

Theosis in Patristic Thought

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The deification theme—*theosis*—finds intricate development in patristic theology. Nor were medieval theologians and magisterial Reformers strangers to this concept. However, as in post-Enlightenment modernity, scholarly emphasis was placed on strictly rationally-grounded argumentation, and most allusions to anything resembling mystical apparitions were eliminated from academic and lay discourse as irrational and unscientific. This tendency eventually led to the disappearance from the scope of theological analysis many themes that had been discussed in Christian theology for centuries. The language of deification followed suit. As a result, in lay theology the term itself might sound blasphemous and overly-pretentious to some, while for others it may seem totally absurd and non-Christian. Even in patristic studies the language of deification for some scholars caused such a disturbance that in a number of English translations of early Christian texts, passages addressing this concept were either omitted or replaced with alternative interpretations.

Deviating from this radical approach to deification, in which the concept was treated as if it never existed in Christian theology, Adolf Harnack and a long line of scholars who followed him saw *theosis* as one of the crucial concepts that influenced the Hellenization of early Christianity and transformed the living faith «into the creed to be believed.» The impact of this alteration of the original faith, in Harnack's opinion, changed «the glowing hope of the kingdom of heaven into a doctrine of immortality and deification.»^[1]

At the other end of the spectrum were a number of modern Eastern Orthodox theologians who not only supported the concept of deification as genuinely Christian, but also saw this no-

^[1] Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1 (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 45.

tion as representative of the Orthodox approach to soteriology that was expressed by patristic authors from the beginning. With regard to these deification theologies, Jean Danielou accurately pointed out the inaccuracy of interpreting the early fathers in light of the later fathers.^[2]

Between these almost diametrically polarized views of seeing deification as genuinely Christian and understanding deification as merely reflecting the Hellenization of doctrine, is a more balanced and historically oriented line of scholarship that was introduced by Jules Gross, who, in 1938, published his extensive study on *theosis* in the Greek Fathers.^[3] In the second half of the twentieth century, ecumenical dialogue and the work of John Meyendorff stimulated new attention to deification. The line of historical interest in *theosis* was further advanced by Norman Russell. Publication of his revised dissertation marks a significant cornerstone in deification research.^[4]

Apart from survey-type works, interest in the notion of deification for the last twenty-five years received particular attention in a number of dissertations and publications that dealt with particular Christian theologians. The success of the first International Conference on *Theosis*, held at the Caspersen School of Gradu-

ate Studies of Drew University in 2004, indicated increasing academic and lay interest in this topic of Christian spirituality. The proceedings of the conference were published recently.^[5] Stephen Finlan and I have edited another recent publication on *theosis*.^[6] What would have been an impossible task for one scholar, these two books cover without redundancy an extensive number of deification-related topics, as well as the treatment of this theme by a variety of historical figures from the patristic period, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and up to modern times. The interest in *theosis* comes from different denominational and academic angles, where the theme itself supersedes precisely Eastern Orthodox affiliation and becomes more common and appreciated in contemporary theological discourse.^[7]

The task of tracing the precise meaning for what patristic writers understood as a human being becoming a god is rather challenging. Human longing for union with the divine is a significant element in many religious traditions and not a new concept introduced by Christianity; however, not all traditions would take it so far as to develop a concept of deification with the preservation of human personal identity, as was developed in Christian theol-

^[2] Jean Danielou, introduction to *La Deification de l'homme, selon la doctrine des Peres grecs* by Lot-Borodine (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1970), 15.

^[3] Jules Gross, *La divinisation du chretien d'apres les Peres grecs: Contribution historique a la doctrine de la grace* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1938); translated in English as *The Divinization of the Christian according to The Greek Fathers* (Anaheim: A & C Press, 2002). Another comprehensive survey on *theosis* appears in *Dictionnaire de spiritualite ascetique et mystique*, vol. 3 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1957), 1370–98. See also H. Rondet, “La divinisation du chretien,” *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* 17, nos. 5–6 (1949): 449–76, 561–88.

^[4] Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

^[5] Michael Christensen and Jeffery Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007).

^[6] Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, eds., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2006).

^[7] See Roger Olson, “Deification in Contemporary Theology,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 186–89.

ogy. The process of *theosis* that introduces human beings inextricably into the presence of God is, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, «a mystery which cannot be taught, [but] it puts souls firmly in the presence of God.»^[8] The «mystery» of *theosis* coincides with the first developments in patristic tradition itself. The complex character of the deification theme can be seen in the comprehensive assessment of Anna Williams:

[The pattern of deification] asserts the *imago Dei* and the Incarnation as the basis of deification and construes *theosis* overwhelmingly in terms of knowledge, virtue, light and glory, participation and union. In some authors, the sacraments are important tridents of divinization; more often, human faculties such as the intellect and the ability to love are significant. While emphasis on the physical dimension varies, there is a broad consensus that participation in divine nature entails bodily incorruptibility. Above all, the Fathers point to the distinction between Uncreated and created, along with the Creator's desire that his creatures partake of his own life and goodness. Thus *theosis*, while entailing a degree of human striving towards virtuous assimilation to God and love of God remains always a divine gift, a gift of grace. The idea of uninterrupted progression towards God, a seamlessness between this life and the next, appears in the work of most Fathers, but hints of *theosis* in its fullness, flowering in this life are rare.^[9]

On the one hand, it could be argued that the notion of *theosis* is a continuous-

ly occurring belief that has been present in Christian theology from the beginning. On the other hand, there is no unilateral consensus among early Christian authors about the precise meaning of this notion. It is not until Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in the sixth century that we find the first theological definition for deification, and even this definition is far from satisfactory in defining the issue.^[10] The explicit language of *theosis* does not emerge until Clement of Alexandria in the late second or early third century, and it is not until later that the concept itself receives significant attention apart from other doctrinal or theological matters that were at stake at the time. In other words, the notion of deification, or more accurately, the deification theme, in the first five centuries of Christian theology had a very marginal character. Often the discourse on deification was contextualized within the development of the trinitarian and christological controversies, and *theosis* was addressed on the periphery of such theological issues as the full divinity of Christ, immortality and eternal life, the image of God in the human being, sanctification, redemption, sacramental theology, and general and individual eschatology. These elements of Christian theology introduce different aspects related to *theosis*. Therefore, it seems to be incorrect to speak about the concept of deification as one single mode; rather, it exists in patristic theology in multiple modes that can be present simultaneously in the writing of the same author. Thus, to apply the term «doctrine» to deification could be very misleading, as there are not any con-

^[8] Letter 9.1, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 283.

^[9] Anna Ngair Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York:

Oxford University Press, 1999), 31–32.

^[10] See *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.3 (373D–376A), in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 198.

iliar decisions that affirmed a certain doctrine of *theosis*, nor were there any dogmatic controversies in the patristic period concerning this issue. Modern Eastern Orthodox consensus on *theosis*, or at least the idea of such consensus, is rather a speculative synthesis of the final phase of Byzantine theology than an accurate historical representation of this concept's development. As Eric Osborn notes, «It is also wrong to accept the common assumption that this [deification] tradition is homogeneous and that there is close continuity between the ideas of the Greek fathers of the second, fourth and sixth century.»^[11]

The concept of *theosis* grew out of a comprehension of primarily practical soteriological and christological aspects of Christian everyday life and spirituality. The notion of deification was often referred to by Christian writers with sort of an appeal to what seemed to be common knowledge in the Christian community. Perhaps as the result of Athanasian (c. 296–373) influence, deification was often a notion of popular theology, as it still lacked coherent systematic theological treatment. This marginal application of the deification theme indicates that it was predominantly used by some patristic authors as a rhetorical tool, as I have stated elsewhere:

We should not discard the intended shocking effect their deification statements would produce on the audience, striking their imagination with powerful and uplifting images. If during the Middle Ages a similar effect was often provoked by references to the burning flames of hell, in patristic writers the attempt to

enhance the devotional zeal for spiritual life and the commitment to Christ was carried out by no less shocking, but significantly more positively oriented, affirmations. Not eternal punishment as retribution for sinful life was emphasized, but rather eternal life in God, divine therapeutic forgiveness, and the restored harmony of the whole creation. Emphasis was placed not on what would happen to people if they did not obey the divine commandments, but rather on what awaits them if they reconcile themselves with God.^[12]

Despite the enthusiasm with which some Christian writers used the terminology of deification, the language of *theosis* was not unanimously shared. Outside of Alexandria and Cappadocia, until the emergence of Byzantine theology in the early Middle Ages very few patristic writers used such terminology. Even in Cappadocia itself, Basil of Caesarea (c. 330–79) and his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–c. 395) were very cautious in their application of explicit deification language. To communicate ideas close to the deification theme, Christian writers often preferred to employ the language of participation and communion with God rather than the language of deification. It is not uncommon to see in the same patristic author indiscriminate use of participation, communion, and deification vocabulary that is used interchangeably to relay similar ideas. It seems to be a personal preference of a particular Christian writer to employ the language of deification in his theology, rather than its being a customary element of patristic thought.

^[11] Eric Osborn, *The Beginning of Christian Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 112.

^[12] Vladimir Kharlamov, "Rhetorical Application of

Theosis in Greek Patristic Theology," in Christensen and Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 127–28.

It must also be noted that before Pseudo-Dionysius, *theosis* was not necessarily an element of mystical theology per se, nor was it exclusively an aspect of Christian soteriology. Nevertheless, among those who, like Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus (329/30–389/90), strongly advocated the concept of deification, as well as those who were more cautious about it or did not use deification language at all, we do not have any patristic author who would openly object to the use of this notion until Nestorius (b. after 351; d. after 451). However, Nestorius in this regard stands more as an exception than the initiator of a steady tendency in patristic tradition to denounce this concept.

Historical analysis of the development of the deification theme, and the formation of a specific terminology associated with it, shows that it was a gradual process, far from being cognate. Deification became more of a theological issue only during the early Middle Ages. Theological attention to *theosis* is closely connected with the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 528). Pseudo-Dionysius not only laid the systematic foundation for speculative mysticism, apophatic methodology, and in his rather complex Greek language, enriched Christian vocabulary with such terms as «hierarchy» and «mystical theology,» but also had a significant impact on the further development of both Eastern and Western Christian theology where *theosis* became a distinct theological topic.

Trying to be systematic in his exposition, Pseudo-Dionysius, in a similar way, applied deification terminology, and as such was the key person in transforming the predominantly marginal character of

this concept into one of the most prominent independent theological subjects. Thus, in Pseudo-Dionysius, who masterfully and consistently integrated different aspects associated with the deification theme and combined them with a wide variety of other theological issues, we encounter the first speculative foundation for the theology of *theosis*. More than anyone prior to him, Pseudo-Dionysius approached the notion of deification from a theologically systematic perspective, with explicit ontological, metaphysical, epistemological, liturgical-sacramental, and anthropological dimensions. Moreover, Pseudo-Dionysius did not simply construct the first full-scaled deification theology, but in the cosmic orientation of his theology, where the divine presence is the Cause and the Source for «beauty of the unity and the harmony of the whole,» the deification theme transformed itself into a deificational worldview.^[13]

With Leontius of Jerusalem (sixth and seventh centuries), deification discourse firmly established itself in the context of continuous post-Chalcedonian christological struggle as a part of technical vocabulary for the so-called neo-Chalcedonian theology. Further advanced by Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662), the notion of deification not only found consolidation as the core theme of Byzantine theology, but it also became a deeply integrated goal of the monastic vocation in Eastern Orthodox spirituality.

Maximus effectively incorporated the cosmic perspective of Pseudo-Dionysius into a general framework of traditional elements associated with human deification, and by doing so achieved a more balanced exposition of deification theology where cosmic-liturgical, christological, and personal aspects of *theosis* constitute

^[13] *Divine Names* 7.3, in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 109.

the essentially soteriological expression. Seeing the ascetic goal for human piety in the form of passionlessness,^[14] Maximus did not separate the lower parts of the soul and the body from communion with God, which consequently introduced and led not some part, but the entire human nature, to the obtainment of a deified state.

In Maximus there is no discrepancy between the principle of natural law (the logos of nature) and written (Scripture) and spiritual (incarnated Logos) law. The logos (meaning or principle) of nature is not replaced or transcended by the spiritual law but transfigured, and thus is actualized or fulfilled. Maximus also incorporates this pro-fulfillment logos-based tendency with a Dionysian understanding of the work of the divine Providence in the world. Therefore, the logos of every entity in the cosmos acquires eschatological significance that manifests itself in the obtainment of final perfection, which, in the case of humankind, constitutes both the restoration of the original, prelapsarian state and an advancement in deification. The unity between God and creation is manifested by grace as the expression of divine philanthropy (love of humankind), which has essentially a christological foundation. As the Logos fully embraced the entirety of human nature, it made human beings capable of penetrating entirely into God and becoming a god—however, without any ontolog-

ical assimilation. «In this way God and [hu]man are united without confusion according to the model of the hypostatic union in Christ.»^[15] It is the reciprocal process of divine-human *perichoresis*. Further on, as all of the created universe is divided into intelligible-spiritual and sensible-material realms, only in human beings do these realms cross over and come together; only a human being dwells simultaneously in the realm of senses and the realm of the soul. This unique positioning in the structure of creation makes a human a replica of the whole universal arrangement. The human being as a microcosm in response to the Incarnation of Christ becomes capable of participating in a mediating role that serves the purpose of reconciling the opposing poles of the world. Thus, cosmological, christological, and anthropological dimensions of the soteriological significance of *theosis* become combined into one unified, both individual and universal, process. The whole cosmos, in the complexity of its stratification, is moving toward perfection and deification.

Ultimately, deification is an eschatological event, when a human being becomes transfiguratively changed and made capable of the ceaseless vision and contemplation of God face to face, along with everlasting participation in divine glory. At the same time, *theosis* is a dynamic and, in a way, innate process of human restoration that begins within the

^[14] Passionlessness or impassibility (Gk. *apatheia*) is a well-established tradition of Greek patristic asceticism from Clement of Alexandria on. In the context of patristic theology, passionlessness should not be understood as apathy or indifference. It is the highest degree of spiritual freedom, when human beings are liberated from any external or internal factors (passions) that act upon them. Thus, passionlessness is not a passive state, but a state of

active spiritual vigilance. Often, as in Evagrius, it was understood that impassibility could be achieved by detachment of the intellectual/spiritual properties of human nature from the lower ones. Maximus significantly modified this tendency.

^[15] Lars Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 89.

context of human earthly life. Deification is possible because of a close connection between Creator and the created intelligible nature of human beings, which is reflected in the image and likeness of God. The inner nature of each human being, and humanity as a collective entity, is to be like God. A virtuous life of contemplation and passionlessness are goals for the obtainment of likeness to God, and likeness to God often is understood as *theosis*.

Deificational initiation is commonly identified in patristic theology with the sacrament of baptism—that is, the sacrament of the divine birth. Participation in the Eucharist is another pivotal component of the deification process, where believers participate in the actuality of the deified body and blood of Christ. The spiritual and physical reality of sacraments is understood as adequately appropriated to correspond with the composite (spiritual and biological) constitution of human nature.

For the church fathers, the Incarnation of Christ is the cornerstone of human salvation and cosmic reconciliation, where divine filiation, forgiveness, healing, restoration, and union with God become essentially integrated aspects of deification. As God, Christ deified his human nature at the moment of the Incarnation. Thus, he is the only one who simultaneously is the deifier and the deified. This act of union brings the true reunion between God and humanity. However, if the Logos is the Son of God and God by nature, Christians become children of God

by adoption and therefore are gods only by grace. They are never gods in an ontological sense, as only God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the true meaning of the term, possesses authentic aseity; the only one who is eternal and without generation. Being a god, a deified human being does not cease to be human, as the Logos after the Incarnation did not cease to be consubstantial with the Father. Athanasius in one place emphasizes, «Things which partake cannot be identical or similar to that whereof they partake.»^[16]

In some patristic authors the deified human state was depicted as a spiritualized or angelic-like existence; later the consensual preference was given to a deified state as one that supersedes the angelic one. If angelic participation is limited to divine energy and grace, human beings become «partakers of the divine nature.»^[17] As the result of this participation in the divine nature some divine attributes, such as immortality and incorruptibility, are ultimately communicated and permanently installed in the deified human nature. Being gods by grace, humans are ontologically transformed or transfigured but, nevertheless, remain always human beings. Thus, *theosis* is not the denial of humanness but rather its fulfillment. If originally a human being was created sinless but with the possibility to sin (which often was understood that Adam and Eve were created in a state of innocence, but not perfection), at the eschatological moment of *theosis*, the human person achieves a state of maturity and perfection through the regenerative grace of God and becomes not only sinless but also incapable anymore of falling into sin. Deification, as Norman Russell notes in the context of Athanasius, «is like a sec-

^[16] Athanasius, *The Letter to the Bishops of Africa* 7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4:492.

^[17] See, for example, John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images* 3.26. Cf. 2 Pet 1:4.

ond creation carried out by the Creator, but this time from within.»^[18] Human deificational maturity, however, does not remove the infinite distance between God and a human being. The understanding of «reconciled with God» and «deified human,» combined with the idea of the infinite distance between God and human beings, implies potential and desire for everlasting progressive participation into God. This never-ending dynamic perfection, and the obtainment of the vision of God, are the main themes of patristic mysticism.

With the increased emphasis on the transcendence of God in patristic theology, and the explicit endorsement of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, the ability of a human being to participate, or have a share, in divine life might be seen as problematic. In modern scholarship, often this tension is exaggerated in the light of later fourteenth-century Palamite developments in Byzantine theology. Gregory Palamas, in order to secure the incomprehensibility of divine nature and the knowability of divine action, introduced the distinction between divine essence and divine energy. Some initial aspects of this distinction had already been proposed by Basil of Caesarea.^[19] Contrary to the common assumption, however, Basil does not develop this distinction consistently in his theology, and neither Athanasius nor the Cappadocians have it. Athanasius, for example, says, «The Word became flesh, that he might make man capable of Godhead.»^[20] Human spirit, Gregory of Na-

zianzus writes, is «a piece broken off the invisible Godhead.»^[21] Furthermore, after Christ's resurrection and ascension at Pentecost, in Gregory's opinion the Holy Spirit manifested itself in the lives of Christians on an essentially new level: «[The Spirit] is no longer present only in energy, but as we may say, substantially, associating with us, and dwelling in us.»^[22] What would be the result of this substantial presence of God the Holy Spirit in relation to our knowledge of God's essence Gregory leaves open; he does not want to state the «teaching» of the church on this subject, but he expresses his opinion:

In my opinion it will be discovered when that within us which is godlike and divine, I mean our mind and reason, shall have mingled with its Like [God], and the image shall have ascended to the Archetype, of which it has now the desire. And this I think is the solution of that vexed problem as to «We shall know even as we are known.»^[23]

In current human life, God is comprehensible only partially, and only through his *oikonomia*, namely, in divine manifestations in the world. Divine incomprehensibility is a motivation for the human desire to know God. At the same time, through deifying purification, a human being enhances capability, though not to the full degree, to comprehend God as God *is* (in other words essentially), even during this life.^[24]

Apophatism in patristic theology is not always that of, strictly speaking, Neoplatonism. For Athanasius, the absolute,

^[18] Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 172.

^[19] Basil of Caesarea, *Letter* 234.1.

^[20] Athanasius, *Against Arians* 2.59, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2, 4:380.

^[21] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina* 1.1.8.73, PG 37:452.

^[22] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 41.11, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2, 7:383.

^[23] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 28.17, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2, 7:294. Cf. 1 Cor 13:12.

^[24] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 38.7.

transcendent singularity of divine nature is not the inaccessible, simple, passive One of Plotinus, but rather this divine simplicity is the essential manifestation of divine life itself, with its communicable presence in the world. There is a fundamental ontological distinction between the Creator and creation; however, the apophatic aspect of this distinction is intimately connected with God's active involvement in the life of his creation, and human involvement in the life of God, where the separation between God's nature and its activity could not be strictly appropriated. Creation for patristic authors is theophany. The communicability between God, transcendent and incomprehensible in his nature, and humankind, lies not in the ontological differentiation between divine essence and divine energies, but in the fact of the incarnation of the Logos, where the two natures are mediated and united in the person of Christ.

Nevertheless, human participation in the nature of God does not necessarily make this nature knowable. Human beings participate in God «as far as possible» for human nature. Divine nature is both mysterious and communicable. God and divine action in the world are beyond human comprehension, and at the same time, human participation in the life of God is real. Frequently, we can encounter in patristic thought the paradoxical methodological interplay of the openness and hiddenness of God. We simultaneously know God, and we never will know him. We see God, and he is totally invisible. We are similar to God, and at the same time we are substantially different. We become gods, but never will we be identical with God. Deification for patristic writers essentially is both the actual experience and the mystery. It is the mystery of divine love toward humankind.

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