Introduction

The Extraordinary Rise of a Theological Theme

what's in a word?

Word studies have their limitations but words are important. Without a clear terminology, ideas can become fuzzy, none more so than ideas concerning humanity's relationship with God. The word at the centre of this investigation is 'theosis'. With the accent on the 'o', it more often than not indicates a Protestant mindset. Catholics and Orthodox prefer to speak of 'divinisation' or 'deification', in the Orthodox case also *obozhenie* (обожение), or 'theosis' (θέωσις) with the accent on the 'e'. The word has spread beyond Christian usage to the Mormons and has even appeared in New Age discourse. Its first use can be dated precisely to the year 363, when it was coined by St Gregory of Nazianzus as a synonym for spiritual ascent in his *Fourth Oration*, an invective he delivered on the death of the emperor Julian the Apostate (4, 71; PG 35, 593B; Moreschini, 2000: 132). Subsequently, it was used several times by Gregory, but although taken up by Dionysius the Areopagite, Leontius of Jerusalem, Maximus the Confessor, and John Damascene, it did not become the standard term for deification until the late Byzantine period.[1] The earlier patristic term was *theopoiēsis* (θεοποίησις), rendered into Latin as *deificatio*, 'deification'.[2] It should be noted that the Greek word for god, *theos* (θεός), without the definite article is to be distinguished from *ho theos* (ὁ θεός) with the definite article. Without the article, *theos* is often

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[1] For detailed references, see Russell, 2004: 341.

[2] According to Souter, 1949, the earliest writers to use *deificatio* belong to the fifth century, Ps.-Rufinus and Ps.-Marius Mercator. Augustine uses the verb *deifico* but not the noun *deificatio*.

used in an adjectival sense. It means 'divine' rather than a particular god, whereas *ho theos* is reserved for the One God. So *theōsis* (the -ωσις ending indicating perhaps a more intimate relationship that the -ποίησις ending) fundamentally means 'becoming divine', or acquiring the attributes of divinity, chiefly those of immortality and goodness.

Several scholars have suggested refinements in the way terms are used to refer to this 'becoming divine'. In 2007, the Evangelical theologian, Roger Olson proposed distinguishing between 'divinisation' and 'deifica-tion', reserving that latter for views on participation in God that rely on the Palamite distinction between essence and energies (2007: 199). A few years later, the Baptist New Testament scholar Ben Blackwell discussed Paul's soteriology under the title of 'christosis' (2016: 264–66). A more radical suggestion has recently been made by Eduard Borysov, an Evangelical, who, taking his cue from Blackwell, would like to see the term 'christosis' replaced by 'triadosis' on the grounds that the Christian's 'becoming divine' is not just the result of union with Christ but entails participation in the trinitarian relations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (2019: 2). These neologisms are intelligent, but it remains to be seen whether either of them will catch on. Greek speakers prefer the linguistic-ally more correct *christopoiēsis* or *enchristōsis* to 'christosis'. By the same token, *entriadōsis* is to be preferred to 'triadosis'. 'Theosis' will probably be with us for some time yet.

THEOSIS IN DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN COMMUNIONS

The meaning of theosis varies in emphasis according to a writer's confes-sional allegiance. For Reformed theologians, mainly Baptists and Evangelicals (who much prefer 'theosis' to 'deification', perhaps because of the latter's pagan connotations), the term expresses a participatory soteriology – becoming children of God through union with Christ – in both its Pauline and Johannine versions (Blackwell, 2016; Byers, 2017). For Anglicans, it is above all participation in God, 'the goal of God's saving and restoring work in human beings' (R. Williams, 2021: 93). For Roman Catholics, it represents 'the full outworking of grace in the Christian life' (Keating, 2007: 5). For Orthodox, it is a relational term expressing the Christian's ultimate participation in the life of the Trinity, often with reference to the divine energies. While these brief definitions are broadly characteristic of their respective communions, none of them belongs exclusively to any single one. It used to be thought that deification was peculiarly Eastern Orthodox and quite foreign to the West. The

prevailing opinion now is that all Christian communions hold some version of theosis as expressive of their soteriology. What has brought this about?

The driving motor has been the Ecumenical Movement. Modern Anglican interest in theosis goes back to meetings in the 1920s between Anglican and Russian theologians that led to the founding of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius.[3] The Russian theologians were members of the so-called Paris School, who a little later also engaged in conversations with sympathetic Roman Catholics of the *ressourcement* movement. It was only after the inauguration of the World Council of Churches in 1948, however, which the Orthodox joined at its inception, that dialogues began between Orthodox and others at the official level. It is not a coincidence that the identification of the theme of theosis in Martin Luther by researchers working at the University of Helsinki under the supervision of Tuomo Mannermaa was made at around the time of theological dialogues conducted between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Finnish Lutheran Church. The findings of the Mannermaa school were communicated to the Anglophone world in 1998 by two American Lutheran scholars, Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (1998).[4] Six years later, a well-attended conference on deification was held at the Theological School of Drew University, a Methodist foundation in New Jersey, which resulted in the publication in 2007 of a significant collection of papers on the topic, *Partakers of the Divine Nature* (Christiansen and Wittung, 2007). Another conference, in which the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, participated, was held at the Catholic university of Leuven in Belgium in 2015. Some of the papers on the Western mediaeval and early modern traditions given at Leuven have been published under the title *Mystical Doctrines of Deification* (Arblaster and Faesen, 2019). Since these conferences, books on deification have multiplied. The theology of theosis has been identified in a large number of writers of both the Catholic and Protestant traditions from the early Latin Fathers to modern theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Thomas Torrance. Books and articles discussing the Orthodox perspective on deification have been fewer but nonetheless significant. What was an

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[3] Modern Anglican interest in Eastern Orthodoxy in general goes back much further to the visits of William Palmer of Magdalen to Russia in the 1840s and the foundation in 1864 of the Eastern Church Association (now the Anglican and Eastern Churches Association) with support of leading members of the Tractarian movement.

[4] For an overview of the Mannermaa school and its influence, see Kärkkäinen, 2004.

exciting theological novelty two or three decades ago has now become mainstream.

A THEME OR A DOCTRINE?

Are all these writers, however, discussing the same thing? Gösta Hallonsten, in an important contribution to the Drew conference volume, insists that a distinction should be made between deification as a theme and as a doctrine (2007: 283–84, 287). The theme is found widely in the Western tradition, largely through its presence in the Latin liturgy,[5] and refers to participation in the divine life as humanity's final goal. The doctrine is a good deal more comprehensive, 'encompassing the whole economy of salvation' (Hallonsten, 2007: 284). In another important contribution to the same volume, Andrew Louth makes a comparable distinction between a lesser arch in the theology of salvation and a greater arch, the lesser arch 'leading from Fall to redemption, the purpose of which is to restore the function of the greater arch, from creation to deification' (2007: 35). Clearly, in the view of both Hallonsten and Louth, the term 'theosis' should be reserved for the greater arch, reaching from the creation of the world to its eschatological fulfilment. Theosis 'is not some isolated *theologoumenon*,' says Louth, 'but has what one might call structural significance' (2007: 43). This structural significance originates with the creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God and attains its full expression through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Word, the intention of which is to reconstitute humanity in the way that God intended. Our true humanity, reconstituted in Christ, is appropriated through our life in the ecclesial body but not without intense ascetic struggle. Louth lays great emphasis on the ascetic commitment of Orthodoxy. Accordingly, he sees the *Philokalia* of St Makarios of Corinth and St Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, published in Venice in 1782, as a work of 'towering importance', of greater importance than the official doctrinal pronouncements of the same period or even the writings of the Russian émigré theologians of the early twentieth century. The transformatory significance of theosis, a transformation that is not simply eschatological but begins with the ascetic struggle in this life, is to be sought primarily in Orthodox experience. In Louth's view, such a concept of theosis is merely adumbrated in Western texts.

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[5] On the liturgical aspect, see Ortiz, 2019a.

Louth has not modified his opinion since his Drew lecture. Indeed, in a recent book review he declares: 'Deification, θέωσις, is at home in Greek intellectual culture in a way denied to Latin intellectual culture' (2020: 837). He is clearly referring to the structural significance of deification, to deification as a *doctrine* with cosmic significance integral to a given writer's work rather than as a *theme* reflected occasionally in such phrases as 'image and likeness', 'adoption as children of God', 'participation in God', and 'wonderful exchange'. I think he is right, despite my own effort (in the book that he reviews) to find common themes linking Greek and Latin authors. There is no Latin equivalent in the patristic tradition to Maximus the Confessor or Gregory Palamas, for whom deification provides an all-encompassing doctrinal perspective. It is only in the mystical writers of the later Middle Ages that deification comes to occupy a comparable place.

The exploration of deification as a theme can nevertheless yield interesting results. As he looks 'east in winter' in his book of that title, Rowan Williams considers what it means in the ascetic tradition both to affirm and to deny the 'self', that is to say, to attain an interior awareness of a personal God and at the same time to shed the specific and negate the particular. The imagined individual self must be rejected but not 'the eternal interdependence in giving that constitutes the trinitarian life, and the dependence on eternal gift that constitutes the finite world' (2021: 109). In the case of Fr (now St) Sophrony (Sakharov), the implications of the practice that the *starets* expounds for achieving this, says Williams, reconfigure what the call to solidarity might mean and also 'direct us to a new imagining of Christian ethics' (109). For ordinary non-monastic mortals, the practical laying hold of deification even in this life might look something like this:

> The fact that theosis encompasses the whole of the economy of salvation means that it is intended for all believers without exception. To live theosis, then, means to lead our life in an eschatological perspective within the ecclesial community, striving through prayer, participation in the Eucharist, and the moral life to attain the divine likeness, being conformed spiritually and corporeally to the body of Christ until we are brought into Christ's identity and arrive ultimately at union with the Father. (Russell, 2009: 169)

Here certain themes are brought together – Christian solidarity, Eucharistic ecclesiology, ascetic struggle, 'adoption into the relatedness of the Word to the Father' – but within the context of an ontological transformation of the believer that goes beyond the attainment of any metaphysical understanding, although the latter is not to be despised. It is

the incorporation of various themes into a coherent and even universal whole that constitutes the doctrine of deification. What is missing in the above definition, however, is any reference to the Holy Spirit. This is rectified in the following definition by Paul Gavrilyuk:

Deification is a process and goal by which the human being (or in some way creation as a whole) comes to share in or participate in God, Christ, divine life, divine attributes, divine energies, or grows into the likeness of God, while remaining a creature ontologically distinct from the Creator. This process is often also described as divine adoption, regeneration, sanctification, and union with God. Human deification is made possible by the incarnation of the divine Logos in Jesus Christ and is sustained by the Holy Spirit through the sacramental life of the Church, prayer, ascetical discipline, and growth in virtue.[6]

The characterisation of deification as both a process and a goal is significant. It is not simply a theological theme or motif, although it is that as well. It is the path by which the whole of created reality, through the human person, having come from God by the kenotic act of creation, returns to him by incorporation, as Williams has put it, into the relatedness of the Word to the Father. Theosis ultimately is a doctrine in which a number of different themes have their place within a larger structure.

THE BOOK'S RATIONALE

Deification in many of its manifestations is not restricted to Christianity. It is found in Late Antiquity's main philosophical tradition, Platonism, and also more marginally in Judaism and Islam. There is a comparable teaching, too, in the ancient Vedanta schools of India and even in the modern religion of Mormonism. I leave the non-Christian traditions aside, however, except insofar as (in the case of Platonism and Judaism) they impinge on the main Christian traditions of Eastern and Western Europe, not only because of my lack of competence in these fields but also in order to develop a coherent argument on the evolution of the doctrine or theme of deification specifically in the Orthodox and Western Christian traditions.[7] Moreover, I discuss this evolution during the first

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[6] Paul Gavrilyuk in a personal communication dated 25 November 2020. This definition will be incorporated into the Introduction of the *Oxford Handbook of Deification*, edited by Andrew Hofer, Matthew Levering, and Paul Gavrilyuk, to be published shortly by Oxford University Press.

[7] For an engaging overview that ranges widely over non-Christian versions of deification, see Litwa, 2013. Litwa traces 'the discourse of deification' from the ancient Egyptian pharaohs to Nietzsche's Superman, seeing them all as manifestations, or 'models', of the

thousand years only very briefly simply as a basis for a more detailed consideration of some of the major developments of the last millennium. Two things in particular struck me in the course of my research. The first is the central importance for deification of Dionysius the Areopagite,[8] in both East and West. The second is how the esoteric traditions came back into fashion, particularly in the sixteenth and early twentieth centuries, making their own distinct contributions to the concept of deification. These two facts are not entirely unconnected.

The methodology followed is that of *Ideengeschichte*, the history of ideas. Chapter 1 explores the meaning of religion – which is much broader than the belief-system of any given ecclesial communion – and also the meaning of theosis in its early historical development. Religion is considered up to the modern age, but theosis only to the end of the patristic age as the springboard for the study of later developments. Chapter 2 traces the post-patristic career of theosis in the Byzantine world, with the definition (at the Constantinopolitan Council of 1351) of theosis as participation in the uncreated energies. Chapter 3 looks at the Western reception of Dionysius the Areopagite and the channelling of thinking on theosis, through Dionysius, into the Western mystical tradition. At the time of the Renaissance, this tradition morphs into the esoteric, as is discussed in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, it is shown how the esoteric contributes to the Russian sophianic versions of theosis. Chapter 6 examines the patristic retrievals of theosis in the twentieth century, and Chapter 7 explores how, through such publications as the *Philokalia* and the *Way of a Pilgrim*, theosis reaches a broad non-churchy audience.

In the book review mentioned above, Andrew Louth regrets the attempt of the book's contributors to make the Greek and Latin Fathers speak in a uniform way. There is a difference of style, he says: 'what would seem to me a real pity would be if Christians felt that there was to be only one theological style' (2020: 837). The difference in style that we can discern by taking a broad perspective lies not only between the Greek and Latin Fathers but also between them and the Western mystics of the

same theme. He rightly says that 'we stand on the brink of a new discourse' (ix). Dissenting from his fundamental thesis, however, I hold that the Christian versions (interconnected as they are in various ways) are significantly different from their non-Christian analogues.

[8] I drop the 'pseudo-' because although briefly challenged in 532, Dionysius's identity as Paul's Athenian convert was not exposed as a fiction until the fifteenth century, by the Italian scholar Lorenzo Valla. As it no longer causes confusion, I am happy to call Dionysius by his chosen nom de plume.

late Middle Ages, the esoteric thinkers of the Early Modern Age, the sophianic theologians of nineteenth-century Russia, and the moderns who have retrieved the notion of deification in some form or other and enriched it from a variety of sources. Theosis is a polyseme, a word with more than one meaning. The discussion that follows attempts to explore these meanings in a selection of different contexts, which, while far from being comprehensive,[9] will indicate, I hope, the broad trajectory of the notion of theosis since it first emerged as a theological theme.

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[9] I particularly regret not having dealt (through lack of space) with the French Oratorians and Spanish Carmelites of the seventeenth century.

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What Is 'Religion', What Is 'Theosis', and How Are They Related?

NOTIONS OF RELIGION IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN AND MEDIAEVAL WORLDS

During my last year at my London grammar school, I attended a class in Latin poetry conducted by the headmaster. In his book-lined study, a small group of pupils read with him *De rerum natura* – 'On the nature of things' – by the great Epicurean philosopher-poet of the first century BC, Titus Lucretius Carus. Not far into the first book of the poem, after a catalogue of crimes committed, according to Greek mythology, in the name of religion, we came to the line: *tantum potuit religio suadere malorum*, 'to such great evils was religion able to impel people' (1.101).[1] 'Mark this line well', said my headmaster, and I have never forgotten it. At the time, its meaning seemed perfectly clear: the superstitious element in pagan religion could persuade people to undertake evil acts in the mistaken conviction that they were pleasing the gods. Later, I came to see that the point Lucretius was making was more philosophical. What he meant by *religio* included not only superstitious awe but also conscientious conviction, moral obligation, and regard for the sacred.[2] As an Epicurean, Lucretius was a materialist who wanted to free his readers from anxieties such as the fear of death. Any supernatural concern that prevented the mind from attaining a detached state of tranquillity was to be deplored.

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[1] The Penguin Classics translation by R. E. Latham renders the line: 'Such are the heights of wickedness to which men are driven by superstition.'

[2] These are the primary meanings of *religio* as used by Cicero (who probably edited Lucretius's poem for publication).

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In his contempt for religion, Lucretius was in a minority. The dominant philosophy in Late Antiquity was Platonism, and the Platonists took religion and the existence of the gods for granted. For them, the gods occupied a celestial realm remote from human concerns; the cultic side of religion (until the time of Iamblichus) was of little interest. Once when Plotinus (205–270) was asked by one of his senior students to accompany him to the temples on the feasts of the gods, he replied: 'They ought to come to me, not I to them' (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, trans. Armstrong). The spirits (δαίμονες) that lurked in the temples were very inferior beings to a philosopher whose guardian spirit, as an Egyptian priest living in Rome had once declared, was actually a god.

Christian writers sought to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable aspects of *religio*. The rhetorician Arnobius of Sicca, writing at the end of the third century AD, makes a distinction between *religio* as 'religion' and *religio* as 'superstition' through interiorising the former ('opinion constitutes religion') and relegating the latter (*superstitio*) to external cultic acts (*Adv. nationes*, 7, 37). The etymological origin of the word *religio* was also investigated as a guide to its fundamental meaning. Cicero connected *religio* with the verb *relegere*, 'to read over again', in the sense of 'pondering what pertains to God' (*De deorum natura*, 2, 28). Writing in the first decade of the fourth century, Lactantius, a former student of Arnobius, questions Cicero's etymology, preferring to connect *religio* with *religare*, 'to bind': 'We have said that the name of religion is derived from the bond of piety, because God has tied man to himself, and bound him by piety' (*Divinae institutiones*, 4, 28, trans. Fletcher). Augustine suggests alternative derivations, either (following Lactantius) from *religare*, 'to bind together', in that religion binds human beings to God (*De vera relig.*, 55; *De civ. Dei*, 10, 1; *Retract.* 2, 13, 19), or (following Cicero but interpreting the word differently) from *relegere*, taken to mean 'to re-elect', consciously to make a new choice: 'by our re-election … we direct our course towards him with love (*dilectio*), so that in reaching him we may find our rest, and attend our happiness because we have achieved our fulfilment in him' (*De civ. Dei*, 10, 3; trans. Bettenson). For Augustine (as for Cicero), religion is therefore closely associated with worship, which in Latin is *cultus*. In this connection, finding the term *cultus* too broad because it can also refer to relations between human beings, Augustine turns to the Greek. The various Greek equivalents for *cultus* seem to him preferable, especially *thrēskeia* (θρησκεία), which he says is the Greek word which Latin translators habitually render as *religio* (*De civ. Dei*, 10, 1).