

“Theosis is nothing less and nothing more than salvation.”

For Orthodox Christians, the unique and absolute goal of life in Christ is theosis (also called deification), our being unified with God, so that humans – through their participation in God’s uncreated energy – may become “by the Grace of God” that which God is by nature (without beginning and without end). This is what “salvation” means, in Orthodox Christianity.

This concept will be unfamiliar to many non-Christians, Protestants and Roman Catholics, although it is not a new concept in Christianity. When Christ said “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17), this was a call to a life of theosis. (1) The Apostle Paul made clear the necessity of human cooperation when he told us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:1-13)”.

What is theosis?

Theosis literally means to become “gods” by grace. The biblical words that are synonymous and descriptive of theosis are: adoption, redemption, inheritance, glorification, holiness and perfection. Theosis is acquiring the Holy Spirit, whereby, through the Divine Grace, one becomes a participant in the *Kingdom of God*. Theosis is an act of the uncreated and infinite love of God. It begins here in time and space, but it is not static or complete, and is an open-ended progression, uninterrupted through all eternity. For the Church Fathers, Christ is the summit of human deification. Christ’s humanity is deified humanity. (1)

What is salvation?

Salvation is the divine gift through which men and women are delivered from sin and death, united with Christ, and brought into His eternal Kingdom. Those who heard Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost asked what they must do to be saved. He answered, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Salvation contains the following three main “facets”.

Facet 1: repent: to repent means to change our mind about how we have been, turning from our sin and committing ourselves to Christ; this is not a one-off occurrence, but a continuous process in the Christian life.

Facet 2: be baptized: to be baptized means to be born again by being joined with Christ; it is a once-and-for-all event, although Confession is seen as a 'second baptism', that is the re-establishing of our original baptismal purity.

and Facet 3: receive the gift of the Holy Spirit: to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit means to receive the Spirit who empowers us to enter a new life in Christ, to be nurtured in the Church, and to be conformed to God's image. Acquiring the Holy Spirit comes in proportion to our cooperation through ascetic life and practice

Salvation demands faith in Jesus Christ. The Orthodox Christians believe that people cannot save themselves by their own good works. Salvation is "faith working through grace." (Ephesians 2:8-10) It is an ongoing, lifelong process. Salvation is in the past tense in that, through the death and Resurrection of Christ, we have been saved. It is in the present tense, because we must also be saved by our active participation through faith in our union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is also in the future tense, for we are yet to be saved at His glorious Second Coming. (2)

The concepts of theosis and salvation in Eastern and Western Christianity.

From the beginning, Greek and Latin cultures each approached the Christian Mystery in their own way. Latin thought was influenced by juridical ideas, by the concept of Roman law (and the idea of satisfying God's justice), while the Greek culture understood theology in the context of worship and in the light of the Holy Liturgy. When thinking about the Trinity, Latins started with the essence of the divine nature and the unity of the persons of the Godhead, Greeks with the person of the Father and the tri-unity of the persons. When reflecting on the Crucifixion, Latins thought primarily of Christ the Victim, Greeks of Christ the Victor; reflecting on salvation, Latins talked more of redemption, Greeks of deification; and so on. The Trinity was seen by the Greek East as a personalist concept, which considers the personal revelation of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as the starting point of Trinitarian theology (God exists as three persons but is one being). The Latin West followed an Augustinian (after Saint Augustine, see below) approach to God, as a simple essence, within which a Trinity of persons can be understood only in terms of internal relations. (3)

The Orthodox Christian teaching on personal salvation is based on the teaching of the purpose of God's creation of man, and the damage suffered by human nature as a result of the "ancestral sin". God created man "in His Image and His likeness" (Genesis 1:26) – that is, God intended man to be god by grace. "The loss of the Kingdom of (communion with) God was the most severe consequence of the fall. Adam and Eve lost blessedness that they had already tasted in Paradise." (4) "After his first fall, man himself departed in soul from God and became unreceptive to the grace of God which was opened to him; he ceased to listen to the divine voice addressed to him, and this led to the further deepening of sin in him. But God never

deprived mankind of His mercy, help, grace, and especially His chosen people. The righteous ones from the Old Testament could not escape the general lot of fallen mankind after death, and remaining in the darkness of hell, until the founding of the Heavenly Church – until the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ destroyed the gates of hell and opened the way in to the Kingdom of Heaven.” (5)

The legalistic view of salvation – that has really become a “trademark” of Western Roman Catholicism and Protestantism – would not have been possible without the theology of original sin of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) that had grown out of a famous dispute with Pelagius, a British ascetic who lived c. 350-425 and who taught in Rome as a well-respected moral preacher and biblical commentator. (6)

The Roman Catholic theology of salvation presents God as more interested in the “letter” of the law, in the visible side of our “agreement”, than in its essence: God cannot see our deeds as “merits” but agrees to accept and reward them as such.

In the same way, Protestants do not seem to have a problem with believing that God agrees to accept a sinner as sinless because of Christ. Needless to say, both of these views are a flagrant contradiction to the teaching of the Orthodox Christian Church about God as Truth and as Unchanging God, in Whom there is “no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (James 1:17). “Concerning God one cannot say that any kind of process is being performed in Him, whether of growth, change of appearance, evolution, progress or anything of the like. God’s attitude toward man does not change.” (7)

The Protestant doctrine of sanctification does bear a certain resemblance to Orthodox Christian theosis. Both involve the healing of the effects of sin, are progressive in nature, and culminate at the Second Coming. Another important similarity is that both are the result of the Holy Spirit in the Christian. But there are significant differences.

Protestantism understands sanctification as moral transformation or a change in attitude leading to behavioural change. This is compatible with its dominant legal approach to salvation. Protestantism is not only suspicious of, but implicitly denies the metaphysical transformation which is the foundation of the Orthodox Christian understanding of theosis.

The Wesleyan Methodist doctrine of being able to perfect human nature is a doctrine that is very alike to theosis, except that it misses the added element of mystical union with God in Christ as both the means and motive for attaining perfection.

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There is a great deal of Scriptural and Patristic evidence showing that the Orthodox Christian Church has always believed in the possibility of Orthodox Christian theosis and has seen it as the means of our salvation. “When Christ said, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand (Matthew 4:17),” this is a call to a life of Theosis.” (8) “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19). “He, indeed, assumed humanity that we may become God” (St. Athanasius of Alexandria, “On the Incarnation”). (9)

It is important to highlight that, according to the teachings of the Church Fathers on theosis, the human person is not getting absorbed, or “swallowed”, by Divinity. In His “High Priest’s prayer”, Jesus Christ prays to God the Father about His followers that “they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us” (John 17:21). Just as three Persons of the Holy Trinity live within each other without losing their individual character, we are also called to “live” in God without losing our identity.

Through theosis humans, of course, do not become God by essence – they become God (divine) by grace. Their togetherness is with the Divine energies – that is, the manifestations of God in this world – not with the essence of God. Finally, it should be noted that, since Christ saved the whole person, personal salvation involves both soul and body. “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God” (Romans 12:1). Holiness is not just a perfection of our morals. Many Orthodox Saints have physically demonstrated the fruits of theosis. In the lives of the Holy Fathers of the early Church are many examples of visible, bodily signs accompanying theosis – like uncreated light (“the light of Tabor”) surrounding the living Saints. The bodies of some Saints have been miraculously preserved.

Countless saints throughout history have demonstrated the possibility of deification as a reality in their lives. They attained deification only after intense suffering. Their sufferings came through persecution and martyrdom, intense ascetic discipline and countless nightly prayer vigils, wrestling with evil spirits to obtain victory in the spiritual life. Such blessed victory was won through suffering.

One such example is St. Seraphim of Sarov, a Russian monk of the nineteenth century, who went into the forest with his disciple, Motovilov, during a snowstorm. While praying, St. Seraphim became iridescent in appearance, to the point of emitting what was for Motovilov an almost blinding light. Accompanying this glow was a warmth in the midst of the Russian winter snow, along with a beautiful fragrance and a feeling of unspeakable joy and peace. St. Seraphim attributed this blessed state to having acquired the Holy Spirit, or deification. (10)

The Orthodox Christian understanding of theosis is based on a sacramental worldview in which matter is viewed as capable of transferring divine grace. In this worldview there is the possibility for human beings to become channels of divine grace. As they grow in holiness, as our hearts become free of the passions, the life of God penetrates their whole being and they become deified.

To put it in the words of Saint Gregory Palamas: humans' ultimate destiny is not merely an intellectual contemplation of God; if it were, the resurrection of the dead would be unnecessary. The blessed will see God face to face, in the fullness of their created being. And in order to see the light with bodily light, as the disciples saw it on Mount Tabor, they must participate in and be transformed by it, in accordance with each persons' capacity. Mystical experience implies this change in our nature, its transformation by grace. (11)



FOOTNOTES:

- (1) Ken Parry, David J. Melling, Dimitri Brady, Sidney H. Griffith & John F. Healey, *The Blackwell dictionary of Eastern Christianity*, Blackwell Publishers, reprinted 2000. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new edition, Penguin Books, 1997, p.159
- (2) Antiochian Christian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America website: <http://antiochian.org/content/theosis-partaking-divine-nature>
- (3) Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new edition, Penguin Books, 1997, p.48
- (4) Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky. *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition* (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1984), p. 159
- (5) Ibid., p. 163-164
- (6) John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p.40
- (7) Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky. *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition* (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1984), p. 68
- (8) Archimandrite George, *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life* (Mount Athos, Greece: Holy Monastery of St. Gregorios, 2006), p. 9.
- (9) Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1991, p. 134

- (10) St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book 5, 1:1, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.vii.ii.html> April 9, 2010).
- (11) *Little Russian Philokalia, Volume 1: St Seraphim*, Saint Herman of Alaska Monastery Press, Platina, California, 1980, p. 89
- (12) Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1991, p. 224

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