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***A “theotic” religious education for the Christian West:
Orientation of the practitioner’s relationships with God, self, others, and the whole created
order to the divine image***

Theosis could help to foster some important emphases within the religious education efforts of the Christian West. A concept attended to more thoroughly in the Christian East, *theosis* emphasizes union with God. It is infused with the hope filled notions of the goodness of creation and a positive human anthropology. A *theotic* religious education would be incarnational, calling on its practitioners to commit to a grace-filled, community centered effort reorienting themselves to the divine image within as they commit to working toward the restoration of relationships with God self, others, and the whole created order.

Theosis; a term often interchangeably used with divinization, is a multi-faceted concept initially formed during the early centuries of Christianity. Over the centuries the idea has metamorphosed and has come to have different emphases within various Christian communities. The author will first attempt to lay the groundwork for a working definition of the term *theosis* itself, and explore foundational elements within it. This effort plays out before a backdrop of expectation-- that implications for religious education efforts within Christian communities (and perhaps other communities of faith) will reveal themselves. One such implication is that reaching beyond the catechetical echoing of a rational faith, integrating *theosis* could help to shape a more relational, holistic, and incarnational approach to religious education. A “theotic” approach would more fully integrate the idea of the lifelong transformation of individuals as they strive for the restoration of all the relationships in which they find themselves; those with self, others, the whole created order, and ultimately with the triune God.

Theosis reaches beyond an emphasis on the end of the soteriological process, the goal defined in Roman Catholic theological and catechetical texts as the *beatific vision*. It would be accurate to say that the union of the believer with the triune God is the hoped for result or an “ultimate goal” of *theosis*. However, *theosis* is simultaneously an orientation and infusive path- a continually graced effort of the believer toward this goal. This idea was at least implicitly emphasized within the Christian East. In recent years in response to an increased interest in the concept of *theosis*, this implicit emphasis has become more explicit and more thickly described. Norman Russell is representative of these efforts. In his *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*, Norman Russell proposes a working definition of *theosis* as follows:

Theosis is our restoration as persons to integrity and wholeness by participation in Christ through the Holy Spirit, in a process which is initiated in this world through our life of ecclesial communion and moral striving and finds ultimate fulfillment in our union with the Father- all within the broad context of the divine economy (Russell 2009, 21).

Russell’s indication that union with God is *initiated in this world* discloses two emphases which may be seen as integral to a discussion of *theosis*. First, since union with God is initiated in *this world*, the world is of necessity a good place. A corollary idea is that human beings, created in the image of God, are capable of the participation Russell describes. The story of the goodness of creation, and how human beings were created in the image of God living in perfect relationship with God and each other, is recounted within the first book of the canon of Hebrew Scriptures and is revered by both Jews and Christians. The essential goodness of creation is reiterated in the creation narrative which reports for us that, after each “day”, God paused to reflect that what had been created was indeed *good*. This essential goodness is definitively affirmed in Genesis 1:31 where “God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good.” John R. Sachs comments on the importance of remembering the goodness of creation as a corrective to those who consider the material world intrinsically evil and dichotomized from the spiritual realm. Sachs recalls the struggles of early Christianity in its first few centuries against gnosticism which saw “liberation from the created world and its evil materiality” as the goal of human life. In his work *Christian Vision of Humanity*, Sachs succinctly advances that “the world is a good place to be. It is precisely where God places us and it is where God wishes to be in relationship with us” (Sachs 1991, 15).

Within the created world are human beings, created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27,

5:1, Wisdom 2:23). The time after the creation of the human race is portrayed allegorically as a time of perfection for human beings as they live true to their own image in perfect union with God and in proper relationship with each other and the whole created order. For humanity, this abode of perfection is justifiably designated *paradise*. However, just as the first chapter of Genesis narrates the creation of humankind in the image of God and its ensuing perfect relations, the second chapter tells how both image and relationships became disordered. The relational rift ensues after human beings turn away in pride from the God in whose image they were created. In the pursuit of an existence perceived as better than paradise, they decide to heed the voice of the arduously tempting snake rather than the voice of God, which they previously had clearly heard, understood and followed.

A major tenet of Christian theology is the incarnation. Through Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, human nature and relationships are restored. Christ is God's ultimate re-identification with humanity as God's Self reaches out to restore human nature and humanity's once perfect relationship with God by means of God's own self-emptying act of *kenosis*. Athanasius, defender of the Council of Nicaea, is a clear patristic representative of the centrality of the incarnation and its importance for humankind. In his *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Athanasius posits that through the incarnation, Christ "was made man so that we might be made God" (Athanasius 1954, 107). Through *kenosis*, the Self-emptying of God, the Word of God becomes human thus undoing humanity's turn to corruptibility. Christ is born as a human being, lives, and dies once for all, in order that "the law involving the ruin of men might be undone" and the divinized, incorruptible potential of humankind is restored (1954, 63).

The incarnation is the once for all overhaul of humanity by the act of a loving God. It manifests God's care for the human race. It initiates a comprehensive reversal of the destitute state in which humanity found itself after the turning away from God and subsequent loss of paradise. Jesus Christ is the new Adam, who restores life to humanity, "since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life" (I Cor. 15:21-22). Human beings, created in the image of God and now restored in this image through Christ, are able once again to be "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:3-4). The incarnate Christ suffered death through the particularly horrific crucifixion. However, Christ's victory over death through the resurrection is a validation through which the Word of God continues to lure human beings to live renewed lives which seek after "heavenly things", are laden with the expectation of their own immortality, and are supplemented with the necessary "strength to meet death..." (1954, 85).

Nonna Verna Harrison is an advocate for a reexamination of the implications of what it means to be created and restored in the divine image, since God is the "direct source of our authentic human identity" (Harrison 2010, 30). At the outset, she acknowledges that there is a popular notion that human nature is inherently bad, then maps out a "prophetic alternative" grounded in Eastern Christian sources (2010, 5). She recalls the creation narrative and identifies facets of the divine image which are at the heart of human nature and are central to past, present, and future considerations of human identity. Harrison sets out to make the case that aspects of human nature are reflective of the divine image. These aspects include freedom, spiritual perception, virtues, royal dignity, a vital connection to the natural world, creativity, community, mystery, and others (2010, 5). She recommends practical steps for people to pursue, in order that they can recognize and cooperate with a process to polish the facets of the divine image in their lives. Thus by "pursuing a facet of the divine image that comes most naturally" (2010, 7) people

can turn their lives toward serving the goal which Harrison aptly puts front and center for human existence: the return of humankind to the image and likeness in which humans were initially created.

Harrison is consistent with authors and educators within Eastern Christianity who emphasize living out of the faith in an incarnational manner, eschewing overly spiritualized or ethereal means of seeking union with God. The Christian East, especially within the Greek or Byzantine churches, has preserved a crucial understanding of the importance of *theosis* via an emphasis on the incarnation, and has carried it forth as integral within its *phronema*, or mindset. Greek Orthodox author and religious educator George Nicozisin situates *theosis* within *phronema*, which is “an attitude, a position, and/or posture, which reflects a particular spirit, a theological sentiment or frame of mind” (Nicozisin 1970, xiii). Within his discussion of *phronema*, Nicozisin sets the stage for attentiveness to Orthodox Holy Tradition, including the centrality of liturgical practice. The hoped-for result of Nicozisin’s construct would be that every Orthodox Christian, immersed in a community attentive to Holy Tradition, would through the divine liturgy “live our theology, achieve our theosis, and manifest our Orthodox *phronema*” (1970, 104).

The Eastern Church prides itself on being a lived tradition, having carried over its *phronema* from the ancient church through the centuries to the present day. The aggregate of its traditions and experiences have now become known as Tradition with a capital “T”, or *Holy Tradition*. According to Stanley S. Harakas, Eastern Christianity maintains and embodies an “incarnational ethos” through its “various interpenetrating expressions” which, through the ever-present Holy Spirit, allow for the “continuity of Holy Tradition central to the Orthodox theological mind-set” (Harakas 2004, 130). For Harakas, “The key to the Byzantine approach to education and formation of the Christian consciousness and lifestyle is, then, its adherence to and identity with Holy Tradition” (2004, 131). Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware affirms the process of how certain traditions have aggregated to become the body of Holy Tradition. Through the years, churches within the East by expanding from the emphasis on the Bible and the early Christian creeds and ecumenical writings to now encompass... “the Canons, the Service Books, the Holy Icons, in fact, whole system of doctrine, church government, worship, spirituality, and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages” (Ware 1987, 204). Ware offers qualifiers to avoid a romanticized, wholesale acceptance of Orthodox Holy Tradition. He acknowledges that in its lived experience, the church has accreted traditions or customs which “are human and accidental- pious opinions (or worse), but not a true part of the one Tradition, the essential Christian message” (1987, 205). Ware adds that there is a resistance to change in Orthodoxy which serves to prevent healthy criticism of some of these individual traditions, a position which he sees as stagnating and untenable. Certain practices are not essential, as they simply are not part of Orthodox Tradition with a capital “T”. He calls on the Orthodox to “look closely at their inheritance and to distinguish more carefully between Tradition and traditions” (1987, 205).

Phronema is a holistic, life-encompassing world view within the Eastern Orthodox Tradition which stresses the dual priorities of *orthopraxy* or “right practice” and *orthodoxy* or “right belief”. In his important work *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Vladimir Lossky unveils the connection between orthodox theological understanding and everyday life. *Mystical Theology* links theological truths to *theosis*- which he reiterates, is no less than a person’s “participation in the divine life of the Holy Trinity; the deified state of the co-heirs of the divine nature, gods created after the uncreated God, possessing by grace all that the Holy Trinity possesses by nature” (Lossky 1976, 65). En route to this *theotic* participation, Lossky

dialogues with patristic sources and makes a case for an Orthodox Christian identity less measurable by rational understandings; he advocates a mystical “moving beyond” literal interpretations of theological and doctrinal assertions via an apophatic approach to theology. Even as he refers to the apophatic way of the theology of the Christian East as “a cross for human ways of thought... a mounting of Calvary” (1976, 65), he advocates for its centrality as a path to unity with God. Thus theoretical understanding of the revealed triune God has further significance transcending cognitive assent. This more profound emphasis is what Lossky terms mystical theology, and he explains that in fact Christian theology

is always in the last resort a means: a unity of knowledge subserving an end which transcends all knowledge. This ultimate end is union with God or deification, the *theosis* of the Greek Fathers. Thus, we are finally led to a conclusion which may seem paradoxical enough: that Christian theory should have an eminently practical significance; and that the more mystical it is, the more directly it aspires to the supreme end of union with God (1976, 9).

A recurring theme for Lossky is a re-appropriation of the term “mystical”. He explains that after being confronted by a dogma, Christians must live the dogma as it expresses a revealed truth, which appears to us as an unfathomable mystery. Instead of concern for full cognitive comprehension, we should look for a profound change, an inner transformation of spirit, enabling us to experience the idea mystically. Far from being mutually opposed, theology and mysticism are seen to support and complete each other (1976, 8).

Lossky’s presentation of the mystical understanding or assimilation of theological concepts may indeed be helpful toward bridging any perceived gap between *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy* as a construct more palatable for a postmodern Christian. With mystical understanding, truths of Christianity can be assimilated into the life of the believer whether or not the believing person can fully comprehend these ideas. Mystically appropriated knowledge is concerned with bringing a believer into *phronema*, a life in touch with ancient Christian wisdom regarding *how to be* (orthopraxy) intrinsically cojoined with an understanding of how to be “right-believing” (orthodox). This approach contrasts most constructs in Western Christendom, as it does not stress comprehension of and intellectual assent to theological constructs which often seem abstract and too remote from human experience. It seems admissible that struggles with obscure syllogistic doctrinal formulations and skewed emphasis on certain doctrinal formulations in the West contribute to the postmodern trend of ascribing to oneself the distinction of being *spiritual but not religious*. This could be less of an issue if there was an emphasis in the West on its *phronema*, life with the community of believers coupled with an emphasis on a more mystical understanding of theology. Albeit less measurable than rational cognitive exercises, mystical theology links an individual to the larger community and does not foster quests for union with God based on one’s particular experiences which may prove to be idiosyncratic. Thus mystical theology neither places intrinsic value on a person’s superior appropriation of rational constructs, nor does it value contributions of those individuals who are commonly ascribed to be *mystics*, since their esoteric experiences may be as unhelpful for believers as grasp of philosophical abstractions. Regarding the latter, Lossky remarks that the mystical approach is not “mysticism properly so-called, the personal experiences of different masters of the spiritual life” since “Such experiences... more often than not remain inaccessible to us...” (1976, 11).

Religious education constructs in the Christian East tend to reflect the paramount importance of connection with the believing community. Constance Tarasar is representative of these efforts. For Tarasar, a total religious education effort has as its central focus life in Christ as experienced in the liturgical life of the church. "Taste and see," Tarasar says; "experience and then understand- this is the form of catechesis that has been given to us by the church" (Tarasar 1981, 256). Tarasar's biographer Robert Matlak explicates her holistic, integrated concept of religious education wherein "the sanctification of time and life, focuses more existentially upon the 'here and now,' on individual appropriation of Tradition, on the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, on the importance of authentic spiritual growth and life, and so forth. Due to the importance of attending to these multiple contexts at once, curricula must be quite 'broad-based'" (in Matlak, 1981, 5). Tarasar's *appropriation of Tradition* is arguably another way to speak about Orthodox *phronema*. Her construct is "broad-based" since it entails an aggregation of experiential wisdom of every believer's life in the church from its beginnings to everyone practicing the faith in a postmodern context today. As Ware does, she qualifies adherence to Tradition with the hope that as believers align themselves more to life in Christ, they will avoid undue emphases which have become dreaded "-isms"- such as pietism and rationalism, which have been distracting emphases at certain times in the history of the church (1981, 5).

More recently, Anton Vrame expounds on *theosis* as inseparably identified with a particular segment of Eastern Orthodox *phronema*, iconography. Utilizing his coined term *iconic catechesis*, Vrame attempts a systematization which emphasizes the Christian Orthodox Church's positive human anthropology and connection with the larger community. Living iconically "calls for each person to strive to become his or her unique, unrepeatable self, to see oneself and others as infinitely precious- endangered species- without whom the world would be diminished... No one is forgotten in the kingdom of God" (Vrame 1999, 95).

What emphases will be evident in religious education in Christianity in the West at it evolves over the next several years? What will be central to the identity of those who call themselves Christian? This author posits that healthy approaches would "*theotic*". They would be *incarnational* in their approach- infused with notions of the goodness of creation and the positive human anthropology gleaned from sacred scripture and early Christian writings. They would incorporate Eastern Orthodoxy's mystical theology rather than stress consent to linear-rational constructs. *Theotic* communities find the means to take human wisdom and experience seriously as these come together to provide an ever-reforming *phronema* which is then at the community's service for forming new members. Grounding religious education in *theosis* provides more than a hoped for end-of-life goal for a faithful person, a beatific vision. *Theotic* religious education is of necessity a "lifelong and lifewide" (Moran, 2009, 163) endeavor as Christians devote their lives working towards restoring healthy relationships with God, others, themselves, and the whole created order as immersed in the community of believers they engage themselves in simply "pursuing a facet of the divine image that comes most naturally" (Harrison, 2010, 7).

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