

## Theosis

**Theosis**<sup>1</sup> a term used in the tradition of Orthodox theology to refer to the participation of the human person in the life of God. It is also known as deification or divinization. It means "being made God" and reflects the dominant Orthodox understanding of salvation in Christ.

Athanasius urged that God became man so that we might become divine. Humanity and God are understood to be infinitely distant from each other, but finite humanity and the infinite God are fully joined in Christ. As stated by Cyril of Alexandria, "We are made partakers of the divine nature and are said to be sons of God. . . not only because we are exalted by grace to supernatural glory, but also because we have God dwelling in us." The saving benefit of theosis is rooted in the Incarnation and the activity of divine grace. The active presence of the Holy Spirit brings us into communion with God. A central image for theosis is Christ's transfiguration (Mk 9:2-8 and parallels). Theosis is associated with the gift of divine glory (Jn 17:5, 22-24), adoption as children of God by the indwelling Spirit (Rom 8), and participation in the divine nature (2 Pt 1:4).

Although theosis has not been emphasized in Anglican theology of salvation, it is compatible with William Porcher DuBose's understanding of humanity's destined union with God through the saving process of divine grace. Richard Hooker emphasized the theological significance of sacramental participation in Book V of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity. An understanding of theosis is also implicit in the collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas Day, which prays, "Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ. . . ." (BCP, p. 214). See DuBose, William Porcher; see Hooker, Richard; see Orthodox Churches.

**Theosis**<sup>2</sup> is the understanding that human beings can have real union with God, and so become like God to such a degree that we participate in the divine nature. Primarily a term found in Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox theology, from the Greek meaning deification or making divine, theosis is a concept derived from the New Testament regarding the goal of our relationship with the Triune God. The terms theosis and deification may therefore be used interchangeably in this context.

This does not imply that we become gods, but rather, that we are to become the fullness of the "divine image" in which we were created (Gen. 1:26), i.e. a perfect reflection of our God, and become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). It may be related to the Protestant concept of sanctification but goes further with what may be expected in this life, emphasizing the element of our mystical union with God in Christ. It may also be seen as something akin to the Wesleyan idea of "entire sanctification". However, Theosis remains a mystical concept not easily grasped and subject to various interpretations.

### Resources

Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).  
Gerald L. Bray, "Deification," in Sinclair B. Ferguson, et. al., ed., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988).  
Rowan Williams, "Deification," in Gordon S. Wakefield, ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).  
Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *The True Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

### External links

Theosis - Achieving Your Potential In Christ, by Fr. Anthony M. Coniaris.  
Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life (PDF), by Archimandrite George.  
Theosis & Sanctification: John Wesley's Reformulation of a Patristic Doctrine by Michael Christensen.  
Can Humans Become God?, by Don Stewart.  
Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis, by Robert V. Rakestraw - JETS 40/2 (June 1997) 257-269.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/theosis>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theopedia.com/theosis>

### Rowan Williams, Deficiation<sup>3</sup>

In 1983, the now Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams,<sup>4</sup> wrote that the word 'deification' [Greek: theōsis (θεώσις)] '...has acquired a very suspicious sound in the ears of perhaps the majority of Western Christians. Williams also notes that discussion of the subject '...has also been a good deal hampered by the confusion of doctrines of deification with speculations [such as those of Gnosticism and the New Age] about a divine and uncreated 'core' of the human soul.'<sup>13</sup>

Williams considers that the antipathy towards the doctrine of divinisation is due in part as '...a result of the claims of mediaeval and sixteenth - century sectarian and apocalyptic groups to be united in essence with God (and so incapable of sin).'<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the claims of such groups, is teaching provided by Maximus the Confessor, arguably the best of the Eastern Theologians who focus on 'the sense of grace'. Norris writes that in the context of his discussion of deification, Maximus the Confessor '...describes it not as a magical activity that overpowers a human being [an error sometimes made by fringe Pentecostal groups] so that the person has no moral life or growth, but one in which grace and free will work together.'<sup>15</sup>

Maximus writes:

[God the Father] gives adoption by giving through the Spirit a supernatural birth from on high in grace; the guardian and preserver of that divine birth is the free will of those who are thus born. By a sincere disposition it cherishes the grace bestowed and by careful observance of the commandments it adorns the beauty given in grace. **By the humbling of the passions, it takes on divinity in the same measure that the Word of God willed to empty himself in the incarnation of his own unmixed glory in becoming genuinely human.**<sup>16</sup>

Rowan Williams suggests that "the deification" tradition enables us to envisage a contemporary theology and spirituality of Christlike freedom – freedom dependent on relation with the Father, yet „divine“ in its own authority, creativity and capacity for self- giving and compassion."

### Craig McBride:

As described by Andrew Louth in the New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, Deification is '...the doctrine that the destiny of human kind, or indeed of the cosmos as a whole, is to share in the divine life, and actually to become God, though by grace rather than by nature.'<sup>20</sup> Louth views this doctrine, characteristic of Eastern Orthodox theology in particular, as 'having developed out of a host of suggestions in the Bible that human engagement with God involves a profound intimacy.'<sup>21</sup>

In the Old Testament, these suggestions include Israel's proximity to God, (Deut.4.7) and Israel's sense of a filial relationship to God (Ex. 4.22).<sup>22</sup>

In the New Testament these suggestions of intimacy with God are multiplied: 'the notion of sonship/[daughtership] becomes central (cf Matt. 6.9-13; Rom. 8. 14-17; Gal.4.4-7).'<sup>23</sup> Finally, Louth writes that '...the notion of transformation into the Lord's glory appears (cf. 2 Cor.3.18; 1 Cor.13.12-13), and there are explicit assertions that 'we shall be like him' (1 John 3.2), and 'become partakers of the divine nature' ( 2 Peter 1.4).'<sup>24</sup> (theias koinōnoi physeōs).

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Louth, 'Deification,' in The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, Westminster, John Knox Press, 2005, p.229

---

<sup>3</sup> The Rediscovery of Participation in God as Deification/Divinisation (Greek:Theōsis) in the Anglican Theological and Spiritual Tradition, Craig McBride, Griffith University

<sup>4</sup> 12 Rowan Williams, 'Deification', in Gordon S Wakefield (ed), A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, London, SCM Press, 1983, p.106

21 22 23 24 Louth, 'Deification', p.229 Louth, 'Deification', p.229 Louth, 'Deification', p.229 Louth, 'Deification', p.229

**Rev. Vincent Pizzuto<sup>5</sup>**

Deification: "to be made God" refers to the manner by which humanity comes to participate in the divine nature through the divine-human union of the incarnation. God alone, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the grace of the Spirit is the cause of deification.

**Baptismal Covenant**

What is it – an ethical document? Or a guide to a spiritual existence?

Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?

Parents and Godparents

I will, with God's help.

Then the Celebrant asks the following questions of the candidates who can speak for themselves, and of the parents and godparents who speak on behalf of the infants and younger children

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

I renounce them.

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? I renounce them.

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

I renounce them.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

I do.

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

I do.

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

I do.

**The Baptismal Covenant**

Celebrant: Do you believe in God the Father?

People: I believe in God, the Father almighty, **creator of heaven and earth.**

Celebrant: Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

People: I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. **He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.** He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. **On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

Celebrant: Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

People: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Rev. Vincent Pizzuto, *Contemplating Christ Notes*

Celebrant: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

People: I will, with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People: I will, with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People: I will, with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People: I will, with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People: I will, with God's help.