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## Exploring the Essence of Orthodox Theology: Theosis and the Ecclesial Experience

### Abstract

This article explores the fundamental aspects of Orthodox theology, with a focus on the concepts of theosis and ecclesial experience. By examining the historical and spiritual dimensions of these elements, the article highlights how they embody the Eastern Orthodox Church's tradition of unity, continuity, and topicality. Theosis, the transformative journey towards divinization, and the communal, sacramental nature of ecclesial experience are explored as integral parts of Orthodox spirituality. As the Church engages with modern challenges, this dynamic interplay between historical tradition and contemporary relevance ensures that



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Orthodox theology remains a living and evolving guide for spiritual and communal life.

### Keywords

Orthodox theology, theosis, ecclesial experience, tradition

## 1 Introduction

Orthodox theology stands as a rich and encompassing tradition, weaving together the threads of historical, spiritual, and communal experiences that have shaped the essence of the Eastern Orthodox Church from its inception to the present. In exploring this profound theological paradigm, two fundamental concepts emerge: theosis, or divinization, and the ecclesial experience. These elements not only define Orthodox theological perspectives but also embody the living, dynamic tradition of the Church. This article endeavors to sketch the development of these core aspects within Orthodox moral theology, highlighting its essential characteristics of unity, continuity, and topicality.

Through a historical lens, Orthodox theology manifests as a continuous expression of the Church's life in the Holy Spirit. This experience integrates the divine and human elements into a holistic spiritual journey. This living tradition transcends mere doctrinal assertions, encompassing the communal embodiment of faith through liturgical practices, sacred art, and the writings of the Church Fathers. In particular, the doctrine of theosis encapsulates the transformative aim of Orthodox spirituality, enabling believers to partake in the divine nature as expressed notably by St. Athanasius of Alexandria and later by St. Gregory Palamas.

## **2 Unity, Continuity, and Topicality in Orthodox Theology**

Orthodox theology, the specifics of which we will attempt to sketch along its historical development by following, in particular, the history of moral theology, expresses the experience of the living and dynamic Tradition of the Orthodox Church of the East from the beginning of Christianity to the present day.

By this, we mean to highlight the essential characteristics of Orthodox theology: unity, continuity, *and topicality*.

By stating that Orthodox theology expresses the experience of the Living Tradition of Christ's Church throughout history, we mean as much the continuity of the Living Tradition as the life of the Church in the Holy Spirit, that is, the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, as we mean the continuity of the theology that has expressed this experience of Christ's Church in the Holy Spirit. The Tradition of the Orthodox Church refers not only to its theological tradition, but to all those expressions of the communal experience of the Living Body of Christ, the Church, in the Holy Spirit poured out in history. It contains the symbols of faith, the Apostolic Canons, the dogmatic definitions of the Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Church Fathers, as well as the liturgical texts, the confessions of faith of the martyrs, and sacred art. This living Tradition of the Church, in its historical continuity, has also matured into a living and inspired theology, which has maintained throughout its historical evolution a fundamental internal unity sustained by the existence of certain broad lineaments of theological thought regarding the specific relations between God, man, and creation.

In this regard, here is what John Meyendorff states in his *Byzantine Theology*:

"Authors as different from each other as Leontius of Jerusalem and Gregory Palamas, Maximus the Confessor and Simon the New Theologian, Photios and Nicholas Cabasilas, all can be found in fundamental agreement."<sup>1</sup>

Beyond its unity and continuity with the Holy Fathers, Orthodox theology is also desired to be contemporary. Therefore, an essential aspect of ecclesial Tradition is its dynamic character, which involves the deepening of the Church's unchanging Tradition through the adaptation of ecclesial life to ever-new historical conditions. However, the Church's dynamic Tradition and the actuality of its theology do not represent a break in its unity or continuity. The actuality of the Tradition and its theology is implemented precisely through the intensive development of the unchanging Tradition and the deepening of patristic theology in those aspects aimed at responding to the current problems that theology faces.

The patristic era was an age of admirable creativity in which Christian theology confronted the ancient world, especially the categories of thought of Greek philosophy with respect to which began the long and arduous process of Christianization later brought to an end by Byzantine theology.

"Centuries of struggle and superhuman effort will be required, says Vladimir Lossky, to move beyond Hellenism through its liberation from its own natural bonds and ethnic and cultural closures, before it becomes, at last, the universal expression of Christian truth."<sup>2</sup>

With this,

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1 John MEYENDORFF, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, Fordham University Press, New York 1987<sup>3</sup>, p. 4.

2 Vladimír. LOSSKY, *Vision of God*, Crestwood: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press 1983, p. 58.

"Christians demonstrated that it was possible to orient the cultural process without falling into a pre-cultural state, to re-structure the cultural fabric in a new spirit. The same process described in different ways as the 'Hellenization of Christianity' can be conceived rather as a Christianization of Hellenism."<sup>3</sup>

and Byzantine periods, due to its intense apologetic and polemical character, theology showed little interest in the systems of positive theology. Christianity, through theology, stood in defense against the Greco-Roman world, Gnostic philosophy, pagan and Jewish religions, and the heresies that threatened the very foundation of the Christian faith: the dogmatic definition of the person of Christ. Theology is therefore formed in polemic and apology. The canons of the Ecumenical Councils and the canons of the Fathers will become normative, although they do not form a homogeneous moral system.

"Moral considerations are thus found everywhere: in the conciliar canons, in scriptural commentaries, in theological and apologetic works, in letters, in the apophthegmata of the fathers of the desert, in monastic rules, in the spiritual writings of Origen and the great successors (Evagrius, Macarius the Egyptian, etc.), in hagiographical narratives, in liturgical texts; that is, they emerge with great ease and naturalness in all contexts and in all forms of expression of Christian experience."<sup>4</sup>

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3 George FLOROVSKY, "Faith and Culture," in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 1-2 (1955-1956), p. 40.

4 Basilio PETRÀ, *L'etica Ortodossa. Storia, fonti, identità*, Citadella Editrice, Assisi 2010, p. 10.

### 3 A theology of divinization

Despite this, in the patristic era, one can identify a main feature of Orthodox theology, a framework that will guide the entire development of Byzantine Christian thought until the fall of Constantinople into Turkish hands. This "golden thread linking patristic and Byzantine tradition"<sup>5</sup> consists of the theology of deification, *theôsis*, summarized by St. Athanasius of Alexandria in the famous phrase, "God became man that man might become God."<sup>6</sup> This main feature of moral theology has been highlighted especially by the renewed Orthodox theology of the 20th century.

"Contemporary Orthodox theology, deeply nourished by the texts of the Greek Fathers read in the light of *Palamism* and the *Hesychast tradition*, animated by a deep desire to affirm its original identity, tends to emphasize the unity and authenticity of Christian *experience*, placing the theme of *theôsis* or deification at the center."<sup>7</sup>

I will therefore present Orthodox theology in its historical development as rooted in ecclesial experience and centered in the pursuit of divinization in Christ. Key to the interpretation of these characteristics is the Palamite doctrine on the experiential possibility of knowing God, to which we will devote more space. In the formation of Trinitarian or Christological dogmas, in spirituality and mysticism, in worship and sacred art, Orthodox theology will follow the same central thread that recapitulates everything: the idea of man as a being called to know God, to partic-

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5 Basilio PETRĂ, «Alle origini dell'etica ortodossa. Il pensiero etico di Gregorio Palamas», in *Rivista di ascetica e mistica* 58 (1989), p. 267.

6 The speech against the Aryans, 54 (PG 25, 192 B).

7 Basilio PETRĂ, «La teologia morale greco-ortodossa da Andrutsos al rinnovamento contemporaneo», in *Studia Moralia*, 22 (1984), p. 237.

ipate in His life and to be saved not only through an external action of God or a rational knowledge of preaching truths, but through the possibility of "becoming God"<sup>8</sup> according to grace and "*partaker of the divine nature*" (1 Peter 1:4). This *theôsis*, deification through the grace of the Holy Spirit, represents in Orthodox theology, the continuation of Pauline theology on "life in Christ."

In essence, the deification of man means his sonship in God by which man can become a "son in the Son." Man was created according to the image of God and then left to acquire the divine likeness through his own effort and personal communion with God. God created man in the Son, since Christ is "the image of the hypostasis of the Father" and, therefore, the Archetype of man. The divinization of man takes place, therefore, in the space between *image* and *likeness* and can only be realized through Christ, the God-Man, the only Mediator between us and the Father.

The divinization of man through grace and in the divine-human person of Jesus Christ is held to be the only authentic destiny of every man and all men, a destiny ontologically inscribed in it because it is worthy of the divine image. Or, as Greek Orthodox theologian Panayotis Nellas asserts, the deification of man "is the original and permanent destiny of man regardless of the fall."<sup>9</sup> Even in a negative way, man's fall into sin does not mean renouncing "deification," but only renouncing the theandry of the process of deification and the reversal of this ontological destiny of deification into a desire for artificial self-divinization through the technical act of eating from the forbidden tree: "*You would become like God, knowing good and evil*" (Genesis 3:5).

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8 John MEYENDORFF, *Byzantine Theology...*, p. 2.

9 Panayotis NELLAS, *Voi siete dei. Antropologia dei Padri della Chiesa*, Città Nuova, Roma 1993, p. 48.

In the divinization of man as sonship in grace, the Fathers saw the purpose of human existence, as well as that of the whole of creation. The concrete model of divinization's realization is indicated in Christology, and the space for its implementation is outlined in ecclesiology.

The teaching on divinization, although recognized as one of the central teachings of Orthodox theology, was not explicitly stated in ecumenical councils. Yet it received special attention in both the patristic and Byzantine eras.

The main reason why the Fathers defended down the centuries so tenaciously, sometimes to the point of sacrifice, the correctness of Christological teaching, especially during the Ecumenical Councils, was the dependence of the possibility of man's salvation and divinization on Christological dogma. The Incarnation and divinization are two sides of the same mystery. Only if both the divinity and humanity of Christ are kept intact and unchanged in their union in the Hypostasis of the divine Word is the divinization of man through the humanization of the Word possible. Therefore, the teaching on divinization is closely connected to the Christological dogma and develops together with it, *is* enlightened by it, always maintaining its Christocentric and personalistic character. From this perspective, the Athanasian formula can be reread thus: only if God became true man while remaining true God, does man have the possibility of being deified in Him.

This teaching on divinization has its beginning in the theology of Athanasius the Great and its fulfillment in the theology of Gregory Palamas on the mysterious vision of God through union with Him in the light of uncreated divine works. By the end of the Byzantine period, before the fall of Constantinople, the teaching on divinization had acquired all its characteristic features: Christocentric, pneumatological, ecclesial, and eschatological. With Nicholas Cabasilas, a lay disciple of Gregory Palamas, deification



is conceived as life in Christ through the Holy Spirit, acquired in the Church (the body of Christ and the temple of the Spirit) as a pledge of eternal life. It can now be said that *the Church is centered on the mystery of divinization*.

Orthodox theology in the twentieth century has certainly meant for morality a progressive re-comprehension of its own identity. More and more it has discovered itself as a theology, [...] as a theology - in particular - of life in Christ."<sup>10</sup> If contemporary Orthodox moral theology is meant to be a discipline that systematically presents the theory of life in Christ, and life in Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Church expresses the reality of man's divinization, then moral theology is closely connected to the teaching on divinization, and its history follows to some extent the history of this teaching. Precisely because Orthodox moral theology takes place within the process of the divinization of man in Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Church, through the actualization of the divine image as an ontological datum, in the likeness of God, our considerations on the history of Orthodox moral theology in the Byzantine period refer primarily to the historical evolution of the doctrine on divinization, highlighting those elements that contemporary Orthodox theology has grasped to re-define its identity.

Following the patristic era of Christian theology, the beginning of its specifically Byzantine period can be linked to the founding of Constantinople in 330. Properly Byzantine, however, is considered the period following the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451) and the barbarian invasions of Italy, until the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453.

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10 Basilio PETRÀ, *Tra cielo e terra. Introduzione alla teologia morale ortodossa contemporanea*, Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, Bologna 1992, p. 21.

"Especially after the disappearance of the ancient Christian centers of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, Constantinople has become the indisputable center of Eastern Christianity. Its bishop will take the title of ecumenical patriarch. In the Balkans, on the vast steppe of Eastern Europe, and in the Caucasus, its missionaries converted vast territories to the Christian faith. Indeed, the 'new Rome' became the cradle of civilization for the Middle East and Eastern Europe, in the same way that 'ancient Rome' was the cradle of the Latin West."<sup>11</sup>

Having the Greek Fathers of the 4th century and the Christology of St. Cyril of Alexandria as a point of reference, Byzantine theology created great theological syntheses, such as those of St. Maximus the Confessor (+ 662) and St. Gregory Palamas (+ 1359).

In the 6th century, the pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, through his works on the heavenly hierarchy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, anticipated by St. Gregory of Nyssa and continued and deepened later by St. Maximus the Confessor, founded apophatic theology. It states that God cannot be known in His Being because God is beyond being. He can, however, be experienced in some way through the knowledge of His works or divine energies, which, for Gregory Palamas, are uncreated and spring from God's Being, communicating God to us without, however, merging with Him.

This led to the delineation in this Byzantine period of another feature of his theology, a feature that would become an essential element of continuity throughout Orthodox theology throughout its history and would later be rediscovered, accentuated and enhanced in the period of patristic renewal of Orthodox theology in the first half of the 20th century: *the theology of the fathers is a theology of ecclesial experience.*

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11 John MEYENDORFF, *Byzantine Theology...*, p. 2.

#### 4 A theology of ecclesial experience

Although the concept of 'experience' rarely recurs in the Eastern Fathers, "their theology is 'theology of experience' in the sense that it remains in a constant relationship with in 'mysteries,' particularly baptism and the Eucharist, but also with other actions and practices later called 'sacraments,' and with the ascetical life."<sup>12</sup> The theology of ecclesial experience essentially means the grounding of Orthodox theology in the liturgical-sacramental and ascetical experiences of the Church.

In Patristic and Byzantine theology, this ecclesial experience was not only the source of theology, but also the criterion of the orthodoxy of theology, becoming, as we shall have occasion to say later, the leaven of the theological renewal of the 20th century. This experiential criterion of the theology of the Eastern Church Fathers, a criterion that also founds the mode of man's authentic realization in divinization, was thus characterized by Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), the author of the best-known introduction to "Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church."

"An existential attitude that claims the whole man: it teaches that there is no theology apart from experience and that to arrive at this experience, we must become a new, changed man. To know God, we must come closer to Him; you are not a theologian if you do not take the road that leads to union with God. "<sup>13</sup>

Theology, as theology of ecclesial experience, is the expression of the unity between *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, and *lex vivendi*. This

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12 Karl Christian FELMY, *La teologia ortodossa contemporanea. Una introduzione*, Queriniana, Brescia 1999, 21-22.

13 V. LOSSKY, *La teologia mistica della Chiesa d'Oriente. La visione di Dio*, EDB, Bologna 1970, p. 51.

unity received its expression in the evolution of ancient Eucharistic prayers, in the development of the baptismal rite in the early Church, and in the fact that, during this period, "the question of knowledge and experience of God is addressed and dealt with in ascetic literature."<sup>14</sup>

The theology of the Eastern Church does not seek to define and conceptualize the divine mystery, to formulate or enclose it in concepts, but rather to distinguish it from erroneous heretical interpretations by pointing to it as an inexhaustible mystery destined to be known and deepened unceasingly through ecclesial, mystical and ascetic, that is, apophatic, experience, and only then formulated in a cataphatic way in concepts that, however, cannot contain it. Therefore, the theological language of this period is also an antinomian language that transcends rational concepts in the pursuit of the experiential mystery.

Greek lay theologian Christos Yannaras also considers experience and participation as criteria of traditional patristic theology:

"Within the Orthodox Church and tradition, theology always had a meaning quite different from what we mean by it today. It was not at all a theoretical development of axioms and concepts but an expression and formulation of experience. Before being a doctrine, the glad tidings of the Church are an event. To know the event is to *participate in it*; to live it denotes a way of life. And to express life, a language other than conceptual language and objective information is needed."<sup>15</sup>

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14 Karl Christian FELMY, *La teologia ortodossa contemporanea...*, p. 22.

15 Christos YANNARAS, «Ἡ θεολογία στὴν Ἑλλάδα σήμερα», in ID., *Ὁρθοδοξία καὶ Δύσι. Ἡ θεολογία στὴν Ἑλλάδα σήμερα*, Atena 1972, 53, citato da Karl Christian FELMY, *La teologia ortodossa contemporanea...*, p. 29.

When Yannaras states that Christian living, i.e., ethos, is realized through participation in the event of Christ's Church, he expresses the unity between doxology, dogma and morality at the level of ecclesial experience, i.e., intimate personal and communal relationship with Christ in the Holy Spirit, which constitutes the main feature of Orthodox morality specific to the Byzantine period. Dogma and ethos cannot be separated. Dogma formulates the ethos of the Church, and ethos is the embodiment of dogma.

## **5 Conclusion**

In examining the rich tapestry of Orthodox theology through the lenses of theosis and ecclesial experience, this article has showcased the essential characteristics that define the Eastern Orthodox tradition: unity, continuity, and topicality. These elements reflect not merely theological propositions but a lived experience that has dynamically evolved from the dawn of Christianity. The concept of theosis remains the cornerstone of Orthodox spirituality, encapsulating the transformative journey of becoming partakers of the divine nature. Rooted in both the theological articulations of early Church Fathers and the mystical insights of Byzantine theologians, this doctrine emphasizes the full integration of humanity with the divine, realized most fully through the life and work of Jesus Christ. This theandric experience - humans becoming divinized - is not merely theoretical; it is the true purpose of creation and the ultimate destiny offered to all believers. The ecclesial experience, on the other hand, highlights the communal and sacramental reality of Orthodox life. Through liturgy, proclamation of faith, and adherence to the tradition laid down by the ecumenical councils and Church Fathers, Orthodox theol-

ogy remains vibrantly connected to its historical past while engaging with present realities. It upholds the harmonious relationship between dogma and lived Christian ethics, reflecting an authentic spirituality that informs and is informed by the community's shared life in the Spirit.

As Orthodox theology continues to face modern challenges, its ability to adapt without losing its core unity and continuity is crucial. Contemporary revitalization of patristic thought demonstrates the Church's commitment to reengage with its roots in order to address today's theological and ethical issues. This dialogue between tradition and present-day application reflects the Church's mission to be both timeless and timely.

In conclusion, the ongoing exploration of Orthodox theology necessitates a balanced appreciation of both its historical depth and its present-day vitality. By emphasizing theosis and ecclesial experience, the Orthodox Church offers a robust framework for believers to journey toward the divine while living authentically within a supportive spiritual community. This dynamic interplay between timeless truths and contemporary applications ensures that Orthodox theology remains a living tradition, continually unfolding in the life of the Church and the world.

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