

PARTAKERS OF DIVINITY: THE ORTHODOX DOCTRINE OF THEOSIS

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For the shepherd David the question came in the middle of the night watch. Alone in the quiet darkness on a Palestinian hillside, he pondered the expansive heavens, the sparkling stars and soft moonlight and, in response, his own feelings of insignificance: "What is man, that thou dost take thought of him, or the son of man, that thou dost care for him?" (Ps 8:4).

For its part, Orthodox theology in the east places the questions of human destiny, sin and salvation at the forefront of its entire theological vision, albeit in ways very different from the western Christian tradition. The long history of Orthodox theology answers the question of the purpose of life with a definitive, unique and unified response. As we shall see in this article, it is a response that is not only different from western conceptions of theological anthropology but one that sounds very strange indeed to our ears.

In the *Philokalia*, an important collection of Orthodox texts from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries compiled by St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite (1749-1809), the *Theoretikon* (probably a fourteenth-century text) puts it this way: "Now the purpose of our life is blessedness . . . not only to behold the Trinity, supreme in Kingship, but also to receive an influx of the divine and, as it were, to suffer deification."¹ The contemporary Greek Orthodox theologian Christoforos Stavropoulos summarizes this Orthodox vision:

In the Holy Scriptures, where God Himself speaks, we read of a unique call directed to us. God speaks to us human beings clearly and directly and He says: "I said, 'You are gods, sons of the most high—all of you'" (Ps. 82:6 and John 10:34). Do we hear that voice? Do we understand the meaning of this calling? Do we accept that we should in fact be on a journey, a road which leads to Theosis? As human beings we each have this one, unique calling, to achieve Theosis. In other words, we are each destined to become a god; to be like God Himself, to be united with Him. The Apostle Peter describes with total clarity the purpose of life: we are to "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). This is the purpose of your life; that you be a participant, a sharer in the nature of God and in the life of Christ, a communicant of divine energy—to become just like God, a true God.²

"Man," writes Gregory of Nazianzus, "has been ordered to become God."³

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¹ Cf. *Philokalia* (ed. G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard and K. Ware; London: Faber and Faber, 1979-1984) 2.43.

² C. Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1976) 17-18.

³ Gregory Nazianzus, "Funeral Oration for St. Basil," in Stavropoulos, *Nature* 18.

The purpose of this article is to explore the meaning of these astonishing words. To the nocturnal question about his feelings of insignificance that David asked on that Palestinian hillside we must juxtapose the startlingly bold response to his fellow psalmist Asaph that is invoked by Orthodox theology (Ps 82:6), words that are in fact reiterated by Jesus Christ himself (John 10:34).

I. THE WORK OF CHRIST EAST AND WEST

The idea of theosis is a distinctive feature that characterizes Orthodoxy and assumes central importance in its overall theological framework. Like a continuous golden thread running throughout the centuries of its ancient theological tapestry, almost all of the major theologians of the east weave the threads of this doctrine into the pattern of eastern Christianity. John Climacus, for whom the idea of theosis is not a major theme, is perhaps the lone exception to this historical rule, although even in Climacus the theme is not entirely absent. It is not too much to say that the divinization of humanity is the central theme, chief aim, basic purpose, or primary religious ideal of Orthodoxy. Theosis is the ultimate goal toward which all people should strive,⁴ "the blessed *telos* for which all things were made."⁵

In emphasizing this doctrine Orthodox theologians have intended not only to focus on what the *Theoretikon* identifies as the purpose of life. For Orthodoxy, deification is "the very essence of Christianity," for it describes the "ineffable descent of God to the ultimate limit of our fallen human condition, even unto death—a descent of God which opens to men a path of ascent, the unlimited vistas of the union of created beings with the Divinity."⁶ To paraphrase Athanasius, when God descended, assumed humanity, and was "incarnated," he opened the way for people to ascend to him, assume divinity, and become "in-godded." In its very definition of the gospel, then, eastern Christianity presupposes the idea of deification. Even when the term is not explicitly mentioned it is implicitly present "as the content of the salvation proclaimed by the gospel."⁷

Except for the important work by the Catholic scholar J. Gros⁸ and occasional references to the theme, western theologians in general and Protestants in particular have given only scant attention to the central importance of theosis in Orthodox thought. Nor do they address the doctrine as an important Biblical category in its own right. On the other hand, as early as Gregory Palamas' fourteenth-century work entitled *On Divine and Deifying Participation*, Orthodox thinkers have systematically analyzed the doctrine at length. More important still, eastern treatments of the doctrine

⁴ G Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man* (Crestwood St Vladimir's Seminary, 1984) 12, 129

⁵ Gregory Nazianzus *To Thalladius* 60, cf P Chrestou, *Partakers of God* (Brookline Holy Cross Orthodox, 1984) 36, cf 16–17, 61

⁶ V Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood St Vladimir's Seminary, 1985) 97

⁷ J Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christianity* (Chicago University of Chicago, 1974) 11, cf 46

⁸ See Mantzaridis, *Deification* 13

of salvation generally construe the dilemma of humanity and the response of God in the work of Christ from a perspective that is very different from that of the west.

Orthodox theologians contend that in the west the doctrines of sin and salvation have been unduly dominated by legal, juridical and forensic categories. These categories, they insist, are not only overly negative and alien to the spirit of eastern Christianity but also, when allowed to dominate, are actual distortions of the Biblical message.⁹ Ernst Benz suggests that this legal framework predominates in western thinking (both Catholic and Protestant). He notes how the apostle Paul frames his epistle to the Romans in terms of divine law and justice, categories that are perhaps taken from Roman civil law, and that his idea of justification by faith answers the question of how guilty people can stand before a just God. In its doctrines of penance, indulgences, concept of the Church, role of the priest, and canon law, Benz suggests that the Catholic Church especially developed in this legalistic direction.¹⁰ This accent on legal concepts, in contrast to the ideas of mystical union perpetuated in the east, is thus seen by Orthodoxy as the "real issue that unites the West theologically [that is, both Catholics and Protestants] and divides it from the East."¹¹

Tertullian (c. 170–220), who may have been trained as a lawyer and was the first major theologian to write in Latin, is usually credited as the first to interpret the work of Christ in juridical categories, but it is Augustine (354–430) and Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) who developed forensic concepts fully and invested them with full force. Meyendorff has suggested that the enormous influence of Augustinian legal categories in the west, and Augustine's lack of influence in the east (where the work of Christ was understood in terms of theosis), is one of the major theological factors that caused the eastern and western churches to drift apart.¹² In his epoch-making work *Cur Deus Homo*, a book that influenced almost all subsequent treatments of the work of Christ, Anselm argued that the sin of man had offended the majesty and honor of God and that the justice of God could only be served by making a "satisfaction" or just payment of the penalty. With only a little work we could adduce further examples of the predominance of juridical categories in western soteriology. In evangelical theology especially, for example, writers like James Packer and John Stott interpret the work of Christ primarily in terms of penal substitution.¹³

A good illustration of this basic difference between the east and the west is the doctrine of justification by faith, so prevalent in the west but almost totally absent in eastern thought. Martin Luther argued that Christianity

⁹ Lossky, *Image*, chap. 5.

¹⁰ E. Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963) 43–47. Here I am following the fine summary by J. Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986) 7–11.

¹¹ Stamoolis, *Mission* 7.

¹² J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham, 1979) 143.

¹³ Cf. J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," *TynB* 25 (1974) 3–45; J. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987).

would stand or fall with this doctrine, and in his treatise entitled *Two Types of Righteousness* he developed the idea of our external, passive and alien righteousness in Christ, that God declares sinners righteous based on the perfect righteousness of Christ that is credited to the believer—certainly an idea quite different from notions of mystical union with Christ. Calvin described justification by faith as the “hinge on which all true religion turned,” and in his precise definition of the doctrine he compares it to an acquittal in the courts of divine justice: “Just as a man, deemed innocent by an impartial judge, is said to be justified, so a sinner is said to be justified by God when he asserts his righteousness.”¹⁴ In the history of Orthodox theology, on the other hand, it is startling to observe the near total absence of any mention of the idea of justification by faith. Justification by faith has received short shrift in Orthodoxy, and the most important text of Orthodox theology, John of Damascus’ *The Orthodox Faith*, never even mentions the idea.¹⁵

We have here a genuine difference of perspective between the east and the west. But if we left the matter at that, we would be guilty of misconstruing the issue. That is, we must add a caveat of sorts to this general theological historiography. Three qualifications are worth noting.

First, if legal categories such as justification by faith are categories that Paul himself uses, as Stamoolis, Lossky, Benz and other Orthodox theologians acknowledge, then this way of interpreting the work of Christ is hardly a distortion or unduly negative. Rather, the idea of justification and legal categories are eminently Biblical.

Second, the real issue here seems to be one of a difference of emphasis—the east emphasizing mystical union through theosis, the west emphasizing juridical categories. No necessity forces us to choose between the two or to see them as mutually exclusive categories that are contradictory. Rather, they and a host of other NT salvation motifs besides (adoption, reconciliation, redemption, ransom, sacrifice, forgiveness, *Christus victor*, propitiation, deliverance) are complementary. We need to affirm them all in order to begin to understand the wonder of God’s salvation in Christ.

Third, the above historical generalizations are not as neat and clean as some would have it. Although the west does not embrace the explicit notion of theosis in any sustained or major way, deification is not entirely absent from its tradition. “God received a body and a soul,” writes Augustine, “in order that the body and soul of man may be blessed: the soul with his divinity and the body with his humanity.”¹⁶ Pelikan has ferreted out references to theosis in several Latin medieval theologians. The canon lawyer and theologian Alger of Liege (died 1131/32) and German exegete Rupert of Deutz (1075–1129) refer to the humanity of Christ as “deified man.” Catholic reformer Peter Damian (1007–72) cites 2 Pet 1:4 and notes that Christ “ascended in order to make us participants in his divinity.” Bernard of

¹⁴ J Calvin, *Institutes* 3 11 2

¹⁵ A notable exception is the *Confession* by Cyril Lucarius (1572–1638), articles 9 and 13

¹⁶ Augustine *Enchiridion* 26

Clairvaux (1090–1153) writes of filling ourselves with God. Nygren sees the doctrine in some Reformation people.¹⁷ Further, the west has a well-developed concept of the Pauline idea of union with Christ. In the opening pages of Book 3 of his *Institutes* Calvin, for example, before he raises the issue of justification by faith, speaks of believers being engrafted into or bonded with Christ through the “secret energy of the Holy Spirit.”

Conversely, when describing our salvation in Christ, theologians of the east incorporate other Biblical motifs in addition to theosis. Athanasius, the preeminent proponent of theosis for Orthodoxy, is a case in point. He uses a host of Biblical motifs to describe the work of Christ, including substitutionary or vicarious atonement, the payment of a debt, the conquest of death and the devil, ransom, and sacrifice. In fact in the *locus classicus* of theosis Athanasius exclaimed that the work of Christ is so multifaceted that trying to number the many and various benefits of Christ is like trying to gaze at the open sea and count the endless waves of the ocean: “Even so, when one wants to take in all the achievements of Christ in the body, one cannot do so, even by reckoning them up, for the things that transcend one’s thought are always more than those one thinks that one has grasped.”¹⁸ We can say, then, that in addition to theosis eastern theologians affirm any number of Biblical metaphors for salvation, including juridical ones. They acknowledge that the work of Christ cannot be reduced to any single metaphor and that while legal metaphors are truly Pauline and should be affirmed they should not be allowed to dominate but rather be “relocated” among the host of other Biblical images.¹⁹

In their better moments both western and Orthodox theologians acknowledge this point, that the Biblical material presents the work of Christ from a number of different perspectives and that all of them are necessary for a complete understanding of our salvation in Christ.²⁰ Nevertheless a difference of emphasis is still a genuine difference. The west lacks any developed notion of theosis and tends to express the idea of salvation in juridical categories. The eastern Church neglects the concept of justification in favor of deification, a theme that it discovers throughout the Bible and repeats down through the centuries.

II. BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL WITNESSES

The Bible speaks extensively about theosis, according to the Orthodox theologians, and thus so must we. The two most direct texts are 2 Pet 1:4 and Ps 82:6 (= John 10:34–35). If it be objected that these texts are taken

¹⁷ J Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology* (Chicago University of Chicago, 1978) 152, *Imago Dei* (Princeton Princeton University, 1990) 141

¹⁸ Athanasius *On the Incarnation* 8 54

¹⁹ V Lossky, *Orthodox Theology An Introduction* (Crestwood St Vladimir’s Seminary, 1989) 111 Cf also J Karmiris, *Synopsis of the Dogmatic Theology of the Orthodox Catholic Church* (Scranton Christian Orthodox Edition, 1973) 70 n 33

²⁰ Lossky, *Image* 100, Chrestou, *Partakers* 42, Mantzaridis, *Deification* 27, Stamoolis, *Mission* 9

out of context, or that finding the doctrine in an array of Biblical texts is unconvincing, Orthodox theologians would care little. True exegesis seeks to perceive the hidden meaning of Scripture that lies beyond or beneath the literal words of the text. Sticking to the "mere letter" of Scripture only proves one's attachment to the senses and the flesh,²¹ and although careless allegorization can "kill the Scriptures" the true exegete always seeks a "spiritual interpretation" of God's Word.²² Further, since the tradition of the Church fathers speaks so definitively about the matter, the Biblical propriety of the doctrine of theosis is for Orthodoxy beyond debate. In fact eastern theologians claim an extensive litany of Biblical witnesses to the doctrine of deification. They consider humanity's organic union with God to be a constant theme in both Paul and John. Far from being unscriptural, according to Orthodoxy theosis claims a "solid biblical basis" that goes far beyond the two explicit texts in 2 Pet 1:4 and John 10:34–35.²³

Moses, who encountered God in the burning bush and the smoky darkness of Mount Sinai and was transfigured so that his face shone (Exod 34:30), "became a god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1).²⁴ The transfiguration of Peter on Mount Tabor (Matt 17:4) parallels Moses' transfiguration on Sinai as a paradigm for us today whereby we "participate in the divine brightness."²⁵ Two oft-repeated texts are 2 Cor 8:9 and Heb 4:15. Commenting on these texts, Mark the Ascetic (early fifth century) writes that Christ "became what we are, so that we might become what He is. The Logos became man, so that man might become Logos. Being rich, He became poor for our sakes, so that through His poverty we might become rich. In His great love for man He became like us, so that through every virtue we might become like Him."²⁶ The Johannine corpus is an especially rich witness to theosis (John 3:8; 14:21–23; 15:4–8; 17:21–23; 1 John 3:2; 4:12). Referring to John the Theologian and his many references to our union with God, Peter of Damaskos invokes the authority of Christ himself, writing that we become "gods by adoption through grace" and, having become dispassionate, "we have God within ourselves—as Christ Himself has told us."²⁷ Both Macarios of Egypt and Chrysostom appeal to the marriage analogy in 1 Cor 6:17 to refer to our spiritual marriage in which "the soul is joined to God in an ineffable union."²⁸ According to Ilias the Presbyter (c. eleventh or twelfth century), it is when we attain divine likeness through theosis that we transcend the differences between male and female (Gal 3:28).²⁹

²¹ Maximos, *Various Texts on Theology* 4 76, cf. *Philokalia* 2 254

²² Peter of Damaskos, Book 2, *Twenty-Four Discourses* 12, 23, *Philokalia* 3 144, 248, 267

²³ T Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London Penguin, 1964) 236–237

²⁴ St Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness* 139, cf. *Philokalia* 1 186

²⁵ Macarios of Philadelphia, in Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, *A Handbook of Spiritual Counsel* (New York Paulist, 1989) 224

²⁶ Mark the Ascetic, *Letter to Nicolas*, in *Philokalia* 1 155

²⁷ Peter of Damaskos, *Treasury of Divine Knowledge*, Book 1, *Philokalia* 3 79, Nicodemus, *Handbook* 186

²⁸ Chrysostom *Homily 20 on Ephesians* 5 22–33, Macarios *Macarian Homilies* 4 67, 6 124, *Philokalia* 3 314, 330

²⁹ Ilias the Presbyter, *Gnostic Anthology* 3 25, cf. *Philokalia* 3 50

The examples of Maximos the Confessor and Symeon the New Theologian are especially instructive on this point, for they illustrate the depth and breadth of the Orthodox confidence that the idea of theosis is an eminently Biblical theme. Maximos discovers the idea of theosis nearly everywhere.

The purpose of the Lord's Prayer was to point to the mystery of deification. Baptism was "in the name of the life-giving and deifying Trinity." When the guests at the wedding in Cana of Galilee . . . said that their host had "kept the good wine until now," they were referring to the Word of God, saved for the last, by which men were made divine. When, in the Epistles of the same Apostle John, "the Theologian," it was said that "it does not yet appear what we shall be," this was a reference to "the future deification of those who have now been made children of God." When the Apostle Paul spoke of "the riches" of the saints, this, too, meant deification.³⁰

In addition to the passages already mentioned, Symeon the New Theologian appeals to a broad array of other Biblical texts when he expounds the doctrine of theosis (1 Cor 6:15; Col 3:1; Titus 2:13).³¹

To these Biblical texts we can add the historical witness of Orthodoxy's sacramental life and theological literature down through the centuries, both of which repeatedly define salvation as divinization. Theosis is "echoed by the fathers and the theologians of every age."³² In addition to the dozen or so representatives already noted we can briefly mention other important historical witnesses to deification, thus giving us a sense of the near ubiquity of the doctrine in eastern theology.

The earliest references to theosis occur in Irenaeus (c. 175) and Origen (185–254), both of whom anticipate the Athanasian epigram with nearly the exact words two centuries earlier. "If the Word is made man," writes Irenaeus, "it is that men might become gods." According to Origen, when we transcend the material realm the contemplation of God is brought to "its proper fulfillment," which fulfillment is for the spirit "to be deified by that which it contemplates."³³

The Cappadocian fathers all continue the theme. Basil insists that "the goal of our calling is to become like God." He attributes the experience of theosis to the Holy Spirit who, "being God by nature . . . , deifies by grace those who still belong to a nature subject to change." According to Gregory of Nyssa "God united Himself to our nature in order that our nature might be made divine through union with God."³⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus echoes the Athanasian epigram, that as God became incarnate, man became endivinized, and that to the extent that Christ became a real man, so we become real gods.³⁵

³⁰ Pelikan, *Spirit* 10.

³¹ Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses* (New York: Paulist, 1980) 207, 336, 361.

³² V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1976) 134.

³³ See V. Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1973) 42, 61–62.

³⁴ Basil *On the Holy Spirit* 1.2; Gregory of Nyssa *Oratio Catechetica* 25 in Lossky, *Vision* 80; Gregory Nazianzus *Poem. dogma* 10.5–9 in Lossky, *Mystical* 134; *Letter to Cledonius* in Karmiris, *Synopsis* 70 n. 31.

³⁵ Gregory Nazianzus *Epistle 101; Logos* 29.19; cf. Chrestou, *Partakers* 40, 51.

Cyril of Alexandria (370–444), one of the most important theologians of the fifth century, comments on 2 Pet 1:4 to note that we are all called to participate in divinity. Although Jesus Christ alone is by nature God, all people are called to become God “by participation.” In such participation we become likenesses of Christ and perfect images of God the Father.³⁶ In the middle ages John of Damascus insists that people are created for deification and that the work of Christ insures that we might have his image restored in us and so become “partakers of Divinity.”³⁷ According to Psellus (died c. 1078), professor at Constantinople, the likeness of the soul to God ultimately means its “ability to make men divine.” Like many before him Psellus invokes the standard formula, that God became man that man might become God.³⁸ To reference an Orthodox saint who not only expounded the doctrine of theosis but who in fact experienced its full effects, there is the moving account of the Russian monk St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833) by his disciple Nicholas Motovilov.³⁹

That the liturgical life of Orthodoxy expresses the doctrine of theosis is another testimony to its importance in the eastern tradition. Not only doctrine and belief (*lex credendi*) but also worship and prayer (*lex orandi*) proclaim the ideal of deification. In the Canon for Matins of Holy Thursday the Church confesses in its worship: “In my kingdom, said Christ, I shall be God with you as gods.”⁴⁰ The ancient Liturgy of St. James (c. 450), extant in both Greek and Syriac, proclaims: “Thou hast united, O Lord, Thy divinity with our humanity and our humanity with Thy divinity, Thy life with our mortality and our mortality with Thy life; Thou hast received what was ours and hast given unto us what was Thine, for the life and salvation of our souls, praise be to Thee in eternity.”⁴¹

The hymnology of the fourth-century Christian poet St. Ephrem the Syrian adds its choruses to the liturgy. Since Ephrem wrote in Syriac and was probably ignorant of Greek, his hymns are significant exceptions to the common charge that the Orthodox doctrine of theosis is only a pale imitation of Hellenistic philosophy. According to Ephrem, if Adam and Eve had not transgressed the divine command “they would have acquired divinity in humanity” (*Commentary on Genesis*). In a Nisibene hymn he writes: “The Most High knew that Adam wanted to become a god, so He sent His Son who put him on in order to grant him his desire.” In Ephrem’s *Hymns on Virginity* we read: “Divinity flew down and descended to raise and draw up humanity. The Son has made beautiful the servant’s deformity, and he has become a god, just as he desired.” And if Athanasius is typically credited with the definitive epigram of theosis, Ephrem is no less aphoristic. In his *Hymn on Faith* he puts the whole matter succinctly enough: “He gave us

³⁶ See Lossky, *Vision* 98

³⁷ John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith* 4 4, 2 12, 3 18, 20

³⁸ Psellus *Omnifarious Doctrine* 71, *Oration on the Salutation to Mary* 2, cf Pelikan, *Spirit* 247

³⁹ Cf Ware, *Orthodox* 130–132

⁴⁰ Ode 4, Troparion 3, cf Ware, *Orthodox* 236

⁴¹ Cf N Arseniev, *Mysticism and the Eastern Church* (Crestwood St Vladimir’s Seminary, 1979) 148

divinity, we gave Him humanity."⁴² Later we will see that for many of the eastern theologians the very means of deification are found in the sacramental life of the Church.

III. DEIFICATION DEFINED

But what, exactly, does it mean to be "divinized" or to "become god"? In attempting to define theosis, Orthodoxy would have us begin with two cautions.

First, remembering its predilection for apophatic theology we must not "seek what is too difficult or investigate what is beyond our power." Instead we can only "reflect upon what has been assigned to us, for [we] do not need what is hidden" (Sir 3:21–22). Because theosis is ultimately a mystery we need to use discretion when trying to define it. In some sense theosis defies analysis.

Deification, insists St. Macarios of Egypt (c. 300–390), is "subtle and profound."⁴³ Palamas, who devoted an entire treatise to the subject, is nevertheless reluctant to describe the indescribable:

Although we have written at length about stillness . . . we have never dared to write about deification. But now, since there is need to speak, we will speak, reverently, with the Lord's grace, though to describe it is beyond our skill. For even when spoken of, deification remains unutterable: as the Fathers say, it can be identified only by those who have been blessed with it.⁴⁴

Union with the divine, asserts Maximos the Confessor, "in the nature of things, cannot be perceived, conceived or expressed."⁴⁵

Second, all of the eastern theologians, both ancient and modern, uniformly and categorically repudiate any hint of pantheism. Whatever it means to "become god," the essence of human nature is not lost. In this sense we can say that human theosis is a relative rather than an absolute transformation. There is a real and genuine union of the believer with God, but it is not a literal fusion or confusion in which the integrity of human nature is compromised. Orthodoxy consistently rejects the idea that humans participate in the essence or nature of God. Rather, we remain distinctly human by nature but participate in God by the divine energies or grace. At no point, even when deified, is our humanity diminished or destroyed.

Thus Maximos writes that "all that God is, *except for an identity in ousia*, one becomes when one is deified by grace." When the Logos became man and deified us, he changed human nature "not in its essential nature but in its quality."⁴⁶ In his definition of theosis Anastasios Sinaites insists upon the same distinction: "Theosis is the elevation to what is better, but not the

⁴² St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1990) 72–74

⁴³ Macarios *Macarian Homilies* 4 67, cf. *Philokalia* 3 314

⁴⁴ G. Palamas, *Triads: Defense of the Holy Hesychasts* (New York: Paulist, n.d.) 3 1 32. Cf. Mantzaridis, *Deification* 127

⁴⁵ Maximos, *Various Texts on Theology* 4 19, cf. *Philokalia* 2 240

⁴⁶ Maximos, *Book of Ambiguities* 41, cf. Pelikan, *Spirit* 267 (italics mine), Maximos, *Various Texts on Theology* 2 26, cf. *Philokalia* 2 193

reduction of our nature to something less, nor is it an essential change of our human nature. . . . That which is of God is that which has been lifted up to a greater glory, without its own nature being changed."⁴⁷ John of Damascus distinguished between "man becoming deified in the way of participating in the Divine Glory, and not in that of a change into a Divine Being."⁴⁸ St. Macarios likewise is careful to protect the creature-Creator distinction, writing that even when we are deified by grace "Peter is Peter, Paul is Paul, Philip is Philip. Each one retains his own nature and personal identity, but they are all filled with the Holy Spirit."⁴⁹

IV. SYNONYMS AND ANALOGIES

Keeping these two disclaimers in mind, we can further our definition of theosis by looking at the various synonyms and analogies or metaphors that Orthodoxy uses to explain the mystery of salvation. Theosis, according to the vocabulary of the fathers, can be described by a number of related words. It is a transformation, union, participation, partaking, intermingling, elevation, interpenetration, transmutation, commingling, assimilation, reintegration, adoption, recreation. Divinization implies our being intertwined with Christ, an influx of the divine, or the attainment of similitude with God.⁵⁰

The most fitting analogy for theosis is the incarnation of God. God and man are "examples of each other," according to Maximos, in the sense that as he was incarnate, man was endivinized. But in this analogy to Christ the Greek fathers are careful to maintain the distinction just mentioned. Our union with God is not a hypostatic one, as with the two natures of Christ, nor a union of essence, as with the three persons of the Trinity. In the incarnation, God "makes man god to the same degree as God Himself became man" except that he "will divinize human nature without changing it into the divine nature."⁵¹ Thus, writes Palamas, "the Logos became flesh, and the flesh became Logos, even though neither abandoned its own proper nature."⁵²

Macarios and Chrysostom employ the analogy of marriage to define theosis. Just as two people are joined together in one flesh, all the while maintaining the integrity of their separate identities, just as they share a single existence and hold all things in common, so the believer is joined to God in an "ineffable communion" (cf. 1 Cor 6:15-17). In several places Maximos even dares to call this theosis an "erotic union."⁵³ Elsewhere Chrysostom compares our union with God to grains of wheat: "Just as the bread is constituted by many grains united together so that the grains cannot be distinguished from one another even though they are there, since their difference is made

⁴⁷ A Sinaites *Concerning the Word*, in Stavropoulos, *Nature* 19

⁴⁸ John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith* 2 12

⁴⁹ Cf T Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood St Vladimir's Seminary, 1990) 168

⁵⁰ I have taken these terms from the *Philokalia*

⁵¹ Maximos, *Various Texts on Theology* 1 62, cf *Philokalia* 2 177-178

⁵² Cf Mantzaridis, *Deification* 29

⁵³ Chrysostom *Homily 20 on Ephesians* 5 22-33, Macarios *Macarian Homilies* 6 124, cf *Philokalia* 3 340, Maximos, *Various Texts on Theology* 3 30, cf *Philokalia* 2 216

unapparent in their cohesion, in the same manner we are joined together both to each other and to Christ." Cyril of Alexandria likens our participation in Christ to a person who "joins wax to wax," to the interpenetration of yeast with a lump of dough, or to red-hot iron penetrated by fire.⁵⁴ Finally, Maximus likens theosis to an eighth day of creation, "the transposition and transmutation of those found worthy into a state of deification."⁵⁵

V. FROM CORRUPTION TO IMMORTALITY

More specifically, in the Greek tradition theosis signifies the transposition of the believer from a state of corruption and mortality to one of incorruption or immortality. Here again the eastern tradition has a different emphasis than that in the west. In the Greek fathers the tragedy of Adam's fall was not that all people inherited his guilt, as in the Augustinian tradition. They hold, most certainly, that all people are sinful and that the fall was an incomparable disaster. But we all sin freely and merit our own guilt. Rather than guilt, in Adam we have inherited death, mortality and corruption. "The first man brought in universal death," writes Cyril of Jerusalem. Sin originates, Basil the Great insists, in our own free wills: "Do not then go beyond yourself to seek the evil, and imagine that there is an original nature of wickedness. . . . Each of us, let us acknowledge it, is the first author of his own vice."⁵⁶

Chrestou explains this important distinction:

The descendants of Adam inherit him in his entirety, including his nature and his weakness. They did not inherit Adam's guilt, as St. Augustine taught in the West; for, according to the view of the Greek fathers, sin is a personal problem. Adam and Eve on one side, and their descendants on the other, interpenetrate each other in such a way that every man bears by birth that nature which Adam and Eve corrupted. . . . In this way humankind has fallen from the road to life onto the road to death, from incorruption to corruption.⁵⁷

According to Anastasios of Sinai, we are heirs of Adam's corruption but "we are not punished for his disobedience to the Divine Law. Rather, Adam, being mortal, sin entered into his very seed. We receive mortality from him. . . . However, the general punishment of Adam for his transgression is corruption and death."⁵⁸

The work of God in theosis means the triumph of life over death. Typical are Symeon the New Theologian and Athanasius. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us he "regenerates you [and] changes you from corruptible to incorruptible, from mortal to immortal, from sons of men into sons of God and

⁵⁴ For the analogies of wheat, wax, leaven and iron cf. Stavropoulos, *Nature* 59, 62-63; on the analogies of iron and fire see Lossky, *Vision* 98.

⁵⁵ Maximus, *Two Hundred Texts on Theology* 1.54-55; cf. *Philokalia* 2.125.

⁵⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechesis* 13.2; Basil *That God is Not Responsible for Evil* 8; cf. Karmiris, *Synopsis* 33-34.

⁵⁷ Chrestou, *Partakers* 28.

⁵⁸ Anastasios of Sinai *Questions and Answers on Various Chapters* 143; cf. Karmiris, *Synopsis* 36.

gods by adoption and grace.”⁵⁹ In both of the passages of his work *On the Incarnation* in which he mentions theosis, Athanasius defines theosis as incorruption. By nature we are mortal, he says, but we are also made in the likeness of God, and if we preserve this likeness then our corruptible nature is deprived of its power and we attain incorruption: “And being incorrupt, ye would henceforth be as God, as Holy Scripture says, ‘I have said, “Ye are gods and sons of the highest, all of you”’” (Ps 82:6). Through the death of Christ deathlessness has been manifest, and through his shame we inherit immortality.⁶⁰

VI. FROM IMAGE TO LIKENESS

The eastern fathers also define theosis as the movement from the divine image to the divine likeness. Many (but not all) Orthodox theologians make this distinction. For Diadochos of Photiki, Maximos, John of Damascus, Palamas and others we can say that every person is made in the divine image but that only a few attain the transformation of the distorted image into the divine likeness.⁶¹ According to this distinction we all possess the divine image by nature, but only some acquire divine likeness by vigilance.

The image of God is the common property of all people, an inherent aspect of every person’s human nature by virtue of creation (Gen 1:26–27). The image refers primarily to our rationality and capacity for free choice. The likeness of God, on the other hand, signifies a potential similitude to God that requires our free cooperation with God’s grace. The image might be thought of as potential likeness, and the likeness as realized image.⁶² The image is static, the likeness dynamic. As we cooperate with God’s grace he renews the distorted image in us so that we attain the likeness and consequently become godlike.

Basil observes that “the image was given to us in our nature, and it is unchangeable; from the beginning until the end it remains. The likeness, on the other hand, we gain and achieve through our cooperation and volition; [it] exists potentially in us, and is energized through the good life and excellent behaviour.”⁶³ Likewise Gregory of Nyssa: We “possess the image of God by being rational; you receive the likeness of God by acquiring virtue. In creation I have the image, but I become through the exercise of my free will in the likeness of God.”⁶⁴

Thus when by grace and imitation we move from the divine image to the divine likeness we become an “earthly God.” We reflect by grace all the many perfections that God alone possesses by nature and essence. In that

⁵⁹ Symeon the New Theologian *Discourses* 337

⁶⁰ Athanasius *On the Incarnation* 1 4, 8 54

⁶¹ Diadochos of Photiki *On Spiritual Knowledge* 89, Maximos, *Four Hundred Texts on Love* 3 24–27, *Two Hundred Texts on Theology* 1 13, John of Damascus, *On the Virtues and the Vices*, A Philemon, *Discourses*, cf *Philokalia* 1 253, 280, 288, 2 87, 116, 341, 350, 354

⁶² Chrestou, *Partakers*, 20–21, cf Stavropoulos, *Nature* 25, Mantzaridis, *Deification* 21

⁶³ Basil *On the Creation of Man*, cf Karmiris, *Synopsis* 29

⁶⁴ Cf Nicodemos, *Handbook* 219

transfiguration of our nature from image to likeness we are deified, according to the words of the psalmist (Ps 82:6).⁶⁵ Salvation, then, "is not possible but by the deification of the saved," writes Dionysius, and "deification is likeness and union with God."⁶⁶ Irenaeus sums up the dilemma of humanity and the remedy of the incarnation as the deification of people through the movement from image to likeness:

The Word of God was made man, assimilating Himself into man, and man into Himself, so that by means of his resemblance to the Son, man might become precious to the Father. For all times long past, it was said that man was created after the image of God, but it was not actually shown; for the Word was as yet invisible, after whose image man was created. Wherefore also he did lose the similitude. When, however, the Word of God became flesh, He confirmed both of these: for He showed forth the image truly, since He became Himself what was His image; and He reestablished the similitude after a sure manner, by assimilating man to the invisible Father by means of the visible Word.⁶⁷

In this assimilation to God, people move from nature to grace, from the divine image to the divine likeness, from sin to salvation through deification.

VII. CASE STUDY: THE *PHILOKALIA*

I have already anticipated the most practical of questions: Exactly how does one attain theosis? Orthodox theologians are unanimous that our final deification is realized only in the *eschaton* with the so-called "third birth," but nevertheless a very sure and certain beginning should characterize all Christians in the present age. The *Philokalia* is not only the single most important collection of Orthodox spiritual texts but also an excellent guidebook and case study to answer this question of the means of theosis. It is, according to its compiler Nicodemus, the "instrument itself of deification."⁶⁸

Although some compilation of the texts apparently began as early as the late fourteenth century, the Greek text of the *Philokalia* (literally "love of the beautiful") was first published in Venice in 1782 and later in a five-volume edition in Athens (1957–63). The present English version is three volumes, although plans call for a total of five volumes. Compiled by St. Nicodemus of Athos, who discovered the "dusty and moth-eaten" manuscripts in the monastery at Athos, the *Philokalia* is an anthology of texts written by Orthodox Christians from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries. In addition to his important introduction to the anthology Nicodemus corrected some of the texts through a philological comparison of manuscripts and added short biographies of each author. By many estimates the influence of the *Philokalia* in the Orthodox tradition is second only to the Bible.

Nicodemus' introduction to the *Philokalia* provides a "synoptic expression of all Orthodox spirituality . . . a panoramic view of the history of salvation,

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.16.2; cf. Karmiris, *Synopsis* 30.

⁶⁸ Cf. G. Gebis, "Introduction," Nicodemus, *Handbook* 20–24.

creation, fall, and redemption." Deification takes center stage in this worldview, for it is the ultimate purpose of God's creation. The unifying theme throughout the many texts of the *Philokalia*, written over a period of a thousand years and from different cultural perspectives, is precisely and practically how a person can fulfill his or her calling or vocation, which calling is the summons of theosis or union with God.

Interestingly enough we can say that for the writers of the *Philokalia* the gift of theosis comes by grace through faith and not by works. Especially significant here is the text by Mark the Ascetic, *On Those Who Think That They Are Made Righteous By Works*. On the contrary we are, insist Maximos and Peter of Damaskos, "deified by grace." We "become god through union with God by faith."⁶⁹

To be more exact, the *Philokalia* urges a very clear synergism or cooperation between the grace of God and human effort. Macarios explains the matter of sovereign grace and human responsibility:

We receive salvation by grace and as a divine gift of the Spirit But to attain the full measure of virtue we need also to possess faith and love, and to struggle to exercise our free will with integrity In this manner we inherit eternal life as a consequence of both grace and justice We do not reach the final stage of spiritual maturity through divine power and grace alone, without ourselves making any effort, but neither on the other hand do we attain the final measure of freedom and purity as a result of our own diligence and strength alone, apart from any divine assistance If the Lord does not build the house, it is said, and protect the city, in vain does the watchman keep awake, and in vain do the labourer and builder work ⁷⁰

Thus faith without works and works without faith are equally rejected (James). In Pauline language, we labor and strive, but only through the empowering grace of God working in us (Phil 2:12–13; 1 Cor 15:10–11).

What direction, exactly, does this human effort take? At the risk of oversimplification we can summarize the *Philokalia* and the human means of theosis with one Greek word: *nepsis*—that is, vigilance, watchfulness, intensity, zeal, alertness, attentiveness, spiritual wariness. The neptic mindset recognizes the reality of our spiritual warfare, that our Christian life is a strenuous battle, fierce drama, or "open contest" (*Theoretikon*), and responds accordingly.

Such vigilance will express itself in many ways. Of special concern in the *Philokalia* is our struggle with the passions and vice, which are analyzed at length, and our efforts to attain dispassion and virtue through bodily asceticism (fasting, vigils, prostrations, tears, repentance).⁷¹ Through such dispassion we will attain an inner equilibrium that helps us to "daily wait on God's providence toward us," and whatever form should that providence

⁶⁹ Maximos, *Various Texts on Theology*, cf *Philokalia* 2 189–190, 243, 246, 263, 267, et al., Peter of Damaskos, *Treasury of Divine Knowledge*, cf *Philokalia* 3 79

⁷⁰ Macarios *Macarian Homilies* 1 1, cf *Philokalia* 3 285

⁷¹ Cf e.g. the list of 228 virtues and 298 vices by Peter of Damaskos, *Treasury of Divine Knowledge*, cf *Philokalia* 3 2-3-206, or the analysis of the same by J Cassian *On the Eight Vices*, cf *Philokalia* 1 73–93

take, we can receive it "gratefully, gladly, and eagerly."⁷² The "science of stillness" (Evagrius), contemplation, and the interiorization of prayer through the constant invocation of the name of Jesus are also of chief importance. Such prayer, advises Evagrius, must always be with "conscious awareness" and not mere ritual. Related to both dispassion and stillness is our need for detachment from the world, from what St. Neilos calls our "groveling in the dust of worldliness," empty trivialities, stupid conformity to fashion, and our modern civilized shamelessness. We must be constantly vigilant that we avoid the "false glitter of this life" (Diadochos of Photiki). To all of this we must add the divine gift of discrimination.

To dispassion, stillness, prayer, detachment and discrimination we can add other means to divinization. We must participate faithfully in the sacraments. Seeking the regular counsel of a guide or spiritual father will save us from many sins. Keeping the commandments of God is indispensable: "In the end they make a man god, through the grace of Him who has given the commandments to those who choose to keep them."⁷³ Above all things we must put on love, for "love makes a man god."⁷⁴

Although some of the ways and means of theosis sound strange to many western Christians, the neptic life is nothing exoteric or esoteric. It is intended for all Christians and not just those who have taken monastic vows. As St. Theognostos observed, the life of the laity "brings us no less close to God than the priesthood."⁷⁵ In fact many priests betray their monastic garb by their style of life. Further, we must never imagine that there is anything mechanical or magical about these many neptic means to godlikeness. Mere ritual or rote practice are the enemies of progress in the Christian life. On this point the *Philokalia* is insistent. Bodily asceticism is useless if it does not lead to moral reformation. Inward intention, whether good or evil, is more important than any outward action. We must turn talk, words, and mere theoretical understanding into practical experience and action.

In the end, according to the Orthodox fathers of the *Philokalia*, even if we were to become "master of the whole world" there is "only one real disaster" in life: our "failure to attain by grace the deification" for which we were created. Conversely, if we avail ourselves of God's grace and lead a life of spiritual vigilance, we can hope for the "glorious attainment of likeness to God, in so far as this is possible for man."⁷⁶

⁷² St Philotheos of Sinai, *Texts on Watchfulness* 20, cf *Philokalia* 3 24

⁷³ Peter of Damaskos, *Treasury of Divine Knowledge*, cf *Philokalia* 3 93, cf Nicodemos, *Handbook* 176, 180, 201

⁷⁴ Maximos, *Various Texts on Theology* 1 27-32, cf *Philokalia* 2 171

⁷⁵ Theognostos *On the Practice of the Virtues* 57, cf *Philokalia* 3 372

⁷⁶ Maximos, *On the Lord's Prayer*, *Various Texts on Theology* 2 88, cf *Philokalia* 2 297, 206