

THEOSIS IN LUTHER: Analysis of the New Finnish Luther Research

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Introduction



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The seemingly unusual theme of this article has to do with the new “Finnish Luther research” that initiated a new way of looking at Luther. This research dates back to the mid- 1970s and originated at the Department of Systematic Theology of the University of Helsinki. The impetus for the new “Finnish school” came from the ecumenical dialogue between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church. As a starting point for the Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue, a group of Finnish scholars under the leadership of Tuomo Mannermaa proposed a new understanding of Luther’s teaching on justification and suggested a way of converging it with the Orthodox view of salvation as *theosis* (also known as deification, or participation in God). In what follows, I will first attempt to recount the main arguments of the Finnish Luther research with a special emphasis on its methodology of describing the idea of participation in Luther. In doing so I will use a collection of published papers that provide a summary of four specific dissertations and form the basis for the Finnish Luther research in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (eds.), *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998). I will then proceed by pointing out that the Finnish methodology of describing participation in Luther—guided by the philosophical (critical) and theological (constructive) concerns—presses them to use two different (if not contradictory) ways of depicting participation in Luther.

In the second part of this article I will clarify the meaning of my argument by discussing a number of problematic statements on participation in God from *Union with Christ*. I will explain how these statements may provoke misunderstanding and why they need to be adjusted in view of the Palamite distinction between the essence and energies in God. To elaborate on this point, I will introduce briefly the difference between the Eastern and Western ways of describing God and the corresponding emphases on the relational and essentialist descriptions of *theosis*. On the basis of that discussion, I will then offer some practical suggestions to help us communicate Luther more effectively and increase the effect of ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox. I also hope that my suggestions will assist us in articulating the heart of the Evangelical belief about the personal nature of God and salvation.

1. The Finnish Breakthrough in Luther Research

The main idea of Finnish research asserts that Christ's indwelling as understood in the Lutheran tradition corresponds to the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* and implies a real participation in God. To explain this fundamental claim the Finns published a series of dissertations that challenge a century of interpretation dominated by German Protestant theologians (with their neo-Kantian presuppositions) and offer a new theological reading of Luther's texts. In the next three sections I will first introduce the Finnish criticism of the philosophical and theological presuppositions of the German Luther scholarship and then describe the main arguments of the Finnish research for *theosis* in Luther.

Realizing both the newness of the subject and the growing interest for *theosis* in Luther I will spend quite a bit of time introducing the current Finnish perspective itself. My rationale for doing so is to give more priority to hearing why the Finns themselves think their research is important rather than to why I think so. Only after the reader is familiar enough with their perspective will I proceed with my own perception of the subject by stating which aspects in the Finnish research are the most relevant from the Orthodox perspective, and I will spend the remaining part of this article explaining why and how these aspects may be improved. More specifically, I will share my impression that considered from the Orthodox viewpoint, Finnish scholars tend to speak two different languages: one in which they criticize the traditional interpretation of Luther by operating with the terminology of nature, or essence, and another in which they give a positive presentation of his thought with the help of concepts of relation. With these observations being made I will argue that an improved approach to *theosis* in Luther will resonate more consistently with the overall intention of the "Finnish school" and provide a stronger stimulus for the broader ecumenical scholarship.

1.1. Criticism of the Philosophical Presuppositions in Traditional Luther Research

The philosophical assumptions of traditional Luther research are specifically addressed and criticized in the Dissertation of Risto Saarinen who published it in 1989 as *Gottes Wirken auf uns. Die transzendente Deutung des Gegenwart-Christ-Motivs in der Lutherforschung*.^[1] The findings of Saarinen's research are summarized in Tuomo Mannermaa's paper "Why is Luther so Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research."^[2] Saarinen investigates the philosophical assumptions of Luther studies by analyzing the way the ontological status of God's presence has been interpreted in that research. He shows that the decisive role in the interpretation of the presence-of-Christ motif belongs to the German philosopher Hermann Lotze (1817–1881). Lotze denied that things must exist in themselves in order to be able to stand in relationship to other things. The only sense of "being" for him is "standing in relationship."^[3] Accordingly, "standing in a mutually affecting relationship to other beings is the primary sense of what it means for a thing to *be*. Being is what happens in reciprocal affectings."^[4] Epistemologically, this view implies that the world of substances remains beyond the scope of human knowledge and we cannot arrive at the being-in-itself. Instead, we can only grasp the effects that flow from the unknown object of knowledge. The result of this affecting upon us, according to Lotze, is that things receive their form from our nature, that is, from one's *a priori* constitution: "For even if things are, our 'knowledge' of them nevertheless cannot consist in their entering into us themselves, but only in their affects upon us. The products of this affecting, however, as effects in our being, can only receive their form from our nature."^[5] When it comes to the philosophy of religion Lotze designates religious effects to the realm of the "person" rather than to the realm of the knowledge of "nature" and argues that they pertain to the area of "values" and ethics. In light of this view, he holds that the effects of the Infinite (*das Unendliche*) on the soul (*Gemüth*) are effects of the will of God and that God's presence in the soul takes place as a community of willing and affecting (*gemeinschaft des Wollens und des Wirkens*), but not as a union of being (*unio*).^[6]

Contrasting Lotze's view with the Finnish understanding of Luther's position on the subject, Mannermaa writes: "Whatever Luther's stance on nominalism may be, in his theology, at least, he follows the classical epistemology quite explicitly from beginning to end." As an example, he refers to a passage from *Sermo de duplici iustitiae* (1518) where Luther writes: "Thus the righteousness of Christ becomes our righteousness through faith in Christ, and everything that is his, even he himself, becomes ours... and he who believes in Christ clings to Christ and is one with Christ and has the same righ-

^[1] Veröffentlichungen des Institut für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Abteilung Religionsgeschichte, ed. Peter Manns. Bd. 137.

^[2] *Union with Christ*, 1-20.

^[3] *Union with Christ*, 5.

^[4] *Union with Christ*, 5.

^[5] *Union with Christ*, 7.

^[6] *Union with Christ*, 7.

teousness with him.”^[7] Mannermaa explains this passages by saying that “here Luther expresses a realist conception of knowledge according to which knowledge brings about a real participation in the object that is known. Thus Luther teaches by means of philosophical analogy that the essence of the relationship to God is a community of being.”^[8] The idea of the real participation in Luther is further supported in the Finnish dissertation by Sammeli Juntunen, *Der Begriff des Nichts bei Luther in den Jahren 1510 bis 1523* (Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft 36, Helsinki, 1996). In *Union with Christ* this work is summarized in the paper “Luther and Metaphysics: What is the Structure of Being according to Luther?” Juntunen criticizes the so-called personalist Luther-interpretation (Gerhard Ebeling, Wilfried Joest, zur Mühlen) that views faith not in terms of being, but in terms of relation to God. Connecting his research with that of Risto Saarinen, he stresses that the anti-metaphysical or anti-ontological notion of Luther’s thought is characteristic of the neo-Kantian division between *Geist* and *Natur* and is clearly reflected in the “neo-Protestant” Luther-scholarship (Albrecht Ritschl, Wilhelm Herrmann) and in the Luther-interpretation of the Luther-renaissance (Karl Holl, Erich Vogelsang, Reinhold Seebert, Erich Seeberg). In these interpretations faith, for Luther, is a reality referring to “*Geist*” and thus can be articulated by ethical or relational concepts and not through ontological “*Seins-Aussagen*.”^[9]

In response, Juntunen suggests that Luther is in some sense indeed “anti-metaphysical” but not in the sense of rejecting the concept of being. Instead, the anti-metaphysical element of Luther’s theology has to do with his understanding that the motivating principle of the scholastic metaphysics is *amor hominis* (self-centered love), rather than *amor dei* (self-giving love). In light of this distinction, the metaphysical thought is not seeking God, but oneself and one’s own good; it wants to reach the *summum bonum* through being wise in its own eyes and in the eyes of its neighbor. As a result, “the metaphysician finds the *summum bonum*, but this is not God; this is the *summum bonum* in respect to *amor hominis*.”^[10] This self-centered principle of life, *amor hominis*, is destroyed when a believer receives Christ as the new principle of spiritual being (*opus alienum—opus proprium*). Only then can we employ philosophizing as *ancilla theologiae*.^[11]

In discussing more specifically the role of metaphysics in Luther’s thinking, Juntunen suggests that “his understanding of the structure of being is above all *theological*—it is a matter about which one knows something through the Scriptures and through the intellect, which assumes (*apprehensio*) the divine Word.”^[12] In reconstructing Luther’s understanding of being (*esse*

^[7] WA 1, 29, 26-27, as quoted in *Union with Christ*, 6. The original text comes from Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–1902) and will be abbreviated as WA.

^[8] *Union with Christ*, 6.

^[9] *Union with Christ*, 130-1.

^[10] *Union with Christ*, 132.

^[11] *Union with Christ*, 134.

^[12] *Union with Christ*, 135.

naturae and *esse gratiae*), Juntunen draws a connection between Luther and William of Ockham in their understanding of creation as a continuous act of God. He suggests:

“Luther’s notion of being is clearly connected with this Ockhamistic *creatio continua*.... For Luther being is not a static being-in-itself. Being is a matter of continuous reception of being from God. Human beings exist only because they receive God’s gifts from outside themselves, such as life, being (*esse*), reason, intellect, nourishment, and clothing.”^[13]

Furthermore, contrary to the Ockhamist tradition (which understood the reality of grace as something accidental in the human substance) Luther extends the scope of *creatio continua* into the *esse gratiae*. Thus, “the *esse gratiae* of a person, like the *esse naturae*, is a continuous reception of the gifts of God, namely, the *dona gratiae*, the “*sacramenta et bona ecclesiae*” in which Christ himself is present and is given to the Christian. Through these sacramental gifts (i.e. through Christ, who is given in them) the Christian continuously receives life, reason, being, and nourishment on the level of spiritual existence.”^[14] In light of this, Juntunen thinks that Luther’s “notion of the *creatio continua* makes at least partly understandable Luther’s criticism in his early writings of the use of the terms *substantia* and *quidditas* in theology.”^[15] In a more elaborated way, Juntunen further concludes: “Faith is not only an existential relation to something, which stays outside the believer, but is a relation that causes a principle (*forma*) of spiritual being (*esse*) and spiritual action (*agere*) to be received *inside* the believer, as a new spiritual reality. The presence of this spiritual *forma* produces a spiritual existence that is not only a “becoming” (*Werden*) in extrinsic relation to God, but also a “being” (*Sein*).”^[16]

When considering the idea of participation in Luther, Juntunen touches on Luther’s Ockhamist methodological education which rejected God’s presence as a necessary requirement for the creatures’ existence and insisted that God’s absolute will alone was able to bring into existence the individual substances. In explaining the relation of Ockhamist education to Luther’s thought, Juntunen writes:

We should understand, however, that Ockhamist ontology..., based on the theory of *suppositio*, could not make a total breakthrough in all areas of theology. Luther’s teachers Jodocus Trutvetter and Bartholomaus Usingen, who wanted to renew teaching at the University of Erfurt and bring it into line with orthodox Ockhamist tradition, were actually themselves Ockhamist only in their logic. When they treated themes like creation or the existence of creatures in their natural philosophy, they could imply the concept of participation in a way that was contradictory to Ockham’s basic intentions. The education which Luther received can be called Ockhamist only in a

^[13] *Union with Christ*, 139.

^[14] *Union with Christ*, 140.

^[15] *Union with Christ*, 141.

^[16] *Union with Christ*, 145.

limited sense. That his teachers did not pay much attention to contradiction between the use of *suppositio* theory and the ontological use of the concept of participation leads one to think that Luther might have understood created being as participation in God, though as a good “terminist” he should not have done so.^[17]

To substantiate his claim Juntunen points to Luther’s praise of the concept of *participatio* in the philosophical portion of the Heidelberg disputation and refers to the idea of God’s omnipresence in Luther as implying God’s presence in each being at the basis of its existence. He adds that “... as far as the spiritual existence—the *esse gratiae*—is in question, clearly this *esse* means for Luther participation in God through Christ. According to Luther a Christian is “in Christ”; the Christian exists in him through participation in him. One is righteous because one is posited in Christ.”^[18]

1.2. Criticism of the Theological Presuppositions in Traditional Luther Research

Two Finnish dissertations that deal specifically with the idea of *theosis* in Luther are: (1) Simo Peura, *Mehr als ein Mensch? Die Vergöttlichung als Thema der Theologie Martin Luthers von 1513–1519*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Bd. 152 (Stuttgart, 1994) and (2) Antti Raunio, *Die Summe des christlichen Lebens. Die „Goldene Regel“ als Gesetz der Liebe in Der Theologie Martin Luthers von 1510 bis 1527* (not yet published in 1998). In *Union with Christ*, they are represented in three separate papers entitled: (1) “Christ as Favor and Gift: The Challenge of Luther’s Understanding of Justification”, (2) “What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation” and (3) “Natural Law and Faith: The Forgotten Foundations of Ethics in Luther’s Theology.” I will briefly summarize the main points of their arguments below.

In the view of Peura, one of the most challenging problems in the Lutheran theology has to do with the relation between the forensic (*gratia, favor*) and effective (*donum*) aspects of justification. Peura argues that Luther related the two closely to each other no later than in 1515/16 when he produced his *Lectures on Romans*. After quoting several passages from Luther that point to the fact that the grace of God and the gift represent the very righteousness given to us through Christ, he explains: “Furthermore, grace and gift are given not only through Christ, but in Christ and with Christ. For whatever distinction Luther makes between them, he also always keeps them together. In his foreword to the German translation of Romans (1522) Luther points out that grace and gift are in Christ and they become ours when Christ is “poured” into us.”^[19] Peura adds that the difference between the grace and gift for Luther is that the former is the *external* good, God’s favor-

^[17] *Union with Christ*, 149.

^[18] *Union with Christ*, 152.

^[19] *Union with Christ*, 43.

able disposition that thwarts his wrath, whereas the latter constitutes the Christian's *internal* good that "effects in a sinner his real renewal (*renovatio*), because it replaces sin with the righteousness of Christ and purifies a sinner from sin (*sanitas iustitiae*)."^[20] Peura argues that the reason why the relation between grace and gift in Luther's theology has been understood incorrectly is because it has been explained according to the interpretation in the *Formula of Concord (FC)*.^[21] Contrary to Luther, the *FC* includes only God's favor—imputed righteousness—and excludes gift because of "its aim to reject Andreas Osiander, who emphasized the indwelling of the divine nature in his doctrine of justification."^[22] Peura explains that "the problem of Osiander's doctrine was not actually his claim that justification was based on God's indwelling in a Christian, but the Christological presuppositions of this claim. Osiander (in opposition to Luther) separated Christ's human nature and divine nature from each other and broke the *unio personalis* in Christ."^[23] Summarizing this point, Peura writes:

The domination of the *FC* and its interpretation of grace and gift were guaranteed in Lutheranism since the end of the nineteenth century above all through neo-Kantian theology and philosophy. Because of this separation [God's being (*esse*) and his effects (*Wirkungen*) from each other], such theological ideas as the union of God and the Christian (*unio cum Deo*) become impossible... Because of the *FC* and the neo-Kantian interpretation, gift and the effective aspect of justification have lost their ontological content in Lutheran theology. Gift (*donum*) has taken on the meaning of a new relation to God, a change in one's self-understanding or existential confidence in God's mercy. The content of gift is actually reduced to the Christian's insight that he has a new position *coram Deo*.^[24]

Arguing against this understanding of justification in Luther, Peura proposes one in which God donates his own being to humanity. More specifically, he states: "The self-giving of God is realized when Christ indwells the sinner through faith and thus unites himself with the sinner. This means that the Christian receives salvation *per Christum* only under the condition of *unio cum Christo*. Luther's conviction on this point leads to the conclusion that a Christian becomes a partaker of Christ and that a Christian is in this sense also deified."^[25]

^[20] *Union with Christ*, 44.

^[21] The specific text in mind from the *FC* (quoted in *Union with Christ*, 27-28) reads as following: "We must also explain correctly the discussion concerning the indwelling of God's essential righteousness in us. On the one hand, it is true indeed that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is the eternal and essential righteousness, dwells by faith in the elect who have been justified through Christ and reconciled with God, since all Christians are temples of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who impels them to do rightly. But, on

the other hand, this indwelling of God is not the righteousness of faith of which St. Paul speaks and which he calls the righteousness of God, on account of which we are declared just before God. This indwelling follows the preceding righteousness of faith, which is precisely the forgiveness of sins and the gracious acceptance of poor sinners on account of the obedience and merit of Christ."

^[22] *Union with Christ*, 46.

^[23] *Union with Christ*, 46.

^[24] *Union with Christ*, 46.

^[25] *Union with Christ*, 51.

In his second paper “What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation,” Peura develops this idea of the Christian’s union with God through Christ with the help of Luther’s concept of love of God and neighbor. In doing so, he changes the traditional portrait of Luther’s search of justification by stating that “Luther’s work cannot be understood properly as deriving from the existential anguish of a monk who became freed from his distress only when he discovered that God in his grace had declared him righteous. Rather, the question challenging Luther was simply the classic problem that has exercised all Christians throughout the history of the church. He was trying to work out a solid answer to the great commandment of Scripture [to love God and our neighbor in Luke 10:27].”^[26] According to this view, Luther’s entire theological work is understood as an attempt to solve the problem of self-serving love. Luther is also viewed as being convinced that our (loving or unloving) actions to our neighbor affect our own salvation. The examples that show Luther’s attempt to deal with the problem of love, according to Peura, include Luther’s “effort to build a system of social welfare with the city council of Wittenberg, his emphasis on the Golden Rule as the basis for all inter-human relations, his doctrine of two kingdoms, his critique of usury and the legal system, and his instructions for being a righteous and fair sovereign.”^[27] In fact, the main issue of Luther’s *Large Catechism* is understood as expressing his conviction that “a believer receives through faith a pure, unselfish love from God, who is himself this love and who gives it to the believer who desires to receive him.”^[28] Peura concludes:

The Reformer often argues that pure love, as well as the faith through which such love is given, is the copula that unites God and the human heart to each other. God first loves man and becomes one with the object of his love. And then this love affects those who receive it in such a way that they begin as well to love God. This mutual loves forges a unifying relation between God and the receiving person, a relation that becomes ever deeper. The person thus partakes of God and thereby undergoes a thoroughgoing transformation. Love is a unifying power that tends to change the loving person into what is loved.^[29]

Thus, redemption is something that happens not only on the cross but also in all believers whom Christ indwells through faith. In light of this, Luther’s idea of salvation as the so-called wonderful exchange (*commercium admirabile*) is understood as the means by which Christ absorbs our sin and death by communicating to us his own divine attributes (such as righteousness, wisdom, and eternal life) which make us Godlike. A similar explanation is also offered in Antti Raunio in his paper “Natural Law and Faith: The Forgotten Foundations of Ethics in Luther’s Theology,” when he says: “Uniting with Christ occurs through the love that is donated to the Christian through faith.

^[26] *Union with Christ*, 76.

^[27] *Union with Christ*, 78.

^[28] *Union with Christ*, 79.

^[29] *Union with Christ*, 81.

In uniting love Christ and the Christian receive each other and put themselves in each other's places."^[30] Accordingly, "the result is that we are made partakers of his divine nature and thus transformed into God. We can, therefore, speak about salvation as *theosis* in a genuine Lutheran sense of the word."^[31]

1.3. *Theosis* in Luther and the Question of Perspective

According to Finnish research, Luther believed that "God gives himself as the Word in the historical birth of Christ and in the spiritual birth of Christ in the faith of the believer."^[32] As a point of departure for understanding Luther's connection between the coming of the Word and *theosis*, the Finnish scholars refer to Luther's Christmas sermon of 1514 in which *theosis* is expressed with the help of the patristic formulations made by Irenaeus and Athanasius:

Just as the Word of God became flesh, so it is certainly also necessary that the flesh may become word. In other words: God becomes man so that man may become God. Thus power becomes powerless so that weakness may become powerful. The *Logos* puts on our form and pattern, our image and likeness, so that it may clothe us with its image, its pattern, and its likeness. Thus wisdom becomes foolish so that foolishness may become wisdom, and so it is in all other things that are in God and in us, to the extent that in all these things he takes what is ours to himself in order to impart what is his to us.^[33]

Mannermaa observes that shortly after this statement Luther substantiates the real character of this union by employing analogies from Aristotelian philosophy in which the object of intellect and love are the being and act (*esse et actus*) of the intellect and love itself. Mannermaa comments: "Thus arises a radically different concept of the relationship between God and man than had been previously described in the interpretative traditions of the Luther Renaissance and of dialectical theology. Luther's concept concerns more than the notion of the union of the will of God with that of man (Luther Renaissance). And it also goes beyond the concept of a community of deed or of act in revelation (dialectical theology). Rather, it refers to a community of being of God and man."^[34]

Further, an important focal point in Finnish Luther research is the connection between Luther's idea of participation in God and his concept of love. A text that is suggested by the Finns as a paradigmatic model of Luther's understanding of participation and love comes from WA 17 II, 74, 20-75, 11:

Once again the example of love is prefigured here in Christ with the leper. For here you see how love makes him a servant, so that he helps the poor man freely and for nothing, seeks neither pleasure, favor, nor honor thereby, but only the good of the poor man and the honor of God the Father. For which reason he also forbids him to tell anyone, so that it be an absolutely pure work

^[30] *Union with Christ*, 117.

^[31] *Union with Christ*, 91.

^[32] *Union with Christ*, 10.

^[33] WA 1, 28, 25-32 as quoted in *Union with Christ*, 11.

^[34] *Union with Christ*, 11-12.

of free, kindly love. That is how, as I have said often enough, faith makes us lords; through faith we even become gods and partake of the divine nature and name, as Psalm 81 says: "I have said, you are gods and children all together of the highest of the high." But through love we become like the poorest of the poor. According to the faith we need nothing and yet have complete abundance. Through faith we receive good from above from God. Through love we release them from below to our neighbor. Just as Christ according to his deity needed nothing, but in his humanity served everyone who needed him.

We have said often enough that through faith we must be born God's children and gods, lords and kings, just as Christ is born in eternity a true God of the Father. And we must once again break out through love to help our neighbor with good deeds, just as Christ became man to help us all. And just as Christ did not earn his divinity beforehand through works or achieve it by becoming man, but rather had this divinity from birth without any works and before he became man, so also we have not through works of love earned being God's children, by which our sins are forgiven and death and hell cannot harm us, but rather have received this out of grace through faith in the gospel, without works and before love. And as Christ did not become man to serve us until after he had been God eternally, so also we do good and love our neighbor only after we have previously become pious, without sin, living, blessed, and God's children through faith.^[35]

Finnish scholars point out that for Luther *theosis* works in two interconnected directions: it starts *vertically* (as one partakes of God) and is fulfilled *horizontally* (as one releases God's gift in love to one's neighbor). Thus in its final intention Luther's doctrine of *theosis* implied that "a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and his neighbor. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love."^[36] In connection to this idea, Finnish scholars also emphasize that the underlying concept of participation in the quoted text makes it possible for Luther to relate faith and love christologically. The basis for such relation between faith and love is said to be the fact that Luther did not distinguish between the person and the work of Christ: "Christ himself, both his person and his work, is the righteousness of man before God. Christ is both *favor* of God (forgiveness of sins, atonement, abolition of wrath) and gift (*donum*), God himself present. Faith means justification precisely on the basis of Christ's person being present in it as favor and gift. *In ipsa fide Christus adest*: in faith itself Christ is present, and so the whole of salvation."^[37] According to Mannermaa, Luther's idea of participation in God finds its theoretical expression in the notion of Christ as the form (*Seinswirklichkeit*, Being) of faith (*Christus forma fidei*).^[38] Contrasting Luther's concept

^[35] *Union with Christ*, 13-14.

^[37] *Union with Christ*, 28.

^[36] WA 31, 371, as quoted in *Union with Christ*, 19.

^[38] *Union with Christ*, 15.

of love as *agape* with that of scholastic theology as *caritas*-love (which Luther criticized), he suggests that Christ himself is the divine reality of being, the *forma*, which makes faith “real.” To illustrate Luther’s strong emphasis on God’s initiative and divine presence in the believer, Mannermaa refers to the text from Luther in *WA 17 I, 438, 14-28*:

... and we are so filled “with all sorts of God’s abundance,” which is in the Hebrew manner as much as saying that we are filled in all ways in which he makes full, and, full of God we are showered with all gifts and grace and filled with his Spirit, so that it makes us courageous and illuminated by his light, and his life lives in us, his beatitude makes us blessed, his love awakens love in us. In short, that everything he is and can do be in us fully and affect vigorously, so that we become completely divine, not having a piece or even a few pieces of God, but all abundance. Much has been written about how man is to become divine; they have made ladders on which one might climb up to heaven and many such things. But this is all vain beggar’s work (*Partheckenwerk*); here the right and closest way to get there is shown so that you may become full of God, that you may not be lacking any piece, but have everything all together, that everything you say or think, everywhere you go, in sum: the whole life be completely divine.^[39]

In light of these and other similar considerations on Luther, the “Finnish school” proposes to reconsider the traditional understanding of Luther’s thought and suggests that the main thrust of his theology is the idea of *theosis* or union with God. Throughout their study of Luther’s texts, the Finns repeatedly call attention to the newly discovered connections between the Lutheran tradition and the common classical Christian heritage. They conclude that Luther’s theology is ecumenically fruitful and Luther himself forges a serviceable passage for dialogue.^[40]

In my own analysis of the Finnish interpretation of Luther, I find the way it identifies new avenues of conversation with the Orthodox to be truly promising and fruitful. I believe that Finnish research has correctly recognized the theological nerve of Luther’s system by placing *theosis* in the forefront of his thought. I especially appreciate the way this research has been able to connect the doctrine of salvation as *theosis* with the doctrine of God in Luther’s thought. I also think that by using the Christological link to connect these two doctrines, the new interpretation of Luther makes him far more accessible to the Orthodox than before. In this sense, the theological assessment of Luther’s thought, coupled with the major revision of the traditional philosophical presuppositions, provides one of the most engaging perspectives to build on in the future. With this idea in mind, I would like to offer a specific suggestion in relation to the way the Finnish scholars have described *theosis* as participation in God throughout their study in *Union with Christ*. In the way Finnish scholars have constructed their arguments this suggestion will

^[39] *Union with Christ*, 16.

^[40] *Union with Christ*, 20.

have to do with what I would call two methodological perspectives on participation. According to the first one, participation is described primarily as a realist conception embedded in the terminology of being, nature or essence, while the second one portrays participation in personal terms of love and intimate communion with God. The realist conception is especially seen in the way the Finnish scholars formulate their arguments against the anti-metaphysical approach to Luther. It emphasizes the fact that Luther was interpreted one-sidedly through the lens of neo-Kantian epistemology (in which we cannot deal with being but only with relations) and insists on real participation in the very essence of God. In contrast, the idea of personal conception of *theosis* depicts participation in terms of love and intimate relationships and is especially articulated in the Finnish presentation of Luther's positive teaching on deification.

While both perspectives are inter-connected and support each other, there is a big chance that Orthodox Christians who are historically guided by the so-called essence-energies distinction (in which only the energies are seen as participable and not the essence of God) may perceive the two as being improperly related. Moreover, the Orthodox may suspect that Finnish scholars operate in two different (if not contradictory) languages in which they simply vacillate between the essentialist and personal conceptions (understood as excluding one another from the Palamite viewpoint) rather than provide a clear-cut distinction of what we do and do not partake in God. To explain this point more clearly, I would like to briefly introduce the main idea of the Palamite distinction between the essence and energies in God that forms the basis for the language of participation in the Orthodox tradition. I will then examine a number of instances where Finnish scholars do their best to discern this distinction and where their statements are less sensitive to it and can, therefore, be adjusted in the future.

2. What Can be Improved: The Language and Content of Participation

The doctrine of *theosis* in the Orthodox theology is closely related to its understanding of God as the one who communicates himself through energies or attributes while remaining utterly inaccessible in his divine essence or nature. Energies express God's manifestation to the world whereas essence points to what he is in himself. This distinction is most closely identified with the fourteenth-century Byzantine theologian, Gregory Palamas, who formulated it in defense of the monastic practice of inner prayer, the so-called *Hesychasm*.^[41] Though having been largely neglected in Eastern thought, the Palamite distinction has been rediscovered in the twentieth century and redefined as the very foundation for *theosis*. In Western theology this distinction

^[41] Georgios Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Tradition* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 87-95.

somewhat corresponds to the concept of immanence and transcendence by which theologians define the divine presence in the world (immanence) and emphasize the fact that God is entirely beyond the Universe (transcendence). The main difference between these two pairs of distinctions is that the Orthodox doctrine of essence and energies assumes two distinct modes or levels of God's existence by emphasizing a sharp contrast between them, while the concept of immanence and transcendence commonly claims that God communicates himself to the world as he really is in the divine life.^[42] Despite the disagreement as to whether Palamas implied the real or ontological distinction between the essence and energies in God, there is a general sense that his model points to a much stronger distinction in God than what the West is historically accustomed to. According to the latter, the transcendent God is understood to be the same as the immanent God, while the difference between the two is explained as a matter of epistemological distinction. The heart of the matter (with a note of criticism to the Western understanding of God that does not distinguish between the divine essence and energies) is well explained by Dom Clement Lialine:

How does this deification of man, this participation in the divine nature which haunts Palamas, operate?... It is not a sharing in the unsharable divine essence. The contrary proposition would, of course, lead to heresy: if man could be at any moment united to the very essence of God, he would be God by nature... But if that is the state of things, is there still a deification? Yes, repeats Palamas, thanks to the divine energy, for this *can* be shared. It is, as we can now see, to safeguard the reality of man's deification without falling into the errors we have indicated, that he postulated the distinction between essence and energies. The energy which is given to man and deifies him is grace. This is what Palamas has set out, first and foremost, to magnify in his writings, claiming for it against his opponents an uncreated and really deifying character, for without this, man's deification would not be effected really but only metaphorically.^[43]

Given the fact that such "differentiation" in God is also related to the so-called *filioque* controversy (having to do with two different models of relating God's missions and processions) and in as much as Palamas himself makes a connection between his arguments against the *filioque* and the essence-energies distinction in God, some scholars^[44] have suggested (correctly, in my view) that fourteenth-century Palamism could be perceived as an indirect

[42] One of the classical examples of this idea is Karl Rahner's statement that "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity" in his *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 22.

[43] Dom Clement Lialine, "The Theological Teaching of Gregory Palamas on Divine Simplicity," *Eastern Churches Quarterly*, 6

(1945-46): 277.

[44] e.g. John Meyendorff, "The Holy Trinity in Palamite Theology," in *Trinitarian Theology East and West* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1977), 30-33; Chrestos Yannaras, "The Distinction Between Essence and Energies and its Importance for Theology," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 19.4 (1975): 232-45.

response to Western essentialism rather than merely a local Eastern controversy between Palamas and his opponent, Barlaam. This view considers Barlaam as an Aristotelian^[45] thinker and interprets Palamas' arguments as being ultimately targeted against the Thomistic understanding of God as divine essence. The main point of this view is expressed by George Barrois who criticizes the West in general for the faulty doctrine of *theosis* by connecting it with what he perceives as the incorrect understanding of God:

The two versions of soteriology, the version of western scholasticism and the version of Palamas, are incompatible... Shall we opt for a western view?... but how to pass from an abstract *deitas* to the living God? How to liberate the *Actus Purus*, a prisoner of its own transcendence? How to bridge the natural theology of the treatises *De Deo Uno* and the dogma of the Trinity of Persons?^[46]

Behind this high appraisal of the Palamite teaching and the overt complaints regarding the Western depiction of God as abstract *deitas*, *Actus Purus* and *De Deo Uno*, lay two historically different models of the Trinity in which the East has emphasized the persons of the Trinity, while the West (both Catholics and Protestants) has stressed the unity/essence of God. In this perspective, Palamas' concern to emphasize God's *enhypositized* (or, personalized) accessibility to the world in his energies is often seen as finding the logical connection with the Eastern trinitarian model that insists on the personal mode of divine processions in which the Father is the source of divinity for the Son and Holy Spirit.^[47] Thus, while the West has criticized the East for the danger of subordination within the Trinity, the latter has been suspicious of the Western emphasis on the unity of God as running the risk of reducing the divine persons to the simple essence of God and, thereby, impersonalizing salvation. As a result, any language of participation that may imply human sharing in God's essence is perceived by the East as potentially undermining the relational or personal nature of God and *theosis*. In describing the effect of such differences between the East and West, a Greek Orthodox theologian, Christos Yannaras, goes so far as to say that "this does not mean simply two different theoretical views or interpretations, but two diametrically opposite ways of life, with concrete spiritual, historical and cultural consequences."^[48] Similar

^[45] According to Meyendorff, Palamas was concerned "to free theology from Aristotle's philosophic categories, which were clearly inadequate worthily to express the Mystery" in *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (London: The Faith Press, 1964), 225, translated from the French, *Introduction a l'etude de Gregoire Palamas* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1959).

^[46] George Barrois, "Palamism Revisited," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 19.4 (1975): 211-31.

^[47] As is expected, the connection between the Palamite essence-energies distinction and the Eastern Trinitarian model is not acknowl-

edged by all. For some scholars this distinction is seen as impersonalizing the direct involvement of God through the intermediating energies and reducing Christ's work of salvation to the attainment of divine energies. See, for example, the three final chapters in Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy Through Western Eyes* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), and my article in Viacheslav Lytvynenko, "Theosis in the Thought of Athanasius of Alexandria and Vladimir Lossky," *Areopagus Journal*, 12.3 (2012): 18-25.

^[48] Yannaras, "The Distinction Between Essence and Energies," 241.

to Barrois, he claims that in Western theology “God is accessible only as essence, i.e. only as an object of rational search, as the necessary “first Mover” who is “unmoved”... and whose existence must be identified with the self-realization of the essence. The world is the result of the “first mover,” even as the grace of God is the result of divine essence. The only relation of the world with God is the connection of cause and effect, a “connection” that organically disengages God from the world: the world is made autonomous and subjected to intellectual objectification and to (useful) expediency.”^[49]

In light of these observations it is especially helpful to see a number of statements from the Finnish presentation of *theosis* in Luther that demonstrate a clear awareness of the complex issue involved in the language of participation in God. A very good example is found in Peura who writes: “God is present everywhere in his creatures. As a present reality he maintains the existence and the life of creatures through his own being and life. But this understanding of the omnipresence of God in no way intends a confusion of God and created beings with each other, but rather indicates a participation of created beings in God’s creative life.”^[50] Here, Peura’s careful distinction between God and created beings leads him to emphasize the idea of participation in the creative life of God. Stressing the personal aspect of participation in God in the way Orthodox would appreciate, other Finnish scholars speak about “salvation as participation in the person of Christ,”^[51] or explain participation as union with Christ who “absorbs” into himself our sin and gives us righteousness.^[52] Similarly, Mannermaa writes that “in Christ the Christian possesses all of the names, treasures, and goods of the divine nature,”^[53] while Peura states that participation can be understood as *perichoresis* taking place as we enter into “the divine life of God as self-giving love.”^[54]

A more elaborate discussion of what it means to participate in God for Luther is offered by Juntunen who draws a distinction between God as the independent reality (*esse per se*) and man as the contingent one (*ens per aliud*). He suggests that Luther shared the classical and medieval presupposition about the limited form of participation of the created, contingent *esse* in the primary and absolute *esse* of God. Accordingly, this means that “... contingent and created being can exist only “within” the divine *esse*, in its presence.”^[55] To this he adds that “God did not create the world outside of his divine reality, because outside of him, of *esse* in the proper sense of the word, is absolutely nothing, the *nihil negativum*. God in creation “called the world out of nothingness into being,” to participate in his being. This is why the difference between God and created reality cannot be spatial. It is a metaphysical difference between an original and independent reality (*esse*

[49] Yannaras, “The Distinction Between Essence and Energies,” 242.

[50] *Union with Christ*, 88.

[51] *Union with Christ*, 31.

[52] *Union with Christ*, 32.

[53] *Union with Christ*, 19.

[54] *Union with Christ*, 92.

[55] *Union with Christ*, 148.

per se) and the metaphysically lower, contingent reality (*ens per aliud*).”^[56] Another distinction is made by Juntunen when he speaks of the difference between God’s presence in the *esse naturae* and *esse gratiae*, and the corresponding ideas of *dona naturalia* and *dona spiritualia*. More to the point, he writes: “The *esse gratiae* is a participation in Christ, who comes into a very intense union with the believer but who nonetheless remains his own substantial reality without becoming part of the essence of the believer or being reduced to an accident in this essence. In the *esse naturae* God is also present in his *dona naturalia*, but not in the same way as he is in the *dona spiritualia*. The *dona naturalia* do make God present in such a strong way in those who receive them, as in those who receive the *dona gratiae*. If we are to interpret the *esse naturae* in Luther’s theology as participation in God’s being, clearly, this participation is mediated in a way that does not cause the divine *esse* to be united with the created *esse*.”^[57]

As these quotations show, Finnish scholars have a genuine desire to qualify what is being partaken of God as we are united to him through Christ. By participating in God we do not become gods in the same sense that he is. Instead, we remain limited creatures but are allowed to share in the real spiritual presence of God himself. At the same time, there are some places in Finnish research where one can run into statements that tend to strongly emphasize the essential participation in God without any specific qualifications. I suggest that these statements (to be considered below) are guided by what I would call the principle of identity between God’s essence and attributes. In so far as this principle claims the ontological correspondence between what we call God *ad intra* and God *ad extra*, it represents the view opposite of the Palamite distinction between the essence and energies in God. Such a principle of identity points to the fundamental difference between the Western and Eastern ways of describing God and salvation, and is formulated by Mannermaa in his own way as follows:

Theosis is based causally on the divinity of God. According to Luther, the divinity of the triune God consists in that “He gives.” And what he gives, ultimately, is himself. The essence of God, then, is identical with the essential divine properties in which he gives of himself, called the “names” of God: Word, justice, truth, wisdom, love, goodness, eternal life, and so forth. The *theosis* of the believer is initiated when God bestows on the believer God’s essential properties; that is, what God gives of himself to humans is nothing separate from God himself.^[58]

The last sentence in the quotation explains the principle of identity by drawing a direct link between God’s inner life and his manifestations. This link corresponds to what I earlier referred to as the Western distinction between God’s transcendence and immanence, or immanent Trinity and econom-

^[56] *Union with Christ*, 148.

^[58] *Union with Christ*, 10, cf. 43.

^[57] *Union with Christ*, 154-55.

ic Trinity. According to this understanding, God is most commonly described as communicating himself to the world as he really is in his divine life. Unfortunately, the very strength of this principle in stressing the idea of simplicity of God in all its expressions becomes its very weakness when it comes to articulating the nature of participation. From the Orthodox point of view this might mean that it runs the risk of potentially blurring the distinction between God and humans (when the simple divine essence is shared by creatures) and de-emphasizing the personal aspect of salvation as intimate communion with God.^[59]

A few examples can illustrate this point more clearly. In discussing the nature of the divine attributes, Raunio states that “the attributes are essential qualities” and that “the Christian participates through them in the divine essence itself.”^[60] In another place we read that God is present in the believer “in the very fullness of his essence.”^[61] In one way or another, this idea of participation in God’s essence through the divine attributes or properties (that are identical to the divine essence) is reiterated time and again throughout the whole study.^[62] In one particular instance, it is stated that by participating in God we receive “divine essences” (in plural) which apparently means attributes of God,^[63] while another text claims that when we become partakers of the divine nature we are said to become transformed into it.^[64] Similarly, even when a personal aspect of Luther’s idea of participation is obvious (as in the case of the passage from *WA* 40 I, 283, 7-9 that says, “Christ remains in me, and that life lives in me, and the life through which I live is Christ”), a more impersonal or essentialist interpretation is given priority to explain this text by suggesting that participation allows Christians to possess “two natures” (human and divine) rather than a relational encounter with God through Christ. Though some of this language may refer to Christians being re-created into the image of Christ (including his moral attributes) as part of a relational union with him, the choice of the language is indicative of the general Western perspective.

These and other similar instances illustrate to what extent the language of participation may become theologically sloppy from the Orthodox perspective which considers blasphemous any claim for essential participation in God. Although Luther himself would never say that we violate God’s simplicity by partaking of him, our own emphasis on the union with the divine essence in Luther without proper qualifications (similar to the ones referred before) may unintentionally create a wrong impression of introducing complexity into the Godhead. In this sense, our task is to keep the proper perspective when communicating the key ideas of *theosis* in Luther. We do not say that we share in

^[59] The classical criticism of this point in Western theology can be found in Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, U.K.: The Faith Press, 1973).

^[60] *Union with Christ*, 113.

^[61] *Union with Christ*, 27

^[62] e.g. *Union with Christ*, 17, 34, 35, 48, 50, 86, 113.

^[63] *Union with Christ*, 115.

^[64] *Union with Christ*, 91.

the divine essence or nature as if it were an impersonal entity added onto us in participation. Rather, we say that we share a person-constituting relationship of the Trinity. Since it is not characteristic of natures to act or do things, but rather is characteristic of persons, we believe that our encounter with God is personal and relational. In other words, our fellowship is not with the divine nature abstracted from the trinitarian persons but with the very persons of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is not the *what* but *who* is the subject of our relationships with God. The person recapitulates, so to say, the mode of existence of nature and we know the essence of God as the content of the person.

Thus to increase the impact of the recent Finnish discovery on the conversation with the Orthodox, I propose that our language of participation be checked for consistency with Luther's own emphasis on the distinction between God and creatures. To describe salvation as union with God's essence would undoubtedly make complete sense to the Western mind accustomed to thinking in substantial terms. Yet using the same language for communicating Luther to the Eastern mindset would increase the possibility for unwanted suspicion and misunderstanding. I also suggest that the most effective way to connect Luther's teaching on *theosis* with the Orthodox teaching is by grounding our discourse on the personal aspect of Luther's thought that revolves around the idea of the intimate union with God through Christ and employs the concept of love as the very content of what we partake in God. To elucidate this suggestion a little more, I will summarize my point as I conclude this article.

Conclusion

In describing what it means for God to give himself to us according to Luther, Finnish scholars, in my view, have managed very well to show that the fundamental *locus* of *theosis* for Luther is his theology of love.^[65] However important is the idea of sharing in the divine essence of God, I believe that Luther's notion of love as the basis for *theosis* provides a much more fundamental reflection on the personal nature of God and salvation than does the essentialist perspective. By using the idea of love in Luther, we should be able to avoid misunderstandings in our conversation with the Orthodox as we emphasize that participation is primarily about the intimate relationships between the lover and the beloved who are joined to each other in the union of love. Being the fullness of love, God loves us first through Christ and causes us to love him in response. Out of this unifying relation between God and man grows the latter's love to his or her neighbor as the loving person becomes conformed to who is loved. In light of Luther's strong emphasis on love, it is not surprising to find that he connects love and *theosis* with the notion of adoption as the most personal image of salvation.^[66] To articulate this con-

^[65] *Union with Christ*, 13-19. Cf. 76-82, 93-94, ^[66] e.g. WA 17 II, 74, 20-75, 11, as quoted in *Union with Christ*, 14.

nection in Luther according to the Eastern way is to say that we become by grace what God is by nature. Or to say the same thing differently—and, indeed, express the heart of the Evangelical belief about God and salvation—is to state that we become God’s children by sharing in the Son’s loving relationships to his Father through the indwelling Spirit who joins us to the Trinity.^[67]

This is a far more personal way of reflecting on the Evangelical doctrine of God and salvation than by casting it into the terminology of essentialist participation. This, of course, does not mean that by employing the personal aspect of participation we will automatically avoid any disagreement in other areas of theology as we enter into the conversation with the Orthodox. Neither do I pretend that we will be able to reach a full agreement between Luther’s teaching of God and *theosis* and the Palamite distinction of essence and energies in God. In fact, I think it is very unlikely that we will reach such agreement in the full sense though we can surely be thankful for some very good studies that have aided us to view this issue in a new light.^[68] But perhaps the very message that Orthodox Christians would appreciate hearing from Luther is how he is able to speak in their language of personal participation while affirming the principle of divine identity in which God’s loving actions in the world are considered to be a consistent reflection of who he is in himself as the Trinity. Even then, the progress of the ecumenical dialogue will in many ways depend on the desire of Evangelical theologians to understand the logic of the Palamite distinction as the basis for *theosis*^[69] and ground their language (historically embedded in the terminology of *natura*, *substantia* and *essentia*) on the personal aspect of Luther’s teaching about God and salvation. To do so is not only to form a bridge between the Orthodox tradition and the Reformation legacy, but also to express the heart of the Evangelical belief in Christ as *personal* Savior and bring into focus the value of *personal* relationships with God.

[67] This short sentence recapitulates the main idea of the Evangelical perspective on God and *theosis* in Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009). For the patristic perspective itself, see e.g. Irenaeus of Lyon, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. by John Behr, Popular Patristic Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997); Athanasius of Alexandria, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, trans. by Henry Newman, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel According to S. John. Vol. 1: S. John 1-8*, trans. by P. E. Pusey, Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, vol. 43 (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1874); Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity*, trans. by Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the Twenty-first Century*, vol. 5 (New York: New City Press, 1991).

[68] For example, attempts have been made to identify common points between the Palamite essence-energies distinction and the so-called quasi-formal causality of Rahner or Scotus’ formal distinction *a parte rei*. For the former, see e.g. David Coffey, “The Palamite Doctrine of God: A New Perspective,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 32.2 (1998): 329-58; for the latter, see e.g. Gerry Russo, “Rahner and Palamas: A Unity of Grace,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 32.4 (1998): 157-80. A more thorough study that compares Palamas and Aquinas is Anna N. Williams, *Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[69] The best way to understand the Orthodox doctrine of essence and energies in God is to get ourselves acquainted with its main source that comes from Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. by John Meyendorff, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983).

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