REVIEWS

Becoming like Theosists: A Critique of Robert V. Rakestraw's "Evangelical Doctrine" of Theosis

Rakestraw, Robert V. "Becoming like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40.2 (June 1997): 257-269.

We at *Affirmation & Critique* have always been quite interested in the notion of deification, the teaching that in God's full salvation the believers become God in life, nature, and expression, while His uniqueness in Godhead is absolutely preserved. We understand that among Protestant Christians this notion has historically been anything but welcome and that within the broader sphere of all Western Christianity it has been only marginally respected. However, the teaching is hardly insignificant among those in the other half of Christendom, in the branches of Eastern Orthodoxy, who for long centuries have spoken of the theosis ("divinization" or "deification") of the believer. And slowly there is a growing appreciation for it in Western Christianity as theologians begin to contemplate, and yes, to understand what has been meant by declarations so striking as Athanasius's in the fourth century: "He became man that we might become God" (*De Incarnatione* 54:3). Eastern Orthodoxy has gone far beyond the simple declaration of Athanasius (who, incidentally, echoes Irenaeus of some 150 years earlier in *Adversus Haereses* V.6.1.) to develop a theology of deification, which was primarily set forth by Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century. It is significant that a portion of his writings, excerpts from *The Triads*, has been entered into the collection of *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (emphasize *Western*). On the attention that this inclusion invites, Jaroslav Pelikan writes in the preface to the volume: "But now, apparently, [Palamas] is becoming a saint to increasing parts of the Western Church as well—an uncanonized saint, to be sure, but one who deserves attention as something more than a museum piece from Mount Athos" (xii).

This growing interest in deification has recently been manifested in articles on the subject in various theological journals of very Protestant persuasion. And by this I do not mean articles that merely report what deification means in other branches of Christianity but articles that recommend some degree of Protestant acceptance of the teaching. In recent months two such articles have been Robert Rakestraw's "Becoming like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis," in *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society*, and F. W. Norris's "Deification: Consensual and Cogent," in *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Admittedly, the articles are exciting in their titled intent, not simply because their cause coincides with those expressed in this journal, but because they represent a deepening of consideration among Protestant theologians in areas that long seemed impermeable to anything but Reformation and post-Reformation insights. However, even as ambitious and encouraging as the articles seem, there is no lack of disappointments in them, and these should be carefully scrutinized if we are to understand exactly how some Protestants can "accept" a doctrine of deification. In this issue I wish to examine the first of these, Professor Rakestraw's, and hopefully respond to what he suggests as "an evangelical doctrine of theosis." Perhaps in a later issue the second article, Professor Norris's, can be considered. At any rate, whether response is given here to it or not, I do recommend a reading of it, as its spirited appeal to Christian thinkers to reconsider this crucial teaching from the early church has great merit.

An Overview of Rakestraw's Article

Robert Rakestraw is certainly ambitious in combining in the title of his article the notions of Evangelical doctrine and theosis; unfortunately, he is less able to do so in the article itself. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to his actual accomplishments in this article for him to speak of "an evangelical stance on theosis," for that indeed is what he has done. In the end, he must be what he really is, an Evangelical, and as such, he can hardly swallow wholly the notion of deification as it has been traditionally put forward by the Christian church.

The article is for the most part well researched, and persons only now being introduced to the doctrine of deification would do well to study Rakestraw's general survey of the doctrine across the ages. Although brief, the survey is in the main true to the development of theosis theology. There are, however, weaknesses in his presentation of the finer and deeper concepts underlying the notion of deification, which I will address below.

But first, a brief overview of the article. Professor Rakestraw tells us from the start why he has taken an interest in the teaching of theosis, suggesting that "Evangelicals may receive considerable benefit from a clear understanding and judicious appropriation of the doctrine," especially as

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the church faces a "plethora of false spiritualities" now attracting a hungry world (257). His Evangelical concern is genuinely admirable and to be shared by all believers, for indeed the church must answer the spiritual needs of humankind and must do so with something appropriately substantial.

Rakestraw then proceeds to highlight the history of theosis, beginning with allusions to it in the Bible. He limits the compass of "biblical themes" primarily to Genesis 1:26 and 2 Peter 1:4, observing that these texts, more than any others, provide the scriptural basis for the teaching. From the former text, which speaks of humankind made in the image and likeness of God, he characterizes, perhaps too simply, "all understandings of theosis" as fundamentally "the Christian's reintegration into the life of God" (258) once lost in Adam's fall. On the latter text, which speaks of the believers as "partakers of the divine nature," he rightly portrays divinization writers as being far removed from Barth's view that Peter means no more than "the practical fellowship of Christians with God and on this basis the conformity of their acts with the divine nature" (258; quoting Barth 28). Rakestraw admits other scriptures frequently called upon by deification theologians. Unfortunately, the passing treatment of this collection of texts hardly leaves one with the impression that deification is indeed a "biblical theme."

This works well for him as he introduces his section on "Patristic Development," for there he maintains that "as with most areas of theology, the doctrine of theosis began to develop indirectly at first and then became more explicit" (259). The clear impression one is left with is that deification is less a "biblical theme" and more a patristic one and one belonging to later theology. I should note, however, that later in his article Rakestraw finds a stronger biblical basis for deification, which he regards as its significant strength. Rakestraw's presentation of the patristic material is brief but well-chosen. Irenaeus, the author of *The Epistle to Diognetes,* Hillary of Poitiers, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory of Nyssa are referenced. The work of Rowan Williams is called upon to help him in his analysis of the patristic view of deification. In this it is important to note that Rakestraw recognizes a crucial distinction in theosis theology between "God's modes of activity" and His "abstract and static attributes (such as incorruptibility)" (260). The distinction will appear again and again in his presentation of the history of deification thought; unfortunately, as we will see, it will be absent when he critiques the doctrine in the last section of his paper.

Rakestraw then turns to a definition of theosis, which he claims "has much the same meaning" as our English apotheosis (260). The identification is unfortunate, for apotheosis, borrowed from ancient pagan religion and essentially unchanged in meaning, is hardly the same as Christian theosis. Rakestraw does, however, provide other sources for a definition of the Christian teaching, and these better reflect traditional understandings. Rakestraw appears to be trying to steer his readers away from a definition of theosis that might involve "a transformation of the human into the divine" (261), which, upon the authority of Philip Hughes, he claims was not what Athanasius had in mind when the latter spoke of man becoming God. "Above all, theosis is the restoration and reintegration of the 'image' or, as some prefer, 'likeness' of God, seriously distorted by the fall, in the children of God" (261). To this notion of reintegration, the concept of communion with God and the "very real impartation of the divine life to the whole human being" is added (261). Hence, less a transformation and more a reintegration into God's image and likeness and a participation in the life of Christ, theosis in Rakestraw's mind "is more than the customary Protestant concept of sanctification" (261), even though similarities to the Western doctrine can be found (263). As his presentation of the definition continues, theosis begins to look more and more like a Protestant concept, only in very Eastern Orthodox shrouds. Citing G. L. Bray, he points out that "in the western churches…the concept of the imitation of Christ is the closest analogy to the theosis doctrine of the east" (263; from Bray 189). By the end of this section, an Evangelical skeptic should be amply disarmed and indeed amenable to "an Evangelical doctrine of theosis."

The next section is, in my view, the best of the entire article. Here Professor Rakestraw presents a refreshing look at British strands of theosis teaching, which go practically unnoticed by many researchers. He begins with the insights of Henry Scougal, who commanded the respect of both George Whitefield and Charles Wesley. For Scougal, Christians enjoy "a real participation in [God's] nature" and "may be said to have 'God dwelling in their souls,' and 'Christ formed within them' " (264; quoting Scougal 40). Rakestraw continues by providing excellent stanzas from some of Charles Wesley's hymns, which point not only to Christian participation in God in eternity but also to that blessedness to be enjoyed today. He concludes this section with material from the Welsh hymnists William Williams and Ann Griffiths, who speak of participating in God's divine nature (Williams) and of that bliss where man is God and God is man (Griffiths) (265-266).

"An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis"

Professor Rakestraw concludes his article with a "critique of the doctrine." It may now be more appropriate to turn from reviewing his article to interacting with his theses. In doing so, I wish to return to certain comments that he makes in earlier sections of his article. The first of these has to do with his definition of theosis. Rakestraw leads us to believe that theosis is merely the apotheosis of the believer. However, ancient apotheosis, which was rejected by the early church, is not the same as theosis, which was advanced by the early church. In the ancient pagan religions men became gods by mere declaration. The process was called *apotheosis* in Greek and *consecratio* in Latin, and generally occurred after the death of the emperor. The church's understanding of theosis was (and, in many branches of the church today, still is) quite different.

Ironically, Rakestraw, even after making the unfortunate equivalence, mentions the more traditional definitions. He quotes Kenneth Leech, who defines theosis as "the work of divine grace by which human nature is so transformed that it 'shines with a supernatural light and is transported above its own limits by a superabundance of glory'" (258, quoting Maximus). One will naturally wonder: What, then, does theosis actually refer to, being made God by declaration (= apotheosis) or being made God by transformation? Some of the other authorities that Rakestraw calls upon to help him define theosis speak of it in terms of a transformation, yet he draws upon Philip Hughes as an authority on what Athanasius understood by the term, claiming that "he did not have in mind a transformation of the human into the divine, an ontological or essential change of humanity into deity" (261). The characterization of Athanasius's thought on the matter is at least suspect and not to be swallowed wholly, especially in view of what patristic writers in or about the same time had to say on the topic, who we know were more likely following Athanasius than departing from him theologically.

I strain on this point for a reason. Rakestraw is attempting "an evangelical doctrine of theosis," which in the title of his paper he flatly describes as "becoming like God." However, the patristic doctrine is not so simple. Pelikan provides us clear evidence from Basil of Caesarea:

> Enumerating the gifts of the Spirit, Basil affirmed that from Him "comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, distribution of good gifts, the heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in God, the being made like to God [ἡ πρὸς Θεὸν ὁμοίωσις]—and highest of all, the being made God [θεὸν γενέσθαι]." (*Emergence* 216; quoting Basil from *On the Holy Spirit* 9:23).

BY VIRTUE OF GOD'S COMMUNICABILITY, WE ARE ALLOWED TO SHARE IN WHAT HE IS, AND IN THIS SENSE, IT CAN BE SAID THAT WE BECOME GOD THROUGH HIS FULL SALVATION.

It is difficult to support the notion that these writers meant "becoming like God" when such clear passages as this distinguish between "becoming like God" and "becoming God." Rakestraw's "evangelical doctrine of theosis" amounts to merely "becoming like God," but apparently the early church had something else in mind when they spoke of theosis. Further, in the same section where he defines theosis, Rakestraw suggests that "the closest analogy to the theosis doctrine of the east" is "the concept of the imitation of Christ" in the Western churches. If that were really the case, then "becoming like God" would not be a gloss too far afield. However, a close analogy hardly represents an identification, and Rakestraw's suggestion only serves to weaken the force of the concept as held in the east and in the ancient church. At the center of the actual concept of theosis is a genuine transformation, not a mere declaration or imitation.

It appears to me that Rakestraw is attempting to cut down to Evangelical size a not too Evangelical doctrine, and it may be that without his sawing it down to size, it just will not fit into Evangelical faith. But this does no justice to the East or to the ancient church, and any "Evangelical" doctrine that derives from their views should be justifiably true to their views. What then do they mean by saying man can become God? In other words, what is the actual definition of theosis?

The answer relies heavily on a chief distinction in patristic and Orthodox theology, which Rakestraw refers to here and there in his article. "Eastern writers stress...the distinction between God's essence and His energies" (263). What Rakestraw fails to do is define what Eastern (and, by the way, ancient) writers mean by the distinction, and more precisely, what they mean by "the energies of God," through which believers can be said to become God. Without some specific clarification, most English readers will not understand the depth of meaning that lies in the distinction. *Essence* may seem to suggest "substance," and *energies* could be understood as referring to either "powers" (for some, roughly equivalent to *grace*) or "actions" (for example, creation, incarnation, redemption, etc.), but these are not exactly what ancient and Eastern writers mean when they employ the terms and engage the distinction between them.

The distinction was first evoked by the Cappadocians in the fourth century as a way "to maintain the absolute

transcendence of the unknowable essence of God and the relationships of God to His creatures" (Maloney 62). Joseph Raya offers this clear expression on the terms and the distinction:

> The uncreated energies of God are not "things" which exist outside of God, not "gifts" of God; they are God Himself in His action. They are the very God who is Himself uncreated. They are therefore called "uncreated" because their cause and origin is the Essence of God….Thus the Essence and energies of God are not "parts" of God but two ways by which we human beings can contemplate God's essence. (37-38)

George Maloney, S. J., commenting on Raya's statements above, adds, "The energies are, we might say, 'God *for us*'" (74). The essence of God is, according to the ancient church, God in His unknowable and transcendent being. Here an appeal should be made to the meaning of the original Greek term, οὐσία, which, in this context, tended in meaning more toward "being" than our modern "essence," since it was employed to describe God in His supranatural existence. The energies of God are God in His actions and particularly in His relationships to humankind. Timothy Ware offers these observations on the distinction:

> But however remote from us in His essence, yet in His energies God has revealed Himself to men. These energies are not something that exist apart from God, not a gift which God confers upon men: they are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world. (77)

This statement by Ware must first be understood before one can fully understand Rakestraw's own quotation from Ware regarding deification: "Union with God means union with the divine energies, not the divine essence" (263, quoting from Ware 237). Coupling Ware's two concepts, we should understand him to mean that deification is effected by our union with "God Himself in His action," as opposed to any sort of union with God in His essence, or transcendent, incommunicable being.

"Becoming God," theosis, in the thought of the ancient church, of the Eastern church, and of other theosis adherents depends on the notion that in God there is a distinction between Him in His unreachable being and Him in His reachable action. Vladimir Lossky points out that "the theology of the Eastern church distinguishes in God three hypostases, the nature or essence, and the energies" (85-86). The former two of these three and the distinction between them are held in common with the Western church as the basis of the triunity of God; the third and the distinction between it and the second have been less widely received in the West. This distinction was fully developed in the theology of Gregory Palamas (†1359), whom Rakestraw mentions in his article. However, Palamas's chief contribution, the development of the Cappadocian distinction between the essence and energies of God, is not mentioned, and this is the chief flaw in Rakestraw's article and ultimately the chief flaw in his "evangelical doctrine of theosis." Theosis, true theosis, cannot exist without the distinction, unless we are willing to admit pantheism into our belief, i.e., unless we are willing to say that we become God in the very sense that God is God in His transcendent being, or we are willing to neutralize the concept to such an extent that we are speaking not actually of "becoming God" but merely of "becoming like God."

Rakestraw, as do most thinkers on the subject, rejects any form of pantheism, but he also implicitly rejects the notion of a true theosis. He voices this primary concern regarding theosis in his critique of the doctrine:

> Perhaps the most obvious deficiency is the terminology itself. To speak of divinization, deification, and human beings "becoming God" seems to violate the historic Christian understanding of the essential qualitative distinction between God and the creation. "Becoming like God" appears to express more biblically the concept of the Christian's union and communion with God in sanctification. Why use terminology that, at first glance at least, will alienate those unfamiliar with this line of thinking in Christian theology, with the result that they miss what might be of benefit to them? Some may reply, however, that the shock value of the terms may be just what is needed to awaken lethargic or defeated Christians to the truth of their union with Christ. (266)

The problem, of course, with his complaint is that theosis writers fully understand the "historic Christian understanding of the essential qualitative distinction between God and the creation" and, motivated by that understanding, find in God the distinction between His essence, as which He remains totally apart from creation, and His energies, as which He is wondrously involved with creation. Further, the distinction between essence and energies, dating back 1600 years, is almost as traditional a Christian notion as that of the distinction between the transcendent God and His creation, even if many Evangelicals have failed to notice it or, as in Rakestraw's case, have ignored it. Hence, by ignoring this critical distinction in God—call it essence and energies of God, or unknowable and knowable God, or incommunicable and communicable God, or immanent and economic Trinity—Rakestraw removes any real basis for man's becoming God and must be content to recommend a "doctrine of theosis" that amounts to no more than man becoming like God. Once this is done, the doctrine begins to look very Evangelical in aspect.

Why indeed do theosis writers "speak of divinization, deification, and human beings 'becoming God' "? I think we can certainly dismiss the one shallow reason Rakestraw provides. In fact, I would think that many theosis proponents might take offense at the suggestion that they are striving at mere "shock value" with their terminology. From all that I can gather, they use these terms because they actually believe that human beings may "become God" through His full salvation in some real sense of the phrase. Their sentiment is probably akin to that of Henry Scougal's, when he describes a religious life in general, which Rakestraw quotes for us: "I know not how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed, than by calling it a divine life" (34; quoted on 264). Hardly because of their shock value, these terms express more fully what the writers mean: human beings may become God, at least insofar as He exists communicably, but not in His incommunicable and unknowable essence. When, as Scougal describes it, God dwells in the souls of the believers and Christ is formed within them, and when, as Paul describes it, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20), there is something more at issue than the imitation of Christ. Theosis writers would say that the believer has become God, not in the sense that the human being has ceased to be and has become deity, for only He who is God in His very essence is such. Attendant to this are the corollary notions that becoming God in this sense does not imply that the believer is to worshipped nor that the believer possesses qualities particular to transcendent God, qualities like omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, etc.

The difficulty many Western Christians have with the thought that man may become God lies precisely in their notion of what God is: only transcendent, only incommunicable, only absolutely "other" than His creation. This is Rakestraw's "historic Christian understanding of the essential qualitative distinction between God and the creation." Yet God became truly man, and this fact alone, so central to the definition of Christian faith, leads us to believe that in God there is an aspect of communicability which allows Him to share in what we are. By virtue of the same aspect of communicability, we are allowed to share in what He is, and in this sense, it can be said that we become God through His full salvation.

Rakestraw cannot have it both ways. There can be no doctrine of theosis, Evangelical or other, without a real distinction between God in His incommunicability and God in His communicability. Rakestraw complains about terms like *theosis*, *deification*, and *divinization*, but the same complaint could be turned back on him: If his "evangelical doctrine of theosis" is merely "becoming like God," why does he even use the term *theosis?* My honest suspicion is that he hopes, by use of radical language (i.e., appealing to its "shock value"), to awaken a rejuvenation of Evangelical theology, even if in the end there is basically no real transformation of it. Hasn't "becoming like God" been in the thought and aspirations of Evangelicals all along? What real contribution to Evangelical theology is being made here then, except to provide a vivid, perhaps fashionable, label for a long-held view? Rakestraw is at most asking Evangelical theologians to become like theosists but certainly not actual theosists in any true sense of the term.

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