

## Theosis and Religion

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).

## Cambridge Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Society

### Series Editors

Paul K. Moser, *Loyola University, Chicago*  
Chad Meister, *Bethel College, Indiana*

This is a series of interdisciplinary texts devoted to major-level courses in religion, philosophy, and related fields. It includes original, current, and wide-spanning contributions by leading scholars from various disciplines that (a) focus on the central academic topics in religion and philosophy, (b) are seminal and up-to-date regarding recent developments in scholarship on the various key topics, and (c) incorporate, with needed precision and depth, the major differing perspectives and backgrounds – the central voices on the major religions and the religious, philosophical, and sociological viewpoints that cover the intellectual landscape today. Cambridge Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Society is a direct response to this recent and widespread interest and need.

### Recent Books in the Series

Roger Trigg  
*Religious Diversity: Philosophical and Political Dimensions*

John Cottingham  
*Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach*

William J. Wainwright  
*Reason, Revelation, and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion*

Harry J. Gensler  
*Ethics and Religion*

Fraser Watts  
*Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality: Concepts and Applications*

Gordon Graham  
*Philosophy, Art, and Religion: Understanding Faith and Creativity*

Keith Ward  
*The Christian Idea of God: A Philosophical Foundation for Faith*

Timothy Samuel Shah and Jack Friedman  
*Homo Religiosus? Exploring the Roots of Religion and Religious Freedom in Human Experience*

Sylvia Walsh  
*Kierkegaard and Religion: Personality, Character, and Virtue*

Roger S. Gottlieb  
*Morality and the Environmental Crisis*

J. L. Schellenberg  
*Religion after Science: The Cultural Consequences of Religious Immaturity*

Clifford Williams  
*Religion and the Meaning of Life: An Existential Approach*

Allen W. Wood  
*Kant and Religion*

Michael McGhee  
*Spirituality for the Godless: Buddhism, Humanism, and Religion*

William B. Parsons  
*Freud and Religion*

Charles Taliaferro and Jil Evans  
*Is God Invisible?: An Essay on Religion and Aesthetics*

David Wenham  
*Jesus in Context: Making Sense of the Historical Figure*

Paul W. Gooch  
*Paul and Religion: Unfinished Conversations*

Herman Philipse  
*Reason and Religion: Evaluating and Explaining Belief in Gods*

Phillip H. Wiebe  
*Religious Experience: Implications for What Is Real*

# Theosis and Religion

*Participation in Divine Life in the Eastern and  
Western Traditions*

NORMAN RUSSELL

*University of Oxford*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
 978-1-108-41868-3 — Theosis and Religion  
 Norman Russell  
 Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)



**CAMBRIDGE**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
 New Delhi – 110025, India  
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,  
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of  
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108418683](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108418683)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108290852

© Norman Russell 2024

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions  
 of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take  
 place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2024

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Russell, Norman, 1945- author.

TITLE: Theosis and religion : participation in divine life in the Eastern and Western traditions /  
 Norman Russell, Oxford University.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2024. | Series: Cambridge studies  
 in religion, philosophy, and society | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2023045651 (print) | LCCN 2023045652 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781108418683 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108406338 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781108290852 (epub)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Deification (Christianity)—History of doctrines.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC BT767.8 .R885 2024 (print) | LCC BT767.8 (ebook) | DDC 234-  
 dc23/eng/20231129

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023045651>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023045652>

ISBN 978-1-108-41868-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-40633-8 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence  
 or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this  
 publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will  
 remain, accurate or appropriate.

*To the memory of*  
*George Russell*  
*1914–1995*

## Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiii
Introduction: The Extraordinary Rise of a Theological Theme	i
1 What Is ‘Religion’, What Is ‘Theosis’, and How Are They Related?	9
2 Byzantium: The Flowering of the Eastern Tradition of Theosis	34
3 The Latin Heirs of Dionysius: Theosis in the Mediaeval West	64
4 ‘Light the Lamp within You’: A Recurring Esoteric Tradition	102
5 ‘People Will Be Gods’: Russian Versions of Theosis	126
6 ‘The <i>Via Regia</i> ’: Deification in the Russian Diaspora	153
7 One with God: From Academic Re-engagement with Theosis to Its Popular Reception	175
8 Afterword: Blank Pages	199
<i>Bibliography</i>	205
<i>Index</i>	223

## 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 – *θέωσις*, 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 Kalaitzidis, 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.

## Abbreviations

CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis
CH	Corpus Hermeticum
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality
Denzinger	H. Denzinger (ed.), <i>Enchiridion Symbolorum</i> , Barcelona, 1951
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte, Berlin
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i> , London
LXX	Septuagint
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
PG	J.-P. Migne (ed.), <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> , Paris, 1857–66
PL	J.-P. Migne (ed.), <i>Patrologia Latina</i> , Paris, 1844–64
SC	Sources Chr�tiennes, Paris
TTB	Translated Texts for Byzantinists
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians
WCC	World Council of Churches