Partakers
of
the Divine Nature
Partakers of the Divine Nature
The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions

Edited by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung
# Contents

Acknowledgments 7  
Preface 9  
Introduction 11  
Abbreviations 17

## Part I: The Context of Theosis in Christianity

The Promise, Process, and Problem of Theosis 23  
**MICHAEL J. CHRISTENSEN**

The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology 32  
**ANDREW LOUTH**

## Part II: Theosis in Classical and Late Antiquity

Deification of the Philosopher in Classical Greece 47  
**JOHN R. LENZ**

Can We Speak of Theosis in Paul? 68  
**STEPHEN FINLAN**

Does 2 Peter 1:4 Speak of Deification? 81  
**JAMES STARR**

## Part III: Theosis in Patristic Thought

The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians 95  
**J. A. McGUCKIN**

Rhetorical Application of Theosis in Greek Patristic Theology 115  
**VLADIMIR KHALRAMOV**

Divinization as Perichoretic Embrace in Maximus the Confessor 132  
**ELENA VISHNEVSKAYA**

Paradise as the Landscape of Salvation in Ephrem the Syrian 146  
**THOMAS BUCHAN**

## Part IV: Theosis in Medieval and Reformation Thought

**STEPHEN J. DAVIS**

Edited by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung,  
*Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*,  
St. Anselm: *Theoria* and the Doctrinal Logic of Perfection 175

NATHAN R. KERR

Martin Luther: “Little Christs for the World”; Faith and Sacraments as Means to *Theosis* 189

JONATHAN LINMAN

John Calvin: United to God through Christ 200

J. TODD BILLINGS

John Wesley: Christian Perfection as Faith Filled with the Energy of Love 219

MICHAEL J. CHRISTENSEN

Part V: *Theosis* in Modern Thought

Neo-Palamism, Divinizing Grace, and the Breach between East and West 233

JEFFREY D. FINCH

Sergius Bulgakov: Russian *Theosis* 250

BORIS JAKIM

Karl Rahner: Divinization in Roman Catholicism 259

FRANCIS J. CAPONI, OSA

*Theosis* in Recent Research: A Renewal of Interest and a Need for Clarity 281

GÖSTA HALLONSTEN

Resources on *Theosis* with Select Primary Sources in Translation 294

JEFFERY A. WITTUNG

Notes on Contributors 311

General Index 313

Scripture Index 323
Introduction

Michael J. Christensen
and
Jeffery A. Wittung

Eastern Orthodox spirituality has become increasingly popular in academic and lay circles, as has the ancient Christian idea of becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4) and of “becoming god” (Athanasius). Western Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians are now in dialogue with Eastern Orthodox theologians on the subject of theosis. Popular and academic interest in this compelling vision of human potential for transformation and spiritual perfectibility is evidenced by increasing numbers of contemporary books, journal articles, academic conferences, and edited volumes on the topic. At the same time, the idea of deification has been tarnished in the West by much of the “New Age” movement, so that many have forgotten or simply do not know the importance and history of theosis in Christian tradition. It is to the renewed interest in a neglected doctrine that the present volume is directed, with the hope that it will serve as a worthy partner in both scholarly conversations and lay explorations.

The topic of deification in the past was largely confined to patristic studies and discussions within Eastern Christianity. Recent publications have focused on particular traditions and contexts of the topic. There has been no full study of theosis across cultures and historical periods within the Christian traditions until now. This multiauthored volume achieves what no one writer probably could have achieved alone: it treats the various visions of deification (from its early Greek origins to modern constructions), related theological conceptions of “participation in the divine nature” (transfiguration, sanctification, perfection, glorification, sophianization), and multiple trajectories of their development (East and West) in the rich history of ideas.

Included in this volume are critical essays by leading scholars on the concept of deification in the New Testament; its place in the ancient Greek, Syriac, and Copto-Arabic Christian traditions; and its development in patristic, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and a variety of Protestant traditions. Attention is given to the development of the theme of theosis over a span of more than a millennium and a half in the works of such prominent theolo-
gians as Athanasius, Ephrem the Syrian, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory Palamas, St. Anselm, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Sergius Bulgakov, and Karl Rahner. The result, the editors believe, is an important and distinctive contribution to the scholarly literature on the subject, as well as a useful text for general courses in historical theology.

Volume co-editor Michael Christensen sets the stage for the essays that follow by locating the idea of deification in its functional context as a bold and viable doctrine of salvation. By organizing this complex concept under three simple categories—the *promise*, *process*, and *problem* of *theosis*—the topic is introduced and explored in a contemporary biblical and theological context for both Eastern and Western traditions.

Andrew Louth investigates the place of *theosis* in the tradition of the East, presenting it in relation to the other elements that comprise the mosaic of this tradition’s theology, and identifying three ways this doctrine functions within the overall Orthodox experience: (1) as a complement to the doctrine of the Incarnation in the economy and plan of God; (2) as a way to stress the real change involved in the transformation of the human nature; and (3) as a witness to the grounding of theology in the transforming encounter with God. Louth demonstrates that the doctrine of deification has “structural” significance in Orthodox theology and goes on to argue that it determines the shape of that theology.

John Lenz provides a careful, foundational study of deification in classical Greece. Recognizing that deification is a neglected but essential theme in Greek philosophy, and arguing that Plato makes the participation of human beings in the divine nature open to all through contemplation and the development of one’s soul, Lenz identifies philosophical antecedents of *theosis* in Greek and classical literature by presenting two major themes: (1) the union of reason and spirituality in Greek thought; and (2) the continuity of Greek philosophy, particularly Plato, and Christian thought.

In the context of scriptural exegesis and reasoning, Stephen Finlan explores the possibility of *theosis* in the Epistles of Paul in the New Testament. He examines Paul’s idea of a “spiritual” and “glorified” body, and argues that what Paul is attempting to do is to delineate differing levels of substance and kinds of life force, and thus differing levels and kinds of bodies. In the “Christification” process of being conformed and transformed by the renewing of one’s “mind,” the believer receives the promised spiritual body, produced first as a *cruciform* and then as an *anastiform* body.

James Starr offers an exegesis of 2 Peter 1:4 within its contemporary context to determine whether it teaches *theosis* or *apotheosis* (i.e., a migration from humanity to divinity). Starr argues that the phrase “partakers of the divine nature” stands for a “constellation of ideas” suggesting participation in specific divine attributes that are only received through knowledge of
Christ and thus cannot be achieved by human effort alone. He concludes that 2 Peter 1:4 neither relapses into Hellenistic dualism nor teaches *apotheosis*, and provides a nonontological understanding of deification.

Through a close reading of the Cappadocians, J. A. McGuckin argues that Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, whose thought came to dominate Byzantine theology, critically appropriated Origen’s mystical vision of the soul’s journey to union with God. McGuckin shows how, while retaining this vision, both thinkers attempted to clarify the language of *theosis* in order to more clearly demonstrate the critical difference between Christian deification theory and Platonic assimilation language.

Vladimir Kharlamov, one of the instigators of the Drew conference on *theosis*, examines the use of the concept of *theosis* in fourth-century Greek patristic theology, using Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus as case studies. He argues that the language of deification was treated more as a rhetorical tool applied to various aspects of Christian spirituality and less as an independent theological topic for discussion. The resulting lack of coherent systematic theological treatment led to *theosis* assuming a variety of modes, often within the same writer, without proper supporting explication.

Elena Vishnevskaya explicates the vision and reality of deification as *perichoresis*—an “interpenetrating” dynamic embrace of divinity and humanity in the mystical theology of Maximus the Confessor. The *perichoretic* hypostatic union as evidenced in the person of the Logos serves as a prototype, Vishnevskaya argues, for the *perichoresis* of God and the believer. This deific union appears in Maximus as “an organic relation of human freedom and divine grace” that coinheres in a dynamic embrace between divine and human.

Thomas Buchan explores *theosis* in the thought of Ephrem the Syrian by focusing on his use of the biblical image of paradise and the Garden of God as the landscape for understanding the meaning of deification. For Ephrem, paradise was a place originally intended to facilitate human union with the divine and whose cosmic geography assumed the shape of a mountain, the ascent of which brought one increasingly closer to God. While paradise was lost in the Fall, the way has been reopened by Christ; so too, the possibility of *theosis*.

Stephen Davis offers a Eucharistic reading of John 3 in the Copto-Arabic tradition and considers the relationship of Coptic Christology to human participation in divinity. While not explicitly addressing the concept of *theosis* in the Gospel of John, the essay transports the reader into an underrepresented area of Christian literature on the nature of Christ and its implications for deification.

Nathan Kerr examines Anselm’s *Proslogion* as a theological bridge between Eastern and Western Christianity. For Anselm, deification is an essential constituent of the doctrine of God, which of necessity must involve a doctrine of creaturely deification. *Theoria*, or contemplation, of God can
only come about through participation in that which is contemplated, so that creaturely participation in the divine nature, or deification, lies at the very heart of theology.

In the Finnish school of Luther studies within the Reformed tradition, Jonathan Linman explores Martin Luther’s vision of theosis as believers becoming “little Christs” for the world. He posits a Lutheran understanding of theosis that is rooted in the doctrine of justification by faith, whereby justification is removed from forensic preoccupations and becomes the means of enacting theosis while faith functions as the source of this union. The sacraments, which play a crucial role in the creation and nurture of faith, remain central in the dynamic process of theosis.

J. Todd Billings suggests, in his contribution, that theosis indeed is present in the thought of John Calvin. Arguing that Byzantine theology cannot be made the only lens through which deification is understood, Billings focuses specifically on the language of “participation” in the Institutes and affirms a particular “type” of theosis in Calvin that is consistent with the rest of his theological system and distinct from the notions of theosis in late Byzantine theology.

Michael Christensen’s essay on John Wesley’s doctrine of entire sanctification and Christian perfection, explores this doctrine’s similarity to (and perhaps, continuity with) older ideas of deification in selected patristic writers of the East. If Wesleyan perfection as “faith filled with the energy of love” functions in the same way as Clement’s and Origen’s vision of spiritual “union” between God and humanity, then the similarity of ideas implies the same means—deifying faith, perfecting love and sanctifying grace—toward the goal of “entire sanctification” and “full salvation,” as both John and Charles Wesley understood their Eastern sources to have taught and practiced.

Theosis in the history of ideas would not be complete without modern theological reflections. Jeffrey Finch explores the neo-Palamite tradition of divinizing grace and its effects on the continued division between Eastern and Western Christianity. He attempts to show that the neo-Palamite distinction between divine energies and essence, and its critique of Western theology, is grounded in a false alternative; and that Eastern and Western conceptions of deification are complementary.

Boris Jakim, a translator into English of several Russian religious philosophers, captures the spirit of theosis in Russian thought by focusing on its formulation in the works of Sergius Bulgakov. Bulgakov’s doctrine of deification, in continuity with Solovyov’s vision of Divine-humanity, is explored from the viewpoint of sophiology and the divinizing process of sophianization.

Francis Caponi turns to an exploration of deification as it is formulated in the Roman Catholic tradition through the scholastic lens of Karl Rahner. With a detailed examination of the thought of this twentieth-century German
Jesuit, who has been extremely influential in the Roman Church over the last fifty years, Caponi concludes that a symbol of theopoiesis lies at the very core of Rahner’s theology, acting as the center of gravity around which the rest of the elements of his theology orbit.

Gösta Hallonsten concludes the volume with a critique of recent theosis research in the West. By focusing on the more recent scholarly work of Tuomo Mannermaa and A. N. Williams, he argues for a distinction to be made between the theme and a doctrine of theosis, and calls for an appropriate scholarly differentiation between the two as well as a careful use of terms.

Volume co-editor Jeffery Wittung, instigator and co-coordinator of the academic conference on theosis at Drew University, contributes an extensive bibliography of works on theosis for further study.

Read individually, each chapter provides intellectual, social, cultural, and theological insights and resources for understanding the idea and development of deification in particular historical and contemporary settings. Taken together, the various essays serve as a matrix of meaning for both scholarly conversation and lay exploration.

NOTES
1. On the Incarnation 54: “God became man so that man might become God.”
2. Theosis/deification is the preferred theological term for what the New Testament describes as “becoming partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4) and Eastern Orthodox theologians refer to as “becoming god.” There are other related terms used in scholarly discourse to point to this ancient vision, including: transfiguration, perfection, sanctification, glorification, Christification, sophianization, ingoding, and Divine-humanity. In this volume, contributors use the terms theosis and deification interchangeably, even as they nuance related terms and concepts.
3. Recent academic publications on the topic of theosis include: Jules Gross, The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers (1938; translated and published in English by A&C Press, 2002); Norman Russell, The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition (Oxford University Press, 2005); Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, eds., Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology (Wipf and Stock, 2006); see also “Resources on Theosis” in the present volume. Recent conferences on theosis include: “Consultation on Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality” at Saint Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary (1999), sections at the American Academy of Religion (2001), and “Partakers of the Divine Nature” at Drew University (2004).