

The Theory of Apocatastasis: New Theological Opinions on an Old Dogmatic Controversy

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Alexandru LAZĂR

Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca

alexandru.05.lazar@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7148-1474>

ABSTRACT: The study entitled "The Theory of Apocatastasis: New Theological Opinions on an Old Dogmatic Controversy" addresses a central and simultaneously controversial theme within Christian eschatology – the universal restoration (apocatastasis) – and reevaluates its implications in the context of contemporary theological thought. The work explores the contributions of the Church Fathers and modern theologians to the understanding and interpretation of this doctrine, highlighting the tensions between divine love, human freedom, and eschatological justice. It analyzes the impact of this theory on several fundamental dimensions of dogmatics: soteriology, the theology of hope, the problem of evil and hell, and the complex interrelations between God's attributes. The research methodology is patristic and interdisciplinary, deliberately avoiding rigid scholastic systematizations. The approach is centered on the question as a form of open, prophetic, and apophatic thinking, grounded in a "theology of exception" that reveals the margins and crises capable of disclosing the essence. The study explores the convergences between Orthodox theology and modern philosophical and scientific thought (Heidegger, Kant, Jung, Cantor), aiming to comprehend the "antinomy of hell" and the spiritual significance of a possible universal salvation. Thus, the study aims not only to provide a dogmatic clarification but also to open a space for existential and pastoral questions of contemporary relevance, in which the issue of universal salvation gains profound – perhaps even emblematic – significance. In the face of the "hell of despair" characteristic of the modern age, apocatastasis is revisited not as a doctrinal certainty, but as a living horizon of Christian hope and love.

KEYWORDS: Apocatastasis, Universal Salvation, Eschatology, Controversy, Christian Universalism.

TITLU: „Teoria Apocatastazei: noi opinii teologice asupra unei vechi controverse dogmatice”

ABSTRACT: Studiul intitulat "Teoria apocatastazei: Noi opinii teologice în legătură cu o veche controversă dogmatică" abordează o temă centrală și totodată controversată din cadrul eshatologiei creștine – restaurarea universală (apocatastaza) – și reevaluează implicațiile acesteia în contextul gândirii teologice contemporane. Lucrarea urmărește contribuțiile Părinților Bisericii și ale teologilor moderni la înțelegerea și interpretarea acestei doctrine, punând în lumină tensiunile dintre iubirea divină, libertatea umană și dreptatea eshatologică. Se analizează impactul acestei teorii asupra unor dimensiuni fundamentale ale dogmaticii: soteriologia, teologia speranței, problema răului și a iadului, precum și raporturile complexe dintre atributele divine. Metodologia cercetării este de factură patristică și inter-disciplinară, evitând sistematizările scolastice rigide. Abordarea este centrată pe întrebare ca formă de gândire deschisă, profetică și apofatică, și se fundamentează pe o "teologie a excepției" care scoate la iveală marginaliile și crizele ce pot revela esența. Se explorează convergențele dintre teologia ortodoxă și gândirea filosofică și științifică modernă (Heidegger, Kant, Jung, Cantor), cu scopul de a înțelege "antinomia infernului" și sensul spiritual al unei eventuale mântuirii universale. Studiul își propune, astfel, nu doar o clarificare dogmatică, ci și o deschidere spre întrebările existențiale și pastorale ale contemporaneității, în care problema mântuirii tuturor capătă o relevanță profundă, poate chiar emblematică. În fața unui "iad al deznădejdiei" specifice epocii moderne, apocatastaza este repusă în discuție nu ca certitudine doctrinară, ci ca orizont viu al speranței și iubirii creștine.

CUVINTE-CHEIE: Apocatastaza, Mântuire Universală, Eshatologie, Controversă, Universalism Creștin.

Research Topic

The proposed topic is entitled "Apocatastasis. New Theological Views on an Old Dogmatic Controversy", and it is part of a chapter that is as extensive as it is enigmatic: that of Christian eschatology. Therefore, what we aim to investigate is the contribution of the Church Fathers and Contemporary Theologians to the nuanced understanding of this subject.

Argumentation of the Topic

The doctrinal implications that this theory generates in the field of Christian eschatology, as well as in the field of soteriology, are significant. It overturns the entire structure of the faith and shatters the fundamental teachings of the Church, as they are found in the Holy Scripture and in the masterpieces of the Church Fathers¹. Supporting this doctrine would imply: the absence of any process of sanctification, the elimination of the Last Judgment, and even the salvation of the devil².

It is of particular interest to examine the position of the Holy Fathers, ecclesiastical writers, and contemporary theologians who have taught, to varying degrees, the theory of the salvation of all, and then to observe how each author understood apocatastasis. *Mutatis mutandis*, we will attempt to offer a well-articulated dogmatic response suitable for contemporary society.

Our topic seeks to address the difficult questions that arise both on a personal level and on a dogmatic and spiritual level:

On a personal level, we ask ourselves: In what sense am I saved, and in what sense am I condemned? How can I be both at the same time? How am I saved in God and yet remain condemned through my own will? How can a freedom that turns against itself still be invested with supreme value? Can this antinomy be overcome? If so, in what direction? If not, what path does it open by remaining and persisting within it? Without the antinomic reflection on eternal hell, my Christianity would have remained infantile, monotonous, barren, and almost certainly irrelevant. For only today, in the contemporary world, can the issue of universal restoration reveal its full creative, renewing, and integrating potential. It may gain an emblematic character for our time – as a key and fundamental concern in reopening, by yet another interval close to the end, the path that began two thousand years ago.

A number of dogmatic chapters and fundamental theological questions converge in this direction and can be integrated into the subject of universal salvation:

1. Divine love and human freedom (the ultimate meaning of divine love, the ontological level and limits of human freedom),
2. The theology of hope,
3. Evil and hell (how was the beginning of evil possible, and how can it be eternal?),
4. The relationship between God's attributes (God's justice and love – what is divine wrath from the perspective of divine impassibility?),
5. The relationship between divine providence and foreknowledge (regarding the damned like Judas, "*it would have been better for him not to have been born*" (Matthew 26, 24), or the freedom of those chosen from the womb, or of those who were never born),
6. The subject/object and objective/subjective relationship in the context of objective and subjective salvation,
7. The structure of temporality, the relationship between time/eon/eternity (between the infernal eon, even if endless, and divine infinity),
8. Divine Judgment (divine condemnation and/or self-condemnation by one's own conscience, divine activity/passivity in judgment, theocentrism and anthropocentrism – Judgment by the Son),
9. Eschatological apophaticism (e.g., the idea of a degree-zero apophaticism, which transcends the purely conventional definitions of apophaticism of the first and second degrees).

Concerning the spiritual significance of apocatastasis, we reflect on the meaning of the saints' prayers for the whole world, on the meaning of love for one's enemies, on the fact that they desired more than anything the salvation of others – and in this desire, they were perfected. How can they be perfected by a desire and a love which, as they themselves know, will never be fulfilled? How have they "tasted" universal salvation on behalf of those who will never know it? What would have been the

¹ Hierotheos de Nafpaktos *Viața după moarte* (București: Editura Bunavestire, 2000), 215

² Bria Ion, "Eshatologia sau lumea viitoare", *Ortodoxia*, anul XLVII, nr. 1-2 ianuarie-iunie (1995), 98.

qualitative substitute for their love toward the damned and toward enemies, had such persons never existed? Is suffering an internal necessity of love?

From the testimonies of the saints – for example, Saint Silouan the Athonite – we learn that divine grace works love in their souls in an antinomic way: Either they forget the world entirely, enraptured by God's love, or they weep for the whole world and for the damned, and would rather be separated from God than lose even one of their brethren. What will happen to the world when these two states become one in the souls of the saints?

Research Methods

From the very beginning, the approach will be patristic, and only secondarily scholastic, deliberately avoiding the closure of revelation within a self-sufficient conceptual system.

Secondly, the elaboration of this study will be shaped within the horizon of the question, understood in a Heideggerian sense as the "holiness of thought". A well-posed and well-oriented question has a threefold dimension: apophatic, anticipatory, and prophetic. It opens and expands the horizon of mystery – as a progression through veiling and unveiling – and brings into one's own light the answer already given in dogma.

Thirdly, our thinking will adopt the perspective of a theology of exception, since only existential exceptions can truly reveal the last things, as well as the edges of the path that leads toward them. Exceptions unveil what ordinarily remains unseen; they place everything into crisis – under the divine judgment that is yet to come – and they form the only possible space for a Christian esotericism.

Fourthly, the openness to modern and contemporary philosophy, psychology, and mathematics (for example: Hegelian dialectics, Kantian and Husserlian transcendental philosophy, Cantorian transfinite mathematics, Jungian archetypal psychology, Gadamerian hermeneutics, and especially Heideggerian thought) provides new semantic structures and new possibilities for approaching and understanding the "antinomy of hell" and the meaning of apocatastasis.

The current state of research on the topic

The Current Stage of Research in the Romanian Context

In the specialized literature from the Romanian academic space, there is no extensive research that specifically addresses the issue of contemporary Christian universalism in the manner we aim to approach. There are two doctoral theses published on the topic of apocatastasis. One belongs to Father Ileana Ionuț Ciprian, defended on September 30, 2014, at the Faculty of Theology "Justinian the Patriarch" in Bucharest, under the title: *Apocatastasis in 20th Century Christian Thought*. This thesis also represents the first comprehensive Orthodox systematic research in Romania on the subject. Unfortunately, the work has a significant shortcoming: it uses a minimal bibliography, especially concerning foreign secondary literature (only two books and three articles).

Given that there is a vast body of specialized literature on the topic in the West during the 20th century, Father Ileana's approach fails to capture the breadth of the phenomenon and to convincingly convey the relevance of apocatastasis today.

The other thesis belongs to Mrs. Raluca Mocean Pleșa, defended on September 12, 2019, at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Alba Iulia, entitled: *"The Relevance of Apocatastasis: Between God's Love and Human Freedom"*¹.

In the Romanian Orthodox sphere, Father Dumitru Stăniloae stands out as a critic of the supporters of universalism who claim that all souls will eventually attain happiness, based on the idea that a being always has the possibility to repent. Among those who support this theory is Lessing, who, "in the name of pantheistic idealist philosophy, replaces the dual end of humanity with a never-ending evolution"².

¹ Raluca Mocean Pleșa, *Actualitatea apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului* (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2021).

² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, Vol. 3 (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1997), 165.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae also refutes the three main arguments that form the basis for supporting universalism:

1. the non-decisive nature of the present life in determining a person's eternal destiny;
2. the eternal freedom of the human being;
3. the impossibility of reconciling divine judgment with God's goodness.

The Current Stage of Research in International Literature

If the 20th century saw the emergence of several theologians who revived the discussion on the theory of apokatastasis, with the beginning of the third millennium, theological debates have significantly intensified, giving rise to increasingly complex systematizations of the concept of universalism. At the same time, increased access to Western bibliographic resources has created a favorable context for apokatastasis to become a topic of interest within Romanian theology as well.

The first major monograph of the 21st century is that of the Catholic theologian Ilaria Ramelli, "The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena"¹, published in 2013. Although it offers a detailed presentation of the issue of apokatastasis in the patristic period – thus limiting the temporal scope of the study to the first nine centuries of Christianity – Ramelli's work is insufficient in that it presents only a pro-apokatastasis perspective and forces certain patristic texts to support this theological position².

Another systematic analysis of apokatastasis appeared in 2015, authored by the Protestant theologian Laurence Malcolm, titled "Will All Be Saved? An Assessment of Universalism in Western Theology"³. His work is an excellent historical-dogmatic study, but it is limited to the perspectives found within the two major Western Christian confessions – Catholicism and Protestantism – without addressing 21st century theological debates. Furthermore, most of his patristic arguments are drawn from secondary literature.

The most recent and comprehensive historical-dogmatic analysis of the topic is represented by the two volumes of Protestant theologian Michael McClymond, published in June 2018: "The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism"⁴, Volumes I–II, Baker Academic.

Also contributing to the historical systematization of the development of the idea of apokatastasis are the two volumes under the general title "A Larger Hope"⁵, edited by Catholic theologian Ilaria Ramelli and Protestant theologian Robin Parry, which aim to explore the topic from the beginnings of Christianity up to the 19th century.

Research Objectives

In our research, we will focus on the following points:

The Historical And Theological Premises Of The Subject

The established meaning of the term was that of "Ἀποκατάστασις πάντων", a phrase which means the restoration of all things, and which commonly refers to the doctrine concerning the restoration of everything at the end of the age. This teaching was attributed to Origen, and later to Saint Gregory of Nyssa. Henri Crouzel stated that "Origen was not the inventor of this term, but rather took it over from those who came before him"⁶, among these were Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, but especially

¹ Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Brill, 2013).

² Steven Nemes, "Review of The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis. Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*", *Journal of Analytic Theology*, Nr. 3 (2015), 4.

³ Laurence Malcolm, *Will All Be Saved? An Assessment of Universalism in Western Theology*, Paternoster, 2015.

⁴ Michael McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

⁵ Robin Parry, Ilaria Ramelli, *Universal Salvation from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019).

⁶ Henri Crouzel, *Origen: personajul, exegetul, omul duhovnicesc, teologul* (Sibiu: Deisis, 2014), 341.

Clement of Alexandria¹, who, according to some scholars, was the first to introduce the issue of universal restoration into the Christian sphere².

Some of Origen's teachings were condemned by the Church, and the Origenists would base their erroneous views on his doctrine. Origen proved to be particularly influential in the development of Christian understanding in the following centuries, insofar as almost all theologians read and respected Origen's work as that of one of the greatest theologians³. His influence on the following centuries can be compared to that of Blessed Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, with ideas from his commentaries and homilies found in Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Athanasius the Great, Blessed Jerome, Saint Ambrose the Great, and even in the works of his critic, Saint Maximus the Confessor⁴.

The condemnation of apocatastasis was encompassed within the general condemnation of Origenist errors, which, having evolved from mere hypotheses (expressed with caution by Origen) into dangerous and major heresies supported by various Origenist factions, caused harmful disturbances within the Church and threatened the purity of orthodoxy.

The condemnation of Origenism in general, and of apocatastasis in particular, raises at least three difficult issues: a) the question of the canonical value of the fifteen anathemas, b) the possibility of a restrictive interpretation of the anathemas concerning apocatastasis, c) the identification of certain deeper causes (of a socio-historical nature) behind Origen's condemnation, which offers a new perspective on its interpretation and calls into question its current dogmatic value.

The term Christian universalism was used in the 1820s by Russell Streeeter in the *Christian Intelligencer* from Portland – a descendant of Adams Streeeter, who had founded one of the first Universalist churches on September 14, 1785⁵. Christian Universalists believe that this was the most common interpretation of Christianity in early Christianity, before the 6th century. Christians from a variety of denominations and traditions believe in the principles of Christian universalism, such as the reality of an afterlife without the possibility of eternal punishment in hell.

As a formal Christian designation, Christian universalism arose in the late 18th century in the Universalist Church of America. Today, there is no single denomination that unites Christian Universalists, but several denominations teach some of the principles of Christian universalism or are open to them. In 2007, the Christian Universalist Association was founded to serve as an ecumenical umbrella organization for churches, ministries, and individuals who believe in Christian universalism⁶.

Apocatastasis in Contemporary Theology

After the condemnation of Origenist ideas at the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553), the doctrine of apocatastasis was, for centuries, considered a theological error. However, in contemporary theology, the idea of a final restoration of all things – albeit in a revised and nuanced form – has returned to discussion, especially in the context of reflections on divine love, freedom, and eschatological justice⁷.

¹ Lautaro Roig Lanzillota, "Greek Philosophy and the Problem of Evil in Clement of Alexandria and Origen". *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica* 26 (2016): 214–215.

² Vasile Răducă, *Antropologia Sfântului Grigore de Nyssa: căderea în păcat și restaurarea omului* (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1996), 336.

³ (Nemes 2015, 1)

⁴ Adrian ROMAN, „Mântuirea demonilor și apocatastaza în gândirea lui Origen”, *Mitropolia Ardealului. Revista Teologică* (2011), 56.

⁵ Russell Streeeter, *Christian Intelligencer, Volumes 1-2* (Legare Street Press, 2023).

⁶ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Pastorship of Fear, Faithlessness and the Return of Christian Universalism in 21st Century Europe: An Analysis of New Politico-Religious Dynamics", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol.24, issue 71 (Summer 2025): 3-17.

⁷ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Politico-Dogmatic Stage of the Apocatastasis' Condemnation. Post-synodal Perspectives", *Teologia*, Issue 92, No. 3 (2022) 136-154.

The Rediscovery of Origen and the Reevaluation of the Church Fathers

Beginning in the 19th century and especially during the 20th century, interest in the theology of the Church Fathers led to a reevaluation of Origen and other ancient thinkers who spoke about apocatastasis. Many scholars have distinguished between the Origenist ideas condemned by the Fifth Council and other more moderate forms of universal restoration.

Thus, the idea of apocatastasis has been reconsidered not as dogma, but as a theological hypothesis – an expression of hope in a God who will ultimately *"be all in all"* (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:28).

Contemporary Orthodox Theologians

In contemporary Orthodox theology, some important theologians have approached apocatastasis with caution but also openness:

- Dumitru Stăniloae recognized the deeply speculative character of the theory, emphasizing that God's love is infinite, but that human freedom is real¹. He rejected the idea of an inevitable apocatastasis but admitted the possibility that divine love may have the final word, without denying the reality of judgment.
- Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, in his writings, spoke of "the hope of universal salvation"², but not as a mandatory teaching, rather as a hope based on God's mercy, not human rights.
- David Bentley Hart, a contemporary Orthodox theologian, is a strong advocate of apocatastasis in the form of universal salvation. In his book *"That All Shall Be Saved"*³, he argues that the idea of eternal punishment is incompatible with God's love, justice, and omnipotence.

Catholic and Protestant Theologians

In Catholic theology, apocatastasis as a doctrine is officially rejected, but the idea of a "hope for all" has been supported by great theologians such as:

- Hans Urs von Balthasar, who in his work *"Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved?"*⁴ argues that the Church must pray and hope for universal salvation, without affirming it as certainty.
- In Protestant circles, especially among liberals, the idea has been revived as part of an optimistic vision of the eschaton. Theologians like Jürgen Moltmann have spoken about "the hope of a new creation"⁵, in which God will heal all the wounds of history.
- The Distinction Between Hope and Doctrine

An essential aspect of the contemporary discussion is the distinction between a dogmatic doctrine of apocatastasis (which affirms the certainty of everyone's salvation) and theological hope (which hopes for this possibility, leaving judgment in God's hands).

Many Orthodox and Catholic theologians refuse to make apocatastasis a mandatory teaching, but affirm that it is legitimate to hope that, in His infinite goodness and mercy, God might save even the most lost without negating human freedom⁶.

Significant Findings of the Proposed Research

The research undertaken – grounded in a patristic foundation, guided by an apophatic and anticipatory question, shaped by a theology of exception, and enriched by dialogue with modern philosophy, psychology, and mathematics – has yielded a number of significant results that contribute both to dogmatic theology and to the broader horizon of contemporary Christian thought.

¹ Alexandru Lazăr, "The Eschatological Vision of Dumitru Stăniloae: A Counter-Argument on the Puralist-Universalist Vision of John Hick", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol. 23, Issue 67, (spring 2024), p. 3-16.

² Kallistos Ware, "Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All? Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Isaac the Syrian", *The Collected Works Volume I: The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 201.

³ David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* (Yale University Press, 2019).

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope That All Men be Saved?: With a Short Discourse on Hell* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014).

⁵ Gregory MacDonald, *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Book, 2011).

⁶ Alexandru Lazăr, "Actualitatea apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului", *Astra Salvensis*, Issue 9, No.17 (2021), 175-182.

A Nuanced Mapping of Apocatastasis in Patristic and Contemporary Theology

Through careful examination of the writings of the Church Fathers (e.g., Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Isaac the Syrian) and of modern theologians (e.g., Bulgakov, von Balthasar, Yannaras), the study has traced the diversity of perspectives on apocatastasis – not to dissolve dogmatic clarity, but to illuminate its complex interpretative potential. Each thinker has been analyzed not as a doctrinal authority to be absolutized, but as a witness to a particular theological sensibility within the Church's eschatological consciousness.

Reframing Hell: Antinomy, Freedom, and Divine Love

The research confirms that eternal damnation, if understood strictly juridically, is incompatible with the radical nature of divine love and human freedom as revealed in Christ. Rather than resolving this tension simplistically, the study embraces the antinomy: hell is real, and yet God's will is for all to be saved. This paradox opens a dynamic space in which the meaning of judgment, punishment, and ultimate reconciliation must be reconsidered.

Theological Epistemology: From Dogmatic Closure to Eschatological Openness

Dogma, far from being a closed and completed system, is shown to be a living response to mystery – a light cast into the darkness of the "not yet". The research reaffirms the idea that true theological thinking does not domesticate mystery, but remains faithfully open to it. In this light, apocatastasis appears not as a defined doctrine, but as an eschatological intuition – one that can be neither fully affirmed nor denied without reducing the mystery it seeks to express.

The Saints and the Logic of Love Beyond Retribution

One of the most striking results emerges from the testimonies of the saints, such as Saint Silouan the Athonite, whose lives and prayers bear witness to a love that transcends justice. Their longing for the salvation of all – even of the damned – is not sentimentality, but a manifestation of divine grace within human freedom. This experiential theology forces a rethinking of eschatological categories in light of the transfigured will, purified by suffering love.

A Renewed Language for Eschatology in the Contemporary Age

Drawing from existential exceptions, symbolic logic, and post-metaphysical hermeneutics, the study proposes new ways of expressing eschatological truth without falling into ideological extremes. The tension between despair and universal hope – between the hell of abandonment and the hell of hope – is particularly resonant for the spiritual climate of our time. In this tension, the apocatastatic vision regains theological legitimacy not as dogma, but as horizon: an image of God's inexhaustible mercy projected into the heart of history.

Integration of Interdisciplinary Insights

By engaging with Heideggerian thought (the holiness of questioning), Jungian archetypes (the shadow and the reconciled opposites), Cantorian set theory (transfinite potentialities), and Hegelian dialectics (negation and reconciliation), the research has expanded the semantic field in which theology can think the "unspeakable" reality of the Last Things without betraying the content of revelation. This approach enables Christian theology to speak credibly and creatively in the postmodern world.

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BIONOTE:

Alexandru Lazăr is a Romanian Orthodox scholar currently pursuing a PhD at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Cluj-Napoca, under the mentorship of Professor Gabriel Viorel Gărdan. His doctoral research focuses on Christian Universalism, specifically exploring its ongoing theological relevance, with a focus on American Christianity. Lazăr has received recognition for his academic contributions, such as the Excellentia Award in 2018 and 2022 from Babeș-Bolyai University for outstanding research. He is member of the Romanian Orthodox Church, serving at the "Saints Constantine and Helen" Cathedral in Chicago, Illinois. He is actively involved in the religious and educational life of the community, particularly with youth, offering catechism lessons at events like summer camps where children learn about the Orthodox faith, prayer, and the lives of saints.