

# THEOPOIESIS AND THEOSIS

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## Introduction:

There is a lot of confusion now among many theologians as well as lay people about some terms and concepts that are little understood. Terms like “Deification”, “Divinization”, “*theosis*” and their Arabic equivalents (see later) are thought to describe one and the same concept.

This paper proposes to show that:

1. The terms “Deification”, “Divinization”, and “*theosis*” are both confusing and misleading for they give the impression that man can become God, something that none of the early fathers ever claimed.
2. That the Alexandrian usage of the Greek words *theopoesis* and *theopoiou* describes an ancient doctrine in the Church that goes back to the roots of Christianity.
3. That the Byzantine usage of the Greek term *theosis* and the concept it represents is alien to the early Patristic tradition.
4. That *theopoesis* and *theosis* are two totally different doctrines.

## THE DOCTRINE OF THEOPOIESIS

*"I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes." (Ps 82:6-7 83 in Coptic/Septuagint)*

How did the Fathers of the Church interpret this Psalm? Before we enquire into this we have to discuss the terminology used. The word "gods" is a translation of the Hebrew "*Elohim*" (noun, plural). The word is used in different ways. First and foremost it is used (still in the plural) to describe God. The use of the plural to describe God is thought by some to be the majestic plural, like when the Queen of England says for example: "It pleases us to do..." Others however see in it an allusion to the Trinity, as in Genesis 3:22, "And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as **one of us**."

The same word is also used for angels, as in Psalm 138:1: "before the gods will I sing praise unto thee." The translators of the Septuagint noting the context, in which "*Elohim*" is used, rendered it: "before the angels will I sing praise unto thee." (Ps. 137:1)

It is even used to describe devils! as in Septuagint Psalm 95:5 (96 KJV): "For all the gods of the nations are devils". Even in the New Testament, the word "God" was used to describe Satan "the god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4) and, as we see from its use in Psalm 82, it is used to describe men.

To summarize then, "*Elohim*" is a generic descriptive term used to describe God but also angels, devils and men. It is not a proper name of God. The Book of Genesis has another expression for the proper name of God which is the Hebrew term "*YHWH Elohim*" (literally Yahweh the God), which in the King James Version is translated "The Lord God" but in the Jerusalem Bible is rendered "Yahweh God". This led Carl Mosser to suggest that whenever this word "*Elohim*" is used to describe other than God, it becomes synonymous with "immortal".<sup>1</sup>

Saint Justin Martyr, considered to be the first Christian author, was also the first to interpret this verse:

"I said, Ye are gods, and are all children of the Most High. But ye die like men, and fall like one of the princes. Arise, O God! judge the earth, for Thou shalt inherit all nations." But in the version of the Seventy it is written, Behold, ye die like men, and fall like one of the princes, in order to manifest the disobedience of men, I mean of Adam and Eve, and the fall of one of the princes, i.e., of him who was called the serpent, who fell with a great overthrow, because he deceived Eve. ... The Holy Ghost reproaches men because they were made like God, free

from suffering and death, provided that they kept His commandments, and were deemed deserving of the name of His sons, and yet they, becoming like Adam and Eve, work out death for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Justin Martyr considers these two verses as describing the creation and the fall. Adam and Eve were made like God, free from suffering (passions) and death, but, through their disobedience they brought death unto themselves and fell from grace even as Satan, who is described as one of the princes fell from his first estate. It is obvious that Justin Martyr sees in calling Adam and Eve "gods" the fact that they were made like God, free from suffering and death or created in the image and likeness of God, not subject to passions (passionlessness, *apatheia*) and immortal. In this, he confirms what Carl Mosser says that creatures that are endowed with immortality are called gods in the Old Testament.

In the second paragraph, he generalizes the concept to include the whole of the human race. All men can maintain their immortality provided that they kept God's commandments, and proved themselves worthy of being named His sons. He then laments the facts that men who become disobedient like Adam and Eve, work out death for themselves.

To summarize: Men are called gods on account of being endowed with immortality, in the same way that angels and even devils, and Satan himself are called gods. Men can keep their immortality by being obedient to God. If, however, they disobey God like Adam and Eve, they, like Adam and Eve, will die and fall from grace.

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1. Carl Mosser, *The earliest Patristic interpretations of Psalm 82*, Journal of Theological Studies, NS, Vol. 56, Pt 1, April 2005, page 38, footnote 22

2. Justin Martyr: *Discourse with Trypho* chapter CXXIV, ANF volume I [read online](#)

*Saint Justin Martyr was born around 110 AD and died as a martyr around 165 AD. Editors of ANF describe him as "the first Christian author" and "the founder of Theological literature"*

## THE DOCTRINE OF THEOPOIESIS (2)

*Saint Irenaeus was born 130 ad and became bishop of Lyons (France) 177 ad. He was a disciple of St. Polycarp, who himself was a disciple of St. John the Evangelist. St. Polycarp is the "angel of the church in Smyrna" mentioned in Revelation 2:8-11. Saint Irenaeus died as a martyr 202 ad. He wrote his book "Against Heresies" circa 180 ad.*

Saint Irenaeus explained the use of the word "gods" in the Old Testament in the following:

When, however, the Scripture terms them [gods] which are no gods, it does not, as I have already remarked, declare them as gods in every sense, but with a certain addition and signification, by which they are shown to be no gods at all. As with David: "The gods of the heathen are idols of demons".<sup>1</sup>

He later adds this:

But as to what they are in their own person, he speaks concerning them; "for they are," he says, "the idols of demons." And Esaias: "Let them be confounded, all who blaspheme God, and carve useless things; even I am witness, saith God." He removes them from [the category of] gods, but **he makes use of the word alone**, for this [purpose], that we may know of whom he speaks.<sup>2</sup>

He also notes that even in the New Testament the word "gods" is used to describe "non gods":

And the Apostle Paul also, saying, "For though ye have served them which are no gods; ye now know God, or rather, are known of God," has made a separation between **those that were not [gods]** and **Him who is God**. ... For he has made a distinction, and separated those which are indeed **called gods**, but which are none, from the one God the Father, from whom are all things.<sup>3</sup>

Saint Irenaeus also notes that the word "god" is used to describe humans in the Old Testament:

And Moses himself, being a man of God, was indeed given as a god before Pharaoh; but he is not properly termed Lord, nor is called God

by the prophets, but is spoken of by the Spirit as "Moses, the faithful minister and servant of God," which also he was.<sup>4</sup>

He later emphasizes that those termed "gods" are gods "**by word merely**":

Now to whom is it not clear, that if the Lord had known many fathers and gods, He would not have taught His disciples to know [only] one God, and to call Him alone Father? But He did the rather distinguish those who **by word merely are termed gods**, from Him who is **truly God**, that they should not err as to His doctrine, nor understand one [in mistake] for another.<sup>5</sup>

He then comments on Psalm 82 by saying:

But of what gods [does he speak]? [Of those] to whom He says, "I have said, Ye are gods, and all sons of the Most High." To those, no doubt, who have received **the grace of the adoption**, by which we cry, Abba Father."<sup>6</sup>

Here Saint Irenaeus makes it very clear that those called "gods" **by word merely** are those who received the adoption (through faith and baptism). He then goes on to describe those to whom God says: "ye shall die like men" as those who have not believed, nor been baptized and accordingly have not received the grace of the adoption:

But, being ignorant of Him who from the Virgin is Emmanuel, they are **deprived of His gift, which is eternal life**; and not receiving the incorruptible Word, **they remain in mortal flesh**, and are debtors to death, not obtaining the antidote of life. To whom the Word says, mentioning His own **gift of grace**: "I said, Ye are all the sons of the Highest, and gods; but ye shall die like men." He speaks undoubtedly these words to those **who have not received the gift of adoption**, but who despise the incarnation of the pure generation of the Word of God, **defraud human nature of promotion into God**, and prove themselves ungrateful to the Word of God, who became flesh for them.<sup>7</sup>

Here Saint Irenaeus very clearly explains that those who do not believe and who have not received **the gift of adoption**, are **deprived of His gift, which is eternal life**, and defraud their own human nature **of promotion into God** (here to be understood as being given the gift of immortality) for they will **remain in mortal flesh**. Saint Irenaeus describes eternal life as a gift of God given to those who have received the adoption which he also describes as a **gift of**

**grace.** He then gives this explanation that will become the nucleus for the doctrine of *theopoiesis*:

For it was for this **end** that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the **Son of God** became the **Son of man**, that man, **having been taken into the Word**, and receiving the **adoption**, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to **incorruptibility** and **immortality**, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruptibility, and the mortal by immortality, that might receive the **adoption of sons**?<sup>8</sup>

Here Saint Irenaeus explains to us that through the Incarnation, by which the **Son of God** became the **Son of Man**, we receive the **adoption** and become **sons of God** and thus attain **incorruptibility** and **immortality**. He makes it clear that the goal (or as he calls it the **end**) of the Incarnation is that the Word of God **having taken our humanity into Himself**, and by uniting our corruptibility and mortality with His own incorruptibility and immortality, we might receive the **adoption of sons**. Becoming sons of God by adoption, we attain incorruptibility and immortality, (two of the attributes of God) and thus can be called gods **by word merely**. We do not become God, we become *gods* as far as we become immortal and incorruptible.

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1. Irenaeus Against heresies, Book III chapter VI, 3 ANF volume I [Read online](#)
  2. Ibid.
  3. Book III, chapter VI, 5
  4. Ibid.
  5. Irenaeus Against heresies, Book IV chapter I, 2 ANF volume I [Read online](#)
  6. Book III, chapter VI, 1
  7. Book III, chapter XIX, 1
  8. Ibid.

### THE DOCTRINE OF THEOPOIESIS (3)

*Saint Clement of Alexandria was born 150 ad. He became a disciple of Pantaenus, whom he succeeded as dean of the famous School of Alexandria. His most famous disciple was Origen, who succeeded him as head of the School of Alexandria. Others include Alexander bishop of Jerusalem, and possibly, Hippolytus.*

In dealing with psalm 82, Saint Clement of Alexandria followed the earlier Fathers. Becoming *a god* (immortal) is attained through sonship to God and this in turn is attained through baptism:

Being baptized, we are illuminated; **illuminated**, we become sons; **being made sons**, we are made perfect; **being made perfect**, we are **made immortal**. "I," says He, "have said that ye are gods, and all sons of the Highest." **This work** is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing: washing, by which we cleanse away our sins; grace, by which the penalties accruing to transgressions are remitted; and illumination, by which that holy light of salvation is beheld, that is, by which we see God clearly. Now we call that perfect which wants nothing. For what is yet wanting to him who knows God? For it were truly monstrous that that which is not complete should be called a gift (or act) of God's grace. **Being perfect, He consequently bestows perfect gifts**. As at His command all things were made, so on His bare wishing to bestow grace, ensues the perfecting of His grace.<sup>1</sup>

Saint Clement relates Baptism and illumination with **being made sons**. Being made sons we are made perfect. **Being made perfect** we are **made immortal**. All of these things are passive, being baptized, being made sons, being made perfect, being made immortal, all are gifts bestowed by God. Then he ties this with Psalm 82: "I have said that ye are gods, and all sons of the Highest." It is quite obvious that he considers being called gods follows from the fact that we are **made immortal**. Then he goes on to say that **This work**, which is obviously attributed to God, since it is He who makes us sons, makes us perfect, makes us immortal and even calls us gods, is called grace. We are made perfect by grace and grace is a gift from God, and since God is perfect, **He consequently bestows perfect gifts**. But, in case someone may claim that salvation is a work of grace only and that works or the human free will is not required for this process, he tells us in another place:

"God stood in the congregation of the gods; He judgeth in the midst of the gods." Who are they? Those that are **superior to Pleasure**, who rise

**above the passions**, who know what they do-the Gnostics, who are greater than the world. "I said, Ye are Gods; and all sons of the Highest." To whom speaks the Lord? To those who reject as far as possible all that is of man.<sup>2</sup>

This is the synergy between the grace of God and the free will of man. But Saint Clement of Alexandria was the first among the Fathers who spoke about *theopoiesis* (*being made into a god*) out of the context of Psalm 82. He coined the vocabulary of *theopoiesis* that would be used by almost all the Fathers that subsequently chose to write on the topic, up to and including Saint Athanasius and Saint Cyril the Great. (He actually was the first to use the verb *theopoiou*, the noun *theopoiesis* was first used by St. Athanasius) Unfortunately, there is no one word that can translate *theopoiesis* or its derivatives, so, in the ANF the words used are "Deification" for *theopoiesis* and "deify' deified ..." for its derivatives. These were translated into the Arabic words تَأْلِيهِ، أَلِه، يُوْلِه... which unfortunately do not do justice to "*being made into a god*" since they can be misunderstood as referring to man being metamorphosed into God. Here are two examples:

Man, when *deified* purely into a passionless state, becomes a unit. As, then, those, who at sea are held by an anchor, pull at the anchor, but do not drag it to them, but drag themselves to the anchor; so those who, according to the gnostic life, draw God towards them, imperceptibly bring themselves to God.<sup>3</sup>

Here Saint Clement equates *theopoiesis* with passionlessness (Greek *apatheia*) which means being **above the passions** and **superior to pleasure**, which can be attained by the synergy between the grace of God and the free will of man. *Being made into a god* is to be made **immortal, incorruptible and passionless**.

**Knowledge** is then followed by **practical wisdom**, and practical wisdom by **self-control**: for it may be said that practical wisdom is **divine knowledge**, and exists in those who are *deified*; but that self-control is mortal.<sup>4</sup>

Here Saint Clement gives us the components that lead to *theopoiesis* or *being made into a god*. He tells us that **Knowledge** (being illuminated in baptism) develops in us **practical wisdom** which will lead us to **self-control**. He then gives us a distinction, for **practical wisdom** is described as divine knowledge, which has to be an act of grace,(a gift from God) unlike **self-control**, which is

mortal since it is a human virtue we have to cultivate by exercising our human will. Another important point Saint Clement clarifies is that our *theopoiesis* starts in this life (by faith) and is fulfilled in the resurrection:

But the end is reserved till the resurrection of those who believe; and it is not the reception of some other thing, but the obtaining of the promise previously made. ... Faith, so to speak, is the attempt generated in time; the final result is the attainment of the promise, secured for eternity....but having in anticipation grasped by faith that which is future, after the resurrection we receive it as present.<sup>5</sup>

Summarizing then what we learn from the early Fathers, we can say that *theopoiesis* or *being made into a god* is an act of grace, acting in synergy with our free will, that makes it possible for us to share in some of God's attributes like immortality, incorruptibility, passionlessness and divine knowledge. These graces became possible to us in the incarnation of the Word of God are made available to us through the adoption, whereby we become sons of God through baptism. It does not mean that we become gods, but we are called gods by virtue of God's free gift of grace which bestows on us a sharing of some of His attributes. It should be noted that God allows us a share in **some of His attributes only**. Other attributes of God like omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence remain completely inaccessible to us.

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1. Clement of Alexandria: *The Instructor* Book I, chapter VI, ANF volume II [Read online](#)
  2. Clement of Alexandria: *The Stromata* Book II, chapter XX ANF volume II [Read online](#)
  3. *The Stromata* Book IV, chapter XXIII ANF volume II [Read online](#)
  4. *The Stromata* Book VI, chapter XV ANF volume II [Read online](#)
  5. Clement of Alexandria: *The Instructor* Book I, chapter VI, ANF volume II

## THE DOCTRINE OF THEOPOIESIS (4)

Although the early Church Fathers defined the doctrine of *theopoiesis*, and Saint Clement defined the vocabulary of *theopoiesis*, it was Saint Athanasius' destiny to become the Father of *theopoiesis*. Saint Athanasius used the word *theopoiesis* and its derivatives more than any of the Church Fathers. As a matter of fact, more than the other fathers combined. It should be noted however, that Saint Athanasius never intended to write a treatise on *theopoiesis*, he was simply forced to use this ancient doctrine to defend the faith of the Catholic Church against the Arian heresy. Here is how this came to pass:

They say then, that the Apostle writes, "Wherefore God also hath **highly exalted Him**, and **given Him a Name which is above every name**; that in the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth"... Then they urge, as something acute: "If He was exalted and received grace, on a 'wherefore,' ... He received a reward of His purpose; but having acted from purpose, He is altogether of an **alterable nature**."<sup>1</sup>

The Arians, misinterpreting Philemon 2:9-10, argued that if God has **exalted** the Word and **gave Him a name that is above every name**, then He became something He was not before and thus **alterable in nature**. As such He is a creature that was "deified" by God. To this saint Athanasius answers:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God;" but for our sakes afterwards the "Word was made flesh." And the term in question, "highly exalted," does not signify that the essence of the Word was exalted, for He was ever and is equal to God, but **the exaltation is of the manhood**.<sup>2</sup>

It is this **exaltation of the manhood** that Saint Athanasius elaborated on as *theopoiesis of the manhood*, as we can see from the following:

For He received it as far as **His man's nature was exalted; which exaltation was its being deified**.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately this was translated into the English *deification of the manhood* and the Arabic تأليه الناسوت . Both of these words are confusing since they can be misunderstood to mean a change of the manhood to become co-essential

with the Godhood, something Saint Athanasius never intended to convey, as his writings on this topic clearly reveal:

The Lord, when made man for us, and bearing a body, was no less God; for He was not lessened by the envelopment of the body, but rather *deified* it and **rendered it immortal**.<sup>4</sup>

Whence the truth shews us that the Word is not of things originate, but rather Himself their Framer. For therefore did He assume the body originate and human, that having **renewed it** as its Framer, He might *deify* it in Himself, and thus might introduce us all into the kingdom of heaven after His likeness.<sup>5</sup>

There are two important things to notice here. The first, is that Saint Athanasius, when speaking about *theopoiesis* of the body of Christ, almost always gives a parallel or synonym for *theopoiesis* like **exalted, rendered it immortal, and renewed it**, thus we are given to understand that *theopoiesis* of the body is equivalent to exaltation, immortalization and renewal. The second thing is that he uses the *theopoiesis* of the body to argue for the divinity of the Word. Like Saint Clement of Alexandria, Saint Athanasius taught that this *theopoiesis* of the body was only fulfilled after the resurrection of the body:

For now the flesh had **risen and put off its mortality** and been *deified*; and no longer did it become Him to answer after the flesh when He was going into the heavens; but henceforth to teach after a divine manner, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father hath put in His own power.”<sup>6</sup>

Once again, Saint Athanasius here equates *theopoiesis* with the **resurrection** and the **putting off of mortality**. But, lest anyone would misunderstand the *theopoiesis* of the manhood of Christ as the body becoming co-essential with the Godhead, he denounces this in the most unequivocal terms in his famous *Letter to Epictetus*:

I write this after reading the memoranda submitted by your piety, which I could wish had not been written at all, so that not even any record of these things should go down to posterity. For who ever yet heard the like? Who ever taught or learned it? .... whence came forth this? What lower region has vomited the statement that **the Body born of Mary is coessential with the Godhead of the Word?**<sup>7</sup>

To summarize: In order to counter the Arian teaching that God the Father created the Word, then made Him God-like (*homo-i-ousion, of like essence with God*) by raising Him from the dead, Saint Athanasius taught the following: It was rather the Word, who is God (*homo-ousion, of one essence with God*) Who created His own flesh in the womb of the Virgin at the instant of the Incarnation, and having made it one with His divinity, He exalted, renewed and immortalized His flesh, thus making it God-like, but not in any way, shape or form, co-essential with His Godhead.

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1. Saint Athanasius: *First Discourse Against the Arians*, chapter XI, 37 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
2. Saint Athanasius: *First Discourse Against the Arians*, chapter XI, 41 N/PNF series II, vol IV
3. Saint Athanasius: *First Discourse Against the Arians*, chapter XI, 45 N/PNF series II, vol IV
4. Saint Athanasius: *De Decretis*, chapter III, 14 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
5. Saint Athanasius: *Second Discourse Against the Arians*, Chapter XXI, 70 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
6. Saint Athanasius: *Third Discourse Against the Arians*, Chapter XXVIII, 48 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
7. Saint Athanasius: *Letter to Epictetus*, 2 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)

## THE DOCTRINE OF THEOPOIESIS (5)

Saint Athanasius used the doctrine of *theopoiesis* of man which had been there since the beginning of Christianity to prove the divinity of the Son. The argument goes this way; if the Son can grant *theopoiesis* (immortality, incorruptibility, renewal etc..) to creatures like men and angels, then He must be God. If, like the Arians claimed, the Son was a creature who received His own *theopoiesis* from the Father, then He could not confer this *theopoiesis* on others, anymore than can angels or men confer their acquired *theopoiesis* to one another:

For man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God; nor had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless He had been His natural and true Word who had put on the body.<sup>1</sup>

Again he stresses the same point in what follows:

And if all that are called sons and gods, whether in earth or in heaven, were **adopted** and deified through the Word, and the Son Himself is the Word, it is plain that through Him are they all, and He Himself before all, or rather He Himself only is very Son, and He alone is very God from the very God.<sup>2</sup>

Again, stressing the fact that the Son does not participate in the Father (to be deified) but, rather things originated (created) partake of Him and in this way receive their *theopoiesis*, the Son cannot be alien in essence from the father but co-essential:

And again, if, as we have said before, the Son is not such by **participation**, but, while all things originated have by **participation** the grace of God, He is the Father's Wisdom and Word of which all things **partake**, it follows that He, being the deifying and **enlightening** power of the Father, in which all things are deified and **quickened**, is not alien in essence from the Father, but co-essential.<sup>3</sup>

Like the Fathers before him, St. Athanasius stresses the fact that *theopoiesis* of man became possible only in the incarnation of the Word:

As the Lord, putting on the body, became man, so we men are deified by the Word as being taken to Him through His flesh, and henceforward **inherit life everlasting**.<sup>4</sup>

Here St. Athanasius paraphrases St. Irenaeus, who said that in the incarnation “man, having been taken into the Word” obtains the adoption, by saying “men being taken to Him through his flesh” obtain *theopoiesis*, “and henceforward inherit life everlasting.”

Note that in the previous statements about *theopoiesis* of man (rendered in N/PNF as deified, deification etc..) Saint Athanasius always gives an alternative synonym to *theopoiesis* and its derivatives like "**adopted** and deified", "deifying and **enlightening**", "deified and **quicken**", men are "deified.. and **inherit life everlasting**."

And if we wish to know the object: attained by this, we shall find it to be as follows: that the Word was made flesh in order to offer up this body for all, and that we **partaking of His Spirit**, might be deified, a gift which we could not otherwise have gained than by His clothing Himself in our created body.<sup>5</sup>

Here, St. Athanasius tells us that the “object” the incarnation is the *theopoiesis* of man. We avail ourselves of this *theopoiesis* which became possible in the incarnation by “partaking of His Spirit” (in Baptism and Chrismation). The concept of partaking (or participation) is important in the theology of Saint Athanasius, since it differentiates between created beings which obtain their *theopoiesis* by participation and the Word whose divinity is not by participation, as he further explains:

Wherefore He is very God, existing one in essence with the very Father; while other beings, to whom He said, I said ye are gods, had this grace from the Father, only by participation of the Word, through the Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Here there are two important points, the first is that we are called gods **by grace only**, while the Son is “very God, existing one in essence with the very Father”. The second thing is that we receive the grace of *theopoiesis* from the Father “by participation of the Word, through the Spirit.”

For as, although there be one Son by nature, True and Only-begotten, we too become sons, not as He in nature and truth, but according to the grace of Him that calleth, and though we are men from the earth, are

yet called gods, **not as the True God or His Word**, but as has pleased God who has given us that grace.<sup>7</sup>

Once again St. Athanasius is very careful in explaining that although we become sons, yet there is **one Son, True and Only-begotten**. And although we are called gods by grace (even though we are men from the earth) yet **we are not God**. St. Athanasius stresses once again the role of grace in the *theopoiesis* of man. St. Athanasius also mentions the Eucharist as one of the means of our *theopoiesis*:

And we are deified not by partaking of the body of some man, but by receiving the Body of the Word Himself.<sup>8</sup>

Saint Athanasius was very careful to stress that *theopoiesis* of man does not mean that man becomes God or even “like God” or “identical with” or “similar to” God:

But a mutable thing cannot be **like God** who is truly unchangeable, any more than what is created can be like its creator. This is why, with regard to us, the holy man said, “Lord, who shall be likened unto thee,” and, “who among the gods is like unto thee, Lord;” meaning by gods those who, while created, had yet become **partakers** of the Word, as He Himself said, “If he called them gods to whom the word of God came.” But things which partake cannot be **identical with** or **similar to** that whereof they partake. For example, He said of Himself, “I and the Father are one,” implying that things originate are not so.<sup>9</sup>

St. Athanasius teaching about *theopoiesis* of man followed closely those of the fathers who preceded him. It is summed up in the granting of **renewal, immortality and incorruptibility as gifts of grace**. These gifts of grace became possible through the incarnation of the Word, of which we can avail ourselves by **partaking of the Word**. In Baptism (and Chrismation) we partake of the Word through the Spirit. In the Eucharist we partake of the Word by receiving his body. The two concepts that stand out are the concept of **participation** or **partaking** and the importance of **grace**. St. Athanasius makes every effort to make sure that *theopoiesis* of man is not to be understood as man becoming God, like God, identical with God, or similar to God. Norman Russel summarized the Alexandrian concept of *theopoiesis* in the following:

The verb *theopoiou* is not used in philosophical contexts. It expresses the bringing about of a change in the believer **by Christ**, a promotion from the fallen condition of humanity to a state freed from subjection to death. Christ's teaching is all-sufficient. ... *theopoesis* is therefore fundamentally a product of Christian discipleship. This is because **to be deified is to attain immortality**, and immortality is not an innate human characteristic but **a gift from God**. It does not come about through the realization of the essential self, as in Platonism, but is granted as a result of fidelity to the teaching of Christ and his Church.<sup>10</sup>

This definition is very important when we compare the Alexandrian concept of *theopoesis* to the Byzantine concept of *theosis*.

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1. St. Athanasius: *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, Discourse II, XXI, 70 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
  2. St. Athanasius: *Four Discourses Against The Arians*, Discourse I, XI, 39 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
  3. St. Athanasius: *De Synodis*, part III, 51 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
  4. St. Athanasius: *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, Discourse III, XXVI, 34 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
  5. St. Athanasius: *De Decretis*, III, 14 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
  6. St. Athanasius: *Four Discourses Against The Arians*, Discourse I, III, 9 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
  7. St. Athanasius: *Four Discourses Against The Arians*, Discourse III, XXV, 19 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
  8. St. Athanasius: *Letter LXI to Maximus*, 2 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
  9. St. Athanasius: *To the Bishops of Africa*, 7 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)
  10. Norman Russel: *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* p. 161

## THE DOCTRINE OF THEOPOIESIS (6)

Although an entire generation separates Cyril of Alexandria (bishop 412-444) from Athanasius, he follows closely in his predecessor's footsteps uninfluenced for the most part by the writings of the Cappadocians.<sup>1</sup>

Norman Russel tells us that Saint Cyril the Great faithfully followed St. Athanasius' teachings on *theopoiesis*. He also tells us that St. Cyril was "uninfluenced for the most part by the writings of the Cappadocians". We shall see the reason for this when we discuss the Doctrine of *theosis*.

For first indeed we obtain the light of the true knowledge of God: and next, when by the aid of holy baptism we have washed away the stains of sin, being purified that we may serve Him purely, ... we are made also **sons of God**, and win for ourselves brotherhood with Him **Who by nature and verily is the Son**.<sup>2</sup>

First, he confirms what the early Fathers said before: through faith and baptism, we obtain sonship to God. He then tells us that we become brothers to Him **Who by nature and verily is the Son**, thus, maintaining the difference between the type of sonship we have and that of the Son.

For they knew not yet that He Who was for our sakes made in the form of a servant, is God the Word, the Life gushing forth from God the Father, that is, the Only-Begotten, **to Whom Alone God is rightly and truly inscribed and is Father**, but to us by no means so: for **we are adopted**, mounting up to excellency above nature through the will of Him That honoured us, and gaining **the title of gods and sons** because of Christ That dwelleth in us through the Holy Ghost.<sup>3</sup>

Here he explains that we are sons **by adoption**, since true sonship belongs only to God the Word. And because through this adoption **we mount up to excellency above nature**, we are honoured by God, Who gives us **the title of gods and sons**. Note that St. Cyril is careful to tell us we are sons and gods **in title only**.

Therefore we mount up unto dignity above our nature for Christ's sake, and we too shall be sons of God, not like Him in exactitude, but by **grace** in imitation of Him.<sup>4</sup>

Once again St. Cyril repeats that through this sonship we **mount up unto dignity above our nature for Christ's sake**, Who took our nature in order that we may be given this dignity. He reiterates that we do not become sons like **Him in exactitude**, but **by grace in imitation of Him**.

St. Cyril also explained the doctrine of *theopoiesis* of the humanity of **Christ** in a most wonderful way:

The holy Tabernacle was reared by the will of God in the wilderness and in it was manifoldly typified Emmanuel. The God of all said therefore to the divine Moses, And thou shalt make an ark of incorruptible wood, ... and thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, within and without shalt thou overlay it. But the wood that will not rot will be a type of the incorruptible Body (for cedar does not rot); gold as matter surpassing all others will indicate to us the Excellence of the Divine Essence. ... And that the Natures or Hypostases have remained unconfused, shall we see hence. For the gold that was spread upon the wood, remained what it was, and the wood was rich in the glory of the gold; yet it ceased not from being wood.<sup>5</sup>

This is one of the most important contributions of St. Cyril to explaining this difficult doctrine. In the same manner that the wood **became rich in the glory of the gold; yet it ceased not from being wood, the body of Christ became rich in glory of the divinity without ceasing to be human. It did not change into Godhead!**

According to Saint Cyril, the Word became flesh without alteration or intermingling (as we affirm in the Liturgy):

So when the manner of the incarnation is investigated, the human mind observes those things mutually joined in an ineffable union without alteration or intermingling.<sup>6</sup>

Saint Cyril was so opposed to any idea of intermingling between God and humanity, an idea espoused by Saint Gregory of Nazianzen, as we shall see in our later discussion of the doctrine of *theosis*.

It is a sickness not small, but akin to the putrid sore of Apollinarius and Arius. For they **mingle** the Lord's union in man to a **confusion** of some sort of **mixture**,.... and **blasphemously** say that **the flesh connected with Godhead passed into Godhead**, using the very word deifying, which is nothing else than to corrupt both.<sup>7</sup>

For to the Nature that is Supreme and above all must be rigidly preserved Simplicity and absence of blending with other and of any appearance of being compounded in what belongs to It or of lacking any addition and coming into fellowship of sameness of nature or consubstantiality with ought unconnatural to It.<sup>8</sup>

St. Cyril refuses to admit any mingling or confusion or mixture between God and man. He rejects that **the flesh connected with Godhead passed into Godhead**, calling this **blasphemous**. He calls these teachings Apollinarian and Arian. Any mingling or blending of the Supreme Nature of the Godhead will make it lose its Simplicity and become compounded which is blasphemous. Accordingly, the flesh of which we partake in the Eucharist **cannot be spoken of as the Godhead**:

But we eat, not consuming the **Godhead** (away with the folly) but the Very Flesh of the Word Which has been made **Lifegiving**, because it has been made His Who liveth because of the Father.<sup>9</sup>

The Flesh of the Word is NOT the Godhead but it **has been made Lifegiving**. We keep this teaching in our liturgical tradition in the Profession that the priest says aloud before communion "I believe.. that this is the Lifegiving Flesh..." Again, addressing Nestorius he says:

It is by no means the Nature of **Godhead** that lieth upon the holy Tables of the Churches, yet is it the own Body of the Word Begotten of God the Father: and God by Nature and in truth is the Word. Why therefore dost thou confound all things and jumble them without understanding, all but mocking at our Bread Which is out of Heaven and giveth Life to the world, because it is not called **Godhead** by the voice of the Divines, but rather the Body of Him Who hath become Man for us, that is, of the Word out of God the Father? And why (tell me) dost thou call it the Lord's Body at all, save because thou knowest it to be **Divine** and God's?<sup>10</sup>

Saint Cyril tells us here that although the Body we receive in the Eucharist is **not the Godhead**, yet it is **Divine** because it is **the own Body of the Word Begotten of God the Father**, Who is **God by Nature and in truth**. So, even though none of the Fathers called it **Godhead**, yet it can be called **Divine** and **Lifegiving**. We call the body **Divine** in the **Short Fraction Prayer**:

O God Who granted us we sinners the afore-appointed salvation and a rational heavenly sacrifice, that is the **Divine Body** and precious Blood of Thy Christ.

Saint Cyril's teaching concerning *theopoiesis* has preserved all the elements that Saint Athanasius and the other early Fathers affirmed. Sonship, adoption, grace, etc.. He even explains some of the aspects that St. Athanasius expounded more fully, like using the analogy of the arc of covenant to explain the *theopoiesis* of the flesh of Christ. Saint Cyril explains in a wonderful way how the flesh of Christ, of which we partake in the Eucharist is divine and life-giving and yet is not the Godhead. He refuses to admit mingling, confusion or mixture between the humanity and the divinity, calling that blasphemous. He maintains a distance between man and God, differentiating between our sonship to God which is by adoption from Him, **Who by nature and verily is the Son**. And insists that we are called gods **in title only**. Saint Cyril also gave great insights into the role of the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist in *theopoiesis*. He also explained in detail the concept of participation in God expounded by Saint Athanasius, equating it with being "Partakers of the divine nature" (2Pe 1:4), commenting on this verse more than forty times. I have chosen not to expand on these areas because that would require a new series of articles.

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1. Norman Russell: *Partakers of the Divine Nature* [Read online](#)
  2. Saint Cyril: *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke* Sermon XXXVII [Read online](#)
  3. St. Cyril: *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* Book 2, chapter V page 245 [Read online](#)
  4. St. Cyril: *Commentary On the Gospel of St. John* Book 1 page 104 [Read online](#)
  5. Saint Cyril: *Scholia On the Incarnation*, 11 [Read online](#)
  6. Saint Cyril of Alexandria: *The Letter to Acacius of Mitelene* in Ebeid and Wickham: *A collection of unpublished Syriac letters of Cyril of Alexandria*, p 26
  7. Saint Cyril of Alexandria: *Letter to Pope Celestine*: in *Five Tomes against Nestorius*, preface (endnote 26) [Read online](#)
  8. Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Against the Synousiasts* , 4 [Read online](#)
  9. Saint Cyril of Alexandria; *Five Tomes against Nestorius*, Book 4, \$5, p 145 [Read online](#)
  10. Saint Cyril of Alexandria; *Five Tomes against Nestorius*, Book 4, \$6, p 151 [Read online](#)

## THE DOCTRINE OF THEOSIS

It was precisely Gregory Nazianzen who made the idea of deification the foundation-stone of his theology, and it is after him that this theme would become a core of the development of the theological and mystical tradition in the Christian East. As D. Winslow rightly points out, "no Christian theologian prior to Gregory employed the term *theosis* (or the idea contained in the term) with as much consistence and frequency as did he; both terminologically and conceptually Gregory went **far beyond his predecessors** in his sustained application to *theosis*."<sup>1</sup>

This is how Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev introduces *theosis* to his readers. Saint Gregory Nazianzen coined the term *theosis*, and his concept of *theosis* **went far beyond his predecessors**. As a matter of fact, it went contrary to the old concept of *theopoesis* in many aspects. Bishop Alfayev explains these differences in the following:

In his Theological Discourses Gregory adds a significant qualification to the formula of Athanasius: God became man "in order that I might be made god **to the same extent that He was made man**". Thus a direct link is established not only between the Incarnation of God and deification of man, but also between the extent to what God became man and **man became god**.<sup>2</sup>

As a matter of fact, none of the early fathers claimed that **man became god**, let alone **to the same extent that He (God) was made man**. To understand the boldness of this new doctrine, let us examine the Liturgy of St. Gregory Nazianzen that the Coptic church cherishes:

"You, without change, were incarnate and became man and resembled us in everything, except for sin only."<sup>3</sup>

For man to become god **to the same extent that God became man**, means that man has to resemble God **in everything, except for sinlessness only**. This is an idea not to be found in any of the early fathers. It is obvious that St. Gregory has introduced not only a new terminology *theosis*, which literally means "to become God", but also a new concept that none of the early fathers espoused. This is called "Speculative Theology". By contrast, Saint Athanasius was never speculative, since he followed faithfully the Apostolic fathers and Saint Clement of Alexandria. Saint Athanasius emphasizes the importance of keeping the received tradition in these powerful words:

Let us note that the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, was preached by the Apostles, and was preserved by the Fathers. On this was the Church founded; and if anyone departs from this, he neither is nor any longer ought to be called a Christian.<sup>4</sup>

Saint Cyril, we are told, "follows closely in his predecessor's (Saint Athanasius) footsteps uninfluenced for the most part by the writings of the Cappadocians."<sup>5</sup> Saint Cyril, like Saint Athanasius before him, recognized the importance of not departing from the teachings of the early fathers:

We think the same things about the economy of our Saviour as the holy Fathers did before us. We regulate our own minds by reading their works so as to follow in their footsteps and introduce nothing that is new into the orthodox teachings.<sup>6</sup>

Saint Gregory Nazianzen first uses the new term *theosis* and explains what it means to him in his Twenty First Oration:

Whoever has been permitted to escape by **reason** and **contemplation** from matter and this **fleshly cloud** or veil (whichever it should be called) and to hold communion with God, and be associated, as far as man's nature can attain, with **the purest Light**, blessed is he, both from his **ascent** from hence, and for his *theosis* there, which is conferred by **true philosophy**, and by rising superior to the **dualism of matter**, through the unity which is perceived in the Trinity.<sup>7</sup>

Conspicuously absent are the Biblical terms "**immortality**", "**incorruption**", "**sonship**", "**adoption**", "**grace**". etc.. which are almost synonymous with the Patristic doctrine of *theopoiesis*, to be replaced by the non-biblical terms, **reason, contemplation, fleshly cloud, purest Light, ascent, and dualism of matter**. So, where did these words come from?

Here he speaks of the possible ascent of a soul to God, even in the present life, which can be taken as a type of the soul's ascent to deification. Referring to **Plato** he designates this process as "**assimilation to the divine**."... Again using deliberate text-markers from Plato's *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium*, ... Gregory sets out his concept of the **noetic ascent that deifies**.<sup>8</sup>

In this oration, for the first time, Gregory uses his term *theosis* and sets the main agenda for this concept, which is **slightly different than in Athanasius**. Gregory points to a **very philosophic form of ecstatic deification through contemplation**. An Origenistic theme of deification as spiritualization, combined with a Neoplatonic approach to a **mystical contemplative ascent to God**, and a Philonic theme of **ecstasy**.<sup>9</sup>

I beg to define this approach as **totally different from Athanasius**, rather than **slightly different than in Athanasius**. Here we have a concept based on Plato, Origen, and the Alexandrian Hellenistic Jew Philo, in other words a philosophical rather than a Biblical concept. In contrast, Norman Russel sums up the Alexandrian concept of *theopoiesis* as follows:

The verb *theopoiou* is **not used in philosophical contexts**. It expresses the bringing about of a change in the believer **by Christ**, a promotion from the fallen condition of humanity to a state freed from subjection to death. **Christ's teaching is all-sufficient**. ... *theopoiesis* is therefore fundamentally a product of Christian discipleship. This is because **to be deified is to attain immortality**, and immortality is not an innate human characteristic but **a gift from God**. It does not come about through the realization of the essential self, as in **Platonism**, but is granted as a result of fidelity to the teaching of Christ and his Church.<sup>10</sup>

There is no philosophical pollution in *theopoiesis*. There was no need to borrow Platonic or Neo-Platonic concepts, because the Alexandrian fathers thought that **Christ's teaching is all-sufficient**. To them, *theopoiesis* meant **to attain immortality**, which they considered **a gift from God**, and not a **mystical contemplative ascent to God**, nor is it an **assimilation to the divine**.

Saint Cyril had very harsh words for those who “mingle Greek error with the doctrines of the Church”:

These errors not only used to exist among the Jews, but are also advocated now by some who are insufferably conceited in their knowledge of inspired Scripture and seem to pass for Christians. Such persons of a truth delight too much in their own sophistries, indulging their private fancies, and not fearing to mingle Greek error with the doctrines of the Church.<sup>11</sup>

St. Cyril is condemning both Hellenized Jews (like Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher) as well as Hellenized Christian thinkers.

To summarize then, the two main differences between the Alexandrian doctrine of *theopoiesis* and the Byzantine doctrine of *theosis* is that the first is

**Patristic** and **Biblical**, while the latter is **Speculative** and **Philosophical**. It is unfortunate that both *theopoiesis* and *theosis* are translated by the English word Deification, which gives the illusion that the two terms mean the same concept. And although in Arabic a distinction is made, for *theopoiesis* is translated into تأليه while *theosis* is translated into تأله yet, unfortunately the two words and the two concepts are treated as one and the same.

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1. Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev: *DEIFICATION IN CHRIST* [Read online](#)
  2. Ibid
  3. The Divine Liturgies of Saints Basil, Gregory, and Cyril, p. 220
  4. St. Athanasius: *First Letter to Serapion*, 28
  5. Norman Russell: *Partakers of the Divine Nature* [Read online](#)
  6. Saint Cyril of Alexandria: First Letter to Succensus, in *John McGuckin: Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* p 352.
  7. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *Oration XXI*, 2, N/PNF [Read online](#)
  8. J. A. McGuckin: The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, pp 102, 103
  9. Vladimir Kharlamov: Rhetorical Application of Theosis in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, p. 125
  10. Norman Russel: *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* p. 161
  11. St. Cyril: *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* Book VI, pp 1,2

## THE DOCTRINE OF THEOSIS (2)

Although the doctrine of *theosis* as defined by St. Gregory Nazianzen agrees with the Alexandrian doctrine of *theopoiesis* in the importance of the Incarnation, yet there are some differences that make the two irreconcilable. The first of these is the way by which the Incarnation affected the humanity assumed by the Word:

He took upon Him your denser nature, having converse with Flesh by means of Mind. While His inferior Nature, **the Humanity, became God**, because it was united to God, and became One Person because **the Higher Nature prevailed** in order that I too might be made God so far as He is made Man.<sup>1</sup>

There are two points to be contested here. First, that the humanity **became God**, something neither St. Athanasius nor St. Cyril would agree to. Second, the notion that **the Higher Nature prevailed** makes the language vaguely similar to that of Eutychus.

For both are God, **that which assumed**, and **that which was assumed**.<sup>2</sup>

It is very difficult to reconcile this with either St. Athanasius or St. Cyril, both of whom insisted that **that which was assumed** (the flesh) is not God but rather the divine and life-giving flesh.

Another area of difference is that **participation in God** which is very important to both St. Athanasius and St. Cyril, is rejected by St. Gregory, who consistently used the terminology of **mingling**, something categorically rejected by St. Cyril:

What greater destiny can befall man's humility than that he should be **intermingled** with God, and **by this intermingling should be deified**.<sup>3</sup>

Being God, You became man and was **mingled with mortals**.<sup>4</sup>

The Word of the Father was God, but became man, as we are, so that, having **mingled with the mortals**, He might unite God with us.<sup>5</sup>

The leaven of deification made human flesh ‘a **new mixture**’, and the intellect upon receiving this leaven was **mingled** with God and deified through Divinity<sup>6</sup>

For such is the nature of intellectual Existences, that they can **minge** with one another and with bodies, incorporeally and invisibly.<sup>7</sup>

The language of **mixing** and **mingling** between the humanity and divinity of the Word is anathema to St. Cyril, who had these harsh words to say:

It is a sickness not small, but akin to the putrid sore of Apollinarius and Arius. For they **minge** the Lord's union in man to a **confusion** of some sort of **mixture**,.... and **blasphemously** say that **the flesh connected with Godhead passed into Godhead**, using the very word deifying, which is nothing else than to corrupt both.<sup>8</sup>

The bold language St. Gregory used equating *theosis* not with immortality, incorruption, or adoption but with **becoming God** is contrary to all the early fathers:

I must be buried with Christ, arise with Christ, be joint heir with Christ, become the son of God, yea, **God Himself**.<sup>9</sup>

On that day, we are no longer what we are now, a multiplicity of impulses and emotions, with little or nothing of God in us, but are **fully like God**, with room for God and God alone.<sup>10</sup>

This is perhaps the most outrageous claim that he makes for our supposed *theosis* when we go to heaven, to be **fully like God**.

The way of achieving this *theosis* is also problematic:

Gregory tends to avoid the language of participation. Nowhere, for example, does he quote 2 Pe 1:4. Nor is deification said to be equivalent to adoption. ... the emphasis is on moral progress and ascent of the soul.<sup>11</sup>

The virtuous life, as a necessary requirement for the imitation of God in relation to deification, has a prominent place in Gregory. In this sense, a human person becomes “god” by moral purification, for a human being has the natural capability for such purification. The mystical spiritual ascent, accompanied by disembodiment or escape of

the soul from the body, and deification go together. ... Ascetism and celibacy are important practical elements in this process.<sup>12</sup>

Nowhere in St. Gregory's pronouncements on *theosis* is **grace** mentioned, rather ascetic practices are in the front line of achieving *theosis*:

But the scope of **our art** is to **provide the soul with wings**, to **rescue it from the world** and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image, if it abides, to take it by the hand, if it is in danger, or **restore it, if ruined**, to make Christ to dwell in the heart by the Spirit: and, in short, **to deify**, and bestow heavenly bliss upon, one who belongs to the heavenly host.<sup>13</sup>

Here he speaks about the **art** of ascetism, which provides the soul with wings (to ascend to Godhood) **rescues** it, **restores** it if ruined, and in short to **deify** it.

How slow you are, my friends and brethren, to come to listen to my words, though you were so swift in tyrannizing over me, and tearing me from my Citadel **Solitude**, which I had embraced in preference to everything else, and as coadjutress and **mother of the divine ascent**, and as **deifying man**.<sup>14</sup>

Here he describes **Solitude** (capitalized in original) as **mother of the divine ascent** and as **deifying man**.

Walk through them, those that are lofty in a godlike manner; those that belong to the body in a manner suitable to them; or rather, altogether in a godlike manner, that **thou mayest become a god, ascending from below**, for His sake Who came down from on high for ours.<sup>15</sup>

Through virtuous life man can **become a god ascending from below**. In short, while *theopoesis* is the descent of God into Manhood to exalt fallen humanity, *theosis* is the ascent of man into Godhood by his ascetic endeavour.

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1. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *Oration XXIX, XIX* N/PNF series II, vol VII [Read online](#)

2. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *Oration XXXVII, II* N/PNF series II, vol VII [Read online](#)

3. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *Oration XXX, III* N/PNF series II, vol VII [Read online](#)

4. PG 37,971. quoted by: Bishop Alfayev. [Read online](#)

5. PG 37,471. quoted by: Bishop Alfayev. [Read online](#)

6. Ibid

7. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *To Cleodnius the Priest Against Apollinarius*. (Ep. CI.) [Read online](#)
8. Saint Cyril of Alexandria: *Letter to Pope Celestine*: in *Five Tomes against Nestorius*, preface (endnote 26) [Read online](#)
9. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *Oration VII, 23* N/PNF series II, vol VII [Read online](#)
10. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *Oration XXX, 6* PG 36:112, quoted by Vladimir Kharlamov in *Partakers of the Divine Nature* p. 127 (omitted in N/PNF but present in the *Patrologia Graeca*)
11. Norman Russel: *The Doctrine of Deification* p. 224
12. Vladimir Kharlamov in *Partakers of the Divine Nature* p. 125
13. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *Oration II, 22* N/PNF series II, vol VII [Read online](#)
14. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *Oration III, 1* N/PNF series II, vol VII [Read online](#)
15. St. Gregory Nazianzen: *Oration XXX, XXI* N/PNF series II, vol VII [Read online](#)

### THE DOCTRINE OF THEOSIS (3)

Saint Gregory of Nyssa did not write much about *theosis*, and, unlike Saint Gregory Nazianzen was more restrained when writing about it, preserving a distance between God and man. When referring to man as god, he often qualified this by "**so to speak**"

And if a man is free from everything that comes under the idea of evil he becomes **so to speak**, a **god** by his **very way of life**.<sup>1</sup>

Like St. Gregory Nazianzen, however, he believes *theosis* can be brought about by one's **very way of life**. Like St. Gregory Nazianzen, virtues, especially virginity, can deify man:

What greater praise of virginity can there be than thus to be shown in a manner **deifying** those who share in her pure mysteries, so that they become partakers of His glory Who is in actual truth the only Holy and Blameless One; their purity and their incorruptibility being the means of bringing them into relationship with Him ?<sup>2</sup>

Again, like St. Gregory Nazianzen, he used the language of "mingling" between God and humanity:

And the God who manifested himself **mingled himself with our mortal nature** in order that by **communion with his Godhead** humanity might at the same time be **deified**,... by means of that flesh, which derives its subsistence from both wine and bread.<sup>3</sup>

He acknowledges the role of the Eucharist in *theosis*, but, like the other Gregory, he considered the Eucharist as **communion with his Godhead**. Although he uses the language of **mingling**, yet, for Gregory of Nyssa, the **mingling** between the divinity and the humanity is not symmetrical, **but one in which the divine swallows up the human "like a drop of vinegar absorbed by a boundless ocean."**<sup>4</sup>

But St. Gregory carries this mingling of God with humanity a step further, suggesting the repulsive idea that in the incarnation "God's seed (literally semen) entered into the Virgin", an idea developed by the Mormons into the blasphemous heresy, that our Lord was born as a result of a conjugal relationship between God the Father and the Virgin:

They ask about baptism: How was it possible that water could acquire the healing energy of God? What has water in common with life? A drop of moisture, is that the image of God? And Gregory answers cheerfully that seed is also a drop of moisture, but it bears in it the image of man, who is like unto God in all things, even to possessing immortality. For Gregory seed, like water, is sacramental. .... it is the generative organ which preserves the immortality of the human race, keeping death at bay. **Did not God's seed enter the Virgin? And should we think it strange that God was united with human life in the same way that nature wars on death?**<sup>5</sup>

The third Cappadocian father, Saint Basil, did not contribute much to *theosis*. There is only one passage attributed to him that touches on it:

Now the Spirit is not brought into intimate association with the soul by local approximation. How indeed could there be a corporeal approach to the incorporeal? This association results from the **withdrawal of the passions ... Only then after a man is purified from the shame whose stain he took through his wickedness, and has come back again to his natural beauty**, and as it were **cleaning the Royal Image and restoring its ancient form**, only thus is it possible for him to draw near to the Paraclete. And He, like the sun, will by the aid of thy purified eye show thee in Himself the **image of the invisible**, and in the blessed spectacle of the image thou shalt behold the unspeakable beauty of the archetype. Through His aid hearts are lifted up, the weak are held by the hand, and they who are advancing are brought to perfection. Shining upon those that are cleansed from every spot, He makes them spiritual by fellowship with Himself. ... so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves **become spiritual, and send forth their grace** to others. Hence 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**, and, highest of all, the **being made God**.<sup>6</sup>

Saint Basil puts man's effort in the forefront. **Withdrawal of the passions, coming back to his natural beauty, cleaning the Royal Image and restoring its ancient form**, are all requirements before the Paraclete starts to work in him. Seeing the **image of the invisible** is Platonic. The suggestion that spiritual persons can **send forth their grace** to others has no Biblical or Patristic support. Finally, suggesting that there is a stage beyond being **made**

**like to God**, that is **being made God** (the Greek reads "becoming God") is contrary to St. Athanasius, who would not concede to man even likeness to God: "But a mutable thing cannot be **like God** who is truly unchangeable, any more than what is created can be like its creator."<sup>7</sup>

Saint Athanasius is credited with being "**the one who had freed Christianity from the shackles of Greek philosophy.**"<sup>8</sup> The Cappadocian fathers re-introduced Greek philosophy again into Eastern Christianity. They were also enthusiastic followers of Origen. St. Basil and his younger brother St. Gregory of Nyssa, collected Origen's writings in a book they called "*Philocalia*" A decade later, Augustin of Hippo would introduce both Greek philosophy and Origenism to Western Christianity. St. Gregory of Nyssa was probably the most among the Cappadocians to quote Greek philosophers and Origen. He even accepted Origen's "*Apocatastasis Panton*" or Universal salvation. He taught that "**even the Prince of Darkness would once more be restored to his seat beside the throne of God.**"<sup>9</sup>

It is these influences (Greek philosophy and Origenism) that bring their views on *theosis* in conflict with the Alexandrian fathers' concept of *theopoiesis*.

Finally, I would like to quote from an article I published in 2007:

Reading the fathers can be confusing, since sometimes they contradict each others and sometimes they even contradict themselves. So, where do we go from here? The first thing is that we have to realize that the fathers **are not infallible**, and that **some are more fallible than others**. So, it is in the consensus of their views that we can find the truth.<sup>10</sup>

In our Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the standard by which we should measure any Patristic writings is the writings of the two pillars of Orthodoxy, Saint Athanasius and St. Cyril. They both agree with each other as well as with the early fathers that preceded them as we have shown in our previous articles.

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1. Gregory of Nyssa: *On The Lord's Prayer*, 5 PG 44.1177D quoted by Norman Russel: *The Doctrine of Deification* p. 227
  2. Gregory of Nyssa *On Virginity*, 1 N/PNF series II, vol V [Read online](#)
  3. Gregory of Nyssa: *Catechetical Oration 37*, PG 45.97B quoted by Norman Russel: *The Doctrine of Deification* p. 228
  4. Norman Russel: *The Doctrine of Deification* p. 229
  5. Robert Payne: *The Holy Fire*, p. 149 published by St. Vladimir Seminary Press 1980
  6. Saint Basil: *On the Holy Spirit IX*, 23 N/PNF series II, vol VIII [Read online](#)
  7. St. Athanasius: *To the Bishops of Africa*, 7 N/PNF series II, vol IV [Read online](#)

8. Harnack, HD IV, pp. 29, 33, 45, 49. The consensus of scholarly opinion has followed his judgement on the independence of St. Athanasius from philosophical influences. See, e.g., Kelly, p. 243; Meijering, pp. 1ff.; Quasten, *Patrology*, III, p. 66.
9. Robert Payne: *The Holy Fire*, p. 146 published by St. Vladimir Seminary Press 1980
10. Father Athanasius Iskander: *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers in Parousia*, October, 2007 [Read online](#)