

# SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

## Mystical Forms in Eastern Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodoxy has begun to expand in the West, attracting the interest of many believers, primarily because of its emphasis on spirituality as expressed both in its theology and methodology.

### The Theology of Theosis

At the heart of Eastern Orthodox spirituality, or mysticism, is the notion of theosis. By definition, theosis is the lifelong process of transformation by which the faithful believer is deified, that is, made god (notice the lowercase *g*). Eastern Orthodox teachers throughout the centuries have often recalled Athanasius's axiom: "God became man to make man god." Timothy Ware, whose book *The Orthodox Church* presents a thorough and accurate explanation of Eastern Orthodox thought, says of theosis,

The aim of the Christian life...can equally well be defined in terms of *deification*....Such, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, is the final goal at which every Christian must aim: to become god, to attain *theosis*, 'deification' or 'divinization'. For Orthodoxy, man's salvation and redemption mean his deification. (236)

According to Ware, then, the goal of every Christian should be "full mystical union with God" (240). This union is accomplished by "the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God" (235).

Protestant theologian Winfried Corduan offers a balanced analysis of Eastern Orthodox mysticism from an evangelical point of view. In his book *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* he summarizes Eastern Orthodoxy's theology of mysticism: "Because God communicates himself through his energies, a human being can thereby actually become deified" (100). Corduan concurs with Ware that Eastern Orthodoxy has always represented deification as incremental, achieved by degrees. He explains, "Deification is a process, not an instantaneous event" (100). Corduan affirms the accuracy of such theology, critiquing it only for its inadequate treatment of the judicial aspect of the gospel; he sees in it an overemphasis of *organic* salvation to the inadvertent *de-emphasis* of judicial, redemptive truth. He points out that "Eastern Orthodoxy seems to minimize sin and reconciliation" (101) and notes "the absence of New Testament salvation theology" (102), a shortcoming

he ascribes more to unintentional omission than to opposition. This imbalance is thus more a deficiency than a deviation.

Vladimir Lossky, a prominent writer for Eastern Orthodox theology, echoes much of Ware's and Corduan's views. In his book *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, he states, "Created beings have the faculty of being assimilated to God because such was the very object of their creation" (101-102). Lossky accurately applies verses such as John 14:23 and 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 to point out the intention of God in Christ to indwell man and transform him into His image. He explains, "The Trinity can remain incommunicable in essence and at the same time come and dwell within us, according to the promise of Christ" (86). In many respects, Eastern Orthodoxy correctly presents the notion of deification, appropriately and accurately deriving its teaching from a scriptural synthesis of New Testament revelation. Its teaching of theosis, therefore, merits our affirmation.

### View of the Trinity

Also deserving of affirmation is the Eastern Orthodox view of the relationship between the Trinity and man throughout the process of deification. Corduan writes, "The Trinitarian personal God, who is both transcendent and immanent, is in evidence here" (101). He points out that theosis does not mean that man becomes a part of the Trinity, of the Godhead: "God is still himself in the energies" (99). Ware also emphasizes that deification implies neither a change in God's nature nor a loss in our status as creature: "We remain creatures while becoming god by grace, as Christ remained God when becoming man by the Incarnation. Man does not become God *by nature*, but is merely a 'created god', a god *by grace* or *by status*" (237). Even more emphatically, Ware underscores the mystery present throughout the New Testament, namely, our union with God while maintaining our distinctness from God in His Godhead. He states, "The mystical union between God and man is a true union, yet in this union Creator and creature do not become fused into a single being....Man, however closely linked to God, retains his full personal integrity. Man, when deified, remains distinct (though not separate) from God" (237). Lossky is also careful to clarify that while we are deified by God reaching us, extending

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Himself to us and flowing Himself into us by grace, “the union to which we are called is neither hypostatic—as in the case of the human nature of Christ—nor substantial, as in that of the three divine Persons” (87).

The notion of the deification of the believers is evident throughout New Testament Scripture, but so also is the distinction between God and man. It is similar to the mystery of Christ and the church. While the Body is one with the Head and enjoys the same life and nature as the Head, the Body remains distinct from the Head, never participating in the divine headship. This careful distinction between man becoming god in life and nature yet not in the Godhead is worthy of affirmation.

### The Method of Orthodox Theosis

In its theology concerning deification, Eastern Orthodoxy points the believer to the apex of Christian purpose and destiny. It not only faithfully maintains the notion of deification contained in Scripture, but it also articulates theosis thoughtfully and carefully. It ascends to the peak in revelation and insight. Nevertheless, it plummets when it turns to method, or practice. It is an astonishing paradox that the Eastern Church can be so sublime in its understanding of deification and yet so abysmally deviant in its methods for accomplishing deification.

### Icons and Relics

Orthodoxy goes to great lengths to justify its use of icons and relics for the purposes of worship and deification. Paintings and statues are used in Orthodox worship mostly to help believers visualize the spiritual. The flawed excuse given is that most people need an external, physical object of worship in order to stimulate an internal, spiritual response. Not only is this concept wrong, but it is also a blatant violation of God’s commandment: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them” (Exo. 20:4-5). God patently forbids us to use images in worship to Him. Rather, John 4:24 states that God is Spirit, indicating an unseen, intangible essence, and as such, He must be worshipped in our human spirit, which is correspondingly unseen and intangible. Not only so, we must also worship in “truthfulness” (v. 24), according to God’s prescribed way. Orthodoxy attempts to create a religious atmosphere with its paintings and statues. Some of its cathedrals are literally covered wall to wall, from ceiling to floor, with paintings of “saints” and portraits of Christ or Mary. The intention may be theosis, but the effect is idolatry.

Even more deplorable is its emphasis on relics, including bodily remains of deceased martyrs. Ware says of Orthodox believers, “Like Roman Catholics, they believe that the grace of God present in the saints’ bodies during life

remains active in their relics when they have died, and that God uses these relics as a channel of divine power and an instrument of healing....Orthodox show...a veneration toward their bones” (239). What a grotesque affront to our Christ who, as the life-giving Spirit, is the unique source of divine life, grace, and power! We are deified by the impartation and accumulation of the Holy Spirit, and such dispensing is accomplished solely by our direct contact with Him in our spirit—not by contact with physical objects, regardless of their origination and association.

### Law-keeping

Another path to theosis promoted by Eastern Orthodoxy is the believers’ valiant effort at law-keeping. In fact, according to Eastern Orthodox teaching, it is not necessarily *successful* law-keeping which deifies; the mere *attempt* at law-keeping, the sheer effort, suffices. As Ware puts it, “Every true Christian tries to love God and to fulfil His commandments; and so long as a man sincerely seeks to do that, then however weak his attempts may be and however often he may fall, he is already in some degree deified” (240). The Bible, however, presents another picture entirely. After devoting an entire chapter to exposing the folly of trying to please God by law-keeping (Rom. 7), the apostle Paul then reveals the liberating New Testament provision: “The law of the Spirit of life has freed me in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and of death” (8:2). He goes on to explain that whereas the law “was weak through the flesh” (v. 3), whenever we walk according to spirit, the righteous requirement of the law is spontaneously and effortlessly fulfilled in us (v. 4). It is our walk according to the spirit, not our efforts at law-keeping, which satisfies God and deifies us.

### Asceticism

Another method promoted by Eastern Orthodoxy for the accomplishing of theosis is asceticism. According to the Eastern Orthodox periodical *Again*,

From the Scriptures and from the tradition of the Church, we know that the goal of the Christian life is growing in communion with God, often referred to as theosis or deification. And we also know that to reach this goal requires not only an absolute and unwavering trust in God, but also a certain acceptance of personal struggle and sacrifice—in a word, *asceticism*. No Orthodox Christian is exempt from this struggle, married or monastic, layperson or priest. This is common to all. (4)

The problem with this approach to theosis is that the practice of asceticism is in fact pagan in origin, predating the Christian era. It was misguidedly adopted by some believers in the second, third, and fourth centuries as an overreaction to the church’s slide into worldliness. It is a blatantly

unscriptural counterfeit of true Christian spirituality. Nevertheless, *Again* lauds the practice of asceticism in Orthodox monasteries, saying, "The asceticism of many of the great Orthodox monastics is well-known. There are the desert-dwellers, the stylites, and the great fasters, to mention just a few" (4). Conversely, Paul warns the believers not to "subject yourselves to ordinances: Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch" (Col. 2:20-21) and describes this type of "severe treatment of the body" as being "not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh" (v. 23). Then he turns their attention back to "Christ our life" (3:4). The scriptural way to deny the self is to turn the heart to the Lord and contact Him in the spirit. It is the believer's positive turn to the Lord that accomplishes the negation of the flesh. One does not mortify the fleshly life by focusing on it; this is achieved only by touching the divine life in Christ. Asceticism, then, is actually a frustration to genuine theosis, producing instead a peculiar and false spirituality.

### "Going to Church"

In *The Orthodox Church*, Ware presents yet another way to be deified: "If a man asks 'How can I become god?' the answer is very simple: go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God 'in spirit and in truth', read the Gospels, follow the commandments" (241). First, it must be pointed out that the expression "go to church" is unscriptural. Neither the phrase nor the notion underlying it can be found anywhere in Scripture. The church is the organic Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23), not a physical building; hence, it is not possible to "go to church."

The intent of the phrase most likely means that believers should attend Christian meetings, and it is true that the Lord's presence is promised where two or three are gathered into His name (Matt. 18:20). Much impartation of Christ as the life-giving Spirit is accomplished in fellowship and worship—if the worshippers are in direct contact with God who is Spirit. Ware rightly recommends praying in spirit and in truth. If a believer uses his spirit to contact God, this will cause him to gradually yet increasingly accumulate the Holy Spirit throughout his being and thus become god in life and nature, but not in the Godhead. But if the believer is merely directed to "go to church" to worship relics, look at icons, perform rituals, and hear exhortations on how to "follow the commandments," he will have very little contact with God in spirit, and thus little acquisition of the Holy Spirit. The believer will be led to mistake a religious environment with its sentimental appeal and performance of ritual for genuine worship. Genuine worship infuses the believer with God, adding the divine element to him.

### The Sacraments

According to Eastern Orthodoxy, the foremost method for accomplishing theosis is to partake weekly of the sacraments.

Ware tells us that "Church and sacraments are the means appointed by God whereby man may acquire the sanctifying Spirit and be transformed into the divine likeness" (242). In fact, Ware views the sacraments as the chief means of achieving the oneness between Christ and His Body: "The unity between Christ and His Church is effected above all through the sacraments" (245-246).

It is undoubtedly true that there is a special dispensing of Christ as the Spirit into His believers, the members of His Body, as they celebrate the Lord's table. Participating in the weekly remembrance of Christ by eating and drinking Him as the all-inclusive Spirit surely accelerates the process of deification. While we are partaking of the outward symbols of the bread and wine, we inwardly turn our hearts to Christ and spiritually partake of Him in spirit while singing and praising. However, Eastern Orthodoxy superstitiously promotes the idea that the bread and wine are transubstantiated into the literal flesh and blood of Christ, consumed as such, and that the divine element thereby enters the believer to accomplish theosis through the bread and wine. Ware says, "In every sacramental action of the Church, and most notably at the climax of the Eucharistic Prayer, the Spirit is solemnly invoked" (235). This interpretation restricts the experience of theosis primarily to the weekly partaking of the elements of the Lord's supper.

In its theology, Orthodoxy teaches a daily, lifelong process of gradual transformation into the image of Christ by the inward acquisition of the Holy Spirit. We are provided a high and compelling revelation of God's intention to deify the believer, but we are left with icons, relics, law-keeping, asceticism, going to church, and the sacraments as the means to reach this lofty goal. Orthodoxy, commendably, conveys the heart of God's New Testament economy in its teaching of theosis, but it wanders far from the New Testament revelation in its method for accomplishing theosis. The New Testament emphasizes the direct, moment-by-moment contact with the pneumatic Christ in our spirit rather than the handling and viewing of physical religious objects and expecting grace from them. It is our direct experience with "the Lord Spirit" that produces transformation into His image (2 Cor. 3:18) and makes the believer god in life and nature, but not in the Godhead.

by Gary Evans

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