

Theosis in the Orthodox tradition

Theosis (lit. "ingodded," "becoming god," deification) in the Eastern Orthodox tradition is a vision of human potential for perfection, anticipated in ancient Greece, witnessed to in both the Old and New Testaments, and developed by Patristic Christian theologians of the first five centuries after Christ. This vision survived and persists yet today in Eastern Christianity as a challenge to Western theology. According to Vladimir Lossky, we are nothing less than "creatures called to gods" (*The Vision of God*). In the words of St. Irenaeus (120-202): "If the Word was made man, it is that men might become gods" (*Against Heresies*, Bk. V. Pref. col. 1035). The idea of *theosis* is that God and humanity progressively achieve a *union* in Christ which in the end both blurs and preserves the distinction between Creator and creation, as in a mirror perfectly reflecting the source of its image.

In Eastern Orthodox theology, *theosis*, is the call to man to become holy and seek union with God, beginning in this life and later consummated in the resurrection. *Theosis* comprehends salvation from sin, is premised upon apostolic and early Christian understanding of the life of faith, and is conceptually foundational in both the East and the West. The statement by St. Athanasius of Alexandria, "The Son of God became man, that we might become God" (*On the Incarnation of the Word*, Bk. IV. par 65), best indicates the concept. What would otherwise seem absurd, that fallen, sinful man may become holy as God is holy, has been made possible through Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate. The fundamental Christian assertion, that God is One, sets an absolute limit on the meaning of *theosis* - it is not possible for any created being to become, ontologically God or even another god.

Through *theoria*, the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, human beings come to know and experience what it means to be fully human (the created image of God); through their communion with Jesus Christ, God shares Himself with the human race, in order to conform them to all that God is in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. *Theosis* also asserts the complete restoration of all people (and of the entire creation), in principle. This is built upon the understanding of the *atonement* put forward by St. Irenaeus, called "recapitulation".

For many Fathers, *theosis* goes beyond simply restoring people to their state before the Fall of Adam and Eve, teaching that because Christ united the human and divine natures in His person, it is now possible for someone to experience closer fellowship with God than Adam and Eve initially experienced in the Garden of Eden, and that people can become more like God than Adam and Eve were at that time.

All of humanity is fully restored to the full potential of humanity because the Son of God took to Himself a human nature to be born of a woman, and takes to Himself also the sufferings due to sin (yet is not Himself a sinful man, and is God unchanged in His being). In Christ, the two natures of God and human are not two persons but one; thus, a

union is effected in Christ, between all of humanity and God. So, the holy God and sinful humanity are reconciled in principle, in the one sinless man, Jesus Christ.

This reconciliation is made actual through the struggle to conform to the image of Christ. Without the struggle, the *praxis*, there is no real faith; faith leads to action, without which it is dead. One must unite will, thought and action to God's will, His thoughts and His actions. A person must fashion his life to be a mirror, a true likeness of God. More than that, since God and humanity are more than a similarity in Christ but rather a true union, Christians' lives are more than mere imitation and are rather a union with the life of God Himself: so that, the one who is working out salvation, is united with God working within the penitent both to will and to do that which pleases God. St. Gregory Palamas affirmed the possibility of humanity's union with God *in His uncreated energies*, while also affirming that because of God's transcendence, it is impossible for any person or other creature to know or to be united with God's *essence*.

The idea of deification must be always understood in the light of the distinction between God's essence and His energies. Union with God mean union with the divine energies, not with the divine essence. The Orthodox Church, while speaking of deification and union, rejects all forms of pantheism. (Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*)

Orthodox mystical theology insists that we humans, however closely linked to God, retain our full personal integrity. The human person, when deified, remains distinct (though not separate) from God. Nor does the human person when it "becomes God", cease to be human.

The journey towards theosis includes many forms of *praxis*. Living in the community of the church and partaking regularly of the Holy Sacraments, and especially the Eucharist, is taken for granted. Also important is cultivating "prayer of the heart", and prayer "that never ceases". This unceasing prayer of the heart is a dominant theme in the writings of the Fathers, especially in those collected in the *Philokalia*.

Sources:

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3. Stephanopoulos, Robert G. – "The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis". *The New Man: An Orthodox and Reformed Dialogue*. Eds. John Meyendorff and Joseph McLelland. New Brunswick: Standard Press, 1973. 149-161.
4. Christensen, Michael J. - THEOSIS AND SANCTIFICATION: JOHN WESLEY'S REFORMULATION OF A PATRISTIC DOCTRINE. http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan_theology/theojrnl/31-35/31-2-4.htm