Theosis, originally a Greek term for Christian divinisation or deification, has become a vogue word in modern theology. Although recent publications have explored its meaning in a selection of different contexts, this is the first book to offer a coherent narrative of how the concept of theosis developed in both its Eastern and Western versions. Norman Russell shows how the role of Dionysius the Areopagite was pivotal not only in Byzantium but also in the late mediaeval West, where it strengthened the turn towards an individualistic interiority. Russell also relates theosis to changing concepts of religion in the modern age. He investigates the Russian version of theosis, introduced in the West by Russian members of the Paris School after the 1917 Revolution. Since then, theosis has undergone additional development through the addition of esoteric elements which have since passed into the mainstream of all theological traditions and even into popular spirituality.

Norman Russell is Honorary Research Fellow at St Stephen’s House, University of Oxford, and Professor of Patristics and Byzantine Theology at the Istituto Teologico di Santa Eufemia di Calcedonia of the Orthodox Exarchate of Italy. He is the author of the acclaimed *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (2004).
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Theosis and Religion

Participation in Divine Life in the Eastern and Western Traditions

NORMAN RUSSELL

University of Oxford
To the memory of
George Russell
1914–1995
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Preface

The title of this book had already been chosen when I was invited by Chad Meister and Paul Moser to contribute a volume to their series. I liked it because I saw that it offered me possibilities for ranging much more widely than in my previous work on deification and perhaps making connections that I had not seen before.

Theosis has become a vogue word in Anglophone theology. Although long familiar to patristic scholars as a Greek term – ἐπίστροφη, meaning literally ‘becoming god’ and signifying deification or participation in the divine life – it was not widely discussed until towards the end of the twentieth century. There appear to be several reasons for this. First, the scholarly foundations needed to be laid through a close examination of the relevant texts. Then, the rise of the Ecumenical Movement (which led to the founding of the World Council of Churches after the Second World War) was necessary in order to bring Western theologians into dialogue with their Eastern counterparts, stimulating the former, initially representatives of Reformed Churches, to take a fresh look at their own soteriology. Anglicans and Roman Catholics in the early days had their own contacts with Orthodox theology through their interaction with the Russian émigré theologians who had settled in Paris after the 1917 Revolution.

At the same time, there was a parallel development in the understanding of ‘religion’. Religion was subjected to theological and sociological critiques which sought to deconstruct what was seen as a fundamentally nineteenth-century ideological category. As a result, departments of theology in many universities were renamed departments of religious studies. On a more popular level, in Western Europe and North America there has...
been a move away from commitment to specific churches ('organised religion') to an interest in ‘spirituality’. God is back, as some commentators have said, but not as the God of the traditional Western theological systems. The purpose of this book is to uncover the different meanings of theosis that have emerged in recent years and to relate them to developments in our understanding of religion.

In the course of writing this book, I have incurred a number of debts to friends and colleagues. I am especially grateful to John Gale, whose thoughtful comments on working carefully through the entire manuscript have greatly improved the book; to Matthew Levering, the Press’s reader, who likewise made a number of perceptive and very helpful comments that are reflected in the final version; and also to Eduard Borysov, Maria Carlson, Douglas Dales, Paul Gavrilyuk, Pantelis Kalaïtzidis, Daniel Keating, Étienne Leclercq, Andrew Louth, Spyros Petritakis, Raymond Russell, and Antonella Sannino, who answered queries and sent me copies of their articles. I also thank Chad Meister and Paul Moser for their great patience in the face of my long delay in submitting the manuscript. My earliest book on deification was dedicated to the memory of my mother, my first teacher of Greek. This book is dedicated to the memory of my father in grateful recognition of the unfailing support he gave to my studies over many years.

Preface
## Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCCM</td>
<td>Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CH</td>
<td>Corpus Hermeticum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWS</td>
<td>Classics of Western Spirituality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denzinger</td>
<td>H. Denzinger (ed.), <em>Enchiridion Symbolorum</em>, Barcelona, 1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCS</td>
<td>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte, Berlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEH</td>
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<td>Septuagint</td>
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<td>WCC</td>
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