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The Aristotelian Spirit and the Cultural Moulding of the Christian World

The study attempts to survey the way in which the rationalist spirit (especially Aristotle's philosophy) was assimilated by Christian thinking in the patristic and scholastic periods. This shows that the great schism is the outcome not only of dogmatic controversies, but also of accepting and promoting distinctive-argumentative methodologies to justify these dogmas. If in the West theory was viewed as contemplation and as method for conceptual construction, in the East the emphasis was laid exclusively on contemplation and revelation. Furthermore, the West accepted the autonomy of sciences by creating the "seven liberal arts" - an unacceptable concept for the Orthodox world, where logic was considered a mere organon, and philosophy, an ancilla theologiae. Among the main consequences detectable to this day are the varied cultural moulds that exist in the Christian world, as well as the scientific and civilizational lagging behind of the Orthodox East.

1. Preliminary Aspects

The theme suggested by the title requires certain preliminary explanations. I suggest two possible perspectives for reflection: a metaphorical perspective, and a logical one.

a) The Metaphorical Perception. After the revolution in December 1989, Romanians had the conviction that the West embodies the charitable Samaritan who comes to the aid of the history-forsaken East. It was not long before some Romanians opened their eyes and understood that the Biblical parable has no applicability in political life, and that the "capitalist Samaritan" is a mere figment of their imagination. Today the "game" of European integration is well known and many clear-sighted Romanians have acquired a lucid perception of the West, which incessantly and mercilessly urges us to wake up and embrace the rhythm of history.

a.1) Commentary on the Metaphorical Perception. No sophisticated apparatus is required to perceive the difference between the realism of the West and the Romanians' (still present) naïve realism. Even Romanians know intuitively that they are living in a dream world of such naïve realism when they utter the

saying, "Please God, grant Romanians their last minute's wisdom." But, this thought appears *a posteriori*, being the conclusion of a painful life experience; unfortunately, proverbs are no more than an anecdotal embodiment of popular wisdom.

The difference between us and our Western peers is also highlighted by philosophical analysis. I have in mind Ion Petrovici's commentary on Kant's practical philosophy, where he puts in balance the *so-called* and the *authentic moral acts*. Thus, it becomes obvious that *good* cannot be the result of an incidental individual act, of a generous feeling or of pity; it can only come as a correlative of duty. A thinker who belonged to Orthodox Christianity must have found it hard to write that "*When people, who are indifferent and cold and devoid of all generous tendencies, succeed to do good without any sentimental urge, that act of good has a high moral value*".¹ Under the influence of pietistic education, Kant considered that the value of religion has an ethic nature. For him, as Jean Beaufret suggests, "duty represents the truest kind of prayer".² This explains Kant's firm belief that God's will is that man should manifest an active type of faith, a faith whose aim is to achieve fulfilment in one's own self, as well as in one's peer.

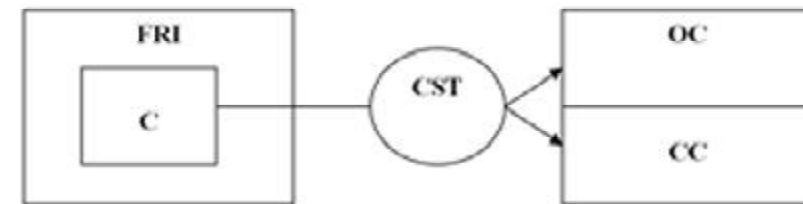
Therefore, it is our own duty to take action, just as it was the West's duty at Yalta to show no mercy for our decades of aimless wanderings along an unconfirmed path of history.

b) The Logical Perspective. In Christian Europe two worlds co-exist. From the point of view of the organization of religious life, this division was officialised by the 1054 schism, by the Reform, and by other events. In parallel, history has placed its mark upon the cultural, political, economic, etc. moulding of European states, and the differences that exist today between the West and the East represent their distinctive features. If we

restrict our consideration to Orthodoxy and Catholicism exclusively, then the two factual conditions are the objective elements of a cognitive proposition that can be symbolised as *p* and *q*.

If the West and the East - as Christian worlds - have an ontological justification, then from a logical point of view *p* and *q* should describe them as possible worlds. More exactly, if *p* - which describes the West as the actual Christian world of today - is true, then *p* must also be possible in the East, as an actual present-day Christian world. Reciprocally, *q* enjoys the same logical status. Hence, both Christian worlds are conceivable as non-contradictory.

If we now consider the history of culture and civilisation as the framework in which faith and religious ideas play a central role for the human being, then Christianity (founded upon the Holy Scripture and the Holy Traditions) can be considered the founder of two possible worlds, i.e. the Orthodox world and the Catholic world. Using the symbols: *FRI* - for *the world of faiths and religious ideas*, *C* - for the world of *Christianity*, *CST* - for *the world of Christianity based on the complexity of the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition*, and *OC* and *CC* - for the *Orthodox*, and respectively, the *Catholic world*, we get:



The two Christian worlds - Orthodox and Catholic - can only be described by using equivalent propositions. These do not exist in the context given by the relations of identity for *p* and *q* cannot replace each other - they merely have the status of truths.

b.1) Commentary on the Logical Perspective. The logical possibility of coexistence of two possible Christian worlds does not involve the identity of the two statuses. Hence, we cannot derive logically the conclusion that Orthodoxy and Catholicism can be described by contradictory terms.

But the practice of religious life has lead – by reciprocal excommunication - to two contradictory worlds, although God is One, the Bible has no variants, and logic shows clearly that these worlds are conceivable as non-contradictory. Conjoined ecclesiastic and political decisions - which imposed the schism and hence a relation of contradiction between the West and the East - presupposed a series of ingredients of political, economic, social, cultural and, obviously, doctrinal nature. Without indulging in analytical details, we can describe this status by using the logical square, according to which a universally affirmative proposition (*SaP*) is in contradiction with a particular negative proposition (*SoP*). For example, we can write,

(1) All those who are Christian recognise Apostle Peter as the stepping stone on which Christ built His Church, the first Pope of the Church of the entire world as such; consequently, all Popes have an apostolic legitimacy.

and the contradictory assertion,

(2) Some Christians do not recognise the relationship between Jesus Christ and Apostle Peter as transitive, and that every Pope has a privileged relationship with God.

If we analyse these statements carefully, we realise that both propositions are pragmatic - or rather, axiological - statements, whose logical status is different from that of cognitive statements. This is because they do not follow the rule “*two categorical propositions that are in a relation of contradiction cannot be true or false at the same time and within the same relation.*”

Consequently, the formulas *SaP* and *SoP* are chameleonic, i.e. they mime categorical propositions. More exactly, the verb “*recognise*” mimes the copulative function of “*is*”, masking in this way an *illogical* state, i.e. the subjection of the Christian multitude to a decision - a decision that is not in clear view but has taken on the impersonal face of tradition.

In his book *The Churches of the East and the West in the History of Church*, Ernst C. Suttner takes under rigorous scrutiny the situations of schism, presenting them as supposedly contradictory stances of communion with Jesus Christ, and not as contradictory positions of sister churches. Or, this shows unmistakably that - if the notion of communion is also an expression of Christianity’s religious identity - then the notion of schism denotes an estrangement from God. The author implies plainly the logical principle of non-contradiction when he says, “We can be certain that the gift of Jesus Christ - who did not come simultaneously as *yes* and *no* (see Corinthians: 1.19) - is given to all communities, to whom he offers himself as a Means of salvation, necessary for their redemption”.³

Consequently, the identity of the Christians must be perceived and moulded in relation with the person of Jesus Christ, as an instance of fully accomplished union between the human and the divine, and not as a function of one’s appurtenance to one church or another. At the same time, according to the supreme commands of the New Testament, the term “Christian” denotes only that human individual or community which lives in full communion, i.e. in love of both God and his peers. If the referent of the term “Christian” is describable as a contradictory state, then either the adjustment between the notion and the object is false, or the idea of “Christian” has been turned into a void notion of the square-circle type.

Therefore, the differences between the Christian West and the Christian East have neither logical nor theological consistency, but have been artificially generated by political, economic, and cultural elements.

2. Christianity and the Resurrection of the Aristotelian Spirit

The type of relationship with one's peers described in the parable of the charitable Samaritan, presupposes - apart from spiritual-religious aid - the satisfaction of a number of vital needs and interests among which those incessantly generated by culture and social practice. Briefly, it involves the promotion and justification of a certain type of relations between Christian theology and various scientific and philosophical disciplines. In the economy of this paper, my focus falls on the reception by Christians of Aristotle's work and of the rationalist spirit that derives from his philosophy. This reception had a powerful bearing on legitimising certain theoretical premises according to which the cultural moulding of the Christian world was accomplished along the centuries.

In Book III (B) of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle analyses the issue of founding a science of the being. In his characteristic style of sustaining his interrogation to the maximum, he identifies a fundamental distinction between what is eternal and what is transitory and ephemeral. Obviously, this existential division comes from Plato and - we must point out - was also taken up by Christianity, i.e. the distinction between the Creator and His creation. What does Aristotle say? His questions concern the One *per se* and the Being *per se*: "But if there *is* to a being-itself and a unity-itself, there is much

difficulty in seeing how there will be anything else besides these, - I mean, how things will be more than one in number. For what is different from being does not exist, so that it necessarily follows, according to the argument of Parmenides, that all things that are are one and this is being."⁴ Thus, if there is something beside One or Being, it cannot be but transitory, subject to change. There are some exceptions, i.e. the mathematical objects, which have a status apart from material elements. But precisely this determines us to affirm the following axiom: "the knowledge of anything is universal"⁵. In other words, science embraces as object of study something that transcends the multiplicity of things. The nature of the oneness of multiplicity is exclusively conceptual, and the nature of the object denoted by the term multiple is either material, or non-material, e.g. the multitude of mammals, or a multitude of geometrical figures.

In order to transcend multiplicity - e.g. multitudes of objects or mathematical objects - we have principles. "It is common, then, to all beginnings to be the first point from which a thing either is or comes to be or is known..."⁶ What takes us by surprise in this definition is the specification of the functions of the principle - meaning the *ontic* and the *cognitive* reasons. We have here a triadic structure, i.e. *ratio-essendi* - the reason for being; *ratio-seminales* - the generative, creative function of the multiple; and *ratio-cognoscendi* - which makes knowledge possible.⁷ By these functions, the principle grants existence and gives us the possibility of reflecting upon what is revealed by the relationship thinking - Being.

Finally, Aristotle asserts the possibility of a science of the being as Being. Commenting upon this possibility, Pierre Aubenque discusses the "double project of an ontology and of a theology, respectively, what he calls

ontological the problem of union, and theological the issue of separation".⁸

The paradoxical condition of theology as science, understood as first philosophy, is asserted by Aristotle straightforwardly. On the one hand, "it is unfitting that man should not be content to seek that is suited to him", and, on the other, "God alone can have this privilege" "possesses such a science, or only He possesses it in its fullest measure." At the same time, for man "All the sciences, indeed, are more necessary than this, but none is better."⁹

2.1. Aristotle and the Western Culture

The idea of theology as science of the divine was held at high esteem by Western Christianity, especially in the scholastic period, but also later on. Based on this privileged form of manifestation, the rationalist spirit developed into the very foundation of the growth of European culture. The phrase "Europe is based on Greek culture and Christian philosophy" shows clearly that this is a generally accepted truth.

The structure faith - reason, already put in conjunction by such early philosophers as Augustin, was later embraced as *credo ut intelligam*. After the scholastic period, the idea of a *Mathesis universalis* – a science legitimised by reference to God – stimulated the thinking of philosophers such as Descartes and Leibniz.

Augustin's philosophy is an exercise in which the search for God and rational understanding merge into one another. He considered that, in order not to fall prey to heresies, a Christian must have a clear understanding of his own condition. Of great interest is his confession concerning the reading of certain of Plato's books and the acknowledging of their beneficial influence. He says, "To these books, I think, you wanted

me to rush before examining Your Scriptures, so that their overwhelming effect should be engraved in my mind, and later, when I would take a rest in Your books (...), I should be able to distinguish what is the difference between supposition and confession, between those who see which way they must go and those who do not see the way one must follow." He makes explicit the relation with philosophy by the following reasoning: "Because, whereas at the beginning I would have been instructed in Your Holy Scriptures and would have taken comfort in their knowledge, had I come across those volumes only later, they may have abducted me from the foundations of faith, or, had I persevered in the feeling that I had so healthily absorbed, I may have considered that those books can also lead to something creative, for those who had only learned them".¹⁰ The conclusion of this puzzling argumentation - i.e. that *philosophy is a philosophy of Christianity* - becomes obvious if we rewrite it in a symbolic formula:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{If } S \text{ is } P \text{ then } S \text{ is } Q, \text{ if } S \text{ is } R \text{ then } S \text{ is } Q \\ \quad \quad \quad \underline{S \text{ is } P \text{ or } S \text{ is } R} \\ \quad \quad \quad S \text{ is } Q \end{array}$$

The scholastic period is, by excellence, a period of rationality. We might summarise its leading idea as follows: It is rational to believe in God. It is rational to believe that God makes Himself known to us through revelation and miracles. It is rational to believe that the Bible is revelation, etc. The work of Anselmus must also be analysed in this spirit. Thus, for example, *Monologion* is conceived as a model of meditation on certain truths of faith, just as the subsequent *Proslogion* - based on *unum argumentum*, or the ontological argumentation. *Why did God Turn into Man* falls under the same category. Subsequent works such as *On Truth* and *On Free Decision* are also viewed as philosophical. Without giving a full list of Anselmus' works, we must point out that he dared - in the spirit of Aristotle, and also of

Augustin, of course - to employ a purely rational method to clarify certain aspects of revelation.

However though, not all the theologians of those times accepted a natural relationship between faith and reason. Peter Damiani, to take only a example, considered that philosophy is Satan's invention.

But let us return to *Proslogion* conceived as a direct dialog with a living God. It begins with a prayer addressed to Him and then continues with a logical investigation of human knowledge and ignorance. "The abstract dialectics carried out here – as Étienne Gilson says – goes from faith and reason and returns to the point of departure, reaching the conclusion that what faith offers is straightforwardly understandable".¹¹ Thus, Anselmus does not deny the existence of God, nor does he turn Him into a concept - as some voices mischievously suggested - on the contrary, Anselmus invokes Him and begs Him to grant "understanding to his faith". Methodologically, what is required is that "the mind should be challenged when contemplating God" (the title of the first chapter); but this methodology must be in close touch with prayer, so that it should simultaneously open a way towards God, and uplift man through prayer and through the rational search for God. In Anselmus' words, "Teach me how to search for You and reveal Yourself to the searcher: because I cannot search for You if You do not teach me, nor can I find you if You do not reveal Yourself to me".¹²

As the quotation shows, Anselmus' search for God is not uniquely the philosopher's doing, but also God's, i.e. it is a rational undertaking within the divine revelation. Or, this can be viewed as an adaptation to Christianity of Aristotle's definition of primary philosophy as theology (*Metaphysics* - I, A, 2, 982 b and 983 a).

By using a metaphor, we can say that Thomas of Aquino Christianised Aristotle, or even that, by studying the work of Aristotle, Thomas became the master metaphysician of the Christian dogma. The formula seems paradoxical if we do not make a clear distinction between faith and knowledge, or more exactly, if we do not understand the limits of the conjunction between man's two possible relationships with God. In *Summa Contra Gentiles* he writes that we have to make "a distinction between what is known in itself simply (*simpliciter*) and in what concerns us (*quand nos*). Because the existence of God is known in itself simply, as God is its own existence. But since our mind cannot conceive what God is, it remains unknown to us in what concerns us (*quand nos*)".¹³ It is obvious that the expression *simpliciter* targets the divine relationship, while the phrase *quand nos* refers to the limited possibilities of human reason, unable to operate in the field of transcendence.

In *Summa Theologie*, Thomas emphasises the nature of human knowledge as opposed to the nature of knowledge among angels. Angels "apprehend the truth of things directly and without resorting to reasoning"; conversely, humans get to know the intelligible truth only by reasoning. For reasoning, man "sets out from certain truths that he knows directly - i.e. the first principles - then he returns, by way of reasoning, to the first principles in the light of which he analyses what he has learned".¹⁴ But reasoning has a limited scope. Thus, if the "formal infinite that is God, is known in itself but is unknown to us this is due to the weakness of our intellect, which in its present status has a natural capability to grasp only material things", then "in our present status we can only know God through His material effects".¹⁵

In Thomas' argumentation - we must admit - Aristotle's logic can be retraced; but this *doctor angelicus* does not try to demonstrate that God exists, but merely that He is in the presence of man. Therefore, the five "paths" described in *Summa Theologica* are *a posteriori* possibilities and are all based on the principle of causality and on empirical knowledge.

Without insisting and considering other philosophers of the scholastic period, some ideas ought to be emphasised - ideas which implicitly reflect the influence of the Aristotelian spirit:

- 1) Western culture in the Middle Ages developed around church, which thus became an *ecclesia docens*.
- 2) Latin made possible the circulation of ideas and the unity of Western culture.
- 3) Philosophy becomes an *ancilla theologiae*, which soon became a privilege as it allowed scientific research to develop in an emancipated way.
- 4) By accepting the autonomy of sciences, learning benefited by the introduction of the seven liberal arts through a two-cycle program, i.e. *trivium*, or first cycle - consisting of *grammar*, *dialectics (logic)*, *rhetoric*; and *quadrivium*, or second cycle - with *arithmetic*, *geometry*, *astronomy* and *music*.

Promotion of the rationalist spirit and stimulation of research are premises for founding, in the 12th and 13th centuries, the universities of Bologna, Montpellier, Paris, Oxford, Salamanca, Cologne, Heidelberg, etc., - autonomous institutions with a well defined status. It was in these great universities that the seeds of the Renaissance were planted, and it was also here that, gradually and continuously, Western culture was moulded - a culture whose pragmatic-rationalistic creativity is in accordance with the typologies described by Ioan Biriş. "In this type of culture and civilisation, the cycles of becoming are oriented progressively", i.e. the "line of creativity" is oriented "principally towards the future".¹⁶

2.2. The East and the Destiny of Aristotelian Logic

The Christian world of the East was not entirely cut off from ancient thought and Aristotle's brilliant rationalist spirit although today it may seem so. The apparent departure is not due to the number of centuries that separate us from the period that precedes the schism, but to the sustained efforts of doctrinarian purging invested especially after the schism. In the East, philosophy was accepted only as servant of theology, and logic only as *organon*, i.e. an instrument for assessing whether a line of thinking was just or not - which means that philosophy and sciences were not granted autonomy. Besides, in 529, emperor Justinian closed the Academy in Athens, thus depriving the so-called "pagan world" from any kind of scientific manifestation.

During the first Christian centuries the situation was different. For example, Justin the Martyr and Philosopher wrote in his work *Dialogue against Jews* that "Philosophy is the greatest asset and worthiest of God. It alone can uplift us to God and bring us close to Him; and true saints are only those who have trained their minds in philosophy".¹⁷ Among the Cappadocians, a philosopher endowed with great speculative ability was Gregory of Nysse. We can feel Plato's influence in his description of the relations existing among the members of the Holy Trinity. Aristotle's thinking can be discovered in *Anthropological Explanations*, in the way in which he defines the attributes of God's face that exist in man, or in the dialectics of the face-similitude relation. Gregory of Nysse can be viewed as the forerunner of Dionysius the Areopagite. In this context, two aspects of Dionysius' contribution need to be emphasised: his work on the logical function of negation performed in the description of apophatic knowledge, and his proto-

nominalist position. The way in which he assimilated ancient thinking would later on influence the West, and especially the development of philosophy and logic. Besides, in the 9th century, his work was translated into Latin by John Scotus Erigena, a good logician of the times.

The Christian writer of the East whose work had, perhaps, the greatest influence upon scholastic logic, was John of Damascus. “His main work *Περὶ ἁγίας τριῶν ὁμολογίας* - *The Source of Knowledge* -- begins with a philosophical introduction – *μὴ ἐστὶν ἄλλο τι πρὸς τὸν θεόν* – on Aristotelian logic. This introduction is based on the stoical idea according to which dialectics is called upon only to defend philosophical conceptions and to contradict false ones”.¹⁸ In a previous study, I pointed out that, in his *Dogmatics*, John of Damascus uses the laws of reasoning with great subtlety. “With impeccable logic, John of Damascus describes the relations between the hypostases and the divine being - *ousia*, accurately underlying the ontological identity and difference that exists between them.” Already in the titles of the chapters dedicated to the Son and the Holy Spirit, we encounter the syntagm “syllogistic demonstration”, and his argumentation can be “summarised under the third syllogistic figure”¹⁹, i.e.

MaP
MaS
SaP

Although John of Damascus considers logic a mere “organon” (unlike Western philosophers, who viewed it as one of the seven liberal arts), this status was contested too after the great schism. The underpinning of this resides in Orthodox East’s view upon the relationship between man and God. Dumitru Stăniloae’s words are unequivocal: “The need for purifying oneself of passions for this knowledge, or for acutely feeling one’s sinfulness

and insufficiency, shows that this knowledge is not of a negative intellectual kind (i.e. a mere negation of rational assertions about God), the way the West perceives it. It is knowledge by experience. Besides, Eastern Fathers call this closeness to God union, rather than knowledge”.²⁰

To illustrate the basic difference between East and West we may bring to mind the Isyhastrian controversy which opposes Orthodox mysticism and scholastic rationalism. Or, Gregory Palama asserts plainly in the dispute the need for a mystical experience of God, for particular sciences are inefficient. These sciences are obviously condemned, for in their case - as Dumitru Stăniloae shows - truth is “forever arguable and mixed with lie”, whereas the truth “inherent in Godly inspiration is obvious ...”. “The truths of sciences is neither necessary, nor does it bring about redemption”. Admittedly, learning and “the knowledge inherent in sciences can contribute to clarifying the Scripture”, but this does not represent a sufficient condition; the undertaking becomes possible “only if we have the only available key to the Scripture, the gift of the Holy Ghost”.²¹

Such a conception about the role of the profane sciences has raised questions concerning the need for organising education, and it can explain - to a certain extent - the centuries of delay before the first Orthodox universities of the East appeared. Furthermore, Eastern culture has always had an atemporal dimension, and - as Traian Herseni puts it - rural Romania represented “a belated ethnographic society” untill the end of the 19th century.

Notes:

- ¹ Ion Petrovici, Kant. Viața și opera, Eurosong Book, 1998, p.182;
² Jean Beaufret, Lecții de filosofie. De la Platon la Heidegger, vol. 2, Editura Amacord, Timișoara, 1999, p.66;
³ Ernst Christoph Suttner, Bisericile Răsăritului și Apusului de-a lungul istoriei bisericești, Editura Ars – Longa, Iași, 1998, p.14-17;
⁴ Aristotle, Metaphysics, III B, 4, 1001a, Translated by W. D. Ross in The Works of Aristotle, Vol. 1, Edited by W. D. Ross, Reprinted in Great Books of the Western World, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, Auckland, London, Madrid, Manila, Paris, Rome, Seoul, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto, p. 520
⁵ Ibidem, III B, 6, 1003a, p. 522
⁶ Ibidem, V D, 1, 1013a, p. 533
⁷ Florea Lucaci, Creație și ființare, Editura Dacia, Cluj – Napoca, 2002, p.27 – 28;
⁸ Pierre Aubenque, Problema ființei la Aristotel, Editura Universitas – Teora, București, 1998, p.245;
⁹ Aristotel, Op. cit., I A, 2, 983a, p. 501 and 500
¹⁰ Fericitul Augustin, Mărturisiri, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al B.O.R., București, 1985, p.165-166;
¹¹ Etienne Gilson, Filosofia Evului Mediu, Editura Humanitas, București, 1995, p.228-229;

- ¹² Anselm de Canterbury, Proslogion, Biblioteca Apostrof, Cluj – Napoca, 1996, p.12;
¹³ Sf. Toma din Aquino, Summa Contra Gentiles, în Proslogion, Ediția citată, p.102;
¹⁴ Toma din Aquino, Summa Theologica, în Gândirea evului mediu, Editura Minerva, București, 1984, p.102;
¹⁵ Ibidem, p.119,
¹⁶ Ioan Biriș, Istorie și cultură, Editura Dacia, Cluj – Napoca, 1996, p.80;
¹⁷ Justin Martirul și Filosoful, Dialog contra iudeilor, II, 1, apud, Anton I. Adămuț, Literatură și Filozofie Creștină, vol. 1, Editura Fides, Iași, 1997, p.83;
¹⁸ Anton Dumitriu, Istoria logicii, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1975, p.303;
¹⁹ Florea Lucaci, Considerații logico – epistemologice asupra cunoașterii raționale a divinității, în Teologia, Anul VII, nr. 3-4/ 2003, p.149-165;
²⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae, Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă, vol. 1, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, București, 1996, p.85-86,
²¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama, Editura Scripta, București, 1993, p.27.