Appendix

Theosis and the Transformation of the Body

The doctrine of *theopoiesis* or *theosis* was an influential interpretation of the eschatological transformation of the body in Patristic thought.[1] This doctrine was based on the concept that human nature was "deified" when it was joined to the Divine Word in the Incarnation.[2] Through union with Christ in redemption, our human nature is brought to participate in the divine life of the Trinity, and thereby also deified, becoming like the human nature of the Incarnate Christ.[3] This state is seen as the final goal of humankind. The doctrine of *theosis* became a prominent part of the theology of Greek Patristic writers, and it was also used by some Latin writers, most extensively by Hilary of Poitiers, but also in a limited way by Hippolytus,[4] and even Augustine.[5]

Both Patristic and contemporary theology express the concept of *theosis* in the phrase: "He became as we are that we might become as he is."[6] That is, the Divine Word became human that the human might become divine. In this view, the relationship of God to the creation is understood in terms of the relationship of the "being" of God and the "being" of creation. Therefore, salvation through being "united with Christ" is thought to mean an ontological union with him,[7] in which his divine being is

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[1] Also translated as "divinisation," although some see this as a misleading and pejorative term which obscures the meaning of the Greek. Cf. T F Torrance, **Theology in Reconstruction**, p. 243.

[2] For example, Athanasius. *Against the Arians* 1.42. NPNF 2/4, p. 330.

[3] Many Patristic writers take the position that Christ, the divine Word, took on human nature, in order that we humans can take on his divine nature. Athanasius. *Defence of the Nicene Definition* 3.13. NPNF 2/4, p. 159. *The life of Anthony* 74. NPNF 2/4, p. 215. Prudentius. *Psychomachia* 76-86. Loeb I, p. 285. Gregory of Nazianzus. *Oration* 1.5. NPNF 2/7, p. 203. Maximus the Confessor. *Letter 24*. PG 91, 609C. Translation cited in: P Sherwood. St **Maximus the Confessor: The Ascetic Life. Four Centuries on Charity**. ACW 21, p. 71. John of Damascus. *Treatise on Images* 3. M H Allies, p. 105.

[4] Cf. D Ritschl. "Hippolytus' concept of deification. Remarks on the interpretation of Refutation 10.34." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 12 (1959) 388-399. Note, however, Nautin's claim discussed by Dunbar that the *Elenchos* (or *Refutation of all Heresies*) which teaches *theosis*, is not authentic. "For the Elenchos the concept of salvation is that of deification, but this idea is absent not only from the Contra Noetum but from all the clearly authentic works of Hippolytus." D G Dunbar. "The problem of Hippolytus of Rome: A study in historical-critical reconstruction." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982) 67.

[5] Cf. G Bonner. "Augustine's concept of deification." *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986) 369-386.

[6] For example, Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* 5. Preface. ANF 1, p. 526. Athanasius. *On the Incarnation* 54. Oxford Early Christian Texts, p. 269. Augustine. *Sermon* 192.1.1. PL 38, 1012. E F Osborn comments that the "exchange formula" (*x* became *y*, that *y* might become *x*) has been commonly misinterpreted. In the first place, it denies an original identity or community between God and man." He comments further that if "*x* becomes *y*, then it was not originally *y*. In the second place, identity is not asserted: *x* and *y* do not become coextensive. Man does not acquire all the attributes of God, any more than God acquires all the attributes of man." **The beginning of Christian philosophy**, p. 115. *Theosis* undercuts the reality of the Incarnation.

[7] A frequent term for this union is "participation," which it seems has overtones of Platonism. Cf. G Bonner. "Augustine's concept of deification." *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986) 379. He comments appositely: "Again, it has been argued that for Augustine deification is equivalent to the New Testament idea of adoption. It is surely significant that Augustine

communicated ontologically with the creature.[8] As a consequence, the distinction between the Creator and the creation is compromised.[9] This ontologising of Christianity arose under the influence of Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophies,[10] which are inherently anti-creational and therefore denigrate the goodness of bodily life. It is worthy of note that those writers who advocate *theosis* are strongly under the influence of Neo-Platonism. The most ardent advocate is perhaps Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whose works exhibit Neo-Platonism "in almost every paragraph,"[11] whose eschatological vision focuses almost exclusively on participation in God and *theosis*. The doctrine of the resurrection occurs only in connection with his description of the rites for the dead; but even this he describes as "an unshakeable conformity to God," and through union with Christ our bodies received "immortality and blessedness in an indestructible conformity with God."[12] Thus we can see how *theosis* distorts even the doctrine of the bodily resurrection.

The creature can never participate ontologically in the "being" of the Creator, nor is there any necessity that it should do so. Salvation rescues the creature from the consequences of sin, it does not transform the creature into something non-creaturely (divine). *Theosis* leads to a repudiation of the creaturely character of the resurrection state, through making a strong distinction between the present body and the eschatological body, to the extent that their identity is obscured.

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should have continued to speak of deification when he had an unambiguously scriptural expression available, to use exclusively, if he had so chosen. Are we to see here evidence of the continuing influence of Neoplatonism in his thought, even after he had come to see there was no way to wisdom save by Christ?" Ibid., p. 384.

[8] Cf. T F Torrance. "To be concerned with the Spirit, to know him, to be acted on by him, is immediately to be concerned with the Being or *ousia* of God the Creator. That, as I understand it, is the import of the patristic notion of *theosis* or 'deification.'" **Theology in Reconstruction**, p. 214. Drewery claims that the idea is based on perceiving God as a **substance** instead of a **person**, so that union with God becomes ontological and not a personal relationship. "Deification." In: **Christian Spirituality**, p. 54. George M Schurr comments that Latin theology since Leo I has interpreted salvation in moral rather than ontological terms. "On the logic of ante-Nicene affirmations of the 'deification' of the Christian." **Anglican Theological Review** 51 (1969) 97. Torrance appeals to the Reformed Church to reconsider this doctrine (ibid., p. 243), but it would be more advantageous to reconsider the authentic Reformed (and Scriptural) doctrine of God's *covenantal* relationship with us, a relationship that is not *ontological* but *personal* and *religious*.

[9] However, Winslow comments that Gregory of Nazianzus rejected the idea that in *theosis* we cross the boundary that separates the Creator from the creature, and holds instead that we thereby realise what God intends us to be, with potential for infinite growth towards fulfilled creatureliness. Donald F Winslow. **The dynamics of salvation**, pp. 186-188.

[10] Winslow reports in this regard the views of R Franks, who "traces the concept of *theosis* back through neo-platonism to Plato, thence to Dionysius and primitive Orphism, concluding that, because of such questionable ancestry, 'deification' cannot be considered a viable category of Christian thought." Winslow argues against this, however, stating that "Gregory was quite aware of the 'pagan' parallels to *theosis*," but rejected these in favour of a purely Christian approach. [R Franks. The idea of salvation in the theology of the Eastern Church. Mansfield College Essays. London, 1909, pp. 249-264.] Donald F Winslow. **The dynamics of salvation**, p. 182.

[11] C E Rolt. **Dionysius the Areopagite**, pp. 1-2. J Pelikan says that in Pseudo-Dionysius the dogmas of the trinity and incarnation were "in danger of being engulfed by these Neo-Platonic presuppositions." Introduction. **Maximus the Confessor. Selected Writings**. Classics of Western Spirituality, p. 7.

[12] Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 7.1.1. Classics of Western Spirituality, pp. 249-250.

While some stress that "deification" refers to communication of grace and not of nature,[13] as for instance, Tresmontant's comment that this was the view of Gregory of Nazianzus,[14] does not mitigate the anti-creational feature of this doctrine, which depends on a dualistic distinction rooted in an unbiblical anthropology, and ultimately undermines an intrinsically Christian eschatology.

Nor did the Incarnation result in the "deification" of the human nature of Christ; it always was and always will be truly **human**. The essence of the Incarnation is that the eternal Word was united to true humanity, both remaining distinct and unchanged: the Word was no more "humanised" than the human nature was "divinised."[15] Christ is now distinctly both human and divine, but the doctrine of *theosis* diminishes the reality of his human nature and absorbs it into the divine nature.[16]

The two passages from Scripture on which this doctrine is based are: Psalm 82:6-7, [*I said, "You are gods, and you are all sons of the Most High," but you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler*] and 2 Peter 1:4, [*Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires*].[17]

The passage from Psalm 82 is considered to teach that we can be gods, although those who sin are to suffer the fate of mere mortals. However, the Psalm probably refers to the judges, whose unjust actions [Psalm 82:2] are contrasted with those of God, who is the true Judge [Psalm 82:1: *God presides in the great assembly; he gives judgement among the "gods."* Cf. also Psalm 82:8].[18] The second passage was understood in a neo-Platonic sense to speak of participation in the divine nature, wherein we share God's being, so as to enable us to escape from this world with its attendant

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13 For example, Clement of Alexandria stresses that we do not become equal in substance to God, since that cannot happen (citing *no disciple is above his master*), since we are deified through adoption and not by nature. Rather, we continue to remain creatures, but become as much like God as possible. Clement of Alexandria. *The Stromata* 2.17. ANF 2, p. 364. Cf. J E Davison. "Structural similarities and dissimilarities in the thought of Clement of Alexandria and the Valentinians." *Second Century* 3 (1983) 213. M F Wiles argues that this approach fails to refute the Arians, indeed even supports them, since they argued that Christ was 'god' by grace, and so in becoming 'gods' by grace we become as Christ truly was. **The making of Christian doctrine**, pp. 107-108. Strange argues, however, that Athanasius insisted [*De synodis* 51. NPNF 2/4, p. 477] that a 'god' by grace could not communicate to others what he had received, since only a 'god' by nature was able to grant what was his own. C R Strange. "Athanasius on divinisation." *Studia Patristica* 16 (1985) 345. B Drewery suggests that this idea pushes a paradox into the realms of the nonsensical. "Deification." In: **Christian Spirituality**, p. 52.

14 G Tresmontant. **La métaphysique du Christianisme et la naissance de la philosophie chrétienne**. Paris, 1961, p. 506. Cited in: Donald F Winslow. **The dynamics of salvation**, pp. 52-53.

15 Cf. the comments of B Drewery. "It seems to be of the essence of the New Testament – its doctrines of God, of Christ, of the Spirit, of man – that in none of these cases is the distinction between 'divine' and 'human' abolished, or even diminished or modified to any degree whatsoever. Indeed, the closer the *koinonia*, the indwelling, the more vital becomes the miracle of their disparity." "Deification." In: In: **Christian Spirituality**, pp. 51-52.

16 Cf. the strictures of G C Berkouwer on the absorption of the human nature by the divine nature, which is the core of Apollinarian Docetism. **The Person of Christ**, p. 202.

17 Acts 17:28-29 and Philippians 3:20-21 are also important for some writers.

18 See the comments by F Delitzsch. **Psalms**, pp. 403-404.

corruption. This corruption was not understood as moral corruption, which 2 Peter 1:4 specifies as having been *caused by evil desires*, but a corruption inherent in creatureliness because of its propensity to decay and disintegration.[19] Wolters has argued that the phrase in 2 Peter 1:4 should be translated as "partners of the Deity," rather than "partakers of the divine nature."[20] This **covenantal** understanding of redemption has been cast in terms of an **ontological** theory in the doctrine of *theosis*: a speculative doctrine not Biblical but philosophical in nature.[21] The pagan roots of this doctrine cannot be denied. Not only does it depend on a Neo-Platonic ontology, it also expresses pagan religious ideas of a polytheistic nature, as can be seen from the comments of Lawson, in relation to the thought of Irenaeus on the pagan background and presuppositions of the doctrine of *theosis*:

> …the mystical piety of divinization through the vision of God, which is to be constructed from separate fragments in the Johannine literature, is here met in a vigorous and convincing form. This clear expression of the divinisation ideal is a piece of Hellenistic piety, and when Irenaeus roundly says that men are to become gods one cannot deny the connexion with piety rooted in polytheistic ground.[22]

The doctrine of theosis takes its inspiration from the statement made by Irenaeus concerning the incarnation, that he became "what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is in Himself."[23] But this refers to our adoption as sons of God, not our divinisation.[24] Christ took on human flesh as the Second Adam, to render obedience to God in contrast to the first Adam and his heirs. It is the Second Adam that we

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[19]   Cf. the comments of Bray, who interprets Irenaeus as saying that human sin was ultimately due to finitude, that is, a natural consequence of being creaturely, and thus redemption overcomes this ontological disability. "As a result he placed much greater emphasis on the incarnation as the prototype of the transcendent life in which the creaturely finitude of man was transformed by grace into the perfection of the divine life. This was the vision of man's destiny which was later to be termed *theosis* (deification), by which man was able to transcend the present limitations of his finitude and participate directly in the life of God." G L Bray. **Holiness and the will of God**, p. 89.

[20]   A M Wolters. "'Partners of the Deity': A covenantal reading of 2 Peter 1:4." *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1990) 28-44. Idem., "Postscript to 'Partners of the Deity.'" *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (1991) 418-420. The covenantal character of our relationship with Christ is stressed by Drewery (citing David Cairns. **The image of God in man**. London: SCM, 1953, p. 42) that life in Christ is always mediated by faith, which is always a relation of persons. "Deification." In: **Christian Spirituality**, p. 52.

[21]   Winslow comments concerning Gregory of Nazianzus, "But, given the importance obviously assigned to this concept, we must point out that he never once sought to support it on scriptural grounds. Like *homoousion*, *theosis* found its way into the Christian vocabulary from extra-biblical sources. But, as we can deduce from his explanation of the 'novel' doctrine of the deity of the Holy Spirit, this was no embarrassment to Gregory since the validity of a specific doctrinal term was based on its faithfulness to biblical ideas, not to biblical words." Donald F Winslow. **The dynamics of salvation**, p. 181. Whether such an idea is 'biblical' is the question in dispute. It can certainly be read into certain passages of Scripture such as those cited, but its origin is in an ontology and soteriology that is incompatible with Scripture.

[22]   J Lawson. **The Biblical theology of Saint Irenaeus**, p. 160. Cf. also M Werner. **The formation of Christian dogma**, p. 170.

[23]   Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* 5, Preface. ANF 1, p. 526.

[24]   Irenaeus clearly sees this to refer to adoption as sons of God, not as partakers in his being. *Against Heresies* 3.19.1. ANF 1, p. 448. That Irenaeus has been interpreted in the light of a later speculative theology seems apparent. Bray for instance comments that Irenaeus had only a **latent** doctrine of *theosis*. G L Bray. **Holiness and the will of God**, p. 90.

would become like, not the divine Word.[25] It would seem that what Irenaeus meant was not that "God became human so that humans can become gods" but that "Christ became the human we should be, so that we can become what he now is, namely the perfect human."[26] Wingren explains that for Irenaeus man was originally created in the image and likeness of God. In salvation corrupted mankind again becomes like Christ, in whom the image and likeness of God is renewed, that is, true humanity, not divinity.[27] Wingren has demonstrated through his study of Irenaeus that the purpose of God's act of redemption is to restore to humankind their true humanity through destroying the effects of sin and death, not to make humankind divine. This "re-humanisation" of humanity will not be complete until the resurrection when we are at last truly free to be what God created us to be: fully human. This interpretation is seen in Cyprian, who holds that if we are true disciples of Christ, we will become like him, not in nature, but in character.

> Therefore we accompany Him, we follow Him, we have Him as the Guide of our way, the Source of our light, the Author of salvation, promising as well the Father of heaven to those who seek and believe. What Christ is, we Christians shall be, if we imitate Christ.[28]

However, *theosis* became established in Christian thought, particularly in the stream of theology originating from Alexandria, which should not be surprising, given the explicitly Platonic and Neo-Platonic roots of this doctrine. Clement of Alexandria, who used the doctrine of *theosis*, saw the *gnosis* given by Christ as giving this deification and thus immortality to those who believe, through participation in the divine nature of God, that is, his immortal being, through knowledge of God.[29] The intellectualistic focus in Clement's works leads him to see the image of God to be the intellect;[30] hence renewal of the image (and deification)[31] comes through education. His concept of the image of God was understood as a Platonic archetype.

> When the concept of the ideas as thoughts of God had been wedded to that of the Logos, Clement could use this new combination to explain the verse Genesis 1:26, that man was created in the image and likeness of God. When the Hebrew of the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the words chosen to express this passage were *kat' eikona hemeteran kai kat' homoiosin*. The use of the term *eikona* to expresse *b'tzalmenu* allowed the transfer of the meaning of the Platonic archetype

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[25]   Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* 3.20.2. ANF 1, p. 450.

[26]   Much Christology neglects the importance of the continuing humanity of Christ, seeing him solely in terms of his divine nature. Wingren comments regarding Irenaeus' doctrine of salvation, that what Christ has done "frees man from his inhumanity and lets him become truly man." G Wingren. **Man and the Incarnation**, p. 24. The consequences of this neglect become apparent in the doctrine of *theosis*.

[27]   G Wingren. **Man and the Incarnation**, p. 24.

[28]   Cyprian. *On the vanity of idols* 15. ANF 5, p. 469.

[29]   Clement of Alexandria. *The Stromata* 5.10. ANF 2, p. 459.

[30]   Clement of Alexandria. "For conformity with the image and likeness is not meant of the body (for it were wrong for what is mortal to be made like what is immortal), but in mind and reason, on which fitly the Lord impresses the seal of likeness, both in respect of doing good and exercising rule." *The Stromata* 2.19. ANF 2, p. 370.

[31]   Clement of Alexandria. *Exhortation to the Heathen* 11. ANF 2, pp. 203-204.

scheme into the Biblical picture of creation, and for Christians, the Logos was the idea according to which man was created.[32]

It is therefore evident that this doctrine is rooted in a synthesis between Scripture and alien thought-patterns. The fact that Patristic writers used this doctrine does not justify it; rather, its roots in the influence of an external thought-world should lead us to reject the Patristic use of this doctrine. Abandoning the neo-Platonic philosophy which underlies this doctrine must lead to abandoning the doctrine itself, as it cannot be supported on another basis.[33] The doctrine of theosis is rooted in an anti-creational perspective which mitigates much of the Scriptural eschatology and discards its focus on the bodily resurrection life on the new earth.

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[32] E A Clark. **The influence of Aristotelian thought on Clement of Alexandria: a study in philosophical transmission**. Ph.D., Columbia University, 1964, p. 85.

[33] Bray notes that there is a Platonic concept of sin underlying the whole doctrine, which the Eastern Orthodox theologians have never adequately critiqued. He comments that the doctrine can hardly be maintained if its essential philosophical foundations are discarded. G L Bray. **Holiness and the will of God**, p. 164, n. 27.