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THEOSIS REVISITED

Ancient terms, their meanings and influence, arise again from time to time within theological discourse to enhance or re-enlighten current trajectories of thought. *Theosis*, the deification or divinization of the human creature, is one such term. It appears to be enjoying a revival of late among some Roman Catholic writers which is not all that surprising considering that Roman Catholicism, by and large, has always embraced the notion of *theosis*. What does seem surprising is the current manner of its adoption and interpretation within various Protestant and Evangelical circles. This is not to suggest that deification or divinization is a new concept within these arenas. Bruce D. Marshall, for instance, points out that Luther, in his *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, refers to the justified Christian as a 'divine creature'.¹ John and Charles Wesley went even further, borrowing from the Eastern Fathers many of the ideas associated with *theosis* for their own understanding of the true meaning of the doctrine of sanctification. As for its current popularity, Roger E. Olson makes the suggestion that the "New Age movement" may be partly responsible.² Regarding this suggestion he writes, "One can only suspect that the increasing cultural thirst for real spiritual experience and even for some union with God in and through religion served as a catalyst for deification's rediscovery."³ Elsewhere, however, he states, "Even if the renaissance of interest in deification has nothing at all to do with the New Age movement and the reach of Eastern religions and spiritualities into Western society, another explanation for it must certainly lie in a weariness with shallow moralistic accounts of salvation."⁴ In an attempt to correct this troublesome state of affairs, Olson describes the various ways in which Protestant and Evangelical pastors and theologians use the concept of *theosis* today to bolster and revitalize a sense of the spiritual and transcendent within their own communities. Though he upholds the worthiness of this project, at the same time, he voices his concern about the way in which *theosis* is being interpreted.⁵

If, as Olson concludes, the Eastern Orthodox meaning of *theosis* has been shanghai'd within contemporary theology and utilized in a manner at odds with its basic teaching, then that in itself appears problematic, for it might well produce the notion that *theosis*, as originally

accepted, no longer functions as a life enriching tenet of Christian faith outside its own domain. But seldom has it been the case that the last word has been uttered with regard to any doctrinal position, be it in the Eastern Church, the Roman Church or the Churches of the Reformation.. Ongoing developments and new insights are to be expected and encouraged in light of new life situations and in the ongoing endeavor of “faith seeking understanding.”

In light of all this, it seems advisable to reacquaint ourselves with the Eastern and Latin understanding of the doctrine of deification, for there also we find differences of opinion as to how one should view this mainstay of Orthodox faith. While engaged in this task, I will argue that one of the early Fathers of the Church, namely Irenaeus, who never used the work *theosis*, possessed an even richer and more challenging understanding of *theosis* than that officially accepted within Orthodoxy stemming from the theology of Gregory of Palamas and contemporary followers such as Vladimir Lossky and others, an understanding that continues to challenge us both theologically and spiritually. Finally, I would like to offer a few reflections of my own regarding the mystery of deification as it works in our own lives here and now.

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There can be no question that the work of the medieval monk Gregory Palamas, following that of the Cappadocian Fathers, and Maximus the Confessor, culminated in the Eastern teaching on *theosis* which continues as the standard interpretation of this doctrine within Orthodox spirituality today. The main contribution of Gregory was his definitive articulation of the absolute distinction between created being and uncreated being, between that of God which can be known and the incomprehensible essence of God, the inner life of God, which remains unknowable, hidden and transcendent. Though we can never possess knowledge of the divine essence, according to Gregory, God’s outward manifestations or “divine energies” make possible our participation in the divine life. This is due to God’s bestowal of grace and other supernatural attributes via Christ and the Holy Spirit, wherein both the integrity of God’s transcendence and the integrity of the human are maintained in a relationship of self-donating love. As one contemporary Orthodox theologian writes,

Yet even in the condition of perfect *theosis* God remains unknown in His superevidence. *Theosis* is limited to man and creation. God is not compromised

but remains fundamentally inviolate and other than his creation....What God is by nature and in his essence man can never become. *Theosis* speaks only of what man can become by faith and grace, that is, a participant in the divine life. Sharing in the life and love of the Holy Trinity in His uncreated energies is possible for created nature, but to become of one essence with the uncreated essence of God is impossible.⁶

The necessity of this clarification on Gregory's part was driven by the need to counter various heterodox groups, both Christian and non-Christian, who maintained that some aspects of our being were immortal from the beginning, i.e., our soul, wherein salvation would entail a return of the divine to the Divine and others who leaned towards pantheism positing some manner of commingling of the human with the divine.

At the same time, however, Gregory argued for a complete transformation of the human being via *theosis* whose destiny is participation in the divine life, that being the sole reason for our creation in the first place. Not even the entry of sin into the world can ultimately curtail God's plan of redemption. Vladimir Lossky states it well when he says, "The goal has never ceased being in union with God in all freedom....But the Fall demands a change, not in God's goal, but in his means....Sin has destroyed the primitive plan, that of a direct climb of man to God. A catastrophic fracture has opened in the cosmos. This must be healed and the abortive history of man redeemed for a new beginning."⁷ Not only does Gregory speak of a complete transformation of the human creature but he maintains, at the same time, that the transformation that takes place is ontological. Lossky explains it this way, "One becomes by grace, in a movement boundless by God, that which God is by nature."⁸ What does that mean? Divine adoption? Divine inheritance by grace? How, exactly, are we to understand such a change, especially in light of human freedom and human sinfulness?

Clearly, Orthodox theologians and those of other Christian denominations would have little problem understanding the humanity of Christ as the perfect example of deified humanity, but the totality of Christ's humanity was without sin. No ontological change was needed and even the resurrection of Christ cannot be considered such. Consequently, the deification of Christ's humanity is different from ours. Regarding the Incarnation, according to the Council of Chalcedon, the person of the hypostatic union, wherein the human nature and the divine nature

are unified, but not commingled, is a divine person and is so eternally, but that is not the case with us. Lossky emphasizes this affirmation when he writes,

The humanity of Christ has never constituted a distinct and anterior nature;it never existed outside the person of Christ; it is He who has created it from the center of His hypostasis, not *ex nihilo*, since it is necessary to redeem all of human history, the total human condition. The uncreated person Himself creates His human nature, and the latter appears from the start as the humanity of the Word. Strictly speaking, it is not a question of union nor even of assumption, but of the unity of two natures in the person of the Word from the moment of his Incarnation.⁹

Furthermore, the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 681 affirmed not only two natures in Christ but two natural wills, a human and a divine will, which are not in opposition, for the human will submits to the divine will, the will of God, eternally. For Maximus the Confessor this affirmation was essential for it was taught that what of our nature is not assumed is not redeemed. Thus if Christ had a divine will but no human will, then a major aspect of our personhood would be excluded from salvation. In addition, Maximus felt the need to clarify that unlike ourselves, in Christ there is no free will. Why? Because,

the two natural wills cannot enter into conflict in His person, for this person is not a human hypostasis, who, for having tasted the fatal fruit, must ceaselessly choose between good and evil, but a divine hypostasis, one whose choice was made once and for all, that of kenosis, of a non-conditional obedience to the will of the Father.¹⁰

And elsewhere we are told in reference to the freedom of Christ,

It is the choice, consented to since eternity, to allow all that makes our condition, that is to say our fallenness, penetrate His self at depth: and this depth is anguish, death, descent into Hell. Contrary to the ascending scheme of the "kenotic" doctrines, if there is a progress in Christ's consciousness it is in a descent, not a climb.¹¹

But if the human nature of Christ “is created from the center of His hypostasis,” the divinity of His person, and if we are to be conformed to Christ, it would appear that the Palamite distinction between God’s essence and God’s energies is not all that helpful. While it is true that we can never think of ourselves as not being dependent upon God, even in a deified state, and in this sense always a creature before the transcendence of God, does this mean necessarily that we are excluded from participation, in some manner, within the inner life of the triune God? Is God’s hiddenness of such an order that God would not want to share as much of it as we are able to assume and would God be any less God if that were to occur?

So the questions remain. How are we assimilated to Christ in such a way that one can legitimately speak of our *theosis* and the ontological change that Orthodoxy affirms? If we are to become a created god, “a new being in Christ,” how does this come about? Baptism? Eucharist? Continual prayer? The work of the Holy Spirit? While all of these play an important role they cannot provide a complete answer. One thing remains certain, *theosis*, however we are to understand it, does not result from any form of meritorious effort, though the Holy Spirit enables our free will to respond to transforming grace. Perhaps a complete answer is not possible. For Lossky and others it remains somewhat of a mystery, but as to our redemption he does insist that “divine love always pursues the same end: the deification of men and by them the whole universe....Redemption, then, appears as the negative facet of the divine plan. Salvation itself is only a negative moment: the only essential reality remains union with God. What does it matter being saved from death, from Hell, if it is not to lose oneself in God?”¹²

With regard to Maximus, it appears he upholds stages of salvation as opposed to thinking of salvation as a single event. As we are transformed into “children of God” in this life, so we can look forward to a continuation of life as participation in the very nature of God in the life to come. We glimpse this in the incarnate Logos and in his humanity. For Maximus, the second Epistle of Peter is definitive for understanding deification, “He has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world and become partakers of the divine nature .”¹³ This entails a willingness on our part and a desire to become children of God. Just as Lossky speaks of a synergism of God’s grace and our free will, so Maximus, borrows from St. Basil the Great, when he claims that while we possess

no inherent power to deify ourselves, nevertheless, we are the creature who receives the command to become god.¹⁴ But the command does not imply coercion. This is the paradox of Eastern Orthodox spirituality that has been maintained throughout the centuries and continues to inspire the faithful. As Jeroslav Pelikan states, this “paradox has been difficult for systematic theology to encompass, as the fifteen centuries of the history of Augustinianism in the West, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, more than amply attest.” In addition, this synergism of grace and human free will is one of the features of Eastern Orthodoxy that Roger E. Olson finds overlooked or discarded in the present use of *theosis* among many Protestants and Evangelicals, a component of this doctrine that he believes cannot be discarded.

Thus far in our discussion it appears that grace carries the weight of how Maximus, Gregory of Palamas, and others understand the basis of our deification. Yet, if we travel a little further back, prior to Maximus, during the time of the Cappadocian Fathers and before, we find at least one figure, of which we have already made mention, whose theological insights and pronouncements offer a more interesting, if not somewhat radical, account of how we are conformed to Christ and participate in the life of God via the notion of *theosis*. We refer to none other than Irenaeus of Lyon.

One of the central questions confronting the early Fathers of the Church with respect to the Incarnation was *cur Deus homo?* Why did God become human? In *Adversus Haeresis* Irenaeus provides an answer that has remained with us to this day. “Our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, (did so) to bring us even to be what He is Himself.”¹⁵ Although Irenaeus never uses the term *theosis* or *theopoiesis* outright, what he does say constitutes the main elements of what would become the foundation for this doctrine of Orthodox faith. To begin, there is the issue of partaking of God. It seems quite clear that Irenaeus thought of the five divine attributes: power, life, eternity, light, and glory, along with God’s other virtues to be a part of the very essence of God.¹⁶ But if they are a part of the very nature of God’s essence, then they would be totally inaccessible to us, at least from the neo-Palamite school of thought. But this is not the case for Irenaeus, for he often speaks of our participation in God, in the Spirit and in the Son. As one scholar, Jeffrey Finch, states, “Irenaeus rather forcefully denies that God’s activities, perfections, or attributes are external to

His essence and therefore somehow more communicable or participable to creatures than is God Himself in His essence.¹⁷ Nor is Irenaeus interested in trying to reconcile Exodus 33:20 (“no man shall see God and live”) as evidence for God’s invisible essence and Matthew 5:8 (“blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God”) as referring to God’s energies. His appeal is to Luke 18:27, “For those things that are impossible for men are possible for God.”¹⁸ In reference to the same point Finch reiterates the fact that “Irenaeus refuses to designate a distinct part or mode of God as intrinsically, eternally unknowable, for God is unknowable only insofar as “no man has searched out His height’.”¹⁹ What this means is that God wishes to share more and more of the richness of God’s inner life with us, but because God is infinite there is no way in which we, as creatures, need ever worry about exhausting the Divine love for us nor the degree to which God will make God’s self known to the human creature, nor the depth of intimacy we will enjoy, for as he says, it is not possible to live apart from life, and the means of life is found in participation in God; but to participate in God is to know God and to enjoy his goodness.

To emphasize the degree of our participation in more specific terms Irenaeus turns to his understanding of the Incarnation and our conformation to Christ. Regarding the Incarnation we, as Denis Minns explains in reference to Irenaeus, must put aside the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith during the Fourth General Council of the Church in 451 (a definition prior to the life of Irenaeus) which upheld the two natures in Christ “as completely distinct and unmixed.”²⁰ For although Irenaeus recognizes the great gulf between created being and God, it was also his belief that God from the beginning intended by grace and adoption to overcome this gulf by bringing the creature to a state of restoration where, in Christ, the uncreated and created meet. According to Irenaeus, “the uncreated, impassible God becomes a passible human being and reconciles Adam’s flesh to the Father, bestowing upon it the divine gift of incorruptibility. Within the person of Christ humanity and divinity are joined.”²¹ Nor was this joining to be treated loosely. Again, as Minns points out, the victory over Satan, the Resurrection and Ascension do not belong to the Word alone while the suffering and endurance are looked upon as components of Christ’s humanity. “Christ was one reality, who was both Son of God and Son of Man, the unique subject of the crucifixion and the resurrection.”²²

To the dismay of some, Irenaeus, in his battle against the gnostic adherence to the belief that the spirit or soul of our being is the only worthy portion of our person to attain salvation, he at times appears to refute the Pauline saying that “flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of heaven.” The fact that we were hand fashioned by God at Creation meant for Irenaeus that every aspect and makeup of our being is precious to God. So though he must admit with Paul that we must say that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven,” he interprets this to mean that flesh and blood cannot on its own inherit the kingdom but must be inherited and the earth itself also from whence we came.²³ It is God who does the inheriting, not us, yet our lives should be lived in such a manner that the Holy Spirit begins the binding of our selves to God in our entirety as we live our lives from day to day. In fact, for Irenaeus, the truly human being is a combination of flesh, soul, and Spirit.

We should not say that flesh and blood will take hold of the Kingdom, but rather that the Spirit will take hold of flesh and blood and lift them up into the Kingdom. Our flesh will not take possession of the Spirit, rather the Spirit will take possession of our flesh and so transform it that, without ceasing to be flesh, it will be radiant with the glory of God.²⁴

Also, if the flesh were not in a position to be saved the Word of God would in no wise become flesh. And if the blood of the righteous were not to be inquired after, the Lord would certainly not have had blood (in his composition).All righteous blood shall be required which is shed upon the earth from the blood of the righteous Abel to the blood of Zacharias....Now this blood could not be required unless it also had the capability of being saved; nor would the Lord have summed up these things in Himself unless He had Himself been made flesh and blood after the way of the original formation of man, saving in his own person at the end that which had in the beginning perished in Adam.²⁵

Elsewhere Irenaeus makes the argument that Christ's flesh had to be Adam's flesh for the image and likeness of God in which the human creature was fashioned was a preparation in advance for the full union of the two which would take place in Christ as the human and divine became more and more accustomed to one another. The importance of this idea resides in Irenaeus' view that Christ had to conquer the temptations of Satan in the same flesh as Adam,

whose flesh had been deceived by the serpent. This victory was necessary for winning back the immortality and life with God for which we were created. In one sense, then Christ is superior to Adam in what Minns refers to as his rational faculties and his moral strength. However, like Adam and like us, Christ was as vulnerable as any human with respect to his mortal flesh. All the suffering of torment and death were his as they are ours.

Regarding the notion of our being joined to Christ both in the flesh and in every other way brings us to the topic of our becoming. While we are created in a state of becoming, or growth and development, which will never cease, even at the Resurrection, as it is our proper state according to Irenaeus, God intends from all eternity that this state of becoming be infinite, infinite in the sense that we are destined to become more and more like God. “The perfection of humankind is to draw near to God and to share in his uncreated glory, especially through the gift of incorruptibility. The goal of the divine plan is that the created earth should be so transformed that, without ceasing to be a creature, it shares the glory of the uncreated God.”²⁶ But the gift of incorruptibility is not the only gift. The most blessed gift is our adoption, not merely by God, but into God. Adoption, as such, cannot be understood in the thought of Irenaeus until we realize first the impact of Christ’s obedience to the Father via the Spirit. Such obedience should not be considered as merely an example to be followed. For Irenaeus it signifies much more,. It actually transforms our flesh physically by casting out sin in every form from our very being. One example he uses is Christ’s curing of the blind man by using spit and earth to create clay and placing it on the blind man’s eyes. The blind man’s restored sight shows how God via the Incarnation, through flesh and blood and Spirit calls us, like Adam, out of hiding and into the vision of the incarnate God, God who activates our restoration in the present..

If the Incarnate Christ heals our physical weaknesses as well as our spiritual anguish, if He can conform our flesh to His, then for what purpose? For Irenaeus it is for the completion of the eternal divine plan, our adoption as sons and daughters of God. But how does Irenaeus understand adoption? In one sense, we are sons and daughters of God because we are God’s creation. We remain so as long as we honor God just as we honor our parents, but we can be disinherited. Although Irenaeus places great importance on our obedience to God, this is not what Irenaeus means by adoption. Adoptive sonship is a gift of God given to us in Christ. While

it certainly involves the restoration of a right relationship with God, it means much more. As Minns states,

It is an incorporation into the natural sonship which is Christ's as the only begotten Son of God. Obviously, as creatures, we cannot be begotten of God in the way the divine Son is, but when Irenaeus speaks of our adoption as sons of God he does not mean that God simply chooses to look upon us as though we were his sons, he means that God has established us as so by incorporating us into his only begotten Son. For this reason Irenaeus does not hesitate to say that when the Psalmist speaks of the 'assembly of the gods' he means by 'gods' the Father the Son and those who have been made gods.²⁷

Many Fathers of the early church who came after Irenaeus found his theology too physical, especially his view of the kingdom God, which was to be an earthly kingdom, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants of whom we are a part, for Christ has made us partakers of those promises anew, a kingdom of justice and peace. Not only was the body in need of salvation for it was the body that was composite and doomed to decomposition and death due to sin, but, for Irenaeus, the earth also, for bodies need land in which to move and interact with one another as they contribute to the building of the kingdom under the rule of God. Perhaps this is why his theology came into dispute not long after. The new spiritualization of eschatological teaching was about to take over and produce in its wake greater emphasis on judgment, sin, atonement, and the reality of hell for most. When it comes to the matter of *theosis*, however, the deification of the human being's entry into the very life of God, it seems that we owe Irenaeus a great deal. Unlike the later Fathers of the church who considered the intimacy of the union of the human and the divine, flesh and Spirit, as something almost abominable to Christian thought, provoking the need to produce a theology that would forever prevent any real contact of the one with the other, Irenaeus broke all the rules. Against Marcion and all the threat of other gnostic groups, he fought ferociously for the goodness of the human being in its totality and for the fullness of its salvation via the Incarnation, a salvation that allows God to reveal God's self ever more intimately. Thus the Pauline saying that "nothing can separate us from the love of God" would include, for Irenaeus, even the distinction between God's energies and God's essence.

Nor does Irenaeus believe in a God of retribution, a God for whom our disobedience requires punitive action.. Though he does not say so, he would, I suspect, find more meaning in the biblical story of the Prodigal Son. The father, on the son's return, does not greet him with curses, whips or stones due to his wanderings and for what he has squandered but embraces him, prepares a feast for him, weeps for joy at being able to embrace him once again at long last. So one might ask what hell means. For Irenaeus I think it is the shame we experience for things we have done so that we, like Adam, feel we too must hide for fear of what the penalty might be. That is our torment, a torment we endure until we too can bear it no longer and return to God, not to punishment, but to the open arms of the divine embrace for which God will wait for eternity if necessary. The most sorrowful part of it all is that belief in a God who demands payment, a payment we could not even provide, is what has caused division after division within Christendom, the division of God's love from God's justice, God's essence from God's energies, God's preference for our soul as opposed to our body, God's choice of one group of people over another.

I have found in reading Irenaeus a Christian writer who repeatedly provides us with biblically based reasons for believing that our access to God can be thwarted by nothing other than our own fear, a fear that this Father of the Church spent the better part of his life trying to allay. If we are to believe in *theosis* at all, I am of the opinion that we can find no better advocate for that belief than Irenaeus. Most importantly, Irenaeus recognizes the need for extending deification, *theosis*, to the restoration of justice for the earth itself, for a divine the kingdom of God and our need to know that we must participate in that kingdom. The thought that something completely new will be provided, both in the sense of our bodies and in the sense of the world, is not really Christian. It is not another world that God wills to provide but this world made other. Nor is it a new body that God wills to provide for us but this body made other, made glorious reflecting the divine image and likeness, the original handiwork of our Creator and more. In our deified state we will never again know the pain and heartbreak of being separated from those we love, nor the agony of being apart from God. The hiding will be over, we will live in the light of divine goodness and enjoy becoming ever more intimately acquainted with our heavenly Father.

It may be the case that Irenaeus places too much emphasis on our physical being for the comfort of many today, and it may be that some would fault him for the weight he gives to the Incarnation, for there can be little doubt that the Incarnation plays a greater role in the idea of *theosis* than the Crucifixion. This is still the case for the Eastern Orthodox Church. Lossky says it well:

And yet, if Christ has no unity of person, our nature is not authentically assumed by God and the Incarnation ceases to be a “physical” restoration. If there is no real unity in Christ, a union between man and God is no longer possible. The whole doctrine of salvation loses its ontological foundation. We remain separated from God. Deification is forbidden; Christ is no more than a great exemplar; and Christianity becomes morality, an imitation of Jesus. 28

Unfortunately this notion of our deification too often has been overly spiritualized or hampered by the notion of God as Wholly Other, as a God who deigns to save a few even though all are deserving of damnation. This makes it difficult to appreciate Irenaeus. Thus, if Protestant and Evangelical theologians are trying to recapture a sense of our deification, more power to them. There is no better time. And if they happen to veer from some aspects of the standard interpretation then that is to be expected. My hope is that they might find in Irenaeus a powerful defendant of this doctrine even before it was officially recognized. To this end I cannot agree more with Minns when he writes:

Irenaeus was so much at pains to uphold the simple truth that it is the body that matters, that taken out of his own context, he might appear to have assigned it too much importance. Despite his initial victory over his opponents, he was unable to arrest the growing influence of Platonism upon Christianity, and many of the essential aspirations of the gnostics were soon to find welcome, and a permanent home, within the spiritual and mystical traditions of the catholic, orthodox Church. The same Church is fortunate to have in Irenaeus’ writings an enthusiastic refutation of the false understandings that ensue when those of spiritual and mystical inclinations succumb to the ever-present temptation to suppose that the body is of no account in the scheme of salvation.²⁹

ENDNOTES

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9. Ibid. p. 93
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13. II Peter, I, 4.
14. Lossky, p. 128
15. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, X, 2. Anti Nicene Fathers, p. 424.
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19. Finch, p. 95
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24. *Against Heresies*, V.9.4.
25. Ibid, V. 14. 1.
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27. Ibid. p. 112
28. Lossky, p. 97
29. Minns, pp 1370-138