Deification, or becoming like God

The ultimate goal of the Christian life is deification, or *theosis* in Greek. The Biblical concept of personal union between God and humans is found especially in the Gospel of St John and the Epistles of St Paul. It was however given its most explicit statement by St Peter when he wrote that through the promises of Christ we may become ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (*theias koinonoi physeos*, 2 Peter 1:4). It is pertinent to point out that in the Orthodox understanding deification entails union with the divine Energies and not with the divine Being as such. There is no question of a confusion of Creator and creature – humans are called to become divine by grace, not by nature.¹

Created in the image and likeness of God

Twice Genesis refers to the creation of man:² firstly to conclude the creation of the land animals (Gen 1:26) and secondly as created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 2:7). As understood by St Gregory of Nyssa, the first account refers to the creation of man according to the image of God, while the second account refers to man as alienated from God.³ According to Nemesius, man was placed in an intermediary position between angels and animals in order to reconcile contradictory poles of existence, such as mortality and immortality, within himself. Man’s role as cosmic mediator is made possible by the Incarnation of Christ, so that St Maximus the Confessor described the human task as ‘theandric’, or divine-human. The same theologian maintained that the Incarnation would therefore still have taken place, even if there had been no fall.⁴

Man is situated at the meeting-place of the intelligible and sensible worlds⁵, and unites them within himself. Containing all the elements of creation, man is a melting-pot, or a harmony composed of many different notes.⁶ All the elements of the created universe are united in man: he has intellect like angels, reason like humans, perception like irrational animals, and

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² With ‘man’ we naturally imply man and woman, as in the Greek *anthropos*.
⁵ In the Platonist cosmology as accepted by the Church, there exists a higher, invisible world that is accessible to the intellect (i.e. intelligible) and a lower, visible world that is accessible to the physical senses (i.e. sensible).
life like plants. St Maximus therefore referred to man as a workshop (ergastirion) of creation.\footnote{Otten, p 127.}

Man is often called a microcosm by the Church Fathers, because he/she is a hypostasis of the whole cosmos that participates in human nature. Furthermore, man is viewed as the climax of all creation, implying that he/she can become through freedom and grace that which God is through nature. St Basil the Great even stated that God created man like an animal with the instruction to become God.\footnote{Lossky, Vladimir. \textit{Orthodox Theology: An Introduction}. Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978, pp 71-73.}

Both the soul and body of man is created according to the image of God, according to Church Fathers like St Gregory of Nyssa and St Irenaeus. In his turn St Gregory Palamas held that man was created according to the divine image even more than the angels, because the Spirit of God can indwell and control the human body. Creation according to the image and likeness of God implies communion with the divine energies in the soul by means of grace.\footnote{Lossky, \textit{ibid}, pp 120-121.}

St Gregory of Nyssa put forward an apophatic view of human nature, flowing from his apophasis, meaning negation; apophatic theology thus deals more with what God is not than what God is.\footnote{From the Greek \textit{apophasis}, meaning negation; apophasis theology thus deals more with what God is not than what God is.}

The concept ‘image of God’ implies that man is a personal being who can relate to a personal God. Man is free to choose for or against God, with all the tremendous consequences this entails. Even when the divine likeness in man is lost due to man turning away from God, the divine image is not totally obscured, and the possibility of returning to God always remains.\footnote{Lossky, \textit{ibid}, pp 123-124.} Dostoyevsky wrote that if Christ had come down from the cross, as He could so easily have done, human freedom to choose would have been destroyed. The greatest Orthodox novelist

\footnote{Lossky, \textit{ibid}, p 128.}
was quite right: God loves humankind so much that He grants us unlimited freedom of will, even to choose against Him.

The fall into sin and its consequences
The origin of evil is to be found in the angelic world, where the will of the fallen angels was turned against God. Evil entered our world through the will of man – evil is therefore not a nature (physis) but a condition (hexis). In fact, sin is a sickness of the will, as St Gregory of Nyssa taught, and this sickness makes evil a reality. Evil can be said to be the attraction of the will towards non-being – it denies God and His creation and hates grace.¹³

Three steps in the fall was identified by St Maximus: firstly, ignorance which brings about separation from God; secondly, self-love which causes separation from other people; and finally, tyranny against others.¹⁴ By blaming Eve, Adam tried to shift his responsibility onto the woman and eventually onto God (‘the woman that you gave me’). Thus determinism is born, as Vladimir Lossky remarked, in which freedom is subjected to external coercion and with God being held responsible for evil.¹⁵ This mindset reminds one of the heterodox doctrine of double predestination, formulated in the ninth century by Gottschalk and taken to its logical extremes in the sixteenth by Calvin, according to which God predestined some persons for salvation and others for damnation.

Man was created good and oriented towards the uncreated grace of God. By choosing self-determination man turned away from God, disintegrated and died, with no place for divine grace any longer. The loss of grace is therefore not the cause of the fall but the result thereof.¹⁶ Human nature was created so that the body would be nourished by the soul, the soul by the spirit, and the spirit by God. Due to the fall human nature became anti-natural, with sin penetrating into being and causing man to live against God. The created, natural sequence was reversed: the spirit fed on the autonomous goodness and beauty of the soul; the soul fed on the body, causing the passions to arise; the body fed on the earth, killing to eat and inexorably dying itself. In this view mortality was instituted by God as a pedagogical device –

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¹³ Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, p 132.
¹⁴ Thunberg, p 57.
¹⁵ Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, p 82, 134.
rather death than a perpetuation of evil. Human finitude thus entails the possibility of repentance and new love.\textsuperscript{17}

Through the human will evil became a power that infects all of creation. The free will of man carried non-being into God’s creation.\textsuperscript{18} Through the act of creation God calls an infinite variety of beings into existence out of the abyss of non-being (the doctrine of \textit{creatio ex nihilo}), but man turns it around by infecting beings with non-being. One only has to witness the massive and ever-increasing destruction of the earth and numerous life-forms on it to realise the validity of Lossky’s statement. Indeed could St Paul write in his letter to the Romans (8:22) that all of creation groans as if in the pangs of childbirth.

It is pertinent to point out that the division of human nature into male and female is not to be linked to the fall, as is so often done in Western theology. Both St Gregory of Nyssa and St Maximus viewed sexual division as foreseen by God to preserve mankind. A new cosmos is formed in this way, with sexual procreation not as cause of mortality but rather as relative antidote thereto.\textsuperscript{19} Human sexuality thus acquires a positive, creative dimension – the opposite of the prevalent Western view over many centuries, which led to the extremes of puritanical repression on the one hand and Freudian libertinism on the other.

The return to God

Man was created for union with God, in other words \textit{theosis}, according to St John of Damascus. The human person is called to reunite, through love, created with uncreated nature, as St Maximus taught. Man is therefore called to become a ‘created god’ or a ‘god by grace’, in the words of Lossky.\textsuperscript{20} According to the greatest Western Orthodox theologian, John Scottus Eriugena, the general return to God takes place in five stages that proceed as follows, commencing with the death of the body:\textsuperscript{21}

(i) The dissolution of the body into the four elements of earth, air, fire and water;
(ii) With the resurrection each soul will assemble its own body from the collective store of elements;
(iii) Body and soul are turned into spirit;

\textsuperscript{17} Lossky, \textit{Orthodox Theology}, pp 83, 136.
\textsuperscript{18} Lossky, \textit{ibid}, p 136.
\textsuperscript{19} Lossky, \textit{ibid}, pp 76-77.
\textsuperscript{20} Lossky, \textit{Mystical Theology}, p 126.
(iv) Spirit returns to the primordial causes that dwell in God;
(v) Spirit and its causes are united with God.

As a result of the fall God had to become man so that man can become like God, as taught by St Irenaeus and St Athanasius. In this profound formula is encapsulated both the Incarnation of the Word and the theosis or deification of man. Stated in characteristically metaphysical terms by St Maximus: the unlimited became limited so that the limited can become unlimited. Due to the first human couple’s turning away from God, divine grace lost its place in human nature. Although grace was at work through the prophets of the Old Testament up to Saint John the Baptist, theosis was impossible. It took the salvific work of Christ to make deification possible for humankind.

St Maximus taught that theosis is made possible by the Incarnation, by which Christ effected a fivefold mediation: between the sexes, between the inhabited earth and Paradise, between heaven and earth, between the sensible and intelligible worlds, and finally between the created and Uncreated. Through His cosmic mediation (including His birth, death, resurrection and ascension) Christ makes possible first the unity of man, then the unity of the world, then the unity of creation in the Logos, and finally the mystical unity of love. Man will then be united with God without becoming part of His nature – it will be a union without confusion, as with the two natures of Christ. One can therefore speak of cosmic redemption: the Incarnation of Christ makes possible the redemption of the whole creation, including the physical and the non-human.

The entire human nature has to be deified, because all of it is created by God. Man ought to become a person created in two natures: a human nature that is deified and a divine energy that deifies. This is made possible by Christ, whose divine person fully assumed human nature. As stated by St Gregory Nazianzus: what is not assumed, cannot be deified. Theosis therefore involves the whole person, body and soul – as witnessed by the bodies of saints like

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22 Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, p 94.
23 Lossky, *ibid*, p 137.
24 Lossky, *ibid*, p 75.
25 Thunberg, pp 80-88.
26 Thunberg, p 89.
27 Ware, p 235.
Seraphim of Sarov, who was transfigured by divine light. This transforming light is none other than the uncreated energies of God, through which He also creates all life in the universe.

**Divine-human synergy**

Synergy or co-operation between man and God is required for *theosis*. God provides the objective conditions in the Church, and we have to provide the subjective conditions required. In Orthodox theology there is no separation between grace and free will as in the West. The righteousness of works and the grace of the Spirit combines in the human soul, as taught by St Gregory of Nyssa. Grace is not a reward for merit or a cause of meritorious acts – in the synergy of divine and human wills, grace is appropriated by the human person.

According to St Theophan the Recluse, salvation is worked out by man, assisted by grace, in co-operation with the Holy Spirit. Salvation begins with conversion (Greek *epistrophe*, meaning return), which entails turning away from the world (that is, the passions) and towards God. The way to union has two interrelated levels: action (*praxis*) and contemplation (*theoria*). According to St Evagrius, action leads man to a state of impassibility or passionlessness (*apatheia*). This is not a passive or an active state, but one of vigilance, which is in fact the normal, integrated condition of the human spirit.

Three stages in the way of union towards God were distinguished by St Isaac the Syrian: penitence, which is conversion of the will; purification, which is liberation from the passions; and perfection, which is the acquisition of perfect love. This is a varying perspective from that of St Dionysius the Areopagite whose mystical way also consists of three stages, namely purification by practising the virtues, illumination through contemplation of the divine things, and perfection leading to union with God. These stages should not be seen as successive but as complementary.

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29 Ware, pp 233.
31 Lossky, *ibid*, pp 199.
32 Lossky, *ibid*, pp 202-203.
33 Lossky, *ibid*, pp 204.
In the final analysis, mystical union is only possible in and by prayer. This applies especially to interior, spiritual prayer, of which the Prayer of the Heart (also known as the Jesus Prayer) is the best example. The method of practising interior prayer was formulated by St Symeon the New Theologian and later by St Gregory Palamas. The Jesus Prayer prepares the heart for the indwelling of grace, in other words the uncreated energies of God.\textsuperscript{35}

**Conclusion**

A number of practical considerations regarding theosis have been put forwarded by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware.\textsuperscript{36} Deification is intended for all, not only a few – there is nothing elitist about it. Theosis presupposes a continued act of repentance (Greek *metanoia*), because consciousness of sin is ever present with the one who is moving towards God. Since there can be no mysticism without morality, participation in the ordinary life of the Church is still required. Deification is a social process and not a solitary one, since love for God and love for your neighbour cannot be separated. Theosis can in the light of the above only be practised within the Church and her mysteries.

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\textsuperscript{35} Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pp 209, 211.
\textsuperscript{36} Ware, pp 236-238.