbs all remaining individual expressions after the fire. The Stoic concept of the restoration of the universe, called *apokatastasis* (ἀποκατάστασις) or *palingenesis* (παλιγγενεσία)⁷, reflects their belief in a universal order that regenerates itself through purification and renewal⁸.

The influence of earlier philosophers is evident in this concept. The Stoics adopt from Heraclitus the idea of restorative fire, which emphasizes the role of change and purification in maintaining cosmic balance⁹. According to Heraclitus, purifying fire is essential to the order and stability of the universe: all things are transformed through fire, and this transformation does not lead to total destruction but reintegrates everything into a higher order. Thus, fire becomes a symbol of regeneration and cosmic salvation, not merely of destruction¹⁰.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, The World Publishing Company, Cleveland, Ohio, 1956, p. 148

⁸ Edward Moore, Origen of Alexandria and apokatastasis: Some Notes on the Development of a Noble Notion, in *Quodlibet Journal*, Volume 5, Nr. 1, January 2003. See online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100214114623/http://www.quodlibet.net/articles/moore-origen.shtml>

⁹ Aryeh Finkelberg, Heraclius and Other Teachers of Salvation, in *Heraclius and Thales Conceptual Scheme: A Historical Study*, Brill, 2017, p. 126.

¹⁰ Ludolf Morwenna, *Universal Salvation. Eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, Oxford Theological Monographs, 2000, p. 38.

This pagan vision of fire is also found reinterpreted in early Christian thought, especially in the Pauline epistles. The Apostle Paul takes up the image of fire as an instrument of purification but gives it a moral and spiritual meaning. In 1 Corinthians 3:13–15, Paul writes: "Each one's work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved even though only as one escaping through the flames". From this perspective, fire is no longer merely an abstract cosmic agent but a divine instrument that tests and purifies the deeds of each person. Even if a spiritual work is "burned", the believer may still be saved, but only through a process of purification "as through fire".

By comparing pagan conceptions with the Pauline perspective, we can observe a significant transition: for the Greeks and the Stoics, fire is a cosmological mechanism, and salvation involves harmonization with the universal order. For Paul, fire acquires an ethical and spiritual character, reflecting judgment and the inner purification of each believer. In both cases, however, the central idea remains the same: fire is not only destructive but also regenerative; it reveals truth and ensures continuity and balance, whether of the cosmos or of the human spiritual life.

This continuity between pagan and Christian thought suggests that early Christians did not completely reject universal symbols but reinterpreted them in a

theological light. Fire thus becomes a universal symbol of purification and salvation: in Greek cosmologies, through the regeneration of the universe; in Paul's vision, through the spiritual purification of each believer. In both cases, fire tests, cleanses, and restores, offering a powerful image of transformation, judgment, and hope.

3. The Purifying Fire and the Pedagogy of Salvation in the Theology of Clement of Alexandria

In the theology of Clement of Alexandria, the idea of "salvation through fire" holds a distinctive place and has generated numerous interpretations. According to his thought, God takes delight in humanity only insofar as human beings attain salvation. Clement emphasizes that God manifests a constant and pedagogical activity toward humanity: He shows mercy, educates, exhorts, protects, and leads toward salvation, offering, as a reward for accepting His teaching, the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven, and rejoicing in humanity only when it is saved. This perspective highlights God's uninterrupted involvement in the process of salvation, through the ordering of everything necessary for the salvation of the world, both at a general and at an individual level.

The theme of salvation through fire appears clearly in Clement's writings, especially in the *Stromata*¹¹. His

¹¹ Adam Pryor, "Clement of Alexandrias Methodological Framework and its Relation to the Biblical Virtues in Light of Concepts of Faith, Knowledge and Gnosis", in *Knowledge an Education*, Student World 1/2004, p. 59.

conception draws on multiple influences, such as Platonic philosophy and certain Jewish and Christian mystical traditions, and is intended to express the idea of purification and perfection through divine light¹². For Clement, fire is the symbol of the transformative work of God's grace, which cleanses the soul of its impurities and leads it to a higher level of spiritual life and communion with God.

Although he speaks in traditional language about punishment by fire reserved for those who refuse a life pleasing to God, Clement does not view this reality as strictly punitive. He maintains that the divine plan of salvation is addressed to all humanity, including both the living and the departed. Thus, the fire of divine grace has a therapeutic and restorative character, offering the possibility of reconciliation and renewal to all who are willing to receive it. In this sense, Clement clarifies that this is not a material fire that consumes bodies, but a spiritual fire, capable of penetrating and purifying the sinful soul.

In describing the torments of hell, Scripture uses the Greek term *kolasis* (κόλασις), found, for example, in Matthew 25:46 and in 1 John 4:18, where punishment is associated with fear. Aristotle distinguishes between *kolasis* and *timōria* (τιμωρία), the latter denoting a punishment inflicted out of a desire for revenge or the satisfaction of personal justice, a term also used in

¹² Clement al Alexandriei, *Stromatele*, VII, 16. 102. 3, vol. 5, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, p. 541.

Hebrews 10:29. By contrast, *kolasis* has a corrective and formative purpose, being applied for the improvement of the one punished. Steven Nemes notes that this terminological distinction remained valid at the time of the writing of the New Testament, which suggests that it was also known and employed by Clement of Alexandria in his theological reflections¹³.

4. Purification and Restoration: The Meaning of Baptism and Eschatological Fire in the Thought of Saint Gregory of Nyssa

Saint Gregory of Nyssa identifies two realities external to human nature that can contribute to salvation: Christian baptism and what he calls "baptism" by fire.

The central importance of baptism in Saint Gregory's soteriological thought reflects the fundamental role of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection in the economy of salvation, with baptism constituting an indispensable condition for the attainment of salvation¹⁴. Gregory understands baptism as a prefiguration and preparation for the eventual resurrection

¹³ Steven Nemes, Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, in *Journal of Analytic Theology*, Vol. 3, May, 2015, p. 227.

¹⁴ Ilaria Ramelli, "Baptism in Gregory of Nyssa's Theology and its Orientation to Eschatology", David Hellholm (Et al), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, Brill, New York, 2011, p. 1209.

and final restoration of humanity, affirming that this "great resurrection" could not take place without the prior rebirth granted by the baptismal washing, described as an initiatory act.

In the thought of the Cappadocian Father, the terms *apokatastasis* (ἀποκατάστασις) and *mystērion* (μυστήριον) stand in a relationship of conceptual equivalence. For him, *mystērion* primarily designates the mystery of the saving economy, and the sacrament of baptism is directly related to it. The "mystery of the economy" is, in essence, the mystery of salvation, concentrated in the incarnation of Christ.

If matters stand thus for the baptized, the question arises concerning the situation of those who have not received the sacrament of baptism. Gregory of Nyssa maintains that, for such persons, there exists a possibility in the life to come, since the "baptism" by fire will fulfill the purifying and preparatory function for salvation: "for since fire and water possess a certain power of cleansing, those who have been freed from the defilement of sin through the water imbued with the mystery of Baptism have no need of another purification; but those who have not chosen to partake of such cleansing must, of necessity, be purified by fire"¹⁵. In this context, the fire of the age to come performs the same purifying function as the water of baptism, ensuring the cleansing from evil in cases

¹⁵ Ilaria Ramelli, "Baptism in Gregory of Nyssa's Theology and its Orientation to Eschatology", p. 1224.

where baptism and/or repentance and moral correction were not accomplished in the present life¹⁶.

Gregory defines God, in accordance with the testimony of Scripture, as love, and this love is described in his conception as a consuming fire that cleanses the soul of every impurity. From this perspective, purification is not conceived as punishment, but as an act of restoring the soul to its original state of purity and communion with God, through a fire unlike that of this world.

5. The Purifying as an Experience of Divine Presence: The Eschatological Vision of Saint Maximus the Confessor

In Saint Maximus the Confessor, the idea of purifying fire does not denote a material fire but functions as a metaphor for the transfiguring presence of God. The patristic Father interprets fire as a symbol of divine love that cleanses and transforms souls. According to him, at the end of the ages all people will pass through this fire, but its effects will differ depending on each person's spiritual condition. For those who have lived in obedience to God's will and have cultivated the virtues, the fire will be a source of light and joy; by contrast, for those who have remained in sin, it will be experienced as a painful burning that brings to light their separation from God¹⁷.

¹⁶ Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, coll. PSB 30, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998.

¹⁷ Lars Thunberg, *Antropologia teologică a Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul: Microcosmos și mediator*, București, Editura Sophia, 2005, p. 87.

When questioned about the passage in 1 Corinthians 3:13–15, which refers to this fire, Maximus replies: "As for sinners, their works are burned through the judgment of conscience, which burns the conscience; it destroys sins and saves the human person, but deprives him of the virtues he did not practice in the former time. And in the age to come, the works of sin are dissolved into non-being, nature receiving back its powers through fire and through judgment"¹⁸.

Through these reflections, Saint Maximus the Confessor offers a profound and coherent theological vision of eternal life, one that goes beyond the simple idea of immortality and emphasizes uninterrupted and love-filled communion with God.

On the basis of the present analysis, we have sufficient grounds to argue that Saint Maximus's eschatological perspective is distinguished from that of Origen and Saint Gregory of Nyssa by the depth and clarity with which he develops, within an esoteric register, the concept of *apokatastasis* after its condemnation at the Fifth Ecumenical Council¹⁹. In this context, Hans Urs von Balthasar proposes a balanced position, stating: "We must also confess, together with Christ and the Gospel, that sinners will be punished with condemnation. To reconcile this antinomy is not the

¹⁸ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Filocalia sau Culegere din scrierile sfinților părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăți, lumina și desăvârși*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2008, p. 221.

¹⁹ Alexandru Lazăr, "Shall All Be Saved? Current Orthodox Clarifications to Pope Francis' Statements", *Teologia*, Vol. 100, Issue 3, 2024, p. 143.

task of earthly theology"²⁰. Saint Maximus's theology with regard to *apokatastasis* represents the apex of patristic thought, setting the tone for future eschatological reflection in this direction, to which certain insights born within contemporary theology will be added – insights that seek to outline, within a profoundly Orthodox vision, the current ideas and directions of the concept in postmodern theology.

6. Conclusion

The theological analysis of the purifying fire in patristic thought, from Clement of Alexandria to Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Maximus the Confessor, reveals the continuity and depth of reflection on salvation, purification, and communion with God. Clement of Alexandria emphasizes the pedagogical and restorative character of the divine fire, viewed as an expression of God's grace that educates, cleanses, and guides the soul toward perfection. This fire is not a material punishment but a therapeutic act aimed at restoring humanity to communion with the Creator. From this perspective, the salvific fire becomes a symbol of divine love, which shapes and spiritually transforms every human being.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa develops, in a systematic manner, the idea of the complementarity between baptism and the "baptism by fire", illustrating how divine grace operates both during life and in the age to

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Liturgia cosmică*, Doxologia, Iași, 2018, p. 231.

come. Baptism, as an initiation and preparation for resurrection, provides the purification necessary for salvation, while the eschatological fire completes this action where, due to the absence of baptism or through sin, full purification was not achieved. In this way, the divine fire is understood as a means of restoration, returning the soul to its original state of purity and communion with God.

Saint Maximus the Confessor offers a profound and symbolic eschatological perspective, in which the purifying fire reflects the transfiguring presence of God and the action of the judgment of conscience upon each individual. The effects of the fire depend on the spiritual condition of each person: for the virtuous, it is a source of light and joy, while for those remaining in sin, the fire reveals separation from God, yet with a restorative purpose. Furthermore, his vision of apocatastasis, developed in an esoteric register after the condemnation of this idea at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, highlights the harmonization of judgment and divine love within the economy of universal salvation.

Overall, these patristic reflections outline a coherent model of salvation through fire: not as arbitrary punishment, but as an instrument of purification, education, and restoration of the soul, achieving full communion with God. They thus provide a unified theological framework in which salvation, purification, and divine love intertwine, while also opening perspectives for deepening the concept in contemporary theology and postmodern reflection on Orthodox eschatology.

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the "century of universal salvation". Possible causes of the development of Christian universalism

Introduction

Contemporary theologians have considered the twentieth century as the quintessential century of universalism¹. Universalism² came to be regarded as one of the most important subjects in contemporary theological studies³. Globalization and the permanent contact with different non-Christian religions have determined theologians to tackle this issue through the lens of religious pluralism⁴ and present a type of

¹ Michael McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption*, p. 38.

² For a better understanding of this theological assertion concerning the salvation of all human souls, it must be noted that this term had been established in the beginning of the 18th century and despite different connotations it may have acquired over time, in the context of theology its meaning is that of universal salvation.

³ Ilarion Alfeyev, *Hristos, biruitorul iadului. Pogorârea la iad din perspectiva ortodoxă*, Sophia, 2007, p. 256.

⁴ Nigel M. de S. Cameron, „Universalism and the Logic of Revelation”, în *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, Autumn 1988, p. 101.

universalism that can be believed/ accepted even by atheists⁵, as a 21st century God must be accepted by the new generation of non-believers. The Calvinist theologists McClymond strengthens this conclusion, claiming that the recent resurfacing of universalism is related to the apologetical interest of making Christianity feasible in a world that is secular and even hostile towards it⁶.

Despite the fact that universalism appeared and manifested itself in different moments throughout Christian history, being present especially in the works of Origen of Alexandria, or those of Saint Gregory of Nyssa in the 3rd and 4th century, respectively, its beginnings as an organized movement can be traced back to the 18th century in the United States. The suddenly increased support enjoyed by universalism seems to be in clear connection with the contemporary cultural state of Christianity in the United States. The concept of universalism, which was rejected by the Church and commonly denounced as a heresy in the previous centuries, found more and more support among Christian theologians starting with the 1960's and continuing with the popular Christian literature of the 1990's⁷. Henceforth, it became remarkably successful in

⁵ Hugh Rock, *God Needs Salvation. A new vision of God for the Twenty-First Century*, Winchester, Christian Alternative, 2014, p. 4.

⁶ Michael McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption*, p. 1012.

⁷ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16th 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesus-creed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

the film industry as well⁸. In Europe, the end of the 19th century revealed to us that the teachings concerning hell were in a decline. The opponents of the Christian hell had attacked this concept more and more fervently, considering it the weak point of Christian doctrine, the breach that can be used to infiltrate the citadel in order to destroy it.⁹

In this text we aim to understand the possible causes that favoured the development of universalism. The following aspects will be used in the solving of this problematic:

1. The enhancement of the fear pastoral and the ways in which this has influenced faith.
2. The ethics of civility spread through the Christian communities in the United States.

⁸ A suggestive movie on the simple man's perception of heaven and hell was made in 1998. This film, called *What Dreams May Come*, presents the love story between Chris Nielsen and his wife, Annie. Chris dies and goes to heaven, and his wife, unable to bear the grief of separation, commits suicide and is damned. The film pictures Chris' journey from heaven to hell in search for his wife. The main message is the impossibility of a rational and existential conceptualization of eternal bliss in the absence of loved ones. Driven by love, Chris would rather be with his wife in hell instead of being in a hell-like heaven without her. Also, the protestant movie *Come Sunday*, that came out in 2018 and is based on true events in the life of Pentecostal pastor Carlton Pearson is successful in problematizing a link between classical teachings about universal salvation and launching some pro-universalist arguments, that cannot be overlooked, simultaneously emphasizing the Pentecostal believers' increased reluctance towards such a theory that was considered heretic to begin with at the turn of the 21st century.

⁹ Alexandru Lazăr, „Actualitatea apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului”, p. 175.

3. The influence of theologians and the new paradigm changes of Christian universalism.

I. Enhancement of the fear pastoral

1.1. The exaggerated preaching about hell

The English Revolution did not radically change the belief in hell, but rushed its evolution. In dealing with the French Restoration and attempting to survive its hostility, the Church anchored itself onto what was fixed and adopted the motto "not the new". For this reason, the characterization and perception of hell aggravated. All of these have shown their influence throughout the 20th century.

Ever since the Restoration, the papacy, along with its bishops and theologians, have added new remarks and warnings concerning the torments of hell. Theological education was wholly based on this element. Father Pierre-Denis Boyer, the leader of the Saint-Sulpice school would tell his students about the whole of humanity being condemned to the torments of hell. His pastoral incentive was very clear in this sense: "when you will preach about hell, do not hesitate to use the exaggerations of human oratory, for nothing can be exaggerated when speaking about a subject that the mind and imagination of man will never fully know"¹⁰.

¹⁰ Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1998, p. 302.

The headmaster would inoculate his students that God's final judgement would be merciless and rigid: "on His judgement, God will preserve the different procedures of human judgement: the guilty will be interrogated and you will see how hardly he will grant forgiveness, their mistakes will be exposed and you will understand what bitter shame will come upon all the guilty, then you will hear the verdict and you will know it to be terrible"¹¹.

The students further disseminated his message in parishes, put it down in written catechisms and preached it from the pulpit. During the same period, Father Jean Marie de Lamennais terrorized his community in Bretagne by walking a bone-filled coffin among the people. When reaching the graveyard, he would rhetorically ask those present where the dead people were now. He would answer that all of them were in hell, ranging from the father that neglected his children's religious upbringing, the rich that did not share his wealth with the less fortunate, the poor that complains about his condition, to the woman who liked dancing and displaying her beauty, and the ploughman who goes to the pub after working the fields¹².

Similarly, abbot Le Reux would imitate in his Sunday sermon a woman that embellished herself to go to a dance in order to attract the men. Then, he would imitate the devil that came and took the woman straight

¹¹ Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 303.

¹² Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 303.

to the depths of hell. So terrible were his screams, that his parishioners left the Belle-Isle-en-Terre church running.

By the middle of the 19th century, priests were already facing scepticism from their believers as far as the existence of hell was concerned. Consequently, Father Louis-Augustin Robinot came to the conclusion that his parishioners had changed: "distrust took the place of Christian naivety, they judge more without being more knowledgeable, they have become more pretentious, less confident in those who guide them, less willing to take their word. Presenting the facts of faith does not suffice anymore, one must also demonstrate them. Drawing attention to the obligations of their faith does not suffice anymore, one must explain why they are obliged to do said thing, refrain from said thing: in short, one must try to be so convincing that they will not doubt that we can defend faith much better than the opponents can attack it"¹³.

At the same time, believers began to come up with all kinds of jokes about the torments of hell and treat it with indifference: "There are others who, in spite of seemingly respecting religious doctrine, have the audacity to interpret it as they will, proving to be as bad a Catholic as the unfaithful. Not making anyone more knowledgeable, today's inclination towards unfaithfulness makes many a person more pretentious and daring. Even in our villages, there are people who

¹³ Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 304.

despite not knowing anything else than the ordinary spade and plough, they have the audacity to doubt this or that, they have opinions, they consider their personal ideas more important than the fundamental dogma and thus manifesting a self confidence that I do not even want to acknowledge"¹⁴.

Father Claude Tailland, minister of the Sainte-Pierre of Macon church, also observes that by the mid-19th century people did not believe in the torments of hell and mocked everything about this new taboo subject: "some Christians who never seriously pondered on religious teaching, or who belittle it to their mind's obtuseness, refuse to believe in hell, and even turn it into their laughingstock. Others, more numerous, speculatively admit to the existence of hell, but let themselves be guided by lust in their day-to-day life"¹⁵.

I.2. Saint Jean-Marie Vianney

Jean-Marie Vianney is a saint of the Catholic Church who died in 1895 and was canonized in 1925. He was an exemplary priest of his church, being renowned for his sickly abhorrence towards sensuality, for his tough austerity, but also for the exacerbated dread he induced his believers as far as hell was concerned.

He considers that the great majority of people will be condemned to hell, starting with the married: "How

¹⁴ Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 304-305.

¹⁵ Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 307.

can one imagine going to heaven, when each night they succumb to the odious sin of the flesh?"¹⁶. In his view, only some married people may can be saved, but they depend solely on the arbitrary choice of God: "Although it is so hard to obtain salvation when one is married, and although the majority of people, without doubting their fate for once, will be damned, the ones that God calls to him will be saved"¹⁷. His thesis is that man can only save himself by suffering throughout his whole life, "if your whole happiness was comprised of suffering and trials"¹⁸.

He presented Christ in his throne at the end of history as God willing to punish everyone according to their sins: "He is a rightfully angered judge, who judges man with all the severity of his justice. He is no longer the merciful shepherd who comes to search for the stray sheep and forgive them, but a vengeful God who comes to forever divide the sinful from the righteous, to crush the wicked with his most terrible revenge and to pour an endless wave of bliss on the righteous"¹⁹. Father Jean Marie Vianney told us that judgement is as fair as it can be: "the verdict is appalling, but endlessly fair. For what can be fairer than this judgement?"²⁰.

¹⁶ St. John Marie Vianney, *The sermons of the Curé D'Ars*, Editura Lulu Pr, 2016, p. 18.

¹⁷ St. John Marie Vianney, *The sermons of the Curé D'Ars*, p. 18.

¹⁸ Jean-Marie Baptiste Vianney, *Thoughts of the Curé D'Ars*, TAN Books & Publishers, București, p. 21.

¹⁹ Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, pp. 311-312.

²⁰ Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 312.

The Father considers that all pagans who did not know Christ will be punished inexorably because they had no knowledge of the great word of Christ. He blames all this on misfortune, but even so, their faith cannot be changed, because there is no salvation outside the church:

"Woe! The poor peoples who worshiped idols will see until the end of time that ignorance was part of their demise. Oh, they will tell one another, if only God would have given us, too, the gift and light he descended upon Christians! Oh, if only we had the joy of receiving his teachings like they had! Oh, if only we had preachers who helped us know and love God, He who loved us and suffered so much for us! Oh, if only we had been told how offended Christ was by sin, and how much God values virtue, could we have gone on sinning and turning our backs disrespectfully to such a loving God? Wouldn't we have preferred to die a thousand times than to spite him? But, alas, we did not know what had to be done to obtain salvation. Yes, we had the misfortune of being born, to live and to die worshiping idols. Oh, if only we had the joy of knowing Him and now, we are damned because we did not know what had to be done to obtain salvation"²¹.

The courses of action initiated by the Catholic Church during this time had lasting and defective consequences. Following a sociological investigation in

²¹ Georges Minois, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 311.

Bretagne, Yves Lambert came to the conclusion that ever since the beginning of the past century, believers were no longer susceptible to the fear of hell. Because of this, a number of fear-soothing phrases appeared, for example: *"Nobody came back to tell us how it is"*, or *"If we go to hell, then everybody will"*. After 80 years, the author concluded that there is virtually no faith in the existence of hell, and phrases such as: *"Hell? We no longer know if it exists"* or *"Nowadays people are not in the habit of believing that there is a hell"*, are very common.

Today, we are witnessing a major paradigm change. The world has moved from a pastoral of fear to an elated theology. Pew Research Center, a private group of experts who offer information on social problems, public opinion and demographical tendencies that shape the United States and the world, have signalled the fact that the Western Europeans are likelier to claim that God has rewarded them personally than to claim that He ever punished them. In Spain, for instance, 41% of adults believe that God rewarded them, while only 18% believe that they were punished by God²².

²² Pew Research Center, May 29, 2018, "Being Christian in Western Europe", p. 113.

	Rewarded them	Punished them
Portugal	63%	23%
Spain	41	18
Italy	40	24
Ireland	36	25
Austria	29	19
Belgium	21	11
Germany	28	19
Netherlands	19	10
Sweden	16	7
Switzerland	32	23
France	28	20
Norway	19	11
Finland	25	18
United Kingdom	25	18
Denmark	14	8
MEDIAN	28	18

Similarly, when asked: "How do you perceive God?", positive answers were not hard to come by. Thus, a 67-year-old Spanish person answered: "To me, God is kindness. Kindness in the broadest sense of the word: good. And then, because I love my family, I believe he is a super-father. He is there when you need him, He will forgive you for your wrongdoings, he will set you free if you want that and he will never admonish you. He will explain, and nothing more"²³. A 39-year-old British person affirmed that: "God accepts everything, he is peaceful and forgiving. I think that is what I understand from the Bible and what He asks of

²³ Pew Research Center, May 29, 2018, „Being Christian in Western Europe“, pp. 114-115.

us. So, I assume we would be a bit arrogant if He himself wouldn't be that way, am I right? So, I believe these would be his characteristics"²⁴.

The conceptualization of hell in Catholicism generated an anguishing literature with powerful echoes that can be still felt today²⁵. At the beginning of the 20th century, a Manual for Dogmatic Orthodox Theology was published under the guidance of Iosif Olariu. His position concerning the torments of hell is an evident one: "the reprimand in the consciousness of the sinful is a result of a useless repentance"²⁶. He goes on to state that: "The torments comprise, first and foremost, of being forsaken from the grace of God and envying the sight of the great gifts bestowed upon the righteous. Their sufferings will be different, so that some will be punished harsher, some less, according to the sins they committed, so that godly justice can be observed"²⁷.

The cognitions of dogmatist thinkers Ioan Zăgrean and Isidor Todoran emphasize a cold relationship

²⁴ Pew Research Center, May 29, 2018, „Being Christian in Western Europe”, p. 114.

²⁵ Dante Alighieri's most famous work *The Divine Comedy* remains paradigmatic in this sense. It pictures the descent of Dante to Hell, his passing through Purgatory and ascension to Paradise, culminating with the apotheosis of the union with Divinity. See Dante, *Divina Comedie*, traducere de Eta Boeriu, Editura Casa Școalelor, București, 1994.

²⁶ Iosif Olariu, *Manual de Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, Caransebeș, Editura Autorului – Tiparul Tipografiei Diecezane, 1907, p. 802.

²⁷ Iosif Olariu, *Manual de Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 810.

between saints and sinners in the afterlife. This indifferent relationship is considered to be an alibi in resolving certain feelings of love and mercy:

"The claim that the sufferings of those in hell could produce sufferings to those in heaven is unacceptable, since they know well that those in hell have refused divine salvation until their last breath and ended up in hell through their contumacy. If the afterlife is the home of justice (1, Petru 3,13), then the sinners in hell cannot instill mercy or pity to the ones in heaven, for they are the only ones responsible for their fate, because they stubbornly and willingly rejected any help towards salvation and continue to do so"²⁸.

Additionally, priest-professor Vasile Borca concedes that God will be a prosecutor whose judgement will be unbiased:

"Firstly, God will come forth as a cruel prosecutor who will unearth and bring to light all of man's iniquities. In this sense, God will use those books in which each and everyone's deeds were written. Secondly, he will pronounce the sentence, which will be irrevocable. Both the reward and the punishment will be personal and non-transferable. Lastly, he will begin to execute the sentence"²⁹.

²⁸ Isidor Todoran, Ioan Zăgrean, *Dogmatică Ortodoxă. Manual pentru seminariile teologice*, Editura Renașterea Cluj, Cluj-Napoca, 2000, p. 361.

²⁹ Vasile Borca, *Omul – încununare a operei creației. Natura și destinul său în lumina Revelației biblice a Vechiului Testament*, Baia Mare, Editura Universității de Nord, 2007, p. 311.

II. Secularization of language

II.1. The ethics of civility

McClymond signals the fact that many versions of universalism took shape by the end of the 19th century. These multiple theories display considerable differences, but, similarly to different paths that meet in a common point, these "universalisms" converge on the idea of general final salvation applicable to anyone. These theories reach their conclusion through different methods, with major contrasts between the universalists who believe that everyone will ascend to heaven immediately after death (the so-called "ultra-universalists") and those who believe that the majority of people need to have their sins forgiven before going to heaven (whom I call "purgatorists"). Christian universalists never agreed on this important matter³⁰.

In a recent study, Raluca Mocean Pleșa synthesises five perspectives on universal salvation³¹:

- 1) Particularism – teaches a double predestination of mankind by God.
- 2) Exclusivism – teaches that salvation is exclusively the result of strong faith in the person of our saviour Jesus Christ.

³⁰ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16th 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreeed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

³¹ Raluca Mocean Pleșa, *Actualitatea apocalipsei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea umană*, Editura Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2021, p. 10.

- 3) Inclusivism – teaches that the easiest way to salvation is faith in our saviour, but accepts the possibility of salvation for unfaithful souls.
- 4) Conditionalism – teaches that at the eschatological end of historic time only those who followed and believed in Christ will rejoice in his heavenly kingdom, while those who did not follow him or repent for their sins will be annihilated.
- 5) Arminianism – affirms that God is unlimited love, but, despite this, universal salvation is limited because of a number of factors that God does not have control over, such as humane liberty.

The idea of universal salvation, rejected by the Church in the previous centuries and often denounced as heresy, found increasing support beginning with the 1960's and then with the popular christian literature of the 1990's. Because of this, Michael McClymons associates this explosion of universalism with a horizontally placed hockey stick, with its final part bent upwards³², because, for centuries, the Church did not show support to this belief, and then, there was a spectacular increase of interest and support for universalism in a very short period of time³³.

³² See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16th 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesus-creed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

³³ Alexandru Lazăr, „Actualitatea apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului”, p. 176.

In the 1940s, the reformed theologian Emil Brunner wrote about universalism as a "doctrine recognized by the Church as heresy"³⁴. That no longer seems to be the case nowadays. The Christian teachings about so called centuries-old, immutable beliefs has rapidly changed in the views of many. Evangelical pastor Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*³⁵ has provoked declared Christians to reconsider universalism³⁶, similarly to the change of

³⁴ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, Dogmatics, vol, 1, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, USA, 1949, p 352.

³⁵ Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, HarperOne, Reprint edition, U.S.A, 2011.

³⁶ Rob Bell – The influential pastor of the Mars Hill Biblical Church from Grand Rapids, Michigan – posted a promotional video for his new book *Love Wins*. Rumours about his book pleading for universalism spread almost immediately, and, unsurprisingly, set the internet on fire. On the 26th of February, on Saturday, Justin Taylor, a known neo-Calvinist posted his provisional reflection on Bell as a universalist on his blog The Gospel Coalition and, it seems, almost 12.000 people recommended his Facebook post that evening. During the same day, Rob Bell was in the top 10 trending subjects on Twitter. From there, the number of blog posts exploded. Universalism went overnight from being a marginal problem that most evangelicals felt they could ignore to being the next big debate. When Bell's book was published on the 15th of March 2011, it raised a lot of uncomfortable questions surrounding the traditional understanding of hell, rendering it a (a) horrendous consequence of the human sin that lives in this age and (b) divine judgement in the next century. But, according to Bell, this post-mortem hell is not an eternal punishment (either in the sense of an aware, eternal torment or annihilation), but a process intended by God as educative and corrective for all those who suffer it. Getting out of hell is possible in Bell's view. As far as universalism is concerned, Bell mercifully suggests that God wishes to save everyone. He sent Christ to die for us, He promises to save everyone and is capable of acting on His will.

beliefs of former Pentecostal pastor Carlton Pearson, who was declared a heretic in 2004 and created his own cult dedicated to "*The Gospel of Inclusion*", promoting his universalist vision³⁷.

No evidence of a significant change of opinion concerning eschatology among Roman Catholics has been found before Vatican II (1962-1965). After the council, during the 70's, there existed a debate about inclusivism and Karl Rahner's idea of "anonymous Christianity". It was only with Hans Urs von Balthasar that the contemporary debate surrounding the propinquity of Catholicism with universalism began³⁸.

The sudden increase of support in favour of universalism is related to the current cultural situation of the Church in the occidental world. What cultural factors are at play? This question is answered by sociologist James Davison Hunter that has been talking about the apparition of an "ethics of civility" among American youth ever since the 1980s (although this observation could be generalized to the evangelicals from Canada, the United Kingdom, continental Europe, Australia, New Zealand, etc.)³⁹.

³⁷ Carton Pearson, *The Gospel of Inclusion. Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God and Self*, New York, Atria, 2006.

³⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mic discurs despre iad*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1994.

³⁹ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16th 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

The most important principle in the "ethics of civility" is "do not offend others". Hunter suggested that this attitude was already widespread among younger evangelists in the 1980s – individuals who are now in their fifties or sixties, therefore, they are in key leading positions of their Christian communities. A great number of aspects concerning the teachings of the New Testament were offensive to the people who first heard the Gospel (for example, the concept of a crucified Saviour). Our twentieth century culture may not find these notions offensive, but it may certainly take issue with some of the clear teachings of the Bible concerning contemporary problems of pluralism/ exclusivity, sexuality and eschatology⁴⁰.

The Bible establishes a message about "two paths", one towards benediction and "one that leads to death" (Prov. 14:12). A text such as Psalm 1 never mentions "hell" per se, but implies a distinction between the path of the righteous and that of the wicked, a type of accountability and perhaps even a coming separation. In the New Testament, these issues are more focused on the eschatological word of Christ from chapter 25 in the Gospel after Matthew, when he alludes to the fact that he will divide people as a shepherd divides goats from sheep. Taking this into account, Hunter says, what reaction will a typical contemporary congregation have, if the pastor goes up to the pulpit, reads this

⁴⁰ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16th 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesus-creed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

passage from Matthew 25, presenting it literally and applying it to the congregation before him? "Some of us today are goats, while others are sheep". This would be an offensive message, even to the ones frequenting that cult.

Preachers talk more easily about the benefits of being Christian, "if you will follow Christ, your life will be better", but they, along with laic Christians, are generally reticent to address the consequences of the deliberate hearing of the Gospel and rejecting Christ. This thing can give the impression that "everyone is alright" and nobody is "lost" or "broken" by sin. This would imply a disadvantage to being Christian, but there is no such thing. It may not be what preachers say, but it may be what people hear. The universalist message represents a postponed celebration – the official statement that no one is really in danger⁴¹.

An evident question that arises is: based on this, what does one make of the Saviour who so often conveyed the idea that many are, in fact, in danger (separating the wheat from the chaff, entering through the narrow door)? One must consider a text from the Gospel: "Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?". He said to them: "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to" (Lc. 13: 23-24). Reconciling such a text with

⁴¹ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16th 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesus creed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

universalism seems impossible. The more time one spends with evangelical texts, the likelier it is to feel uncomfortable.

Throughout the centuries, the teaching of universal salvation based itself, generally, on a metaphysical or ontological foundation. The human spirit must return to God due to its inherent nature and direct derivation from God. It is a "spark of the divine". As the human spirit is bound to God, evil is bound to forgetfulness. Given the ontological weakness of evil, if not its inexistence, it has no power to remain in the metaphysical. Taking this premise into account, the human soul could be compared to a helium-filled balloon, placed inside the chest and set free when a person dies. As soon as death occurs, the spirit rises to the heavens. The balloon rises because of a natural property (i.e., its gaseous density is lower than that of the surrounding atmosphere). Considering this, if this is how salvation takes place, then everybody is saved solely based on an intrinsic characteristic that all human beings possess⁴². Therefore, there is no place for favour or need for a saviour. In some cases, contemporary universalist theology gravitates back towards its gnostic starting point. Former Pentecostal Carlton Pearsons speaks now about all human beings as "essentially"

⁴² See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16th 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

divine⁴³. Professor John Crowder wrote about God "absorbing the whole order created by Himself" into Christ⁴⁴. These are metaphysical and not biblical stories about salvation. These leave no room for favour and minimize faith, repentance and obedience⁴⁵.

III. The influence of theologists and new paradigm changes in Christian universalism

The beginning of the new millennium brought along a large series of changes facilitated by the access to information, thus universalism became a modern problem. A number of theologists began to reject the idea of eternal damnation, affirming different forms of universalism. For instance, the evangelical theologist Robin Parry declares himself a "full of hope dogmatic universalist"⁴⁶, American protestant theologist David W. Congdon, the youngest author who made a name for himself in theological studies with a new

⁴³ Carlton Pearson, *The Gospel of Inclusion. Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God and Self*, New York, Atria, 2006, p. 8.

⁴⁴ John Crowder, *Mystical Union*, Santa Cruz, Sons of Thunder, 2010, p. 119.

⁴⁵ See the interview given by Michael McClymond and published online on June 16th 2018: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesus-creed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/>

⁴⁶ Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, Second Edition, with a foreword by Oliver D. Crisp, Eugene, Cascade Books, 2012, p. 4.

perspective on universalism, proposes a new universalism form called: "eschatological teo-updated universalism"⁴⁷. Additionally, Jürgen Moltmann speaks about the promise of Christian universalism offered by the Saviour through his sacrifice⁴⁸, Rob Bell proposes an imantization of the eschaton through a permanent link between the kingdom of God and the call for social improvement, and Carlton Pearson starts from a pantheist view of God (who dwells in all objects, religions, places, people, cultures, ideologies, concepts or beliefs). Similarly, new eschatological perspectives belonging to the charismatic theologians John Crowder⁴⁹, Francois Du Toit⁵⁰, Benjamin Dunn⁵¹ have appeared. Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart developed a philosophical understanding of Christian universalism. His work *That All Shall Be Saved*⁵² builds on three main directions that legitimize a universalist view. These are as following:

- 1) The argument of the responsible Creator: i.e. the divine nature of creation leads implicitly to salvation.

⁴⁷ David W. Congdon, *The God Who Saves: A Dogmatic Stretch*, Eugene, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The coming of God. Christian Eschatology*, London, SCM Press LTD, 1996, p. 251.

⁴⁹ John Crowder, *Cosmos Reborn: Happy Theology on the New Creation*, Portland, Sons of Thunder, 2013.

⁵⁰ François Du Toit, *Divine Embrace*, Hermanus, Mirror Word, 2012.

⁵¹ Benjamin Dunn, *The Happy Gospel! Effortless Union with a Happy God*, Shippensburg, Destiny Image, 2011.

⁵² David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell and Universal Salvation*, Yale University Press, 2019.

- 2) The argument of divine-natured good: i.e. all that is worldly will admit to the grace of God.
- 3) The argument of humane solidarity: i.e. all people constitute an entity, so either all of us, or none of us will be saved.

Conclusions

Ab initio, we can observe that the problem of everlasting damnation and that of universal salvation have become recurrent in the past century. In the West, the teachings about hell are in a detectable decline. The opponents of Christian hell will attack this teachings more and more fervently, considering it the weak point of Christian doctrine, the breach that can be used to infiltrate the citadel in order to destroy it⁵³. On the other hand, the sermon about hell no longer affects the contemporary man, who is a partaker to the terrible experiences of the age, and traditional faith in hell is collapsing. Based on this, the change in perspective on Christian universalism can be considered imminent. People from the secularized, relativized Occidental environment have easily switched sides, trading the fear of damnation for the hope of universal salvation. For some, such a mindset change can seem only an example of the tireless dilution of the Gospel by modernity, a superficial optimism that refuses to

⁵³ Alexandru Lazăr, „Actualitatea apocalipsei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului”, p. 175.

acknowledge the power of evil in our world and our responsibility for it. For the Church, however, this represents a major issue. The beginning of the century brought about a number of changes facilitated by the access to information, universalism becoming, thus, a debate in which the Orthodox Church is invited to state a firm and convincing case for the contemporary man. Universalism is not to be understood only by a select group of theologians, but by each and every one of us. Because the Church takes all people seriously, it must answer to anyone, anytime, in accordance with the word of Peter the Apostle "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Ptr. 3, 15).

Even if universalism would have doctrinaire support in the Bible, which is not the case, or if it would be supported by solid theological and philosophical arguments, it could still not serve as the official and public teaching of the Christian Church without being in disagreement with the institution's moral, spiritual and missionary foundations. The real case in point we have, that of the Universalist Church of the United States demonstrates this. The parishioners became fewer and fewer and had to unite their church with another declining institution, the Unitarians – becoming thus the Universalist-Unitarian Association. Things have declined so much that they completely excluded the word "God" from their doctrinaire basis, so as to not offend any agnostic who would wish to attend their sermons.

The result I have reached as a consequence of this scientific endeavour can be used in other projects and studies. One can further analyse other contemporary authors who address this difficult and sensitive issue, but, regardless of the approach, most arguments converge towards one solution: Christian universalism that targets universal salvation for all people is not possible, given the breadth of human liberty and responsibility, which have eternal consequences. At the same time, however, we have sufficient reason to hope that the number of those who will reject God for eternity will be a very small one.

The Ecumenical and Missionary Importance of Asceticism as a Response to Universal Salvation

Ecumenical and Ascetic Man vs. Christian Universalism

Asceticism, first of all, is aimed at the that leads to holiness and to the ultimate goal: union with God. The ascetic, who is sincerely and correctly practicing the work of asceticism is wrapped in humility, a humility that opens up a free space in the heart of the ascetic who is meant to be filled with grace¹. Once freed from sins, God makes his dwelling in that space which has just been cleansed and prepared to receive him. But God, once received, touches the heart of the one who has been in need, and sincere love for him is inevitably and naturally redirected towards his fellow men, in whom God is identified.

When talking about ecumenism, openness to others is mentioned. One could say that one who is involved in the ecumenical movement is willing to open oneself to something or to someone; one has a certain openness

¹ Alexandru Lazăr, "Redescoperirea valorilor ascetice în contemporaneitate", *Revista Astra Salvensis*, Nr. 1/2023, Vol 11, Issue 21. p. 57.

to something foreign to oneself. Making the connection with the above, opening oneself to or towards God inevitably leads to an openness marked by love, towards one's neighbor and towards the whole of creation.

The person of another will appear as the image of God for the one who will be able to break away from his individual limitation in order to find the common nature and to realize his own person. Orthodox theology makes a distinction of these terms. What does the word "individual" mean and what does the word "person" mean? Why does theology speak and use the noun person more than the noun individual? The individual is the expression of something that cannot be divided: I with me, I for me. In theology the word person means, among other things: being in dialog, being in openness, in prosoponic dialog (face-to-face dialog). We are faces in dialog with others and first of all with God. Self-denial means openness to the other. To reach the state of saying: this man is my salvation, if he leaves me, I cannot stop him². But if he stays with me, this man is my salvation. In a personal way, self-assertion, in which the person is confused with the flesh and loses his true freedom, must be broken. Thus, the Church in her wisdom sets before us the paradigm of the monastic who, renouncing himself, embraces in his heart the whole world, the whole Adam. This is why St.

² Alexandru Lazăr, *Fragilitatea Ființei – Premisă sensibilă a Îndumnezeirii*, Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2024, p. 108.

Nil of Sinai the Sinaite affirmed that the perfect monk will honor all men after God as God Himself³, while Father Petroniu Tănase, a contemporary monk from Mount Athos remarked that we must honor all men as God, because in every man is the image of God⁴.

The one united with God, marked by divine love, cannot fail to manifest it outwardly. His mission is driven by compassion and in fact no longer a mission in itself, but becomes a natural act of graceful inertia. Olivier Clement inserts in his book, "The Power of Faith", a well-known apophthegm: Avva Antony is sent by God to take the example of the spiritual life from a curate of Alexandria. Noticing that this curate was leading an ordinary life, living in a shabby hut with his wife, and that the money he earned he distributed to the church and the poor, Avva Antony asks him what else he does. And the curate gave him a profound answer. He tells him that he does nothing else but meditate every evening on the thought that "All will be saved, and he alone will go to hell"⁵. The one who has humbled himself by his unselfishness is seized with love for his fellow men, and his sole aim in relation to them is to see them saved, even if he should go before them.

³ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 122.

⁴ Petroniu Tănase *Icoane smerite din Sfânta Ortodoxie Românească*, Editura Bizantină – Schitului Românesc Prodromu, București, 2003, p. 9.

⁵ Olivier Clement, *Puterea credinței*, Editura Pandora, Târgoviște, 1999, pp. 109-110.

In order to speak of mission, it is necessary, that it serve a goal, an objective proposed from the beginning, as necessity teaches man along the way that all things are in God, with God and through God. Selfishness is renounced, and then ecumenism, in its Christian sense, manifests itself. Asceticism, involuntarily, by its very nature gives evidence of ecumenism. Also, mission is accomplished by mere existence. The ascetic is transformed into a torch, designed to point one's neighbor towards God: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:16).

The virtue of humility is manifested in ecumenism at the level of dialogue, for the purpose of the Church, and of Christianity in particular, it is not to dominate the interlocutor, or to exalt oneself above him, but to bear witness. As for importance of the mission itself, it presupposes, a leaning towards the other. Following the examples of the Savior, of the Holy Apostles, and of many saints, such as the fathers of the desert, whose acts are presented in the Patristic Letter, the purpose of the mission is manifested in service: "Not so shall it be among you, who among you would be great among you, and who among you would be first among you, and be your servant" (Matthew 20:26-27). Another aspect of humility in mission is to gradually increase its intensity. The humble one, who is aware that he has the mission of preaching about God, and is not driven by the desire to feed his ego, shows patience, tact and understanding in his ministry. No realistic missionary can begin his mission with "hard food" (Hebrews 5:12).

Orthodox spirituality has been accused of promoting a withdrawal from life, a carelessness marked by indifference, yet this is entirely wrong. As such, St. Maxim the Confessor speaks to us of the movement of creation in which man is invited to participate. For only by participating in this movement, can man rise in goodness and perfection. Each person becomes responsible for the fate of the whole universe. Every personal action influences to some extent the movement of the whole created world⁶. This statement supports exactly what was illustrated above. Recently canonized, Dumitru Stăniloae shared: "The great mystery of love is the union that it realizes between those who love each other, each one receiving the other in himself"⁷.

Communion and friendship are still fundamental today, reaffirming that christian fraternity must not disappear from this hurried and individualistic world. Fraternity is diametrically opposed to individualism, and it is through prayer, learned in turn from asceticism, that all are united and each person is reintegrated into the common consciousness of humanity. Friendship nourished by brotherly love is the recipe for ecumenism in the postmodern period. Man was created to crown creation, and his value to others and to the world is inestimable, for the soul is priceless. The soul's innate

⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă: Ascetica și Mistica*, București: EIBMO, 1992, p. 24-25.

⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă: Ascetica și Mistica*, București: EIBMO, București, 1992 p. 263.

relationship with the self, with others and, above all, with all and beyond all, with God, is a contemporary imperative. Contemplating that human beings have value, both in this world and beyond this world, thus this value needs to be regained or reconfirmed.

To relate ecumenically to one another and to demonstrate spiritual exercise in your life means to open yourself to the other, to make everything about the other and not just about ourselves, meaning to leave everything to God's will without working on one's own eschatological becoming resulting into selfishness and laziness, thus always looking for solutions other than the winning ones.

The Need and Importance of an Ascetic Discourse in Contemporary Life

This theme, is structured in two sub-chapters, the first being Conceptualization and the second the Contemporary Paradigm and how to overcome it, both aim to define the terminology of "neediness" (in the past and present) identifying several types of contemporary mentalities. Conceptualization deals with how asceticism has been perceived over the past centuries, while, the second concept of contemporary paradigm proposes a reconciliation of everyday human aspirations with the Christian ascetic ideal and shows how they can fully correspond to man's existential purpose.

Conceptualization

If originally asceticism was defined as being a practice for monks, regardless of their cult, it has since evolved into the following definition: 'A way of life that excludes excess or compromise'. In retrospect, the first definition poses a rather serious problem for our contemporary understanding of the concept of asceticism, although the reality is different. Ascetic values have been manifested in human life since before the monastic movement appeared. There is a relationship of interdependence or reciprocity between them: monasticism arose, among other things, as a consequence of ascetic aspirations, and the spiritual life of the city is inspired and sustained by monastic life. The lives of ascetics are said to be role models in man's relationship with God. At the same time, asceticism takes on the character of a martyr's gift and sacrifice from the lives of the early Christian martyrs. To say that asceticism is a purely monastic duty is to deny its aspirations and its spiritual character to anyone who lives outside this environment. One of the functions of asceticism is the social environment⁸.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae's interpretation of asceticism suggests that it is not about rejecting the world but transcending it, in that ascetic practices help deepen

⁸ Emil-Mircea Mărginean, *Ascetism contemporan la părinții Sofronie Saharov, Emilianos Simonopetritul și Basil Pennington: conceptualizare și studiu comparat*, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2020, p. 89.

one's relationship with God. Asceticism arises from the human desire to thank God for all the gifts received. Through the world given to us, God shows his love for us. To achieve a progressive dialog in love⁹, a human response to this divine gift is required. The greatest gift that man can offer is his existence paired with his own labor. Father Stăniloae emphasizes that human labor, when seen through the lens of faith, is a spiritual act, thus work takes on a spiritual character for man, and the gifts given to man for labor serve as a bond of love between humanity and God. But, in order not to be captured by pleasure, man has the duty to rise above these gifts, to go toward their origin, that is, toward God. This is why "all that is between God and man is required after the cross"¹⁰. The limitations the world has created are meant to enhance spiritual growth and curb human selfishness. It is in this light that Father Dumitru Stăniloae sees the concept of asceticism. Asceticism is defined by him in his writings analyzed in this research, entitled "Orthodox Spirituality: Asceticism and Mysticism". Father Stăniloae presents the relationship and the passage from darkness to light (from non-being to being), emphasizing that the light can only be known through human consciousness¹¹ exploring another goal

⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, Ediția a IV-a, EIBMO, București, 2010, p. 355.

¹⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, Ediția a IV-a, EIBMO, București, 2010, p. 359-360.

¹¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos: lumina lumii și îndumnezeitorul omului*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1993, p. 27.

of asceticism: the (re)awakening of conscience and its cleansing.

Christianity has been seen as the way in which asceticism is formalized, and for Orthodox Christian asceticism makes the religious dimension of communion with God active in our lives and our existence. We conclude from this that the goal of asceticism is therefore man's communion with God. Man contributes with his need, and God strengthens him by grace. The greater the effort, the greater the grace¹². Asceticism as an act of service to God, is fulfilled in the Church's communitarian worship. Therefore, asceticism does not promote isolation, exclusivism and in no way individuality or selfishness. Personal action is not the same as individual action, because the person include much more than the individual.

Returning to the definition of asceticism, we see that it involves both abstention and effort. The primordial state was a good one but not perfect state. Man had the mission to strengthen himself for the good. Ascetic effort is seen as a primordial requirement. Strengthening in the good is not a duty of a particular person, religion or cult, but of human nature itself. Vladimir Lossky sees in this renunciation a rejection of self-will in order to enter into the possession of true freedom¹³, the personal, which is the image of God embodied in man.

¹² Cristian Sonea, *Teologia dialogului intercreștin: O introducere*, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2017, p. 28

¹³ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 140.

The term askesis has the primary meaning of *practice*, regardless of the field. It is also encountered in describing military exercises. There are three principles found within the ascetic process including: practices, intentionality and novelty as presented by the author:

"From a Christian perspective, asceticism can easily be called an eschatology of transfiguration, since, according to Georges Florovsky, the ascetic gesture is not centered around the contempt and rejection of a reality, but precisely on a transformative impulse. This is, in essence, a return to the state of the beauty of the building, the first state from which man has departed through sin"¹⁴.

Asceticism, or necessity as it is called in this research, is a renunciation of the old self in order to form a new, transfigured mode of existence. This renunciation means, according to St. Luke of Crimea, the complete casting away of one's own understanding of the ways of life¹⁵. Basil Pennington speaks of the false self, an erroneously constructed self-image that the ascetic is obliged to renounce in order to know his true self from God's perspective. The complexity and difficulty of this effort is affirmed by St. Isaac the Syrian¹⁶. St. Theophan the Zaverite also states that

¹⁴ Emil-Mircea, Mărginean, *Ascetism contemporan la părinții Sofronie Saharov, Emilianos Simonopetritul și Basil Pennington: conceptualizare și studiu comparat*, p.66.

¹⁵ Sfântul Luca al Crimeei, *La porțile Postului Mare: predici la Triod*, Ediția electronică, Apologeticum, București, 2005, p. 102.

¹⁶ Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte despre nevoie, Bunavestire*, Bacău, 1997, p 55.

without great zeal¹⁷ this work cannot be accomplished. Therefore asceticism becomes a voluntary struggle for liberation.

St. Maxim the Confessor speaks of a mysterious wedding of God with every soul. From this perspective, human need is a preparation of the soul for the wedding day. A parallel can thus be drawn between the spiritual ascent and the bride's journey to the altar. From the opposite direction, as St. Nectarios of Eghina states, the Kingdom becomes accessible to the people of God ¹⁸ through ascetical work. The Holy and Great Council of Crete describes the purpose of asceticism thus: "The Church also lives this foreshadowing of the 'new creation', of the transfigured world, through her saints, who, through asceticism and their virtues, have become images of the Kingdom of God from this life". The same Synod describes the importance of fasting¹⁹ and therefore of asceticism, as well as the fact that asceticism do not end in this life²⁰ being a work that is constantly required of man, however perfect he may be on earth.

¹⁷ Sfântul Teofan Zăvorâtul, *Viața duhovnicească și cum o putem dobândi*, Ediția a II-a, Iași. 2006, p. 68.

¹⁸ PS Benedict Bistrițeanul, *Personalități duhovnicești contemporane: biografii și repere*, vol. 1, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2016, p. 50.

¹⁹ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Bioethics in the discussions of the Panorthodox Synode", *Astra Salvensis*, Vol. IV, No. 7, 2016.

²⁰ Gabriel-Viorel Gârdan, "The Changing Face of Christianity and New Outlines of Ecumenism in The 21st Century", *Journal for Freedom of Conscience/Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2014.

For Archimandrite Sophrony, asceticism means first and foremost that unceasing prayer through which man manifests his trust in God²¹ and opens towards a cosmic ecclesiology in Christ, the new Adam. It is only in Christ and through Christ that human nature can be perfected. This communitarian character of asceticism is also found in Emilianos Simonopetritus²². To continually cry out to God is an ascetic act. All these methods rightly turn asceticism into an art form. We can observe in asceticism a blending of the practical and the contemplative, as developed by Saints Gregory of Nyssa and Maxim the Confessor²³.

The Contemporary Paradigm and Overcoming it

Today's man is in a constant search for meaning. This may be the main bridge between Christian asceticism and modern human aspiration. The Romanian nun Siluana Vlad confessed that in her search for meaning in life²⁴, ended up being found by God. Father Dumitru Stăniloae devotes whole pages to the subject

²¹ Arhimandrit Sofronie Saharov, *Rugăciunea – experiența Vieții Veșnice*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2007, p. 15.

²² Emil-Mircea Mărginean, *Ascetism contemporan la părinții Sofronie Saharov, Emilianos Simonopetritul și Basil Pennington: conceptualizare și studiu comparat*, p. 73.

²³ Lars Thunberg, *Antropologia teologică a Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul: Microcosmos și mediator*, București: Sophia, 2005, p. 370-371.

²⁴ Schimonahia Siluana Vlad, *Căutând sensul vieții, m-a găsit Dumnezeu*, Doxologia, Iași, 2021.

of the reasons for things²⁵ and the importance of their discovery. That the universe has a purpose²⁶ such as the great religions of the world – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – reflect humanity's enduring need to give meaning to existence. Even when man was profane, he was never sacrilegious²⁷. There is, however, a retreat from the search for existential meaning in contemporary man's mentality. The world without a known meaning is a vortex from which there is no escape²⁸. Science has often been seen as the guilty side in this fall, even if it is more a consequence of human pride in science.

In several of its documents, the Council of Crete describes the state of contemporary man and how to overcome it. Speaking about the contemporary crisis of marriage. The synodal document describes the great crises of man today: the misunderstanding of the relationship between freedom and responsibility, the restriction of freedom to a pleasure orientation and its identification with selfishness. The problem with the above is that man will never be able to find peace in anything in the material sphere, because he seeks infinite fulfillment in finite matter. There is in the

²⁵ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos: lumina lumii și îndumnezeitorul omului*, București: Editura Anastasia, 1993, pp. 360-374.

²⁶ John Haught, *Știință și religie: de la conflict la dialog*, Eonul Dogmatic, București, 2002, p. 24.

²⁷ Teofil Tia, *Parohia ortodoxă astăzi: Metode pastorale – Strategii profesionale de revitalizare a comunității parohiale*, Cluj-Napoca, 2021, p. 77.

²⁸ Henry Michael Gott, *Ascetic modernism in the work of T.S. Eliot and Gustave Flaubert*, Pickering & Chatto, London, 2013.

ascetical life a stage of withdrawal of grace precisely with a view to overcoming the aforementioned, but also as a verification of the stability in the desire for transfiguration. There is talk of certain "spiritual diseases"²⁹ from which today's man suffers. One of these is the concept of infallibility. This is nothing but an expression of the pride of human reason. Neurosis is triggered when this human supremacy is questioned. Man loses his coherence on reality and the archetypal meaning of things³⁰, which generates inner conflict. When man truly realizes his existence, he hears, beyond the emptiness in which he finds himself, the divine call³¹. In fact, Plato, in recounting the story of Socrates' death, describes the peace gained by a man who has come close to understanding this meaning³². Plato himself gives the explanation: "the author of comedies must also know how to write tragedies: that the true playwright is as good in tragedy as in comedy"³³. Of course, in the light of the above, it can be seen that Christian asceticism proposes much more in terms of the meaning of life.

Today, the Church is accused of conservatism and there is an autonomization of man from Christ and

²⁹ Grigorie-Dinu, Moș, "Știința și religia în mentalitatea omului contemporan. Riscurile ideologizării", *Tabor*, Vol. 8, Issue 10, 2014, p. 74.

³⁰ Grigorie-Dinu, Moș, "Știința și religia în mentalitatea omului contemporan. Riscurile ideologizării", p. 77.

³¹ Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit*, Deisis, Sibiu, 1994, p. 137.

³² Platon, *Phaidon sau Despre suflet*, Humanitas, București, 2011, p. 39.

³³ Platon, *Banchetul sau Despre amor*, Humanitas, București, 2017, p. 50.

from the spiritual influence of the Church³⁴. Romanian philosopher Mihai Șora, like Gabriel Marcel, draws attention to the tension in the world between "to be" and "to have". The following statement can be made:

"In a global society, oriented towards having and individualism, the Sovereign Orthodox Church emphasizes the truth of life in Christ and conformed to Christ, freely concretized in the daily life of each person through his works until evening (Psalm 103:23), through which he becomes a co-worker with the eternal Father [...] and with His Son"³⁵.

Even the environmental crisis is seen as having moral and spiritual roots. In fact, people realize all this, but they try to remedy it without the religious component, which is the main problem in the perception of asceticism today:

"Contemporary society has rediscovered the ideal of asceticism because in many aspects of its existence it capitalizes on various practices of renunciation, whether of food, through diet, or of comfort, through physical exercise, pollution, care for the environment and rationalization of consumption, all of which are nothing other than a response to excess, exhortations to moderation, that is to say, a general form of asceticism"³⁶.

³⁴ Wim Lamfers, *Libertate și apropiere*, Roșiorii de Vede, București, 2016, p. 149.

³⁵ Arhimandrit Sofronie Saharov, *Nevoința cunoașterii lui Dumnezeu*, Alba-Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2016, p. 345.

³⁶ Emil-Mircea Mărginean, *Ascetism contemporan la părinții Sofronie Saharov, Emilianos Simonopetritul și Basil Pennington: conceptualizare și studiu comparat*, p. 16.

The importance of holiness in the perspective of spiritual life is what contemporary man is lacking in order to capitalize on his ascetic drives. This requires a (re)awakening of conscience and an unceasing guarding of thoughts. Only a clear conscience and a clear mind united with the heart can give man a clear perspective on things and on God. The theorist *par excellence* of unceasingness applied to the mind is Evagrius Ponticus³⁷. From the very moment of the practical stage, the main goal of the need is to free the mind from all kinds of images in order to be totally captured, in the final stage, by the contemplation of the divine. Vladimir Lossky says in this regard that the mind must find its nourishment in God³⁸, because of origin and inclination in the flesh. The main target of contemporary asceticism must be, primarily, the mind.

The summary of the doctrines of the new theologies is given by Seraphim Rose: apostasy ("the death of God"), the onslaught of demons (by the phrase: "everything is permitted"), the superman (which, in his conception, means a sub-human because his worship is exclusively of the self), the ultimate deception of the devil (man and the world are considered divine) and millenarianism or universal monarchy. The answer is also given by the hieromonk Seraphim: personal

³⁷ Gabriel Bunge, *Rugăciunea în Duh și Adevăr*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2015, pp. 219-347.

³⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, pp. 145-146.

salvation³⁹. In conclusion, the most precious asset for contemporary man, in order to acquire true happiness, is discernment⁴⁰, strengthened by the work of ascetic.

**Universal Salvation and its Slogan:
All will be Well!**

Within the teaching of universal salvation, there is a variant that states that salvation is already an accomplished fact for all people, due to the unconditional love of God. According to this perspective, God has ensured, through the sacrifice of Christ and through divine grace, the salvation of all humanity, and this does not depend on the individual deeds or behaviors of people – good or bad. Thus, not only is God's love sufficient for salvation, but, in this view, salvation is already a free and universal gift, which does not require an active reaction on the part of man to be obtained.

This teaching starts from the premise that, at the moment when Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world, He accomplished a complete work of salvation for all humanity. From this perspective, all people are already saved, even if they are not aware of it or do not have an active religious experience. God's love is considered so profound and powerful that

³⁹ Serafim Rose, *Cursul de supraviețuire creștin ortodoxă*, Anastasia, București, 2011, p. 544.

⁴⁰ Stelian Pașca-Tușa, "Psalmul 1 – abordare isagogică, exegetică și teologică", *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Theologia Orthodoxa*, Vol. 59, Number. 2, 2014, p. 18.

nothing that man does, regardless of his deeds, can prevent the salvation already offered.

This view challenges the traditional idea that man's deeds (morality, faith, religious behavior) are the decisive elements for salvation. Instead of emphasizing a process of awareness or "earning" salvation, the teaching of universal salvation in this form emphasizes that salvation is a state already achieved and accessible to all. Thus, man does not have to "deserve" salvation through good deeds or avoid sins in order to be saved; salvation is a divine gift that does not depend on human behavior, but only on the loving will of God.

In this context, salvation is not seen as a goal to be achieved through an intense religious life or by observing a moral code, but as a reality already achieved for all humanity, and the role of man is to recognize this salvation and to live in accordance with the divine love that has already saved him, Jesus Christ. Thus, the teaching of universal salvation supports the idea that salvation is not conditioned by human deeds, but by the unlimited love and mercy of God, which includes all people, regardless of their choices.

Christ is called the Savior of all and, following the logic of traditional teaching, we should affirm that He is the Savior of those who actually did not save them, although He came to save precisely the wicked⁴¹.

⁴¹ Thomas Allin, *Christ Triumphant. Universalism Assesed as the Hope of the Gospel on the Authority of Reasonm the Father, and Holy Scriture*, Wipf and Stock, London, 2015, p. 35.

Rob Bell rejects the idea that if you have said a prayer of acceptance by God, this makes you worthy of heaven, because, in his view, salvation is not about simply belonging to a cult, but about the way in which man relates to God. Rob Bell believes that if man starts thinking with the premise that the time will come when he will leave this world for a worse world, this relationship often demotivates him to do something with his own life and for the suffering in this world in which he lives. Therefore, the author believes that only the relationship with God can transform the world, and through God man can be part of creation. "From this perspective, eternal life is not so much a kind of time that begins with the moment we die, as a quality and vitality of the life that we live now in connection with God. It is about experiencing now this way of life that can last and survive even after death"⁴².

On the divine plan of salvation for all creation, Carlton Pearson says that he would rather overestimate God's love and grace than underestimate them. His inclusivist and pluralist stance, however, stems from a pantheistic view of God, which he himself declares himself to be an adherent of: "I have come to the conclusion that I am not a monotheist but a pantheist – I believe that God or the Godhead is all and everywhere. This is a belief in an omnipresent God. If God is everywhere, then He is in everyone and

⁴² Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, Harper One, Reprint edition, U.S.A, 2011, p. 59.

everything – in all religions, people, cultures, ideologies, concepts and beliefs. And in all books"⁴³.

Conclusion

The present study addresses a fundamental topic in Christian spiritual traditions – the importance of asceticism in terms of salvation, comparing this view with the perspectives of contemporary theologians, such as Rob Bell, Thomas Allin and George MacDonald, who support the idea that God is obliged to save all humanity because of the gift of life that he has given them. In the analysis of this study, the essential differences between traditional Orthodox approaches and the latest theological conceptions are pointed out, highlighting the importance of asceticism, will and personal responsibility in the process of salvation.

A first aspect of the study emphasizes the Orthodox view of salvation, which cannot be conceived only as an gift, but as a continuous work between man and God. In this vision, asceticism plays a central role, being seen as a process of cleansing the soul and aligning the human will with the divine will. Salvation is not a human right, but a gift of God, which can only be realized through the active cooperation of man with divine grace. Asceticism, in this context, is not just a physical practice or a series of external abstinences, but

⁴³ Carlton Pearson, *The Gospel of Inclusion. Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God and Self*, New York, Atria, 2016, p. 8.

an inner state of openness to God, a constant willingness to renounce selfishness and one's own desires in favor of love and humility. Everything is important for the life which is to come⁴⁴. Contrary to this view, theologians such as Rob Bell, Thomas Allin, and George MacDonald hold a more universalistic and "debtive" view of salvation. They believe that since God gave life to every human being, He is obligated, in a theological sense, to provide for the salvation of all who have been brought into being. In this light, salvation becomes an act of divine justice, an obligation of God towards His creation. This position emphasizes God's unconditional love and His intention to save all humanity, without significant consideration of human response or personal choice of each individual.

The study points out, however, the contradictions that arise when it is claimed that salvation is a duty of God. Salvation, in the Orthodox tradition, is not just an automatic gift, but a path that requires human effort, a spiritual struggle against passions and selfishness, and a constant desire for perfection. From this point of view, asceticism is not only a method of personal fulfillment, but a means by which man frees himself from his weaknesses and makes himself capable of receiving divine grace in an authentic way. Salvation is thus a continuous work of the whole being, which involves a deep commitment to God's will and to inner transformation.

⁴⁴ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Problem of Eternal Life – Some Anti-Universalist Landmarks", *International Journal of Religion*, Vol. 5, Number 8, 2024, p. 704.

In contrast to these views, the idea that salvation is God's duty may diminish the importance of human involvement in this process. If God were obliged to save all people, man's freedom of choice would disappear, and salvation would no longer be a personal and transformative process, but an act imposed from outside. This conception could lead to an erroneous understanding of salvation, in which man becomes passive, waiting for God to save him regardless of his will or efforts.

The study concludes that salvation presupposes an active collaboration between God and man. Even though God is the source of unconditional love and grace, salvation cannot be achieved without the conscious participation of each individual. Asceticism, in this context, is not just a religious or ascetic practice, but a deep and free choice of man to respond to the divine call⁴⁵. Thus, salvation is not a right that man has because of the gift of life, but a continuous and dynamic gift, which is achieved only through a personal and spiritual work. According to traditional Orthodox teaching, man must make efforts to cleanse himself of sins, to overcome selfishness and to reach salvation, thus being able to receive the gift of salvation.

⁴⁵ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Eschatological Vision of Dumitru Stăniloae: A Counter-Argument on the Puralist-Universalist Vision of John Hick", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 23, issue 67, Spring 2024, p. 13.

Dogmatic Foundations for Praying for the Salvation of All People

1. Introduction

Faith, as the fruit of the working of grace in human souls, is the human response to God's love: "We love God because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Therefore, there must be a synergy between faith as a personal act and the content of the Gospel. For the content of faith determines the content of Christian life; the rule of faith becomes the rule of life.

The Savior Christ came into the world to save the world and to gather the scattered sheep: "Father, I desire that they also whom You have given Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24). He recapitulated the world in Himself, for "He raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6), and He also granted humanity access to the Father. The tearing of the veil at the moment of Christ's death is highly suggestive in this regard. In the Old Testament, the consecrated high priest entered only once into the Holy of Holies, on the feast of Yom Kippur, sprinkling the blood of the goat

upon the veil separating the Holy from the Holy of Holies, as well as upon the Ark of the Covenant. At the moment of Christ's Crucifixion, that dividing wall falls, and humanity gains access to the Father: "For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Hebrews 9:24).

Understanding the content of our faith, a person comes to the awareness that he can attain the Kingdom of Heaven only insofar as his brother also enters it; therefore, in all public and/or personal services, one prays for the salvation of all. This prayer for the salvation of all people, in our view, is rooted in the Adamic and Christological unity of humanity, as well as in the spiritual stake of apocatastasis – a stake that has mobilized so many generations of saints.

2. The Adamic and Christological Unity of Humanity

The fall of Adam into sin and the failure of the plan of deification affected all humanity. The condition to which Adam condemned himself by his free will became an abyss difficult for man to cross. In order to be freed from this state, man needed to overcome a threefold barrier: nature, sin, and death¹.

What man was meant to accomplish in his ascent toward deification, God accomplishes by descending to

¹ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 165.

earth and assuming all that belongs to man except sin. Through Christ's Incarnation from the Virgin, the barrier of nature is overcome: God becomes flesh, and by "flesh" we understand solidarity with the material world. Through the Logos, we become children of God (John 1:14; Galatians 4:4-6). Through the Incarnation, we recognize Christ as our brother and God the Father as our Father.

This is also the reason why the *Menaion* and the *Pentecostarion* tell us that on the feasts of Christmas and Pascha one does not kneel: because, once Christ is my brother, I am equal with Him, there is no longer subordination, no longer the condition of a servant. Christ has made me His brother, and liturgically, the Church reminds us of this royal dignity: you are the brother of Christ; He is by nature equal with the Father, equal with the Father's love, and you are so by grace. You are another child of God the Father; you have become a child through the love of your Brother, who has shown you to be "conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29).

The body of Christ passes through suffering and death, and through this God crushes sin by His death: "God shows His love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "For what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:3).

The Savior makes the transition from the paschal lamb to Christ the Lamb, "who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This image is powerfully suggested at the moment of the Last Supper. According to the Jewish ritual, the meal began with the recounting of the Exodus from Egyptian bondage, after which the guest or the head of the family had the duty to make an anamnesis concerning the paschal lamb. Christ does not speak of the paschal lamb, but of Himself. Saint Cyril of Alexandria holds that: "The lamb was regarded as a pure and blameless sacrifice required by the Law, while the race of goats was continually brought to the altar for sins. This too you will find in Christ. For He was likewise without blemish, offered as a fragrant offering for our sins"², and Origen distinguishes between the souls that need Christ in the form of a lamb offered as a sacrifice for sin (Lev. 4:28) and those that have Christ as the Paschal Lamb³.

Christ does something entirely distinctive at the Supper. According to Jewish custom, four cups were placed on the table, each consumed at different moments. The first cup (the *cup of qiddush*) was served with the first course of green and bitter herbs, followed by the second cup (the *cup of the haggadah*), and then the third cup, called the *cup of blessing*, which was served with the paschal lamb (it is with this cup that Christ institutes the Eucharist, according to 1 Cor. 10:16 and

² Sorin Usca, *Tâlcuire la cartea Ieșirii*, Editura Christiana, București, 2002, p. 36.

³ Sorin Usca, *Tâlcuire la cartea Ieșirii*, p. 36.

Luke 22:20)⁴. An extremely important fact is that Christ does not drink the fourth cup (the *cup of Hallel*). The Savior extends the Last Supper onto the Cross and transforms it into a wedding banquet: the union between Christ and the New Israel, the Church. That word, "I thirst" (John 19:28), marks the moment when Christ receives the final cup as a sign of betrothal and becomes the Bridegroom of humanity. Yet, "when He had tasted it, He would not drink" (Matt. 27:34), which shows that Christ extends this Supper into the eschaton: "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18).

God instills this longing for His Supper, a longing for His Body, which is fire. This longing, *dor*, is untranslatable, a uniquely Romanian word. The German renders it as *Sehnsucht*, meaning the search for meaning. But *dor* is something else: it does not seek meanings; it burns, it aches, it waits. It is the anticipation of joy. The encounter with God means to go from joy to joy toward a joy without end, finding the face of God, and in God, finding all those dear to us.

The Apostle Thomas understood better than all the teaching that Christ left to the world on the Cross. The Evangelist John tells us that "when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week (Sunday), Jesus came and stood in their midst..." (John 20:19), and that "after eight days, His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them" (John 20:26). Some theologians interpret

⁴ Karl Christian Felmy, *De la Cina de Taină la Dumnezeiasca Liturghie a Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2008, pp. 13-14.

that Thomas touched Christ's side; others say he did not. Yet this is not what matters. Rather, on the eighth day, the day of eternity, the unending day of the Kingdom – Thomas, and we together with him, partake of Christ's side, which is fire.

The side of Christ will hold the whole Adam united: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16–17). It also shapes the awareness that the entire ecclesial body will partake together in His Kingdom: "O great and most holy Pascha, Christ; O Wisdom and Word of God and Power; grant that we may partake of You more truly in the unending day of Your Kingdom"⁵.

Christ conquers death through His Resurrection. The Resurrection of Christ begins from the depths, for resurrection must first take place in the soul: "In the tomb with the body, in Hades with the soul, as God..."⁶.

Christ, as the mystery that recapitulates humanity from Adam, so that He might become the brother of all, had to pass through the condition through which all others had passed. The Holy Apostle Peter speaks of this preaching of Christ in the darkness of Hades: "He suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which also He went

⁵ Canto IX of the Paschal Canon.

⁶ Liturgy of Saint John Chrisostomos.

and preached to the spirits in prison" (1 Pet. 3:18–19). In that proclamation, Christ meets His friend, John the Baptist.

In Jewish tradition, there is the ritual of the *mikvah*, through which the friend of the bridegroom prepared the bride for the immersion in water, that cleansing before marriage. Saint John the Baptist descends into Hades and prepares the Church for the reception of Christ the Bridegroom, who descends into the darkness and illuminates the whole of Sheol, once held captive by the devil.

Christ restores the primordial condition through His Incarnation and Resurrection. In Paradise, God breathes into man the breath of life, and after the Resurrection Christ breathes upon the apostles: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). Man receives the Spirit virtually after the Resurrection, and actually at Pentecost. We may affirm, without hesitation, that man has been placed in a more privileged condition than in Paradise. There, in Eden, he received grace as breath; here, it is a work flowing from the Person of the risen God-Man. In Christ, the second Adam, "the very transcendent divine Image of the Logos becomes also the transcendental human image, which means the complete restoration of the primordial condition of man and of the cosmos. The restoration of man's original condition occurs together with the restoration of the entire world, which clearly indicates the impossibility of separating man from the totality of the world"⁷.

⁷ Grigore-Dinu Moș, *Ideea transcendentalului în teologie, în: Caiete de dogmatică*, p. 41.

The Resurrection of Christ sets the world back on its proper course. From this point, only one stage remains in the divine plan: that moment at the eschatological end of history when God will unite with creation and become "all in all". From this moment onward, the time of the Church moves toward the final and decisive segment of the history of salvation. From this ontological perspective, the only true novelty, and therefore the sole soteriological content, of this stage is precisely the mission: the proclamation and communication of the eschaton, which is the very being of the Church.

As time flows toward this fulfillment, and being conscious of the work of salvation accomplished in the Person of Christ, man has the duty to pray for the whole Adam: "For if by the trespass of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many" (Rom. 5:15). The Holy Apostle Paul, aware of this reality, prayed: "May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus... may the Lord grant that he may find mercy from the Lord on that Day" (2 Tim. 1:18).

The Church cares for each of its spiritual members; therefore, it offers prayers for the entire world: "I urge, then, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people" (1 Tim. 2:1). The pages of the *Patericon* are filled with spiritual figures who prayed for the salvation of all. In a well-known apophthegm, Abba Anthony is sent by an angel to learn the example of spiritual life from a

cobbler in Alexandria. Observing that the cobbler lived an ordinary life, dwelling in a humble hut with his wife, and that he distributed his earnings to the Church and to the poor, Abba Anthony asked him what else he did. The cobbler gave a profound answer: he said that he did nothing else except meditate each evening on a single thought, that "all will be saved, and he alone will go to hell"⁸. This opens, without limit, the perspective of hope for the salvation of all, a hope that underlies that perfected work of the saints: prayer for universal salvation.

3. The implication of apocatastasis in personal soteriology

Paul Evdokimov states that: "apocatastasis can only be a dimension of our prayer, the daring work of our love. One may paradoxically say that God awaits apocatastasis from us"⁹.

"He who takes into account the possibility of the existence, outside himself, even of a single person lost for eternity, can hardly love without hope"¹⁰, and will hardly be able to choose "in favor of a patience that never renounces in principle, but is ready to wait for the other indefinitely. Might not my own eternal misery

⁸ Oliver Clément, *Puterea credinței: studii de spiritualitate*, p 109.

⁹ Paul Evdokimov, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, Asociația Filantropică Medicală Creștină Christiana, București, 1995, p. 205.

¹⁰ Hans Urs Von Balthasar *Mic discurs despre iad*, Editura Paideia, București 1997, pp. 63–64.

consist precisely in the fact that I myself lack the patience to wait endlessly for the other's restoration?"¹¹, Hans Urs von Balthasar asks. In the view of Hilarion Alfeyev, for whom this issue represents a central point of eschatology, to assert that all people will be saved regardless of their deeds and choices is heretical; however, it is not heretical to hope and to pray for the salvation of all¹². When expressing these words, Hilarion Alfeyev has in mind the dogma of Christ's descent into hell, which he interprets in a universal and eschatological sense.

In a similar way, David Bentley Hart interprets this, yet he goes further, stating that "the loss even of a single person would leave the body of the Logos incomplete, and God's purpose in creation unfulfilled"¹³, thus placing himself, through his vision, among the most prominent contemporary voices advocating the salvation of all. The work of David Bentley Hart suggests that this perspective is one worthy of being followed and that there is a need to move toward a resolute universalism¹⁴.

Prayer for the salvation of all belongs to those who are perfected, or who are being perfected, through such

¹¹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar *Mic discurs despre iad*, p. 64.

¹² Ilarion Alfeyev, *Hristos, biruitorul Iadului. Pogorârea la iad din perspectiva ortodoxă*. Editura Sophia, București, 2007, p. 256.

¹³ David Bentley Hart, *Frumusețea infinitului. Estetica adevărului creștin*, p. 496.

¹⁴ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Universal Salvation. New Opinions in Contemporary Theology", p. 262.

a work of love. To this extent, they themselves taste hell and see themselves as condemned. Only "a hope against all hope" of a strong soul can overcome this extreme infernal experience: "Keep your mind in hell and do not despair", God revealed to Father Silouan. Hell is assumed to the very end as a self-condemnation, and precisely in this way it is overcome; for in such an experience, the soul loses every support in itself and remains only in God, in whom it places all its hope.

Knowing from his own experience both the boundless love of God and the hell of despair of the one who resists Him, Saint Silouan said: "Glory to the Lord that He has given us repentance, and through repentance all will be saved, all without exception. Only those who do not wish to repent will not be saved, and in this I see their despair, and I weep much, for I have compassion on them. They do not know, through the Holy Spirit, how great God's mercy is. But if every soul knew the Lord and understood how much He loves us, no one would ever despair and no one would ever complain"¹⁵.

His disciple, Sophrony Sakharov, added:

"Thus the love of Christ hopes to draw all people to Himself and therefore descends into the depths of hell. Yet even to this perfect love and this perfect sacrifice, man, who is he? We do not know; how many are they? we likewise do not know, can respond with a refusal even unto eternity, saying:

¹⁵ Cuviosul Siluan Athonitul, *Între iadul deznădejdiei și iadul smereniei*, p. 109.

'I do not want this.' This fearful possibility of freedom, which the Church knows well from her spiritual experience, has led her to reject the teaching of the Origenists. Without any doubt, the prayer for the salvation of all, which we see in the life of the Elder, could not arise within an Origenist consciousness"¹⁶.

In the view of Gabriel Bunge, the Church judged rightly in condemning the Origenist theory of apocatastasis, since on this matter we cannot make unfounded assertions, much less construct a theoretical system. It is not given to man to know who will be saved and who will not. Worse still, by making such claims, man places himself in the position of God¹⁷. Thus, what the Church condemned is rather the assertion of apocatastasis with certainty, not its possibility, a possibility which, in the realm of lived spirituality (not that of formulated theology), becomes an apophatic space of a great hope.

In support of this irrepressible possibility, Edith Stein also expresses herself:

"The freedom of God, which we call omnipotence, finds a limit in human freedom. The grace of God that descends upon the human soul cannot find a dwelling there unless it is freely received. This is a hard truth. It expresses, beyond the aforementioned limit of divine omnipotence, the

¹⁶ Arhimandritul Sofronie, *Viața și minunile Sfântului Siluan Athonitul*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1999, p. 97.

¹⁷ Gabriel Bunge, *Mânia și terapia ei după Avva Evagrie Ponticul*, Editura Deisis, 2016, p. 164.

principled possibility of a self-exclusion from salvation and from the kingdom of mercy. It does not express a limit of divine mercy. [...] Could there nonetheless be souls that steadfastly refuse Him? We cannot dismiss such a thing as a principled possibility. In fact, however, it may become infinitely improbable, precisely through what prevenient grace is able to awaken in the soul. It is also possible for it to enter into souls and to expand there more and more. The greater the space it occupies in this way, the more improbable it becomes that the soul will refuse it (...) the more it withdraws it from acts directed against it. Then faith in the boundlessness of love and grace becomes justified, and hope in a universality of salvation as well, even though, through the principled possibility of resistance to grace, the possibility of eternal condemnation also remains"¹⁸.

Here we find the same hope in the goodness of divine creation, that it is not a failure, present in Origen, in Gregory of Nyssa, and in our own time in theologians such as Pavel Florensky, Paul Evdokimov, Olivier Clément, and others.

From this perspective, we may hope that no human being will reach a state of complete satanization, even though this possibility has been dogmatically affirmed. We may at least hope, and this time without doctrinal reservations, that through the prayers of the Church many people will emerge from hell in the interval between the particular judgment and the

¹⁸ Hans Urs Von Balthasar *Mic discurs despre iad*, pp. 71-72.

universal one. We may also hope that the human will shall in fact be not constrained, but convinced, won over, or even "seduced" by the beneficent will of Christ; that the divine will, if it cannot act against human freedom, will act within and through that freedom, guiding it toward its own salvation. We may also place under the sign of hope these words of a saint: "I believe that there is a hell, but it is empty"¹⁹. We may hope, insofar as there is no perfect, rigid overlap between dogmatics and spirituality. As a rule, dogma, as the expression of a revealed truth, precedes the spiritual experience that it also grounds. Yet at times, a spiritual experience, ever more profound and fuller in its reception of Revelation, may anticipate a future dogmatic formulation or partially foreshadow what God will reveal in its fullness only at the end.

It may also express what God Himself may will and allow to arise as a human creation, proceeding from man in the fullest freedom, under the ineffable, almost imperceptible inspiration of His grace.

4. Conclusion

The possibility of praying for the salvation of all is grounded in the fact that we are all children of Adam, and Christ came to raise up this Adam: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because

¹⁹ Jean Guittou, *L'enfer dans mentalité contemporaine*, p. 348.

all sinned in him... But the gift is not like the trespass. For if by the trespass of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many" (Rom. 5:12–15).

The most profound spiritual appropriation of the antinomy of hell is found in the words of the cobbler of Alexandria: "May all be saved; I alone deserve to perish". This opens without limit the perspective of hope for the salvation of all, a hope that underlies that perfected work of the saints: prayer for universal salvation, while at the same time placing before us the gravest possibility of our own perdition.

The way out of the infernal experience was revealed by God to Saint Silouan: "Keep your mind in hell and do not despair". In such a state, the soul, losing every support in itself, descends into the hell of God's love. Only this antinomy of hell, or of universal restoration (which we have sought to highlight throughout this work), makes total love possible and embraces all its extremes. Only it unites inseparably the mystery of man and the mystery of God, the mystery of human freedom and the mystery of divine love, affirmed within one another and never overcome.

From all that has been said, we can only conclude with wonder: how deeply God protects the mystery of man! How profoundly He envelops it and deepens it within its own destiny, never separating it from His own!

Chapter II

Book Reviews

**Andrew Hronich, *Once Loved Always Loved:
The Logic of Apokatastasis*,
Wipf and Stock, 2023, 400 p.**

In *Once Loved Always Loved: The Logic of Apokatastasis*, Andrew Hronich invites readers on a profound journey into the heart of one of the most fascinating concepts in theology: Apokatastasis. Through careful scholarship and thoughtful philosophical reflection, Hronich examines the essence of this ancient idea and highlights its significance within both religious traditions and philosophical discourse.

Apokatastasis, which originates in Greek philosophical thought and later became integrated into Christian theological reflection, proposes a vision of universal reconciliation, a final restoration in which all beings ultimately return to their divine source. With clarity and insight, Hronich guides the reader through the complexity of this concept, exploring its implications for questions concerning salvation, justice, and the very nature of existence.

Drawing on a wide range of sources, from classical writings to contemporary theological reflection, *Once Loved Always Loved* is not simply an academic study but also a reflective exploration of humanity's enduring search for meaning and belonging. Hronich's writing encourages readers to reflect on fundamental questions regarding divine love, the human condition, and the ultimate destiny of the soul.

The book thus becomes an invitation to engage seriously with the idea of apokatastasis and to reflect on its consequences for our understanding of the cosmos and humanity's place within it. Those who follow this intellectual and spiritual path will encounter a vision shaped by hope, compassion, and the enduring power of love capable of transcending every boundary.

Once Loved Always Loved: The Logic of Apokatastasis offers a thoughtful meditation on love, redemption, and the human condition. Through a philosophical perspective, Hronich examines the ancient theological proposal of universal restoration and considers how it reshapes our understanding of love, justice, and the structure of reality itself.

One of the most remarkable features of Hronich's work is his ability to combine rigorous philosophical inquiry with a deeply humane and compassionate vision. He navigates complex theological and existential questions with clarity and depth, inviting readers to contemplate the implications of apokatastasis for the relationship between the divine and human experience.

At the center of Hronich's reflection stands the idea of love as the fundamental force that sustains and directs existence. He argues that love, in its most authentic form, possesses a transformative and redemptive power capable of overcoming even the darkest dimensions of human life. Through engaging prose and careful argumentation, the author develops a compelling vision in which divine love ultimately seeks the restoration of all creation.

Moreover, Andrew Hronich does not confine his work to abstract theorizing. He skillfully interweaves philosophical reflection with concrete examples and personal anecdotes, grounding his arguments in the lived experiences of individuals who struggle with questions of love, forgiveness and redemption. This interplay between theory and lived experience gives *Once Loved Always Loved* a sense of immediacy and relevance that can resonate with readers from a wide variety of backgrounds.

At the same time, although Hronich's exploration of Apokatastasis is undeniably compelling, some readers may find themselves challenged by the profound theological and existential implications of his arguments. *Once Loved Always Loved* is therefore not a book meant to be read passively. Rather, it requires attentive engagement and thoughtful reflection, inviting readers to confront the deepest questions of existence with both intellectual honesty and humility.

In conclusion, *Once Loved Always Loved: The Logic of Apokatastasis* stands as a stimulating and deeply reflective work that leads readers into a philosophical and theological exploration of love, redemption and the human condition. Hronich's meditation on apokatastasis leaves a lasting impression on those willing to engage seriously with its pages, offering both intellectual depth and a vision of spiritual hope grounded in the transformative power of divine love.

Theodor Damian, *The Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus: Discovering a New Face of His Personality*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022, 130 p.

Theodor Damian's book: *The Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus: Discovering a New Face of His Personality*, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2022, offers an intriguing and much-needed shift in perspective regarding one of Christianity's most revered figures. Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the foremost theological minds of the 4th century, is an iconic figure in the history of early Christianity. His theological orations and central role in shaping the doctrine of the Orthodox Church at the Second Ecumenical Council of 381 in Constantinople are widely acknowledged and celebrated. Yet, Gregory's literary voice is perhaps less well-known, overshadowed by his towering theological works. Theodor Damian's *The Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus: Discovering a New Face of His Personality* aims to change that, offering a comprehensive study of Gregory's poetic works and, in turn, providing a fresh lens through which to understand the complex persona of this Church Father.

The preface by John McGuckin, a prominent scholar in early Christian thought, provides an excellent framework for understanding the significance of Gregory's poetry. McGuckin highlights Gregory's unparalleled intellectual stature in the ancient world, noting that he was revered as "the Second

Demosthenes" for his rhetorical skill. While Gregory's contributions to Christian doctrine and Christology are well-known, McGuckin emphasizes the often-overlooked dimension of Gregory's genius as a poet within the literary world of Late Antiquity.

McGuckin draws attention to the philosophical context of the time, particularly the conflict between the ideas of Plato and Aristotle concerning poetry. Plato, with his critical stance against poets in *The Republic*, rejected poetry as a source of truth because poets, in his view, fabricated myths and falsehoods. On the other hand, Aristotle and many other Greek thinkers recognized poetry's potential as a vehicle for moral and spiritual truth. McGuckin points out that Gregory, like Aristotle, understood the divine inspiration behind poetry and elevated it as a significant form of expressing deep truths. Gregory's view of poetry was not just an intellectual exercise; it was an inspired act, a means of conveying higher truths to the soul and a reflection of divine inspiration, as McGuckin eloquently puts it.

Gregory, McGuckin explains, saw the true poet as one who had refined both intellect and soul, preparing themselves to hear the voice of God. This Christian perspective, which Gregory incorporated into the Greek literary tradition, offered a distinct and deeply spiritual approach to poetry. As McGuckin suggests, Gregory believed that a well-crafted poem could serve as an expression of divine truth, revealing higher insights into the nature of reality and the human soul. This vision of poetry as a conduit for divine wisdom,

according to McGuckin, elevates Gregory's work beyond mere literary craftsmanship; it is an act of spiritual refinement.

Theodor Damian's book invites the reader to look beyond the well-documented theologian and ecclesiastical leader that Gregory was and to engage with the more personal and emotional dimensions of his life as revealed in his poetry. While Gregory's influence in establishing Orthodox theology in opposition to heresies of the time is of paramount importance, Damian contends that his poetry offers a much-needed glimpse into the humanity of this revered figure. Rather than a strict focus on Gregory's theological debates and ecclesiastical duties, this book takes a turn towards his artistic expression, where his inner thoughts, emotions, and spiritual struggles come to the forefront. Through his poetry, Gregory emerges not as an isolated intellectual, but as a deeply reflective and vulnerable person grappling with universal concerns such as loss, existential despair, joy, and spiritual yearning.

One of the book's key strengths is how Theodor Damian situates Gregory's poetry within both its historical context and its literary tradition. Damian's scholarship is meticulous, offering a thorough examination of Gregory's poetic style, themes, and influences. He places Gregory's poetry within the context of the 4th-century Christian milieu (pp. 1-16), where theological debates and philosophical schools of thought were in constant flux. Through this lens, Damian unearths a variety of emotional states in Gregory's poetry, ranging

from spiritual longing and self-examination to expressions of grief and melancholy. This exploration offers a fuller picture of Gregory's life, one that combines both intellectual and emotional depth.

The poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus is not often the first thing that comes to mind when discussing the Church Father, and yet Damian demonstrates that it is essential to understanding Gregory's character. In the poetic realm, Gregory allowed himself to express vulnerabilities and doubts that are notably absent in his more formal theological works. Damian's analysis brings attention to the emotional complexity of Gregory's poetry, showing how it reveals a man who, while deeply committed to the defense of Christian orthodoxy, was also profoundly aware of his own limitations and struggles. Gregory's verses, more than simply religious or theological, were an outlet for his internal conflicts, offering him a space to reflect on his own faith, the burdens of leadership, and his personal losses.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Theodor Damian's work is his ability to humanize Gregory (pp. 34-43), presenting him not as an impassive, doctrinal architect of Orthodox theology but as a man who experienced the full spectrum of human emotions. As a poet, Gregory was able to wrestle with feelings of despair, fear, loneliness, and vulnerability in ways that were not always visible in his theological orations. These poetic expressions allow Damian to suggest that Gregory's intellectual pursuits were always underpinned by a deep, often tortured, introspection.

Damian's analysis highlights how Gregory's poetic works offer an alternative perspective on his theology. While his theological speeches were formal and directed at the Church's public understanding of Christian doctrine, his poetry speaks more to the intimate, personal faith of an individual grappling with the weight of his own soul. The book opens a window into Gregory's inner world, offering insight into the personal conflicts that informed his theology, conflicts that were not solely intellectual but deeply emotional.

Through his poetry, Gregory's own theological reflections are revealed not as cold, rational decisions, but as deeply shaped by personal pain, loss, and the challenges of faith. This is especially evident in his reflections on suffering, death, and the human condition, central themes in his poetry that he addresses with both profound sadness and spiritual hope. The poignancy of these themes stands in stark contrast to the more formalized, often dogmatic nature of his theological works. Gregory's poetic voice, Damian argues, is where we can find his most human side.

Damian's book makes an invaluable contribution to the scholarship surrounding Gregory of Nazianzus. By shifting the focus from the well-known theological orations to Gregory's poetry, Damian offers a more holistic and nuanced view of the man behind the theological treatises. For scholars and theologians, this book is a reminder that great figures in the history of Christianity were not mere abstract thinkers but individuals who lived through the same emotional,

existential, and spiritual struggles that many believers experience today.

The book's careful examination of Gregory's poetic works and their role in expressing his internal thoughts enriches our understanding of Gregory as both a theologian and a poet. Damian's analysis not only expands the canon of Gregory's writings but also invites readers to reassess the way in which personal expression and theological reflection can intertwine. In Gregory's case, this intersection is often most evident in his poetry, which offers insights that are less accessible in his public theological discourses.

Damian's work also speaks to the enduring relevance of Gregory's poetry for contemporary readers (pp. 44-57). By showcasing how Gregory's poetic expressions of faith and doubt are intricately tied to his theology, the book underscores the universality of the struggles of faith. As readers grapple with questions about the meaning of life, the nature of God, and the burden of suffering, Gregory's poetry provides a means of connecting with an ancient voice that continues to speak deeply to the human condition. Damian's scholarship reveals that Gregory's poetic legacy is not merely for theologians and historians, but for all readers who wish to explore the complexities of faith and the human soul.

The Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus: Discovering a New Face of His Personality is a thought-provoking and illuminating work that uncovers a side of Gregory of Nazianzus that has long been overlooked. Theodor

Damian masterfully brings to light the poet behind the theologian, offering an insightful exploration of how Gregory's poetry reveals the more intimate, vulnerable aspects of his life and thought. This book offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Gregory as a human being, not just as a theological authority. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of poetry, theology, and the personal dimension of religious life. Damian's scholarly work significantly enriches our understanding of Gregory, and in doing so, it invites readers to discover a new face of one of the Church's most important figures – one that is both deeply human and profoundly spiritual.

Chad Bahl (Ed.), *Deconstructing Hell: Open and Relational Responses to the Doctrine of Eternal Conscious Torment*, SacraSage Press, 2023, 563 p.

In a time when many Christians are reexamining long-held doctrines in light of deeper scriptural engagement, psychological insight, and evolving views of God's character, *Deconstructing Hell* emerges as both timely and courageous. Edited by Chad Bahl, this anthology gathers a compelling roster of scholars, pastors, philosophers, therapists, and storytellers to challenge the traditional doctrine of eternal conscious torment (ECT) and offer hope-filled alternatives rooted in open and relational theology.

The contributors in this volume are not content with surface-level critiques. Each chapter serves as a thoughtful, layered engagement with the implications of hell—historical, philosophical, theological, cultural, psychological, and personal.

Robert D. Cornwall, a retired pastor and historical theologian, opens the book with *To Hell and Back*, charting the development of hell from early Jewish thought to modern Western theology. His background as both scholar and pastor gives this chapter a grounded tone, blending academic rigor with pastoral sensitivity.

Philosopher R.T. Mullins then takes readers into the metaphysical weeds in *The Philosophy of Eternal Life*, exploring how an eternal punishment sits uneasily

within any coherent concept of divine justice and moral proportionality.

Julie Ferwerda, a holistic nurse and author of *Raising Hell*, explores the moral incoherence of ECT in *Divine Injustice: The Problem of Hell*, questioning how a supposedly loving God could consign people to infinite punishment for finite sins, a dilemma many Christians find emotionally and theologically untenable.

Keith Giles, former pastor and author of the *Jesus Un* series, presents a passionate case for universal restoration, arguing that God's mercy ultimately triumphs over judgment. In a world so often shaped by punitive theologies, Giles's voice is a pastoral balm and theological provocation.

Chad Bahl and Chris Loewen take up the case for conditional immortality, the belief that immortality is granted by God, not innate to the human soul, and that eternal punishment is neither biblical nor necessary. Loewen, a Canadian seminary student and agricultural worker, brings a grounded, imagery-rich engagement with the Gehenna language of Scripture.

Sharon L. Baker Putt, professor at Messiah University and author of *Razing Hell*, offers a particularly moving vision of purification through fire, where God's judgment is restorative, not retributive. Her academic expertise and commitment to a nonviolent theology of love shape one of the book's most powerful theological reframings.

Thomas Jay Oord, a leading voice in open and relational theology, reframes the question entirely

in *God's Glory as Relentless Love*. For Oord, the core theological error is imagining a God who ceases to love. Instead, divine glory is best understood through relentless, restorative love, never through torment.

Eric A. Seibert and Shawn M. Ryan tackle the cultural forces that have propped up the doctrine of ECT, including troubling portrayals of God in the Old Testament and Western traditions that have moralized fear. Seibert, a well-published Old Testament professor, is known for helping readers interpret violent biblical texts with fresh, peace-oriented eyes.

Dr. Meghan Henning, whose research on hell in antiquity is groundbreaking, brings intersectional analysis to the table in *Engaging Cultures of Oppression*, demonstrating how ideas about damnation have been shaped by and reinforce systems of gender, disability, and power. Her scholarly contributions anchor the book's more academic side.

Mark G. Karris, a therapist and author, takes this one step further, mapping the psychological trauma many suffer from hell indoctrination. His chapter is haunting yet healing, revealing just how deeply theology can wound – and how recovery is possible.

A special strength of *Deconstructing Hell* is the inclusion of deeply personal reflections that bring theological shifts to life:

- **Josh Patterson**, host of the *(Re)thinking Faith* podcast, shares his journey from certainty to mystery as a young pastor.

- **Elizabeth Enns-Petters (Lizz)**, co-host of the *Deconstructing Mamas* podcast, writes with motherly tenderness about raising children free from fear-based theology.
- **Esther Joy Goetz**, known on social media as “The Dolly Mama”, offers heartfelt wisdom from her life as a missionary kid turned faith coach, reflecting on how love – not fear – ought to be the engine of spiritual formation.

Deconstructing Hell is not an academic tome in the traditional sense – though it includes rigorous scholarship – but a deeply pastoral work. It meets readers where they are: whether they’re scholars rethinking doctrine, pastors struggling to preach a coherent gospel, or laypeople haunted by images of fire and brimstone.

The contributors write with conviction and clarity, yet the tone is never arrogant. Instead, there’s a refreshing humility and openness that reflects the heart of open and relational theology itself. The book doesn’t pretend to offer the final word but invites an ongoing conversation rooted in love, justice, and fidelity to Christ.

This is a timely and necessary book. As increasing numbers of Christians find the traditional doctrine of eternal conscious torment morally indefensible and biblically suspect, *Deconstructing Hell* offers an invaluable resource. It models how to wrestle with hard questions faithfully – without fear, and with love at the center.

Pr. Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu,
Propovăduire, teologie, spiritualitate și mesaj,
Reîntregirea Publishing House,
Alba Iulia, 2025, 156 p.

The volume of studies *Propovăduire, teologie, spiritualitate și mesaj*, authored by Protos. Dr. Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu and published in 2025 by Reîntregirea Publishing House in Alba Iulia, stands among the most recent and substantial theological contributions of the author. As suggested by its subtitle, the book brings together 13 theological studies and articles addressing a broad range of pastoral, dogmatic, spiritual, and cultural themes.

The structure of the volume is clear and well organized: a Preface by His Grace Ioan Casian, Romanian Orthodox Bishop of Canada (pp. 7–8), followed by the Author's Foreword (pp. 9–10), the main body of studies, and concluding sections including the Abstract, Bibliography, Index of Names, and About the Author. With the exception of the paper on *Pastoral Care of the Elderly in the Confessional* and the unpublished study entitled *The Theology of the Nativity of the Lord as Reflected in the Work of Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania*, the remaining texts were previously published between 2021 and 2024 in the journal *Cuvântul. The Word. Le Verbe*, the official periodical of the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Canada.

In the Preface, His Grace Ioan Casian emphasizes the thematic diversity and formative value of the volume, noting that the studies offer readers "spiritual life landmarks and Christian identity references" capable of illuminating the path of those seeking meaning and spiritual truth. This observation is confirmed throughout the book, as the texts go beyond a purely theoretical approach and invite reflection, interiorization, and spiritual commitment.

In the Author's Foreword, Fr. Maxim Morariu expresses his hope that the collected studies will become more accessible to the reading public and will bring "spiritual benefit" to those interested in pressing questions of Christian life and in the ways Orthodox spirituality has been cultivated within the Romanian cultural space. This pastoral and formative intention is evident in the balanced, clear, and profound language, which avoids excessive technicality and favors understanding.

One of the most notable studies in the volume is *Saint Luke of Crimea (1877–1961) – A Leading Figure of Contemporary Orthodox Spirituality*. The author provides a rigorous biographical synthesis, highlighting Saint Luke's dual vocation as physician and bishop, as well as his witness of faith under the hostile conditions of the Soviet regime. His refusal to perform surgery in the absence of an icon, the persecutions and years of exile, his medical service in prisons and military hospitals, and his unwavering commitment to episcopal ministry all contribute to the portrait of an exemplary confessor-hierarch. The conclusion of the study convincingly

summarizes the message of his life: authentic faith can flourish even in the harshest historical circumstances, becoming a source of hope, courage, and dignity.

Another important merit of the volume lies in the author's ability to create a fruitful dialogue between theology, history, and contemporary pastoral concerns. By engaging figures such as Saint Luke of Crimea, Dumitru Stăniloae, Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, or contemporary voices like John Breck and Savatie Baștovoi, Fr. Maxim Morariu demonstrates a consistent effort to anchor theological reflection in lived experience and historical reality. This approach not only enhances the relevance of the studies but also makes them accessible to a wider audience, bridging the gap between academic theology and the concrete spiritual needs of today's believers. Consequently, the volume succeeds in offering both intellectual coherence and spiritual nourishment, confirming the author's place among the noteworthy voices of contemporary Orthodox theological discourse.

Overall, the volume *Propovăduire, teologie, spiritualitate și mesaj* stands out for its thematic unity achieved through diversity, the rigor of its documentation, and the author's pastoral openness. The studies are not merely academic exercises but genuine invitations to deepen one's faith and to rediscover the spiritual values that define Christian Orthodox identity. The book is addressed both to theologians and clergy, as well as to lay readers interested in the life of the Church, representing an important reference point in contemporary Romanian theological literature.

David W. Congdon (Ed.), *Varieties of Christian Universalism: Exploring Four Views*, Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2023, 175 p.

In a world often divided by faiths, where the concept of salvation is intertwined with various interpretations and traditions, some of today's theologians have tried to find a beacon of hope through a deeper exploration of the concept of universal salvation.

Within these pages unfolds a journey of discovery woven through a tapestry of religious teachings, philosophical reflections and human experiences. From the ancient wisdom of the Church Fathers to the modern insights of contemporary theologians, the book sets out to explore new perspectives on the idea of universal salvation that fascinates many Christians today.

As we move through the chapters, the authors invite the reader to undertake a pilgrimage of the heart, a search for understanding, compassion and unity. In the exploration of universal salvation lies the possibility of awakening to the boundless grace that permeates the cosmos and illuminates the path toward a world in which all beings may be welcomed into the embrace of divine love.

Varieties of Christian Universalism: Exploring Four Views offers a comprehensive and perceptive analysis of a mosaic of diverse theological perspectives within

Christian universalism. Edited by David W. Congdon, with contributions by Morwenna Ludlow, Robin Parry, Tom Greggs and David W. Congdon, the volume carefully navigates the nuanced terrain of universal salvation and presents four distinct viewpoints with clarity and depth.

First, Morwenna Ludlow provides a detailed overview of patristic universalism, incorporating the perspectives of important early Christian thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor. Next, Robin Parry discusses evangelical universalism, focusing on themes such as the historical roots of evangelical universalism by focusing on the following points: The Historical Roots of Evangelical Universalism (pp. 38-42), Revival Roots From Britain to America (pp. 42-45), The Legacy of Early Evangelical Universalism (pp. 48-53), The Diversity of Evangelical Universalism (pp. 73-79).

Tom Greggs's contribution to this compilation incorporates Karl Barth's vision and the post Barthian influence on the teachings of Christian universalism. Barth's vision of universal salvation is grounded in his understanding of Jesus Christ as the definitive revelation of God. For Barth, Christ is the reconciler of all things, and through his death and resurrection he has overcome sin and death for all humanity. In Christ, God's judgment and mercy intersect, offering the possibility of redemption to all. This vision is particularly evident in the sub chapters Election and Logics of Universalism (pp. 85-87), The Election of Jesus Christ (pp. 87- 91), The Election of Reprobation (pp. 91-96).

The most recent theologian to set forth his teaching on existential universalism is the editor David W. Congdon. A contemporary theologian, he has made significant contributions to the discussion of universalism through the concept of existential universalism. Unlike traditional understandings of universal salvation, which often focus on theological propositions or doctrinal formulations, Congdon's existential universalism explores the very fabric of human existence and experience.

One of the book's core strengths lies in its thorough exploration of each theological perspective. From the inclusive approach of inclusivist universalism to the hopeful vision of apokatastasis, the author provides a balanced analysis of the beliefs, arguments and historical contexts that shape each view. Readers are offered a rich tapestry of theological discourse that invites thoughtful engagement with the complexities of universal reconciliation.

Furthermore, the author demonstrates a commendable commitment to scholarly rigor. Drawing from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including biblical texts, theological treatises and historical documents, the book offers a solid foundation for understanding the theological underpinnings of Christian universalism. The inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives adds depth and nuance to the discussion and enriches the reader's understanding of this multifaceted theological doctrine.

**Robin Parry, Ilaria Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?*,
Volume 2: *Universal Salvation from the Reformation
to the Nineteenth Century*, Cascade Books, 2019, 326 p.**

A Larger Hope?, Volume 2: *Universal Salvation from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century* is not simply a continuation of the first volume, but a deep expansion of its central intuition: that the hope for universal salvation did not disappear after antiquity, but persisted in more discreet, fragmented, and often contested forms throughout the modern period. Under the careful editorial guidance of Ilaria L. E. Ramelli and Robin A. Parry, the book reconstructs a complex intellectual landscape in which universalism is neither dominant nor entirely marginal, but something more elusive, a recurring theological possibility that resists definitive suppression.

The chronological span from the Protestant Reformation to the nineteenth century is particularly significant. This is a period marked by confessional consolidation, doctrinal rigidity, and the sharpening of boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. One might expect universal salvation to vanish under such pressures. Instead, the volume shows that it survives precisely within these tensions, sometimes as a quiet undercurrent, sometimes as an explicit and daring theological claim.

What gives the book its particular weight is not only the range of figures discussed, but the way in

which they are situated within their intellectual and spiritual contexts. Universalism does not appear as an abstract doctrine imposed from outside, but as something that emerges organically from deeper theological concerns. In some cases, it arises from a radical commitment to the nature of divine love. In others, it is tied to questions of justice, freedom, and the ultimate coherence of creation. The editors and contributors succeed in showing that universalism is less a single idea than a family of responses to a shared problem: how to reconcile the goodness of God with the reality of eternal damnation.

The diversity of these responses is one of the most illuminating aspects of the volume. Some authors draw explicitly on the legacy of Origen, reworking themes associated with apocatastasis in new philosophical and theological frameworks. Others arrive at similar conclusions through different paths, often grounded in scriptural exegesis or in a more experiential, even mystical, understanding of salvation. The book carefully avoids collapsing these approaches into a single narrative, allowing their differences to remain visible and significant. Particularly striking is the attention given to figures outside the main confessional traditions. Thinkers such as Hans Denck represent a form of radical reform Christianity in which institutional authority is relativized and the inner transformation of the believer becomes central. In such contexts, universal salvation can appear not as a speculative hypothesis, but as a natural extension of a theology centered on the

immediacy of divine grace. Similarly, in the work of Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, one finds a synthesis of pietist spirituality and speculative theology in which the restoration of all things becomes part of a broader vision of cosmic redemption.

The engagement with Pietism is especially important. Pietism, with its emphasis on personal faith, transformation, and the living experience of God, creates a space in which rigid doctrinal formulations can be softened. Within this space, the idea that divine love might ultimately overcome all resistance becomes not only thinkable but, for some, compelling. The volume shows how such movements function as fertile ground for the reemergence of universalist hope. At the same time, the book does not romanticize its subject. It remains attentive to the opposition that universalist ideas encountered, as well as to the internal tensions within universalist thought itself. The hope for the salvation of all raises difficult questions about freedom, judgment, and the seriousness of evil. Rather than resolving these questions, the contributors often allow them to remain open, which gives the volume a certain intellectual honesty and depth.

Stylistically and methodologically, the work is rigorous and at times demanding. Many chapters presuppose familiarity with early modern theology, philosophy, and ecclesiastical history. This is not an introductory text, but a scholarly resource that rewards careful and patient reading. One might wish for a more synthetic conclusion that would draw together the

many strands presented across the volume, yet the absence of such a synthesis is also consistent with the book's overall approach. It resists closure, much like the idea it explores.

In the end, what *A Larger Hope?*, Volume 2 offers is not merely a history of a doctrine, but a reframing of the theological imagination of the modern period. It suggests that the question of universal salvation is not an anomaly or a marginal curiosity, but a persistent horizon that continues to challenge and unsettle established frameworks. The "larger hope" of the title is not presented as a definitive answer, but as a possibility that repeatedly reasserts itself wherever theology takes seriously the depth of divine love and the destiny of creation.

For a reader interested in the long trajectory of universalism beyond the early church, this volume is indispensable. It not only fills a significant gap in the historical record, but also invites a reconsideration of what counts as central or peripheral in the history of Christian thought.

Afterword

Afterword on Human Fragility and Salvation from a Socio-Political and Post-modern Approach

The chapters of this book build a comprehensive understanding of humanity's decline in light of Scripture as a whole ("Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" – Isaiah 41:10) and, in particular, of the hope of the Gospel ("Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" – Matthew 28:20). In this sense, the author offers an argumentative and detailed examination of human nature from a theological perspective, while also orienting the discussion toward the idea of "salvation", grounded patristically and dogmatically. To all this, Alexandru Lazăr adds a note of contemporaneity both in the understanding of the controversial term Apocatastasis and in the current understanding of history as a path toward universal salvation, as well as

in society's ongoing attempt to coalesce toward a form of religious pluralism. Starting from this latter idea – history as a journey toward universal salvation – this afterword will highlight two dimensions of the contemporary relevance of the theme of this book, from the perspective of the two visions proposed and analyzed by the author himself: man and the architecture of salvation, from the point of view of a post-modern world.

Human Fragility as a secular and post-modern socio-political concept

As the author explains in the first part of the book, God's love and the salvation of humanity begin in the very state of spiritual misery and physical helplessness in which humanity finds itself within a World of violence and conflict. This human decay, however, is not exclusive to religious texts but, as a result of the fall from Eden and the desire to rediscover God, has been the subject of study by philosophers and political scholars who seek to understand the evolution of societies and states. In his work *Leviathan*, referring to human nature, Thomas Hobbes emphasized that in the natural state (without political authority), people are equal in capabilities, but dominated by desires and fear, which leads to conflict: "In such condition, there is no place for industry and the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"¹. This idea of fallen human

¹ Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathanul*, traducere de Anca Niță, București, Humanitas, 2001, p. 105.

nature in society is also found in Niccolò Machiavelli, who states in his fundamental work *Il Principe* that "People are ungrateful, changeable, deceitful, cowardly in the face of danger and greedy for gain"². In this situation, firm and pragmatic leadership is necessary to maintain social order. The parallel proposed from this perspective is linked, on the one hand, to the fact that the fragility of human nature has immediate effects – societal and political – throughout the history of salvation, effects no less important and leading to tragedies of humanity such as war and perpetual violence. On the other hand, the need for a decisive and immediate intervention is noted to bring stability and good governance, while on the spiritual level, as the author mentions, this intervention will be marked by the Apocatastasis in the light of God's love.

Trying to understand these ideas from the perspective of the contemporary international system and the interaction between people in post-modern societies, several authors note a transformation of the decline of human nature. A first example of human fragility in post-modern societies is given by Zygmunt Bauman, who speaks of the unstable and fluid contemporary society resulting in human relationships and identities that become fragile: "Social forms can no longer and do not want to maintain their form for long"³. A second example is found in Michel Foucault, who discusses

² Machiavelli, Niccolò, *Principele*, traducere de Nina Façon, București, Humanitas, 2006, p. 95.

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernitatea lichidă*, traducere de Ciprian Șiualea, București, Editura Antet, 2005, p. 12.

human nature in terms of the loss of autonomy and the transformation of the individual into a simple disciplined body: "The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations invest it, mark it, train it"⁴. Such post-modern socio-political realities make the intervention of God as Father protector of His creation an extreme and decisive one: "And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse, and He who sat on him is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war" (Revelation 19:11). As a separation of the human decadence accumulated throughout political history and the history of salvation, the Love of God separates the good and the just from those enslaved by power and dehumanized, as Bauman and Foucault emphasize.

The Architecture of Salvation: Socio-Political Foundations for Praying for the Salvation of All People

Facing secularization and relativization, as Father Alexandru emphasizes within the second part of the book, Western society – but not only – abandons religious ideas in favor of some much more comfortable ethically and morally. The world, as a social and political construct in which theology is found in modernity and post-modernity on the principles described by the

⁴ Michel Foucault, *A supraveghea și a pedepsi*, traducere de Bogdan Ghiu, București, Editura Paralela 45, 2005, p. 30.

author within the previous chapters of this book, is based on what Jürgen Habermas describes as an active participation of citizens in public debate. Public opinion influences the decision-making process in post-modern societies, while institutions (including religious ones, the Church) must be open to argumentation⁵. From this perspective, there is a post-modern socio-political architecture for praying for the Salvation of All People – from all societies. At the same time, this does not contradict what Alexandru Lazăr concludes: "Because the Church takes all people seriously, it must answer to anyone, anytime, in accordance with the word of Peter the Apostle: Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Peter 3:15)".

The socio-political architecture of the salvation of all individuals is best represented in Immanuel Kant's work, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project*. The philosophical approach proposed by the German philosopher represents a secularized transposition of Christian hope. If the New Jerusalem portrayed in the Book of Revelation is the expression of a perfect peace resulting from the righteous judgment of God, then "perpetual peace" is the attempt to achieve this peace through reason, law, and the political will of all people. Starting from Kant: "The state of peace between people living side by side is not a natural state (*status naturalis*), but

⁵ Habermas, Jürgen, *Facticitate și validitate. Contribuții la teoria discursivă a dreptului și a statului de drept*, București, Editura All, 2000.

rather a state of war"⁶ and discovering the results that Father Alexandru presents in the light of the Apocalypse of Saint John ("And there will be no more death; neither will there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore"), one cannot help but notice the relevance of the topic addressed within this book for the post-modern world. From a synthesis of the decline and rediscovery of human nature in the light of God's love, to the definition and analysis of the architecture of salvation for contemporary man, Father Alexandru Lazăr offers a documented and argued approach toward God's Plan for humanity.

Dragoș Șamșudean, *Teaching Assistant, PhD*
Department of International Studies
and Contemporary History, Babeș-Bolyai University

⁶ Kant, Immanuel, *Spre pacea perpetuă*, București, Editura Științifică, 1998, p. 9.

Bibliography

Books

- Allin, Thomas**, *Christ Triumphant. Universalism Asserted as the Hope of the Gospel on the Authority of Reason, the Fathers, and Holy Scripture*, London: Wipf and Stock, 2015.
- Alfeyev, Ilarion**, *Hristos, biruitorul iadului. Pogorârea la iad din perspectiva ortodoxă*, București: Editura Sophia, 2007.
- Alighieri, Dante**, *Divina Comedie*, trad. Eta Boeriu, București: Editura Casa Școalelor, 1994.
- Andrei, Alexandru**, *Dicționar român-latin, latin-român*, București: Editura Astro.
- Augustin, Fericitul**, *Confessiones*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 1985.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs von**, *Liturghia cosmică*, Iași: Editura Doxologia, 2018.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs von**, *Mic discurs despre iad*, București: Editura Anastasia, 1994.
- Behr, John**, *Ascetism și antropologie la Sfântul Irineu de Lyon și Clement Alexandrinul*, Iași: Editura Doxologia, 2016.
- Bell, Rob**, *Love Wins*, New York: HarperOne, 2011.
- Benedict Bistrițeanul**, PS, *Personalități duhovnicești contemporane*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renașterea, 2016.
- Bernea, Ernest**, *Îndemn la simplitate*, București: Editura Anastasia, 1995.
- Borca, Vasile**, *Omul – încununare a operei creației*, Baia Mare: Editura Universității de Nord, 2007.
- Briquel Chatonnet, Françoise; Debié, Muriel**, *Le monde Syriaque*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2018.

- Brock, Sebastian**, *Efrem Sirul I-II*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 1998.
- Brunner, Emil**, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949.
- Buchiu, Ștefan**, *Manual de Teologie Dogmatică*, București: Editura Basilica, 2017.
- Bulgakov, Serghei**, *Lumina neînserată*, București: Editura Anastasia, 1999.
- Bultmann, Rudolf**, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1956.
- Bunge, Gabriel**, *Mânia și terapia ei după Avva Evagrie Ponticul*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2016.
- Bunge, Gabriel**, *Rugăciunea în Duh și Adevăr*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2015.
- Carton Pearson, Carlton**, *The Gospel of Inclusion*, New York: Atria Books, 2006.
- Clément, Olivier**, *Puterea credinței*, Târgoviște: Editura Pandora, 1999.
- Clement al Alexandriei**, *Stromatele*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 1998.
- Congdon, David W.**, *The God Who Saves*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016.
- Crouzel, Henri**, *Origen*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2014.
- Crowder, John**, *Cosmos Reborn*, Portland, OR: Sons of Thunder, 2013.
- Crowder, John**, *Mystical Union*, Santa Cruz, CA: Sons of Thunder, 2010.
- Cuviosul Siluan Athonitul**, *Între iadul deznădejzii și iadul smere-niei*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2001.
- Damaschin, Ioan**, *Dogmatica*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 1943.
- Du Toit, François**, *Divine Embrace*, Hermanus: Mirror Word, 2012.
- Dunn, Benjamin**, *The Happy Gospel!*, Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2011.

- Damian, Theodor** et al., *Istorie și Teologie*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Limes, 2022.
- Egger, Maxime**, *Să ne rugăm 15 zile cu Sfântul Siluan*, București: Editura Sophia, 2010.
- Evdokimov, Paul**, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, București: Christiana, 1995.
- Evdokimov, Paul**, *Ortodoxia*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 1996.
- Felmy, Karl Christian**, *De la Cina cea de Taină la Dumnezeiasca Liturghie*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2008.
- Florenski, Pavel**, *Stâlpul și temelia Adevărului*, Iași: Editura Polirom, 1999.
- Gott, Henry Michael**, *Ascetic modernism in the work of T.S. Eliot and Gustave Flaubert*, London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013.
- Grigorie de Nyssa**, *Despre suflet și Înviere*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 1998.
- Grigorie de Nyssa**, *Marele cuvânt catehetic*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 1998.
- Grupp, Jeff**, *Hyper-Calvinist Universal Salvation*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024.
- Guittou, Jean**, *L'enfer dans la mentalité contemporaine*, Paris: [editura].
- Hart, David Bentley**, *Frumusețea infinitului*, Iași: Editura Polirom, 2013.
- Hart, David Bentley**, *That All Shall Be Saved*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019.
- Hart, David Bentley**, *The Doors of the Sea*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011.
- Haight, John**, *Știință și religie*, București: Eonul Dogmatic, 2002.
- Hierotheos de Nafpaktos**, *Viața după moarte*, Bacău: Editura Bunavestire, 2000.
- Kourembelis, Ioannis G.**, *Hristologia la Sfântul Roman Melodul*, Iași: Editura Doxologia, 2018.
- Lamfers, Wim**, *Libertate și apropiere*, Roșiorii de Vede: [editura], 2016.

- Larchet, Jean-Claude**, *Inconștientul spiritual*, București: Editura Sophia, 2009.
- Larchet, Jean-Claude**, *Terapeutica bolilor spirituale*, București: Editura Sophia, 2006.
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, *Fragilitatea Ființei*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024.
- Lossky, Nicolas**, *Teologia muzicii liturgice*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renașterea, 2013.
- Lossky, Vladimir**, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, București: Editura Humanitas, 2010.
- Ludlow, Morwenna**, *Universal Salvation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- MacDonald, Gregory**, *The Evangelical Universalist*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012.
- McClymond, Michael**, *The Devil's Redemption*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.
- Minois, Georges**, *Istoria infernurilor*, București: Editura Humanitas, 1998.
- Moltmann, Jürgen**, *The Coming of God*, London: SCM Press, 1996.
- Moltmann, Jürgen**, *Venirea lui Dumnezeu*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2015.
- Mocean Pleșa, Raluca**, *Actualitatea apocatastazei*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Eikon, 2021.
- Morariu, Iuliu-Marius**, *Repere ale autobiografiei spirituale*, Iași: Editura Lumen, 2019.
- Moș, Grigore-Dinu**, *Curs de dogmatică*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2019.
- Nellas, Panayotis**, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2009.
- Nicolaescu, Costion**, *Hristos – Adăpostul...*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renașterea, 2011.
- Olariu, Iosif**, *Manual de Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, Caransebeș: Tipografia Diecezană, 1907.
- Origen**, *Despre Principii*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 1982.

- Pearson, Carlton**, *The Gospel of Inclusion*, New York: Atria Books, 2016.
- Platon**, *Banchetul*, București: Humanitas, 2017.
- Platon**, *Phaidon*, București: Humanitas, 2011.
- Răducă, Vasile**, *Antropologia Sfântului Grigore de Nyssa*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 1996.
- Rahner, Karl**, *Tratat fundamental despre credință*, Târgu Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2005.
- Rose, Serafim**, *Sufletul după moarte*, Iași: Doxologia, 2006.
- Rose, Serafim**, *Cursul de supraviețuire creștin ortodoxă*, București: Editura Anastasia, 2011.
- Saharov, Nicholas**, *Iubesc, deci exist*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2008.
- Saharov, Arhimandrit Sofronie**, *Nevoința cunoașterii lui Dumnezeu*, Alba Iulia: Editura Reîntregirea, 2016.
- Saharov, Arhimandrit Sofronie**, *Rugăciunea – experiența Vieții Veșnice*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2007.
- Sf. Efrem Sirianul**, *Imnele Raiului*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2010.
- Sf. Isaac Sirul**, *Cuvinte despre nevoință*, Bacău: Editura Bunavestire, 1997.
- Sf. John Marie Vianney**, *The Sermons of the Curé d'Ars*, Lulu Press, 2016.
- Sf. Luca al Crimeei**, *La porțile Postului Mare*, București: Editura Apologeticum, 2005.
- Sf. Teofan Zăvorățul**, *Viața duhovnicească*, Iași: [editura], 2006.
- Silvana Vlad**, *Căutând sensul vieții*, Iași: Editura Doxologia, 2021.
- Sofronie, Arhimandritul**, *Viața și minunile Sfântului Siluan Athonitul*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 1999.
- Sonea, Cristian**, *Teologia dialogului intercreștin*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2017.
- Spidlik, Tomáš**, *Maranatha*, Târgu Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2008.
- Špidlik, Tomáš**, *Spiritualitatea răsăritului creștin*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2005.
- Stăniloae, Dumitru**, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 2002.

- Stăniloae, Dumitru**, *Filocalia*, București: Editura Humanitas, 2008.
- Stăniloae, Dumitru**, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 2010.
- Thunberg, Lars**, *Antropologia teologică a Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul*, București: Editura Sophia, 2005.
- Todoran, Isidor; Zăgrean, Ioan**, *Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renașterea, 2000.
- Usca, Sorin**, *Tâlcuire la cartea Ieșirii*, București: Editura Christiana, 2002.
- Vianney, Jean-Marie Baptiste**, *Thoughts of the Curé d'Ars*, TAN Books, Charlotte, NC.

Articles / Studies

- Anghelescu, Gheorghe**, „Sensul eshatologic al timpului în scrierile Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul”, *Mitropolia Olteniei*, nr. 1–2, 1995.
- Baghos, Mario**, “Reconsidering Apokatastasis in St. Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Soul and Resurrection* and the *Catechetical Oration*”, *Phronema*, vol. 27, nr. 2, 2012.
- Cameron, Nigel M. de S.**, “Universalism and the Logic of Revelation”, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 1988.
- Frăcea, Ilie**, „Idei teologice în «Imnele Paradisului» ale Sfântului Efreem Sirul”, *Studii Teologice*, II, nr. 5–10, 1979.
- Gârdan, Gabriel-Viorel**, “The Changing Face of Christianity and New Outlines of Ecumenism in the 21st Century”, *Journal for Freedom of Conscience / Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, vol. 1, nr. 1, 2014.
- Hart, David Bentley**, “God, Creation and Evil: The Moral Meaning of *Creatio ex Nihilo*”, *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, vol. 3, nr. 1, 2015.
- Ică jr., Ioan I.**, „O teologie poetică a misterului pascal”, în *Sf. Efreem Sirianul, Imnele Păresimilor, Azimelor, Răstignirii și Învierii*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2010.

- Jersak, Brad**, "Why I Am a Universalist (But Sound Like One). Reflections on David Bentley Hart's *That All Shall Be Saved*", *Clarion Journal of Religion, Peace and Justice*, 2019.
- Lanzillota, Lautaro Roig**, "Greek Philosophy and the Problem of Evil in Clement of Alexandria and Origen", *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica*, vol. 23, 2013.
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, „Actualitatea apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului”, *Astra Salvensis*, vol. IX, nr. 17.
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, "Human Freedom and the Hope of Universal Salvation: St. Gregory of Nyssa's Theological Dilemma", *Astra Salvensis*, vol. 12, nr. 24, 2024.
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, "Maran Atha and the Soteriological Consequence of the Eshaton", *Research & Science Today*, vol. 26, nr. 2, 2023. DOI: 10.38173/RST.2023.26.2.9:83-92
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, "Orthodox Response to Christian Universalism: The Theological Perspective of Pavel Florensky", *Khazanah Theologia*, vol. 5, nr. 3, 2023. DOI: 10.15575/kt.v5i3.21456
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, „Redescoperirea valorilor ascetice în contemporaneitate”, *Astra Salvensis*, vol. XI, nr. 21, 2023.
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, „Salvarea Universală. Noi opinii în teologia contemporană”, *Astra Salvensis*, vol. VIII, nr. 16, 2020.
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, "Shall All Be Saved? Current Orthodox Clarifications to Pope Francis' Statements", *Teologia*, vol. 100, nr. 3, 2024.
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, "The Eschatological Vision of Dumitru Stăniloae: A Counter-Argument on the Pluralist-Universalist Vision of John Hick", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 23, nr. 67, 2024.
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, "The Eternal Return. Apocatastasis and its Manifestations in Ancient Philosophies", *EON*, vol. 5, nr. 4, 2024. DOI: 10.56177/eon.5.4.2024.art.1
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, "The Politico-Dogmatic Stage of the Apocatastasis' Condemnation", *Teologia*, vol. 92, nr. 3, 2022.

- Lazăr, Alexandru**, "The Problem of Eternal Life – Some Anti-Universalist Landmarks", *International Journal of Religion*, vol. 5, nr. 8, 2024. DOI: 10.61707/2as2cz02
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, "The Theory of Apocatastasis: New Theological Opinions on an Old Dogmatic Controversy", *EON*, vol. 6, nr. 4, 2025. DOI: 10.56177/eon.6.4.2025.art.15
- Lazăr, Alexandru**, The Fertile Silence of the Middle Ages: Universal Salvation and the Few Theological Voices That Dared to Dissent (9 th -14 th c.), Research and Science Today, Vol. 31, No.1, 2026. DOI: 10.38173/RST.2026.1.12
- Moore, Edward**, "Origen of Alexandria and Apokatastasis: Some Notes on the Development of a Noble Notion", *Quodlibet Journal*, vol. 5, nr. 1, 2003.
- Morariu, Iuliu-Marius**, "Bioethics in the Discussions of the Panorthodox Synod", *Astra Salvensis*, vol. IV, nr. 7, 2016.
- Moș, Grigore-Dinu**, „Idea transcendentalului în teologie”, în *Caiete de dogmatică*, vol. 1, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2020.
- Moș, Grigore-Dinu**, „Judecata universală și viața de veci în teologia ortodoxă contemporană”, în *In honorem Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Valer Bel*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2019.
- Moș, Grigore-Dinu**, „Știința și religia în mentalitatea omului contemporan. Riscurile ideologizării”, *Tabor*, vol. 8, nr. 10, 2014.
- Nemes, Steven**; Ramelli, Ilaria, "The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment...", *Journal of Analytic Theology*, vol. 3, 2015.
- Patrides, Constantinos Apostolos**, "The Salvation of Satan", *University of Pennsylvania Press*, vol. 28, nr. 4, 1967.
- Pryor, Adam**, "Clement of Alexandria's Methodological Framework...", *Knowledge and Education*, nr. 1, 2004.
- Ramelli, Ilaria**, „Baptism in Gregory of Nyssa's Theology and its Orientation to Eschatology”, în *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism*, New York: Brill, 2011.
- Sachs, John R.**, "Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology", *Theological Studies*, vol. 54, nr. 4, 1993.

Electronic sources (Webography)

Arminius, Jacobus, *Works*, available online:

<https://ccel.org/ccel/arminius/works1/works1.v.xvi.html>

Bible Study Tools, “Aionios – Greek Lexicon Entry”, available at:

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/aionios.html> (accessed on 15.10.2025)

Digi24, „Papa Francisc: iadul nu există”, available at:

<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/ue/papa-francisc-iadul-nu-exista-904284> (accessed on 18.02.2026)

Dilema Veche, „Cum vine duhul pe furis – Andrei Scrima”, available at: <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/societate/cum-vine-duhul-pe-furis-andre-scrima-621045.html> (accessed on 03.03.2025)

Dexonline, „fragil”, available at:

<https://dexonline.ro/intrare/fragil/21783> (accessed on 14.02.2026)

Google Docs (Pemptousia material), available at:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/13w7N3jOgnmHmGTJfeXqBcRR2JJ199zzc_jN6WGhsy8M/edit (accessed on 14.02.2026)

Patheos – Jesus Creed, “Universalism and the Devil’s Redemption”, available at: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/16/universalism-and-the-devils-redemption/> (accessed on 16.06.2018)

Reforming Hell, Robin Parry, “The Actual Words Behind Hell”, available at: <https://reforminghell.com/2020/02/13/the-actual-words-behind-hell-robin-parry/> (accessed in 13.01.2020)

Pew Research Center, „Being Christian in Western Europe”, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>, 29 mai 2018.

Saint Sophia DC, David Bentley Hart, „Traditio Deformis”, available at: <https://saintsophiadc.org/2015/08/traditio-deformis-part/> (accessed on 27.08.2015)

The Gospel Coalition, recenzie / interviu privind *That All Shall Be Saved*, available at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/shall-saved-universal-christian-universalism-david-bentley-hart/> (accessed on 02.10. 2019)

Quodlibet Journal, Edward Moore, „Origen of Alexandria and Apokatastasis...”, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100214114623/http://www.quodlibet.net/articles/moore-origen.shtml>



ISBN 978-606-37-2985-0