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**THE RELEVANCE OF APOCATASTASIS  
TODAY  
(SUMMARY)**

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## SUMMARY

### 1. Introductory considerations

Our thesis belongs to the *field* of Dogmatics, dealing especially with the eschatology section but also covering important chapters such as Anthropology, Soteriology, Christology or Ecclesiology. The multi-disciplinary character of the thesis is rendered by the constant interference of our topic with other theological subjects such as the History of the Universal Church, Patrology, Biblical Studies, Pastoral Theology or Philosophy of Religions.

Eschatology is a sensitive issue in Christian theology because it deals with things which haven't happened yet and for which our language seems precarious and limited. Throughout the Christian history eschatology has been understood in different ways by the theologians. Different eschatological perspectives (apocalyptic, individualistic, cosmic, ecclesiological or mystical) have periodically followed-on from one another starting from the patristic period up to the present, each of them being a new dimension in understanding life so far. If to some eschatology means the belief in solving some unsolved things from the history, an escape from current oppressions or the expectation of a final justice and retribution, to others it is the beginning of a new world, a revelation of the true human nature as well as an expectation full of trust of the complete union with God and one's peers through knowledge and love. Whereas to the former eschatology is a way of solving the theodicy, to the latter it represents the final stage of the accomplishment of universal salvation.

Throughout the history, theologians have been searching and trying to find an answer to the most sensitive questions in the field of eschatology, such as those relating to the relationship between God's justice and love, between man's sufferance and divine love, between sinners' salvation and human freedom, between hell's eternity and the triumph of good or between the existence of eternal torments and Christ's redeeming work.

If until not too long ago eschatology was not a central preoccupation, today it seems to dominate the entire theological landscape. It has become increasingly relevant and important, reaching every section of life and theology and being placed at the centre of contemporary theological preoccupations.

The issue of apocatastasis has been considered a taboo subject especially in the traditional Orthodox and Catholic space. However, it has always raised questions and concerns because man, beyond any interdictions and taboos, has never stopped seeing the beauty of a fascinating and encouraging idea: instead of eternal torment, “the shining light of universal forgiveness”.

## **2. Definition of terms**

The term of 'apocatastasis' comes from the Greek word ἀποκατάστασις (originating from the words ἀπὸ and καθίσταται) and it means restoring, returning or re-establishing a thing to its initial condition. In the primary Christian writings, this term was used to designate the restoration of the entire being to the state of primary happiness or to the one of the unblemished mind. However, in the modern and contemporary theology, apocatastasis seldom refers to a return of the beings to the paradisiac state, the core meaning being that of final salvation of all people.

In order to define this theological opinion, starting from the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of 'universalism' also started to be used. Because this term has other non-theological connotations as well, we would like to state that in our thesis we have used it solely with the meaning of 'universal salvation'.

Apart from the apocatastatic vision but in close connection with it, in theology there are five major points of view on salvation: particularism (that speaks about a double predestination of humankind by God); exclusivism (which states that salvation is possible only through explicit belief in Christ); inclusivism (that believes the easiest way to salvation is through belief in God but it also accepts the possibility of salvation among non-believers); conditionalism (which states that in the end there will be only God's Kingdom because all those who don't believe and don't turn to God will be annihilated); arminianism (that concludes that God's love is infinite but the aim of universal salvation is hindered by certain factors He cannot control, such as human freedom).

## **3. Aim and methods**

The main aim of this thesis is to challenge contemporary theology regarding the fundamentals of official eschatology and re-evaluate apocatastasis in the current theological discourse, searching an answer as clear and comprehensive as possible to this issue. To this

regard we have started our scientific endeavour from the idea that: *Apocatastasis has bases and it is sustainable.*

In order to reach these goals, we have decided to explore and critically assess recent theological debates regarding apocatastasis, against the historical background and development of this theological idea. The questions we are going to answer throughout this thesis are as follows: What arguments lay behind apocatastasis? How widely shared was this belief over the centuries? What are the factors that determined the extent of research during the last decades? What are the shortcomings and deviations in approaching this theory?

The main method we have used was to systematize and critically assess primary sources and patristic literature. In the development of this synthesis we have also used secondary literature. The general approach is inter-disciplinary and interconfessional, the concept itself aiming at a philosophical-theological understanding, apocatastasis being dealt with in most Christian confessions. We have highlighted the arguments we found at the theologians from the three great western Christian confessions – Catholicism, Protestantism and Neo-Protestantism – the method of comparison with the Orthodox theology being widely used.

We underline the fact that the term 'relevance' refers to the works which have been published and the authors who have stood out from the beginning of the third millennium up to nowadays. Their vision has been assessed in relation to their predecessors' points of view, starting with the first approaches of the subject during the primary epoch and until the end of the XX<sup>th</sup> century.

We have selected from the relevant literature those theologians for whom the topic of apocatastasis represents their main academic preoccupation. It is easy to notice there are many theologians to whom this theory is appealing. Nevertheless, we have focused on those for whom apocatastasis forms an integral part of their theological vision and who have shared it by largely dealing with it in their writings. Moreover, we have selected those theologians who bring forth an original argumentation of the subject, by limiting ourselves to present the most relevant pros and cons for each author, with the aim to offer a picture as comprehensive as possible of the idea of universal salvation. The most important authors have been assigned separate chapters. The other studies have been mentioned, to the extent to which we have considered their vision as being relevant to our research. Among the supporters of apocatastasis from the XX<sup>th</sup> century we

have chosen only the ones who are not (sufficiently) dealt with in priest Ciprian Ionuț Ileana's thesis.

#### **4. Current state of research**

Whereas during the XX<sup>th</sup> century a series of theologians became known and brought forth the theory of apocatastasis once more, starting with the beginning of the third millennium the theological debates became widely spread, leading to an increasingly complex systematization of universal salvation. At the same time, the wide access to western bibliographical resources has led to indigenous theology's interest in apocatastasis.

At the beginning of the third millennium, in 2003 the collective works *Universal Salvation? The current Debate* was published, being coordinated by Protestant theologians Robin Parry and Christopher Partridge. This work starts with the perspective submitted by the philosopher Thomas Talbott and it is succeeded by the answers of several contemporary theologians regarding this approach and it ends with Talbott's answer to his critics. Although it introduces us to current debates concerning apocatastasis, the work has a generalist character and it covers a limited set of arguments.

The first important monography in the XXI<sup>st</sup> century belongs to the Catholic theologian Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis. A critical Assessment from New Testament to Eriugena*, published in 2013. Although it thoroughly deals with apocatastasis during the patristic period, thus setting a temporal limitation of the subject's depiction to the first nine Christian centuries, Ramelli's work does not suffice because it depicts only the pro-apocatastasis vision and it forces certain patristic texts to favour this theological opinion. On the other hand, we underline that this work was the most important systematic one in the beginning of our doctoral studies.

At the end of 2014, the Orthodox theologian Ciprian Ionuț Ileana defended in Bucharest the first doctoral thesis concerning apocatastasis from our country - *Apocatastaza în gândirea creștină a secolului al XX-lea* – this work being the first extensive systematic Orthodox research concerning this subject. Apart from the temporal limitation of the approach, his work being based on the theological way of thinking belonging to the XX<sup>th</sup> century, it also has an important shortcoming because it uses a minimalist bibliography especially with regard to secondary foreign literature (two writings and three articles). As for the XX<sup>th</sup> century there is a vast

literature in the West, priest Ileana's work does not capture the extent of the phenomenon and it does not persuade the reader of the relevance of apocatastasis.

Another systematic analysis of apocatastasis is published in 2015 by the Protestant theologian Laurence Malcolm, being titled *Will all be saved? An Assessment of Universalism in Western Theology*. It is an excellent historical-dogmatic work, but it is limited to the perspectives found in the two great western Christian confessions, Catholicism and Protestantism, without mentioning the theological debates of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, most of his patristic arguments are taken from secondary literature.

The latest and most extensive historical-dogmatic analysis belongs to Protestant theologian Michael McClymond and it was published in June 2018. His purpose is completely different from our approach. McClymond wishes to prove that apocatastasis is worse than a simple heresy, being a pagan conception leading to many other heresies. The premise from which he started is obviously against this theological opinion, and the perspectives he submits we consider as being inconclusive.

The two volumes titled *A larger Hope* edited by Catholic theologian Ilaria Ramelli and Protestant theologian Robin Parry (the second volume was published in March 2019 and the first is due to be released) ascribe to the direction of a historical systematization concerning the development of the idea of apocatastasis and they are intended to debate the subject from the beginning of Christianity until XIX<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, an Orthodox perspective on the arguments brought forth throughout the history in favour of apocatastasis and a critical analysis of the development of the eschatological discourse of the Church is due to be released in September 2019, with the book *All shall be saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, written by the philosopher and Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart.

Unlike in the West, where there is an immense theological literature, in Romania the issue of apocatastasis still frightens the theological thinking, being often mentioned only within more comprehensive writings. However, we would like to mention priest Gheorghe Remete's contribution, who dealt with this subject in his book *Suferința omului și iubirea lui Dumnezeu*, offering for the first time in contemporary theology a synthetic dogmatical answer to the issue of apocatastasis. We believe the main factor that contributed to this shortcoming in the Romanian landscape was the theologians' fear concerning spontaneity, novelty and initiative. Since such a

subject inevitably places one beyond the comfort and safety zone of dogmas, there have been few authors who dared to approach it.

## **5. Importance of research**

The novelty of the thesis does not reside in the topic itself but in the approach and the perspectives submitted. We can highlight the importance of this research through a few aspects. First of all, a more comprehensive approach to the subject is necessary, from a contemporary Orthodox perspective. The need for the approach of this topic is also given by the ever-growing access to information during the last decades, which fostered the interaction of the Orthodox with the issues raised by western theologians and thinkers who stood out by debating this topic. We also note insufficient information regarding this topic in Romanian Orthodox theology, foreign research being often inaccessible to many theologians and who do not receive enough information throughout their theological studies to be able to supply pertinent answers to this issue. There are too few studies that deal with this topic from an interconfessional perspective. That is why the current thesis is an attempt to answer all these requirements within the specific indigenous context.

At the same time, we consider that the contemporary man needs clear and comprehensive answer to this issue. Apocatastasis is not a conception restricted only to an elite of theologians. It has to be understood by each person. The Christian has to fully answer to anyone anytime because he takes seriously all people, fulfilling Apostle Saint Peter's word, who requires from us to "be always ready to answer whoever asks us to account for our hope" (*1 Peter* 3,15). There are many Christian and Non-Christian who understand, feel and believe in the idea of absolute universal salvation. This thesis comes to synthetically present the possible approaches to this topic, as well as Church's point of view, allowing the reader to choose the path of the faith they want to pursue but fully aware of the position they will take regarding the Church as a result of their option. Therefore, with this thesis we intend to bring forth into Romanian space the foreign research in this field, to deal with this topic from an interconfessional perspective and to offer a clear and comprehensive answer to the contemporary man.

## 6. Thesis structure

This research has followed a chronological path but also an argumentative reasoning. Starting from the classical fundamentals of apocatastasis we have followed a historical journey up to contemporaneity, in our attempt to provide an overview of the constitutive pillars of this theological opinion, and afterwards depicting the main development stages of this work up to its final shape. First of all, we considered it was necessary to present the pros and cons regarding apocatastasis because, starting from here, theologians, throughout the history have been carrying out their own discourse concerning this topic. Obviously, whether they belonged to Western tradition or to the Eastern one, theologians have used some of these arguments, naturally adding other perspectives. The aspects brought forth within the first section were based especially on the primary resources of theology, in order to observe the way in which the Church Fathers and church writers have approached this topic.

The second and the third part followed a historical development of debates concerning apocatastasis at the end of patristic period – which formally ended at the end of VIII<sup>th</sup> century – and up to the end of XX<sup>th</sup> century.

The major influence of Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas D'Aquino reduced any attempt of reviving the idea of apocatastasis in the medieval and modern Catholic space. On the other hand, Origen's sentence during the fifth Ecumenical Synod proved to be an insurmountable obstacle for Easterners in approaching this topic that became a theological taboo to some extent.

Naturally, the reformers' appearance in the theological space of XVI<sup>th</sup> century led to a series of new subjective interpretations of the Scripture and, at the same time, to ever-growing speculation concerning apocatastasis. We must mention however that the idea of apocatastasis appeared first of all as an inherent reaction to the juridical and penitential theology developed in the West.

It cannot be denied that an increasingly growing number of Orthodox and Catholic theologians appeared on the framework of debates concerning apocatastasis in the XX<sup>th</sup> century. Generally speaking, even if certain orthodox theologians such as Sergei Bulgakov, Paul Evdokimov, Andrew Louth, Vladimir Lossky or Olivier Clément plead for a possible apocatastasis, neither of them argues unequivocally its certainty, thus apocatastasis remaining no more than a theological opinion. According to Catholic tradition, theologians from this century, such as Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Sachs or Joseph Ratzinger have included the

idea of universal salvation within an ever-growing hope. Within Protestant space, eschatological debates were largely influenced by Karl Barth's personality and work. He reshaped the idea of double predestination as all people's universal choice of Christ.

To all the theologians aforementioned one can notice a *crescendo* of interest and audacity, as a result of the dissatisfaction with the way in which Christian eschatology was formalized. Apocatastasis, understood as a possibility of salvation for all into eternity, was the one that offered the optimal environment for a re-evaluation of eschatological problems, often restricted to an inflexible framework of salvation understanding. Setting apocatastasis in an area of mystery, divine power and love was the most "Orthodox" version of refining the theological discourse in XX<sup>th</sup> century.

The fourth division is destined to the perspectives drawn up by theologians over the last two decades. This chapter's role is to prove that apocatastasis is a current and widely spread issue in the three great Christian confessions, being supported even by renowned Orthodox theologians. As far as the subject development at the beginning of the millennium is regarded, we have noticed an increased interest of theologians in bringing arguments in favour of apocatastasis. It can be noticed that, unlike during the XX<sup>th</sup> century when apocatastasis was mostly seen as a "hope for all", supporters of apocatastasis in the new millennium consider this issue in the direction of a dogmatization, revealing in their works and with an increased scientific rigour, the scripturist, traditional, rational, existential and philosophical support of this theological opinion. In this chapter it is easy to notice the differences in approaching the issue between contemporary theologians and their predecessors, especially mentioning the most significant shortcomings.

The Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart belongs to this trend and we consider him one of the most fervent supporters of apocatastasis. In the Catholic area, Ilaria Ramelli's research stands out, through its new exegetical and patristic approaches bringing an added value to the arguments brought forth by supporters of apocatastasis. The cult of Church, mainly through pascal texts asserts Christ's uncontested victory over hell, its final emptying and destruction, therefore, during recent theological debates, the possibility of hell's temporality comes into discussion again, being brought forth by Orthodox theologian Ilarion Alfeyev. In the Protestant and Neo-Protestant area new perspectives of accomplishing apocatastasis are brought. Whereas Thomas Talbott stands for the complete annihilation of human freedom, David Congdon

proposes the idea of unconscious co-crucifixion, through which each man is passively and involuntarily saved in this life. We believe the most “Orthodox” approach to eschatological issues from the beginning of the third millennium belongs to Protestant theologian Rob Bell. The focus on apocatastasis as an eschatological certainty inevitably led to a critical reaction, the most fervent representative being the Protestant theologian Michael McClymond.

The current thesis is undoubtedly more than a synthetic statement of pros and cons concerning the idea of apocatastasis throughout the history. It is also an attempt to highlight the possible perspectives brought forth in the current theological discourse. Therefore, in the last section we clearly stated our opinion concerning apocatastasis.

The aim of the re-evaluation of apocatastasis in current Orthodox theology is that people, and especially believers, should become more generous, freer and more optimistic in their relationship to their peers. Such an approach can broaden horizons in interconfessional relationships, and accepting the fact that any man who searches for God and places Him at the centre of their existence, irrespective of the shape and external means they use, can enter into eternal communion with God will considerably facilitate our dialogue with confessional or religious alterity.

Secondly, the idea of apocatastasis reminds us the following fact: man was made in God’s image and likeness. As long as we state that this *imago dei* cannot be absolutely destroyed, we believe there can be hope, be it beyond death, so that the ontological potentiality might be updated and reborn, thus making possible the restoration of those who want to enter communion with God and their peers.

Even though the official teaching of the Church still considers apocatastasis as pure theological speculation, a purely theoretical argumentation of a long ago solved issue by the tradition of the Church, a thought of certain more sensitive or artistical minds, which abuse certain arguments that cannot remain but simple suppositions, renowned theologians belonging to the main Christian confessions argue, more or less explicitly, that it is possible that all people be saved in the end. It is worth noting that many contemporary Orthodox theologians argue in favour of apocatastasis. Therefore, we can undoubtedly argue that apocatastasis is a relevant challenge. It is clear that no matter how many arguments are brought for or against apocatastasis, they will not suffice to prove the validity or the impossibility of this theological opinion. However, the idea of apocatastasis *has bases and it is sustainable*. Any reinforcement of

apocatastasis indisputably implies the risk of moral pantheism and relativism. Consequently, we argue that eternity remains God's mystery and no theologian should resolve this matter. The Church should not forget that, above anything and anyone, there is God and His power cannot be limited by any theological reason. Given the lack of some answers, maybe the most accurate approach to apocatastasis would be that "pious silence" in front of God's impenetrable mystery, thus broadening the dogmatic horizons of the eschatological perspective and leaving space for God's love and creative power in solving any paradox.

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