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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Signposts for an Eastern Orthodox inclusive anthropological ethics

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Abstract

Despite the strong interest of Eastern Orthodox theologians in the area of anthropology, their reflection has almost never included intellectual disability. The article aims to take the discussion further by providing the contours of an inclusive anthropological ethics. In this sense, it will develop constructively the three main principles of Dumitru Stăniloae's dialogical anthropology: (1) that each human being is a person because she is called to dialogue with God from the womb of her mother; (2) that this dialogue with God is mediated by one's neighbour; (3) that the materiality of creation is meant to be transformed into a gift of communion with other humans and God.

Keywords: anthropology; disability; Eastern Orthodoxy; Dumitru Stăniloae; theological ethics

Theologians working on the inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities within the Eastern Orthodox Church face at least two preliminary challenges: the lack of Eastern Orthodox reflection on the topic and of an adequate ethical framework. Although disability theology is a quickly evolving field with an increasing number of books and articles being written every year, Eastern Orthodox voices are seldom present. To my knowledge, until now, there is only one Byzantine Catholic monograph on the topic, a booklet, a series of articles and a PhD thesis.[1] At the same time, mainstream Eastern Orthodox reflection on ethics leans towards apophaticism. As Alexis Torrance explains, apophatic ethics is afraid 'to collapse the message of the Gospel

[1]Summer Kinard, *Of Such is the Kingdom: A Practical Theology of Disability* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2019); John Chryssavgis, 'Ministry, Disability and Brokenness: Orthodox Insights into the Authority of the Priesthood', *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 12/2 (June 1999), pp. 169–80; John Chryssavgis, *The Body of Christ: A Place of Welcome for People with Disabilities* (New York: Department of Stewardship, Outreach & Evangelism Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2017); Aikaterini Pekridou, 'Disability as a Question for Ecumenical Dialogue', in Pantelēs Kalaïtzidēs (ed.), *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education; 'That They All May Be One' (John 17:21)* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), pp. 822–6; Myroslaw I. Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013); Petre Maican, 'Overcoming Exclusion in Eastern Orthodoxy: Human Dignity and Disability from a Christological Perspective', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 33/4 (November 2020), pp. 496–509; Konstantinos Papanikolaou, 'Persons with Disabilities and Chronic Diseases in Greek Orthodox Society' (PhD thesis, (University of Winchester, 2019).

into a pietistic pharisaism and, worse, to make the coming of Christ, the Incarnation of God, an event of merely moral rather than ontological significance to humanity and creation as a whole'.[2] This might be a legitimate concern at theoretical level, but when reading about the abuses of persons with intellectual disabilities taking place in state-run institutions in countries with Eastern Orthodox majorities, one feels an acute sense of the importance of normative claims about the behaviour of Eastern Orthodox believers.[3]

This article wishes to fill in this gap and argues that an inclusive anthropological ethics for Eastern Orthodoxy can be grounded on Dumitru Stăniloae's dialogical framework. Although Stăniloae does not write explicitly about disability and at times can seem overly focused on cognitive capacities,[4] his overall vision is ideally positioned for the task, for at least three reasons. First, he offers a synthesis of the most important trends in the Eastern Orthodox theology of the twentieth century. Many of his readers will recognise that Stăniloae often searches for a middle path between various theologians, such as Sergius Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Georges Florovsky or Nikos Nissiotis.[5] Second, Stăniloae does not shy away from normative ethical claims. For him, nobody can attain deification on her own without taking care of and responsibility for her neighbour.[6] Third, and most importantly, Stăniloae is unique among Eastern Orthodox theologians in that he engages more profoundly with the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber and Ferdinand Ebner, making the notion of dialogue central to his system.[7]

To show the relevance of Stăniloae's dialogical anthropology for an inclusive ethics, I will begin with an overview of its main features. I will focus on three points: (1) that each human being is a person because she is called to dialogue with God from the womb; (2) that this dialogue with God is mediated by one's neighbour; (3) that the materiality of creation is meant to be transformed into a gift of communion with other humans and God. In the second section, I will highlight the implications of these points for an inclusive ethics. (1) That the dialogue with God that starts at conception eliminates the distinction between individual and person and reaffirms the goodness of every human being regardless of her being born in a Christian family (*contra* Zizioulas) or her ability to control her body and mind through ascesis (*contra* Lossky). (2) That the other is a word of God for us supports a different perspective on persons with disabilities. They are not deficient human beings, but 'divine

[2]Alexis Torrance, 'The Category of "Ethical Apophaticism" in Modern Orthodox Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17 (January 2021), pp. 1–2.

[3]Petre Maican, 'The Care of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities in Romania: Between Politics and Theology', *Political Theology* 2 (March 2021), pp. 1–14.

[4]Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* [hereafter *TDO*], vol. 1 (Bucharest: Institutul Biblic şi de Misiune Ortodoxă, 2010), p. 380.

[5]Calinic Berger, 'A Contemporary Synthesis of St. Maximus' Theology: The Work of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae', *Revista Teologica* 1 (2013), pp. 23–38; Calinic Berger, *Teognosia: Sinteza Dogmatică şi Duhovnicească a Părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae*, trans. Nicolae Daraban (Sibiu: Deisis, 2014); Viorel Coman, *Dumitru Stăniloae's Trinitarian Ecclesiology: Orthodoxy and the Filioque* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019).

[6]Dumitru Stăniloae, 'Dinamica Creaţiei În Biserică', *Ortodoxia* 3–4 (1977), pp. 289–91.

[7]Ciprian Costin Apintiliesei, *La structure ontologique-communionnelle de la personne: Aux sources théologiques et philosophiques du père Dumitru Stăniloae* (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), pp. 371–99; Marian Pătru, 'Mutuality – Presence – Personal Revelation through the Word: Father Dumitru Stăniloae and Martin Buber's Relational Ontology', *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 5/3 (2013), pp. 320–38.

communicative acts' that need to be approached with attentiveness and care.[8] (3) That the materiality of creation should become a gift for others supports not only one of the most basic requirements of disability activists (namely, the creation of accessible spaces), but also that of communities of belonging for persons with disabilities.

Dialogical anthropology

It is no exaggeration to say that, for Stăniloae, the human being finds herself at the centre of a dialogical universe. The source of this vision lies in the reading of Maximus the Confessor through a combination of Buberian, Ebnerian and personalist lenses. Maximus argues that each element of the created cosmos has its inner rationality (*logos*). This logos was created by the Logos of God, in whom it will also find its eschatological fulfilment.[9] Since the term *logos* has often been translated as 'word' – most famously in the prologue of John's Gospel – Stăniloae decides to interpret Maximus' *logoi* of creation as words of God addressed directly and personally to each human being.

> The rationality of created things implies a creative Person who thought and continues to think them. Moreover, any rationality is an interpersonal rationality. As for the world, there is a primordial Person who thinks and creates things, and there are other persons to whom they are addressed in order to be thought in communion. Their being thought by us means that we, as thinking subjects, are in the image of the Word, who thought and created them for a dialogue with us.[10]

The quote might appear to conflate *imago Dei* with cognitive capacities, and, as I mentioned in the introduction, there are many such passages; but the truth is rather different. Stăniloae is quite far from such a stance, precisely because he works within a dialogical framework. For him, each human being enters in dialogue with God from the very moment of her conception, regardless of her capacities. The most relevant passage is his commentary on the creation of Adam. Stăniloae notes that in Adam's case God acted differently than in that of other creatures. Instead of bringing Adam to existence 'as an object or as a succession of objects',[11] God breathes life into his face. Through this gesture, God makes clear that each and every human being who lived and will live is desired by God and destined to be God's dialogue partner.[12] The dialogue can take place even in the womb – or by extension when cognitive capacities are diminished – because the creative word of God already contains in itself the answer that the creature should give. The very existence of a being is in itself an answer to God's call.[13]

Still, a human being is not brought into existence for an individualistic relationship with God. As a word of God, the other prompts me to answer God's call for love and

[8]Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), p. 29.

[9]Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas, 1.28–9 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 95–103.

[10]Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 2, p. 9; translation from Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, trans. Ioan Ioniță and Robert Barringer, vol. 3 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), p. 3.

[11]Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 1, p. 348; Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, trans. Ioan Ioniță and Robert Barringer, vol. 2 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), p. 12.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Dumitru Stăniloae, 'Responsabilitatea Crestină', *Ortodoxia* 22/2 (1970), p. 190.

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communion.[14] Through her conception she responds to God's love, while at the same time she is inserted into a web of communicative meaning, becoming a word of God for another. For Stăniloae, some of the persons I will meet throughout my life will communicate to me indirectly a message from God. Some could ask me to fulfil my responsibility towards them, while others through their unjust actions could push me to act in a more Christlike way and rise closer to deification.[15]

Ignoring the presence and/or the words of another person represents an implicit rejection of God. Stăniloae illustrates this point with a stark example, the Genesis passage where Cain is asked by God of his brother's whereabouts (Gen 4:8–16). Cain's refusal to answer God's question is interpreted as illustrating both Cain's rejection of responsibility towards his neighbour and as his willingness to step outside the relationship with God.[16] Conversely, answering to the call of the other is the beginning of holiness. The more one develops spiritually, the more one begins to feel responsible for the other and seeks to care for those outside one's intimate circle. If at the beginning of her dialogue with God, the believer learns to love those close to her, the more she advances in union with God, the more she begins to feel love and responsibility for each and every person she encounters. For Stăniloae, the saint is capable of embracing and helping each person she meets with a fiery self-sacrificial love that imitates as close as possible the love of God for humanity.[17]

Ideally, the positive answer to the call of another human being is followed by the establishment of a relationship with him or her. For Stăniloae, at the centre of this relationship lies the notion of gift. The highest gift she can make is that of her life for somebody else.[18] Stăniloae, however, is a realist: in the gift category, he includes any gesture or object that entails a personal, self-sacrificial effort on the part of the giver, no matter how small the sacrifice. Still, the greater the sacrifice, the greater the gift. To take a working example, buying someone a shirt is not the same with putting together a scrapbook with photos of some of the most important moments of their lives. For Stăniloae, the latter is much closer to a gift than the former, because one can recognise there some form of effort and personal sacrifice (i.e. the time necessary for collecting the photos, choosing the scrapbook, putting everything together in a certain order). The more self-sacrificial effort the giver puts into her gift, the higher the degree of intimacy between the two persons.[19]

Stăniloae sees human relationship with God in similar terms. Humans are called to respond to the gift of their existence by returning the world as a gift to God through their sacrifice and toil.[20] God, who created the world out of nothing, does not need anything, so, Stăniloae argues, the only appropriate gift for God is the transformation of creation into a place of communion with others in Christ. Stăniloae finds the ideal illustration of this vision in the eucharist. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, particularly during Stăniloae's youth, the bread and the wine used for the eucharist were brought in by a member of the community. That the bread and the wine were the result of a long process that included physical work – taking care of the vineyard, picking the

[14]Ibid., p. 181.
[15]Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 1, p. 144.
[16]Stăniloae, 'Responsabilitatea Crestină', p. 186.
[17]Stăniloae, 'Dinamica Creației În Biserică', pp. 289–91.
[18]Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 1, pp. 198–9, 356.
[19]Dumitru Stăniloae, *Chipul Nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu in om*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Cristal, 1995), p. 123.
[20]Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 1, pp. 355–7.

grapes, pressing them and waiting for fermentation to take place – qualified the wine and the bread as gifts.[21] Through the celebration of the liturgy, these gifts were put in relation with Christ and by receiving the eucharist each of the faithful was strengthened in her union with Christ and those who drink from the same chalice.[22] Thus, when Stăniloae says that humans are called to engage in dialogue with God, he envisages them as working for the transformation of the world into a place of human–divine communion. This transformation begins with paying attention to their existence as communicative acts of God and continues with self-sacrificial effort for the other.

Ethical implications

Three main implications can be derived from Stăniloae's dialogical framework for an inclusive ethics. The first one, supported by Stăniloae himself, is the universal and unconditional bestowal of personhood. As I will explain below, some key Eastern Orthodox thinkers draw a distinction between individual existence and personhood, linking the latter either with baptism or asceticism. Stăniloae rejects this distinction. Human beings are persons because they are God's dialogue partners. The second implication is an ethics of responsibility and attentiveness. Since each human being is God's dialogue partner and a word of God for me, then not only is it the case that the category of disability cannot be viewed as entailing a diminishment of personhood, but also I have to assume responsibility and care for my neighbour with attention and love. Finally, the emphasis on the transformation of the world into a gift for others entails that the Eastern Orthodox should work towards becoming communities where people with intellectual disabilities are not just included, but feel that they belong.

Personhood as universal and unconditional

The basic statement that grounds Stăniloae's dialogical anthropology, namely that each human being is a person because she is brought into existence as God's dialogue partner, is foundational in protecting against the temptation of a hierarchy of human existence. This temptation is felt strongly in Eastern Orthodox theology whenever the notion of person is on display. Highly celebrated thinkers, such as Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas have endorsed the distinction between individual existence and personhood. For them, an individual is a human being who has to live under the negative conditions of this existence such as repetitiveness, necessity and selfishness. A person is the individual who transcends this condition, either through ascesis or baptism. What this distinction does is to cast doubt on the very goodness of human existence and to sustain, indirectly, the idea that some lives are more worth living than others.[23] Stăniloae's

[21] *TDO*, vol. 1, p. 357.

[22] Stăniloae, *Chipul Nemuritor*, 1:49; Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 3, pp. 94–5.

[23] I agree that one of the main features of Eastern Orthodox personalist thought is the irreducibility of person to nature, and that this feature allows Eastern Orthodoxy to avoid defining human beings starting from a predefined set of natural attributes. See Alexis Torrance, *Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology: Attaining the Fullness of Christ* (New York: OUP, 2020), 14; Alexis Torrance, 'Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology: Reassessing the Debate', *Heythrop Journal* 52/4 (July 2011), pp. 700–7. This positive feature has even been developed by Linda Woodhead in an essay on apophatic anthropology and disability. Linda Woodhead, 'Apophatic Anthropology', in Richard Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (eds), *God and Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 233–47. However, I think that at least a certain tension between this anthropological apophaticism and the distinction between individual

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position protects against these unintended consequences by affirming unwaveringly the goodness of all human existence.

In what could be easily considered the most influential Eastern Orthodox book of the past century, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*,[24] Lossky recasts the patristic distinction between image and likeness into the more modern categories of person and individual. For Lossky, the individual existence of the human being is characterised by selfishness and a certain biological necessity. Both could be transcended in personhood through ascetic struggle. As he puts it,

> the idea of the person implies freedom *vis-a-vis* the nature. The person is free from its nature, is not determined by it. The human hypostasis can only realize itself by the renunciation of its own will, of all that governs us, and makes us subject to natural necessity. The individual, i.e. that assertion of self in which person is confused with nature and loses its true liberty, must be broken. This is the root principle of asceticism; a free renunciation of one's own will, of the mere simulacrum of individual liberty, in order to recover the true liberty, that of the person which is the image of God in each one.[25]

Zizioulas continues in the same vein. For him, nature represents the state of the individual – or in his more elaborate terminology 'biological hypostasis' – that all human beings receive at birth. This state is fundamentally tragic because human existence is caught between two boundaries: death and the desire to be affirm oneself as truly unique individual.[26] Any attempt to overcome these boundaries is going to fail because they are inscribed in humans' ontological constitution. The way out is to be placed in relation with someone with a different ontology who is free of these limitations; namely, with a Person.[27]

For Zizioulas, only God is a person because only God possesses ontological freedom. To be truly free, God has to exist out of God's own volition and not because freedom is a characteristic of the divine nature.[28] If the latter were the case, God would not be truly free but determined by God's own nature. Zizioulas insists that this freedom is found only in the Trinity, especially in the person of the Father, who 'perpetually confirms through "being" His free will to exist',[29] to beget the Son and spirate the Spirit. Thus, the unity of the Trinity does not reside in their common nature, but in the absolute freedom of the Father.

To become persons, humans have to be integrated in this trinitarian relationship. This possibility was opened for them through the incarnation when the second

and person should be admitted, since for Eastern Orthodox personalists 'the human "individual" is considered the enemy of the human "person"' (Torrance, *Human Perfection*, p. 14). In my view, it is this second statement that introduces a hierarchy of the modes of existence between those who can become persons and those who, for various reasons, remain individuals. As Torrance himself points out, 'There is a presupposition that to fulfil one's vocation as a human person or hypostasis is to be a deified human being: personhood and deification go hand in hand'. (*Human Perfection*, p. 15)

[24]Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Greenwood: Attic Press, 1968), p. 25.

[25]Ibid., p. 122.

[26]John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p. 52.

[27]Ibid., pp. 54–5.

[28]Ibid., p. 40.

[29]Ibid., p. 41.

Person of the Trinity assumed human nature in Jesus Christ. Although Christ is not physically present now in the way he was for the apostles, he is still present in the church and its sacraments. Baptism places the human being in relation with Christ and through him with the person of the Father. In this way the 'natural individual' becomes a person.[30]

Stăniloae opposes this distinction for at least two reasons. First, it is not patristic. The fathers of the church understood person to be an individual of a specific nature.[31] Second, and most importantly, for him, a person is an 'I' linked to another 'Thou'. Personhood does not start at some point in life (baptism) nor is it achieved through one's efforts (asceticism). It exists from the very moment of conception, because each human being is an answer to God's dialogical call.[32]

From the perspective of disability theology, the pitfalls that accompany the distinction between individual and person are not hard to see. In Lossky's case, anyone who cannot control her body through ascetic efforts (e.g. fasting, continuous prayer) will not fulfil her potential as a person; while in Zizioulas', where personhood is bestowed only upon those inside Christian communities, a person with profound intellectual disabilities born in a non-Christian family will not be a person, being always subjected to natural necessity.[33] Undoubtedly, there are more nuances to Zizioulas and Lossky's positions than I could capture here, and of course their theologies contain many insights that could be useful for grounding an inclusive anthropology.[34] Still, if one pushes their statements to their logical conclusions, it will not be too far off the mark to say that some lives are more worth living than others, and that the line between the two is somewhat artificial and unhelpful. Stăniloae's understanding of all human beings as words of God provides a clear, resounding and unconditional reaffirmation of the goodness of all lives.

This robust defence of universal personhood allows Eastern Orthodoxy not only to support the goodness of each human being, but also to establish a new ethos celebrating inclusive practices. To show how this is the case, I will refer to Brian Brock's latest work *Wondrously Wounded*, which proposes a Christian response to the practice of selective abortion (e.g. the abortion of children with Down's syndrome).[35] The centrepiece of Brock's historical argument is Augustine's view that children with disabilities are communicative acts of God with 'strange vocations'. The similarity between Augustine and Stăniloae is remarkable and Brock allows for a better understanding of the stakes behind it.

From the beginning of the book, it is clear that for Brock selective abortion flourishes due to the medical lenses through which contemporary society evaluates human

[30]Jean Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 109.

[31]Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 1, p. 424.

[32]Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 1, p. 425; Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, trans. Ioan Ioniță and Robert Barringer, vol. 2 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), pp. 100–1.

[33]Jonathan Martin Ciraulo, 'Sacraments and Personhood: John Zizioulas' Impasse and a Way Forward', *Heythrop Journal* 53/6 (November 2012), pp. 993–1004. Joanna Leidenhag, 'The Challenge of Autism for Relational Approaches to Theological Anthropology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17 (December 2020).

[34]See for instance Woodhead, 'Apophatic Anthropology'; Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 227–75.

[35]See esp. chapters 3 and 4 in Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, pp. 59–99.

existence. For Brock, as for most disability theologians, the advent of modern medicine introduced into social consciousness the notion of deviancy from a set criterion of health. In its desire to cure all illnesses, modern medicine began an inventory of all the physiological and psychological differences between human beings.[36] These differences were then considered negative, being contrasted with a certain ideal standard (e.g. the normal body). Without wishing to dismiss the importance of modern medicine, Brock argues that the evaluation of human lives based solely on their illnesses or deviances has had many repercussions for persons with disabilities, from feeling reduced to a diagnosis or a failed existence to the practice of selective abortion, where mothers are encouraged to end their pregnancies if the foetus shows high chances of having Down's syndrome.[37]

To this modern medical perspective, Brock opposes that of the early Christians, who saw children born with disabilities as wonders of God. In first-century Mediterranean culture, it was common for the birth of a disabled child to be considered a bad omen and the child to be abandoned at the side of the road. Christians rejected this practice, because they considered that each child came from God, and therefore that each life was good and worth preserving.[38] For Brock, the patristic theologian who most clearly articulates this perspective is Augustine. Brock hails Augustine for being able to propose that anomalous births are miracles of God, aimed at furthering 'God's own purpose'.[39] Fighting against those who considered that scripture was not credible because of its many miraculous stories, Augustine pointed out that we should not be surprised by the miraculous events described there. At any moment, miracles are taking place around us, and we are not even blinking. One example of such miracles is anomalous births.[40] The children found at the limits of humanity are not a consequence of the fall nor are they bad omens, but they are 'divine speech to the world'.[41]

This inverted perspective is highly valuable because it subverts ethical certainties and creates space for better engagement with disability. More precisely, Brock argues that, by affirming that each human being was willed by God and is a word of God, we affirm the goodness of each human being, including persons with disabilities. In today's context, the statement retains the same force it had in the Graeco-Roman world. It constrains us to pause, look around and think better. This shaking of our ethical certainties is highly beneficial because it enables Christians to reflect more critically on the values to society and establish a new ethos and new practices. This is what happened in the first-century Mediterranean culture, when the stern determination of Christians to believe in the goodness of every person changed social perception towards those at the margins and opened the path for new practices such as adopting the disabled children exposed at the crossroads or the foundation of public hospitals where everyone was received and cared for irrespective of status, gender or the length of treatment.[42]

What Brock asks us here is not if we believe in the goodness of humanity, but if we take this belief seriously. Do we think that the lives of persons with disabilities are also

[36]A very good overview of the relationship between medicine and disability is found in Catherine Kudlick, 'Oxford Handbook of Disability History', in Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick and Kim E. Nielsen (eds), *Social History of Medicine and Disability History*, vol. 1 (Oxford: OUP, 2018).

[37]Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, pp. 75–98.

[38]Ibid., pp. 24–5.

[39]Ibid., p. 27.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid., p. 35.

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important and worth living, or when we affirm the goodness of all human being are we in fact speaking only about an abstract humanity? For me, the answer too often seems to be the latter. Reading many works of Eastern Orthodox anthropology (and Lossky and Zizioulas are just examples here), one has the feeling of reading about persons who all have the same standard of mental and physical health.[43] The distinction between individual and person only reinforces this belief, since only those who do not want to do not become persons. Brock's recovery of Augustine's view of disability highlights the value of Stăniloae's logocentric worldview. It is not just sheer opposition to the reinterpretation of patristic categories that moves Stăniloae to criticise Lossky, but the awareness that Lossky is losing something essential for the Christian ethos: the something that motivated Christians to foster exposed children and to build hospitals for everyone; namely, the belief that all human beings are good, and that their existence is equally meaningful in God's eyes.

For an ethics of responsibility and care

Another benefit of Stăniloae's dialogical vision is its potential for developing into an ethics of care. As I will point out below, for Stăniloae, the view of the other as a word of God is not limited to donating money for building hospitals or defending publicly the right of children with disabilities to be born; it includes as well an ethics of responsibility towards one's neighbour. Christians have to pay attention to the others not from the height of a universalisable Christian maxim, but because those others are concrete persons who demand from them specific responses.

For Stăniloae, words contain in themselves an ethical dimension because they call the other towards a common future. In the article 'Christian Responsibility', Stăniloae breaks down the communicative act to three elements: the call stimulating a reaction from the other, the response of the other and the communion.[44] An initial word towards another aims to draw attention and stir a reaction. For example, it might happen that on my way to work I meet someone asking for money or someone with a placard demanding a fairer society. I can choose to respond or simply walk away, but in both cases, the word of the other demands a reaction from me. To say no represents a rejection of our common future, while saying yes is equivalent to entering into a dynamic of communion (i.e. a dialogue). Thus, responding to the call of the other entails assuming responsibility for a common future.

Christians have at least two reasons to take seriously the calls coming from other persons. They have the awareness that it is God who speaks through the person in front of them and they know they should work synergically for the eschatological future where all will be one in God. According to Stăniloae, Christians experience their life as a constant dialogue with God, where God is speaking to them through their consciousness, historical circumstances and the persons they meet.[45] Behind every moment of their lives lies God, who calls them to union with Christ or deification. Deification can be achieved only through the other. Still, responding to one's neighbour is not simply a self-serving act. By answering to the other, the Christian becomes co-worker with God for the transfiguration of the world into a divine–human communion. Stăniloae does not believe that social change can happen through a rule imposed from

[43]See Maican, 'Overcoming Exclusion in Eastern Orthodoxy'.
[44]Stăniloae, 'Responsabilitatea Crestină'.
[45]Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 1, pp. 143–9.

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above.[46] The path to a just society is realised through the response of each person to the call of her neighbour. Cumulatively, these responses will create a chain reaction that ends up changing society and takes the world closer to its eschatological fulfilment. By assuming responsibility for the other, Christians get closer to God and at the same time prepare the world for its ultimate destiny.

This ethics of responsibility is doubled by an ethics of care. The more one advances in her relationship with God, the more she is going to pay attention to her neighbour. Stăniloae sees progress in spiritual life as analogous to human loving relationships, where after a while the lovers become capable of seeing the world through each other's eyes. Similarly, the Christian who moves towards union with God learns to look at other human beings, not from her selfish socio-historical vantage point, but from that of God's immeasurable love. At the centre of this shift from selfishness to love lies the notion of delicacy (*delicatețe*). Delicacy is the desire to care for the other in a gentle and attentive way. It is born out of the purification of one's egotistical desires through ascesis. Stăniloae insists that delicacy is the highest form of appreciation and love that can be shown to another person,[47] because delicacy allows the person who acquires it to know and understand even the unspoken thoughts of their interlocutor.[48] The embodiment of delicacy is the saint.

> In the person of the saint, because of his availability, his extreme attention to other and by the alacrity with which he gives himself to Christ, humanity is healed and renewed. How does this renewed humanity show itself in practice? The saint shows us a bearing full of tact, transparency, purity of thought and feeling, in relation to every human being. His consideration extends even to animals and to things, because in every creature he sees a gift of God's love, and does not wish to wound that love by treating his gifts with negligence or indifference. He has respect for each man and for each thing. He shows a profound compassion towards the suffering of any person, or even of an animal.[49]

This description echoes quite closely what we call today the ethics of care, and it is particularly significant for the care for persons with intellectual disabilities. Without going here in details, suffice is to say that, for the ethicists of care, care is not a duty born out of formal obligation, but out of love and consideration for the other.[50] This love is manifested in its fulness as the attentiveness to the other and sensibility to her slightest suffering and movements that Stăniloae attributes to the saint. It is this attentiveness, this '[a]ttunement to the rhythms of bodily tension and relaxation characteristic of unique individuals grows from concern to know their joy and their pain',[51] that Brock demands from everybody, and that he claims to be possible even for persons with limited cognitive and sensory capacities.[52]

[46]Dumitru Stăniloae, 'Munca și proprietatea în Testamentul Nou', *Revista Teologică* 16/8–10 (1926), pp. 230–40.

[47]Dumitru Stăniloae, *Studii de teologie dogmatică ortodoxă* (Craiova: Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, 1990), pp. 191–2.

[48]Dumitru Stăniloae, *Prayer and Holiness: The Icon of Man Renewed in God* (Fairacres: SLG Press, 1993), p. 8.

[49]Ibid., p. 7.

[50]For an overview of the discussions on the ethics of care, see Frans J. H Vosman, Andries J Baart and Jacobus Retief Hoffman (eds), *The Ethics of Care: The State of the Art* (Leuven: Peeters, 2020).

[51]Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, p. 52.

[52]Ibid.

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The ethics of inclusive community

Another avenue for developing an Eastern Orthodox ethics of disability is Stăniloae's notion of gift as transfigurative effort aimed at building communion with others. As pointed out in the previous section, for Stăniloae, the dialogue between the human beings and God takes place through the transformation of the material creation into a gift for others. To illustrate this point, I took as an example the eucharist, whose elements are the result of physical transformative labour used for the unity of all in Christ. Stăniloae, however, does not limit this vision to the eucharist. He believes that the entire physical world is meant to become a place of communion with others in God, through the joint action of God and the faithful.[53]

Stăniloae's understanding of the gift as the moulding of natural creation into an inclusive space fits on a very basic level with the minimum requirement made by disability advocates, that all public spaces to be made accessible for persons with disabilities. Since the 1970s an important distinction has been made between impairment (biological) and disability (social). Impairment refers to 'a defective limb or mechanism of the body',[54] while disability to the way in which society was organised in order to exclude the participation of persons with impairments, 'from the steps going into the building to the accessible toilet being used as a cupboard'.[55] For some Christians with disabilities, this fight is ongoing, because certain churches still remain inaccessible and socially inhospitable places. Stăniloae's vision places responsibility on the Eastern Orthodox not simply to check if their liturgical spaces are indeed using the materiality of creation as a gift for others and for creating communion, but also to support any initiative that aims for the social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

And yet while simply transforming the worship space so that persons with disabilities might attend the liturgy is a valuable step, it is not the most important. One has to be able to move beyond inclusion towards belonging. As John Swinton explains, the difference between the two is that between allowing someone to be there and missing someone when she is not there.[56] Swinton gives the example of Kevin, a young man with profound intellectual disabilities who attended a Christian community for three months. The only interaction he had there was a pat on the back.[57] Stăniloae's theology of gift could help here. For him, the materiality of the world found at the heart of the gift is the expression of one's good feelings and appreciation for the other. The gift is not just a formality, a box to be ticked, but is the result of the delicacy attained in the progress towards union with God. Thus, the transformation of Eastern Orthodox churches into a gift for others entails a commitment to continue the dialogue with Christ and to attain the level of spiritual transformation that will make our communities spiritually sensitive to the presence of others.

[53]Stăniloae, *TDO*, vol. 3, pp. 7–14.

[54]Colin Barnes, 'Understanding the Social Model of Disability', in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 14.

[55]Laurence Clark, 'Barriers', in Colin Cameron (ed.), *Disability Studies: A Student's Guide* (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), p. 15.

[56]John Swinton, 'From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 16/2 (April 2012), pp. 183–4.

[57]Ibid., pp. 180–1.

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Conclusion

Until now, Eastern Orthodox theology might not have engaged consistently with disability, but – as I have sought to show in this article – it has the necessary resources not only to sustain a robust reflection, but also to bring its own particular contribution to the topic. My aim was to identify some of these resources and unveil their potential. Stăniloae's dialogical anthropology appeared as an excellent starting point, because it testifies to the unconditional goodness of all human beings. The same framework allows for developing an ethics of care and attentiveness that extends the duty of care for the other to a special sensibility capable of responding not only to verbal cries for help but also to non-verbal cues. Finally, since for Stăniloae the dialogue between God and human beings takes place through the mediation of our material existence, it means that we are responsible for moulding the physical dimension of creation into spaces of belonging, where nobody is left behind.

I am aware that this article barely scratches the surface by only pointing to some paths worth taking. Each of these paths could be developed easily into an article of its own, if all the nuances and complexities of the topic are taken into account. I am also aware that some readers might prefer or consider more suitable for this task other Eastern Orthodox theologians. Still, the intention here is simply that of encouraging more elaborate Eastern Orthodox reflection on disability, whether following the same path or another one. The hope is that this reflection will then spill out in the life and practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church, where often it is sorely needed.

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