

Is There Anything Orthodoxy Can Learn From the Reformation?

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¹ Martin Luther, “The Ninety-Five Theses” (1517), in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 10.

*God,
Grant me the serenity to accept the
things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.*
—Attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr

The Reformation is often presented in Orthodox circles as a disaster from which there is not much to be learned. My intention is to offer an alternative view. Using the work of Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–93), I argue that there is something the Orthodox Church should learn from the Reformation and especially from Lutheranism: namely, that faith requires personal commitment from every member of the Church, and not only from those deciding to pursue a monastic life.

Before explaining why this insight is important and how it is relevant for Orthodoxy today, I must address a preliminary question: Can the Orthodox Church, as the church that possesses the fullness of truth, learn something from history? The answer is yes, so long as we continue to confess that we are the new people of God on our way to perfection. Throughout the Old Testament, we find that God communicates his will to his people through various historical events, most of them extremely tragic. As the new people of God in Christ, we should consider that God has never

ceased to speak to us. Every significant event taking place outside or inside the Church is God’s way of guiding us to the heavenly land, telling us how to improve our spiritual life. Thus, how could the Reformation, one of the most traumatic moments in the history of the Church, not have anything to teach us?

But what can we learn from the Reformation? The Reformation—and I will refer here specifically to Luther—shows how important personal commitment is for faith. Luther’s revolt against the papal indulgences and his call for a return to the life of the early church springs mostly from pastoral concern. As Luther articulates in his thirty-ninth thesis: “It is very difficult, even for the most learned theologians, at one and the same time to commend to the people the bounty of indulgences and the need of true contrition.”¹ Buying indulgences allowed his parishioners to feel saved without changing anything in their lives. By pointing out that works are the result of our communion with Christ, Luther wanted to cut off the danger of indulgences and to reduce the gap between personal life and declared beliefs. A true Christian, for Luther, should act only in accordance with this name, without expecting any reward.

This emphasis on personal engagement with faith is often presented in



Lucas Cranach the Elder, Portrait of Martin Luther, 1532.

Orthodox polemical discourse as individualism. Yet for theologians seeking to learn from history in order to help the people of God get closer to spiritual fulfilment, this purported individualism hides something more. It is actually “the sensitive expression of the personal relationship between the individual human being and his God.”² Or to put it differently, Reformed “individualism” is born out of the human being’s desire to follow God and to fulfill God’s will conscientiously in all aspects of her existence. That this desire for individual communion with God can sometimes be exaggerated should not turn us away from the important message it contains: faith cannot be dissociated from the personal experience of God.

This re-evaluation of the Lutheran Reformation, which places it in a light

that would allow Orthodoxy to learn something from it, belongs to Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae. Stăniloae was far from being a liberal or a relativist. Quite the opposite. For Romanians, Stăniloae is more than a theologian. He is a spiritual father. He worked unceasingly to make the treasures of Orthodox spirituality accessible and contemporary to the Romanian faithful. His two main contributions were a Romanian translation of the *Philokalia* and his book *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, a volume that brings together the ascetical experience of the Philokalic Fathers with the dogmas of the Orthodox Church in a way that is still relevant for contemporary readers. It is this Philokalic spirit that allows Stăniloae to see the world and its dramatic history as God’s way of guiding his people further on their path to eschatological fulfilment.

² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Theology and the Church*, trans. Robert Barringer (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1980), 184.

³ Dumitru Stăniloae, introduction to *Filocalia*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Sibiu: Institutul de Arte Grafice, 1947), viii.

⁴ Pew Research Center, "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," May 10, 2017.

Stăniloae saw the personal commitment to God that the Reformation required from every believer as acutely important for the Orthodoxy of his day. The main reason behind his translation of the *Philokalia* into Romanian was his conviction that the spiritual writings of the Fathers should be incorporated into the lives of ordinary believers. In the introduction to the second edition of the first volume, Stăniloae says that the Orthodox talk very well about the dogmas of their faith and say many interesting generalities about them, but they do not know how to put these generalities into practice in their everyday lives.³ It is through the writings of the spiritual Fathers that we can learn how to live our faith and advance in communion with God. And although these writings were meant primarily for a monastic audience, Stăniloae argues that there should not be any separation be-

tween laypeople and monks. We are all called to perfect our lives in Christ and to put into practice the dogmas we profess.

For those familiar with the spiritual landscape of Eastern Europe, Stăniloae's concern with the lack of personal engagement with the Orthodox faith will ring timely. Although more people identify as Orthodox than ever before and monastic life has flourished across the region, the engagement of laypeople with their faith is very limited. A recent survey has shown that of the millions of Orthodox believers in Eastern Europe, only a minority attend the Liturgy weekly, read Scripture, or pray.⁴ Most Orthodox seem to believe that confessing their faith is enough for their salvation. It is in this context that we, as Orthodox, must appreciate the Reformation's emphasis on personal commitment to faith. ✱

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