

# Theosis: a Christian Perspective on Human Destiny

John F. Nash

---

## Summary

The concept of *theosis*, or deification, has roots in Greek philosophy and was discussed by the early Christian church fathers. It enjoyed ongoing support in the mystical theology of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, especially among contemplatives of the hesychastic tradition. While theosis did not find fertile ground in the intellectual environment of the West, a low level of interest can be detected throughout the centuries, and attention has increased in recent times.

Orthodox theologians articulate a doctrine of theosis that envisions a profound transformation of human nature, made possible by Christ's incarnation. Answers to how, when and where we might achieve theosis are proposed in the Orthodox literature and, more surprisingly, in the writings of Methodist and Anglican churchmen. These latter speak of an "intermediate state" of healing—contrasting with the Roman Catholic penitential purgatory—providing opportunities for spiritual growth after physical death. An understanding of theosis helps bridge the gulf between Christian and esoteric perspectives on the human condition and destiny. New fluidity in theological opinion and increasing interest among esotericists raise hopes of a synthesis of teachings. This article presents an account of theosis and related issues with the objective of stimulating further study and insight.

## Introduction

This article traces the emergence of the doctrine of *theosis*, or "deification," and its development in eastern and western Christianity. It also examines the concept of

an "intermediate state"—a term coined by John Wesley—in which progress toward theosis can continue after physical death. Few western Christians, or, for that matter, esoteric students, would recognize the term "theosis." Yet it has been a traditional belief in Eastern Orthodox Christianity since patristic times, and influential western churchmen also have explored the concept. Through theosis, proponents argue, man can share in the divine nature or perhaps recover his primeval divinity. Man can, in a very real sense, become "the image and likeness of God." Theosis' strongest supporters argue that deification was part of God's original purpose for humankind and that "redemption"—viewed in a more positive light than simply atoning for sin—was preordained by the creative act. Our opportunity to achieve theosis was established by Christ's incarnation and continued through its extension in the Eucharist. These various issues will be discussed in detail in the pages ahead. Before proceeding, however, it will be useful to step back and examine contrasting attitudes toward the human condition and human destiny.

A major stumbling block to building a viable system of Christian esotericism has

---

## About the Author

John F. Nash, Ph.D., is a long-time esoteric student, author, and teacher. Two of his books, *Quest for the Soul* and *The Soul and Its Destiny*, were reviewed in the Winter 2005 issue of the *Esoteric Quarterly*. His latest book, *The Sacramental Church*, will be published shortly. Further information can be found in the advertisements in this issue and at <http://www.uriel.com>

been the difference in the ways the human condition and human destiny are depicted by mainstream western Christianity and by the ageless wisdom extending through Plato and the Neoplatonist to Alice Bailey and beyond. In the Pythagorean tradition, Plato (c.428–348 BCE) taught that the human soul incarnates in a series of bodies to gain wisdom before returning to the divine realm. In the *Phaedrus* he spoke of the “beatific vision” whose beauty and glory await us at the end of our incarnational cycle.

Plato divided the soul into a higher aspect, the *nous* (“rational mind”), and a lower aspect, the *psyche*. The latter term, as Plato used it, meant the principle that animates the body; “etheric nature” would be a better translation than the conventional “soul.”<sup>1</sup> Platonic philosophy regarded the *nous* as belonging to the divine world of Forms. A Form (*Eidos*) is a perfect, eternal archetype or thoughtform. It is the “real” thing, and what we experience in the phenomenal world is but an imperfect, transient manifestation or “shadow” of that Form. Our body, in particular, is “less real” and much less important than our *nous*.

Plato also theorized that the whole of reality was triune in nature. His successors in the Platonic school built upon that concept to develop a model of the human constitution consisting of *nous*, *psyche*, and *soma* (“body”). As a modern commentator explained:

Plato’s trichotomy is the starting point of later views. A common division is into rational, irrational, and vegetative spheres . . . . For Middle Platonism the soul derives from the *nous* but has powers that enable it to work on matter; the *nous* affects the *psyche*, and the *psyche* the *soma*. On this view the *nous* is the innermost core . . . Pythagoreans see two souls. They equate the logical soul with the *nous*, while the alogical soul is the garment that it puts on in its descent through the spheres. In sum, the *psyche*, in distinction from the *nous*, undergoes a

certain devaluation, since it cannot denote pure spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

The *nous* and *psyche* acquired divine correspondences in the trinity proposed by Plotinus (c.204–70 CE), the leading exponent of Neoplatonism. Plotinus’ trinity, consisting of *Monad* (“the One”), *Nous* (“Divine Mind”), and *Psyche* (“World Soul”), was hierarchical. The two latter were successive emanations from the *Monad*, and in a further process of emanation *Psyche* birthed the manifest universe. Human beings participated in the two lower aspects of the trinity, while also having a *soma* on the physical plane. The *nous* was sometimes identified with the *pneuma* (“spirit”), a divine and eternal element in man; in other accounts the *nous* was regarded as forming a bridge between the *psyche* and *pneuma*.

Modern esoteric philosophy built upon those foundations to construct a detailed understanding of the human constitution consisting of monad, soul (or Ego, capitalized), and personality. The monad is regarded as a fragment of the logoc essence, comparable with the *atman* of Vedantic Hinduism. “We believe,” Helena Blavatsky wrote, “that every human being is the bearer, or Vehicle, of an Ego coeval with every other Ego; because all Egos are of the same essence and belong to the primeval emanation from one universal infinite Ego. Plato calls the latter the *logos* (or the second manifested God).”<sup>3</sup> In the teachings of Alice Bailey the soul is considered to be the seat of awareness, the architect of successive personalities, and the driving force behind progress on the evolutionary path. The personality embraces the dense physical, etheric, sentient (“astral”), and lower mental vehicles.<sup>4</sup> Comprehensive discussions of the human constitution are readily available in the literature.<sup>5</sup>

Platonic and Neoplatonist philosophy influenced early Christianity. By the fifth century, however, Christian theologians had rejected Plotinus’ hierarchy in favor of a trinity of coequal hypostases, or “persons”:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*Pneuma*).<sup>6</sup> The Son was “begotten” by God the Father, and the Spirit emerged from the Father—or jointly from the Father and Son—by “spiration,” a term that can be understood in the sense that the Spirit is the “Holy Breath.”<sup>7</sup>

By the sixth century Christianity was also moving away from Platonic psychology. The Second Council of Constantinople (553 CE) declared that each soul is individually created by God sometime between conception and birth;<sup>8</sup> that is, the soul is only *semi-eternal*: immortal but created in time. The Fourth Council of Constantinople (869) decreed that man “has one rational and intellectual soul” and spoke of that soul “animating the flesh.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the *nous* and *psyche* were conflated into a single entity and denied contact with the divine *Pneuma*. Man nominally was created in the image and likeness of God, but that likeness stopped short of a triune constitution and a share in the divine essence; it also stopped short of divine origin and destiny.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430), considered the greatest of the western church fathers, built upon the work of Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria to assert that the universe was created, not by emanation, but *ex nihilo* (“from nothing”). That assertion launched western Christianity onto the belief that humanity, along with the rest of the manifest universe, was separate from the Divine. Only a small step was then needed to conclude that humanity was corrupt and mired in sin. Augustinian pessimism steadily gained momentum and reached its zenith when John Calvin proclaimed man’s “total depravity.”<sup>10</sup> Calvin further declared that only a small elect was predestined to be saved, whereupon his followers came to the logical conclusion that the rest of humanity must be predestined to damnation.<sup>11</sup>

The western Christian view of human destiny generally was not as bleak as it might have been. Predestination made only limited inroads into the Christian mindset. Emphasis was also placed on the redeeming force of grace, a gift of God freely bestowed on all

who accepted baptism and obeyed the Commandments. Great saints emerged to serve as role models of righteousness. Nevertheless, as one writer complained, western Christianity “has been unable to free itself from the sin–grace dialectic.”<sup>12</sup> One might add that it has also been unable to free itself from an intellectually based theology.

A contrasting picture of both the universe and man emerged among the eastern church fathers and continued in Eastern Orthodoxy Christianity. Throughout the centuries eastern Christianity retained at least a limited sense that creation was accomplished through emanation. Importantly for our theme it also held out the possibility of a much more optimistic future. Through Christ’s incarnation, humanity gained, if only *in potentia*, some kind of divine status. Thus was born the doctrine of theosis.

This article’s main purpose is to make theosis and related concepts accessible to esoteric students. A few parallels with modern esoteric teachings are identified to show directions that future research could take. Rich opportunities exist to create a synthesis of understanding of human destiny that could appeal to both the religious and the esoteric communities. An important resource for the present study was *Partakers of the Divine Nature* (2007), a collection of essays edited by Michael J. Christensen & Jeffrey A. Wittung, that was reviewed in the Winter 2011 issue of the *Esoteric Quarterly*. We shall also quote liberally from patristic writings and the work of eastern and western theologians.

## The Concept of Theosis

The pharaohs of ancient Egypt claimed to be incarnations of the god Horus. In the Homeric period of Greek history it was believed that heroes who performed exemplary feats received the gift of immortality and would reside with the gods on Mount Olympus. Later Greek culture rewarded prominent civic figures with divine status. For example, the fourth-century BCE Philip II of Macedon, was raised to divine status in a

process referred to as *apotheosis*—a word from which *theosis* eventually derived. Philosophers were particularly valued in Greek society. Socrates was deified soon after his death, and as late as the fourth century CE the Neoplatonist Iamblichus declared Pythagoras a god.<sup>13</sup> Roman emperors claimed to be deities and were revered accordingly.<sup>14</sup>

The Hebrew Bible affirmed divine potential not just for kings and prophets but for all devout Jews. The psalmists wrote: “Shew the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye [are] gods”<sup>15</sup> and “I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.”<sup>16</sup> In the New Testament Christ referred to those passages when he asked “Is it not written in your law . . . Ye are gods?”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, we read in the prologue of the fourth gospel: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory”<sup>18</sup>—implying that “the flesh” was in some sense capable of receiving the Word and responding to the glory. Apprehension of and response to the divine glory came to be considered key ingredients of theosis.

Whether Paul believed in theosis is disputed, but he famously proclaimed: “I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.”<sup>19</sup> Other statements suggesting the possibility of human transformation include: “we all . . . beholding the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory.”<sup>20</sup> The *Epistle to the Hebrews* referred to “the spirits of just men made perfect.”<sup>21</sup> Most often cited in support of theosis is a passage in *2 Peter*:

Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be *partakers of the divine nature*.<sup>22</sup>

## Theosis in the Patristic Writings

In the emerging theology of Christianity the eastern church fathers were inspired more by Platonic philosophy than were their western brethren, and stronger connections were maintained with the ageless wisdom. It was among the eastern fathers that we find the earliest work on theosis.

Second-century CE church father Irenaeus commented on humanity’s steady progress from creation through the recovery from sin to successive stages of sanctification. Man, he said, “should be glorified; and being glorified, should see his Lord. For God is He who is yet to be seen, and the beholding of God is productive of immortality.” Immortality, he added, “renders one nigh unto God.”<sup>23</sup> To cite the work of Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Roman Gaul, might seem to undermine the assertion that theosis was the product of eastern Christianity. We should remember, however, that the Gallic church owed its lineage to the East; Irenaeus was born in Asia Minor and was a student of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna.

The Alexandrian and Cappadocian schools produced the greatest wealth of patristic writings on theosis. Among the Alexandrians were the second-century Origen and the fourth-century Athanasius. Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria, famously built upon *John* 1:14 to declare: “He [the Logos] was made man that we might be made god.” As a modern writer explained: “More clearly than any Christian writer before him, Athanasius makes a direct identification between deification and divine sonship.”<sup>24</sup> Origen’s work will be mentioned later.

Notable among the Cappadocian fathers were Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great, and his brother Gregory of Nyssa, all of whom lived in the fourth century. Gregory of Nazianzus, accomplished poet and theologian, coined the word *theosis* after experimenting with various terms suggestive of “making a god.”<sup>25</sup> He suggested that individuals of special sanctity might ascend to

the divine light, even in their lifetimes. As a metaphor of the illuminating power of the divine light, Gregory of Nazianzus described the sun as “the most beautiful of all visible things” and “just so is God . . . himself the highest of all objects of thought.”<sup>26</sup> The reference to thought suggested belief that it was the *nous* that was capable of ascension.

Gregory of Nyssa was more cautious with regard to timing; he considered it more likely that theosis could be attained only after the resurrection of the body. Christian teachings asserted that the body will be raised to rejoin the soul prior to the Last Judgment. Gregory emphasized that theosis was a gift of God; our bodily resurrection and theosis ascension were made possible by Christ’s. On the other hand, he stressed that eventual theosis was the very purpose of humanity’s creation.<sup>27</sup> Our destiny was to become “priests of the cosmos, rendering by [our] dynamic engagement with the world’s order, a degree of divine life, a sacred blessing as it were, to all the fabric of God’s created existence.”<sup>28</sup> The strong implication was that Christ’s incarnation was not a repair mission, a response to humanity’s failure, but was preordained “from the beginning” as the means to unlock humanity’s latent capability.

Gregory of Nyssa’s understanding of theosis received a boost when the Council of Chalcedon (451) decreed that Christ, the Son of God, was a single *hypostasis*, or “person,” with distinct divine and human natures. The conventional interpretation was that the hypostatic union of natures was necessary for redemption: the human nature to identify with man’s failure and the divine nature to make a sufficient atonement to the Father. Gregory’s interpretation was that, when “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,”<sup>29</sup> human nature was exalted, even deified. “Redemption,” as a commentator on Gregory’s work remarked, “was more than the forgiveness of sin, rather a profound reworking and *anakephalaiosis* [“recapitulation”] of the terms of ordinary humanity, into a divinely graced life-form that would experience an ascentive metamorphosis.”<sup>30</sup>

Theosis, the commentator continued, means the refashioning of “the very boundaries of creaturely existences.” The human *nous* could become a divine hypostasis, comparable in some way with the hypostases of the Trinity.

A notable contribution to the doctrine of theosis was made by Maximus the Confessor (580–662). Maximus resigned his position in the court of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius to pursue a vocation as a monk in Carthage, North Africa. He was influenced by Neoplatonist philosophy and especially by the work of the Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>31</sup> Interpreting the Chalcedon decree, Maximus viewed Christ’s incarnation as a reciprocal coming-together of the divine and human natures, not diminishing either but creating a new, higher synthesis.<sup>32</sup> Driving that reciprocity was ecstatic love—a realization that Jalaluddin Rumi would famously explore six centuries later. Along with Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus leaned toward the universalist view that all rational souls would eventually be saved. Origen was accused of teaching that even Satan might be saved.

The Copts agreed that Jesus Christ was a single person but rejected the Chalcedon doctrine of distinct natures. Inspired by the work of Cyril, late patriarch of Alexandria,<sup>33</sup> they believed that Christ’s two natures were merged. They also used Cyril’s teachings to develop a strong sense of theosis. The leading exponent of Coptic theosis was the 12th-century Egyptian theologian Bulus al-Bushi. Writing in Arabic he presented a detailed argument that man participated in the merged divine–human nature. Emphasizing the role of the Eucharist in theosis, Bulus drew upon a passage in the fourth gospel that was incorporated in eastern and western liturgies:

Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For

my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.<sup>34</sup>

A modern writer commented: “Bulus derives his conclusion that the act of partaking in the eucharistic bread grants us a participation in the life-giving, divine body of Christ.”<sup>35</sup>

The eastern church fathers and their successors were not unanimous on the precise meaning of theosis, and some did not discuss the concept at all. Nevertheless, a consensus emerged that man potentially could participate in the divine nature—or perhaps return to the primeval divinity—in this life or the hereafter. In its most complete form theosis envisioned man becoming a divine hypostasis—not an ontological one, like the persons of the trinity, but an hypostasis of adoption, appropriate to our creaturely nature. “Weaker” forms envisioned “living in Christ” or some kind of union with Christ.

### Theosis in Eastern Orthodoxy

A form of contemplative prayer gained wide popularity among ascetics in the Greek Orthodox Church. Known as *heschasm* (Greek: hesychia, “stillness” or “silence”), it may date back to the fourth century. The practice involves extended periods of solitary meditation. Timothy Ware, a future bishop, explained that the hesychast “is one who devotes himself to the prayer of silence—to prayer that is stripped, so far as is possible, of all images, words, and discursive thinking.”<sup>36</sup> Despite the intent to avoid verbal formulas, hesychastic practice was often accompanied by silent repetition of the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”). Recitation was often synchronized with inhalation and exhalation of the breath. Hesychasm has been compared with the South Asian disciplines

of mantra yoga and *pranayama*. Practitioners, most of them monks or hermits, reported heightened states of consciousness, profound mystical experiences, and a sense of the divine light. Hesychasm came to be regarded as the royal road to theosis.

Hesychastic prayer came under attack in the 14th century from critics influenced by western scholasticism, notably Barlaam of Calabria, Barlaam asserted that contemplation was worthless and that the only way to God lay through the intellect. Plato might have agreed with him, but the Neoplatonist who valued mystical experiences would certainly have disagreed. Hesychasm’s critics further asserted that it was impossible for finite beings to gain knowledge of a transcendent, unknowable God. Claims to have seen the divine light were blasphemous.

Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), a monk of Mount Athos in Greece and later archbishop of Thessaloniki, emerged as the champion of hesychasm and its related theology. He cited hesychasm’s origins in antiquity and quoted liberally from the church fathers on the theological issues. Gregory agreed that the *essence* (Greek: *ousia*) of God can never be known, even in the hereafter, but he insisted that knowledge of God’s “uncreated energies” or “uncreated light,” was possible in both this life and the next. “Uncreated” became an important concept in Orthodox theology, with the connotation that the energies proceeded *ontologically* from God’s very being, rather than from any specific action God might take. We might explain the process by analogy with electromagnetic energy radiating from the sun; that is just what the sun is and does. The uncreated light was manifest in Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor, an event to which Eastern Orthodoxy attaches much greater significance than the western church does. The hesychast, Gregory argued, was granted an experience of the same light and thereby gained true spiritual knowledge of God.

Gregory Palamas’ theology of divine essence and energies and his explanation of the divine light had lasting influence on

Eastern Orthodox thought, and he is listed in the eastern calendar of saints. His work did not end the controversy, however, and “Palamites” and “anti-Palamites” have continued to debate the merits and propriety of hesychasm. Yet both parties maintained the mystical orientation that has always characterized Eastern Orthodox theology.

Best-known of 20th-century Palamites was the academic theologian Vladimir Nikolayevich Lossky (1903–58). Exiled from Russia in the 1920s, Lossky moved to Paris and graduated from the Sorbonne. Tragic as his exile was from a personal standpoint, it became a platform from which he brought Orthodox mystical theology to a western audience.

Lossky agreed with Gregory of Nyssa that deification could be attained only after death, but he insisted that the necessary preparation must be done in this life.<sup>37</sup> Like Gregory Palamas, Lossky regarded contemplative prayer as the best preparation for theosis. But he regarded ecstasy as merely a beginner’s response to the contemplative experience, and he warned against “giving any particular image to the Godhead.”<sup>38</sup> Lossky explained the uncreated light seen by contemplatives as “the visible quality of the divinity, of the energies or grace in which God makes Himself known. It is not a reality of the intellectual order . . . . Nor is it a quality of the sensible order. The divine light, being given in the mystical experience, surpasses at the same time both sense and intellect.”<sup>39</sup> The light “is proper to God by His nature: eternal, infinite, existing outside space and time.”<sup>40</sup>

Lossky related the hesychastic experience to the receipt of divine love, expressed by the triune Godhead and communicated by the

Holy Spirit. But the “Love of God is necessarily bound up with love of one’s fellow man. That perfect love will make a man like Christ, for; in his created nature he will be united with the whole of humanity.”<sup>41</sup> As a result, contemplation could not be separated

from the impulse to serve. Citing Maximus, Lossky declared that contemplation without action “differs in no way from imagination, from fantasy without any real substance.”<sup>42</sup>

The theologian who did the most detailed work on theosis was Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov (1871–1944). A Russian Orthodox priest, he also fled to Paris, but he and the much younger Lossky were never close; they even belonged to competing branches of the émigré Orthodox Church. Lossky

disagreed with key areas of Bulgakov’s teachings, particularly those relating to Sophia, the divine feminine hypostasis of wisdom. Ecclesiastical authorities eventually forced Bulgakov to retract certain of those teachings as heretical.<sup>43</sup> Most of his work on theosis was never seriously challenged, however, and his and Lossky’s work can be viewed as complementary.

Bulgakov agreed with Gregory of Nyssa that Christ’s incarnation was motivated not only by humanity’s need for redemption but more importantly by God’s plan to glorify humanity. In response to the plan, “Man desires to become a son of God and enter into that glory of creation, and he is predestined to this. Out of natural man, he is called to become a god-man.”<sup>44</sup> That goal became possible when divine and human nature were united in Christ. The glorification of Christ’s humanity was begun at the incarnation and completed when Christ ascended into heaven. “The God-Man’s earthly humanity follows His Ascension to heaven, first the Most

**[T]he eastern understanding of theosis reminds us of Platonic and modern esoteric teachings that anticipate a return to the divine realm after the sojourn in physical existence. Importantly ... theosis has a group implication; it is not to be regarded as a reward for individual sanctity but as an event that unites the whole of humanity more firmly with the Trinity.**

Holy Mother of God, and then the entire Church in the age to come. This is the deification of humanity. . . . The Father saves and deifies the world through the Son, the God-Man, and it is through the Son that He sends the Holy Spirit into the world.”<sup>45</sup> Christ’s mother Mary, Bulgakov declared, has already achieved “perfect theosis.”<sup>46</sup>

Bulgakov reiterated Bulus al-Bushi’s assertion that the Eucharist both symbolizes and facilitates the approach to theosis: “Christ who sits in Glory at the right hand of the Father is the same Christ who institutes the Last Supper and personally offers communion to His disciples. And He has continued to do this from that time forward, as the Church attests in its liturgical prayer.”<sup>47</sup> Bulgakov also agreed with Lossky on the important role of the Holy Spirit: “Divine humanity in process of being accomplished presupposes the union of the divine and human natures, or of divine and created Wisdom, in the one hypostasis of the Logos. But this union has to be effected by the Holy Spirit, more than that, *is* the Holy Spirit.”<sup>48</sup> Reference to Wisdom revealed Bulgakov’s interest in sophiology.

In another work Bulgakov discussed humanity’s approach, or perhaps return, to the divine image in which it was created. Identification with the divine image, he declared, “is the task and goal of creation. God creates future ‘gods by grace’ for inclusion in the multihypostatic unity of the Holy Trinity and in the unity of the divine life.”<sup>49</sup> Bulgakov came close to suggesting that a divine *nous* or *pneuma*, distinct from the *psyche*, could be restored in the human constitution. “Man,” he declared, “is created as the god-man in the sense that, in his creaturely psycho-corporeal essence, he contains a spirit of divine origin.”<sup>50</sup> Only a degree of ambiguity saved him from direct confrontation with the Fourth Council of Constantinople.

When Bulgakov lay dying, he seemed to undergo a personal transfiguration. The nuns caring for him reported: “We were

witnesses in an amazing spectacle. [His] face had become completely illuminated. It was a single mass of real light. . . . The phenomenon was so extraordinary and joyous that we nearly cried from inner happiness. This lasted for about two hours.”<sup>51</sup>

## Theosis in the West

The western church valued its contemplative religious orders. And Meister Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross, and many others spoke of the sense of union with God. According to John of the Cross (1542–1591), such union comes to pass when God grants the soul this supernatural favor, that all the things of God and the soul are one in participant transformation; and the soul seems to be God rather than a soul, and is indeed God by participation; although it is true that its natural being, though thus transformed, is as distinct from the Being of God as it was before, even as the window has likewise a nature distinct from that of the ray, though the ray gives it brightness.<sup>52</sup>

Based on their experiences, the great mystics stressed the distinction between mystical and rational knowledge. The former, which they declared to be superior, afforded experience of the divine light and knowledge of God beyond what reason, even reason enlightened by faith, could offer. The western mystics were careful to avoid any suggestion that they actually took on the divine nature; the Creator–creature divide was too strong, despite the argument that Christ’s incarnation had bridged that divide. On the other hand, the semblance of being divine happened in their own lifetimes.

Significant as we now regard them, the writings of the western mystics received relatively little attention in their own time. Western Christianity was theologically oriented and its theology intellectually based. When western apologists discussed theosis at all, they approached it from an intellectual standpoint. As a result their discussions lacked the force and passion of direct experience—and also guaranteed that statements conformed to established dogma.

The early scholastic, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), proposed an ontological proof for the existence of God. Anselm, a Benedictine monk of Burgundian birth who became archbishop of Canterbury, defined God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Few people at the time would have suspected that he was discussing theosis. With increasing interest in theosis, however, attempts have been made to show that Anselm’s proof implied perfection in creation: “The acknowledgement of who God is, is equally rooted in a clear and distinct perception of who we are as creatures in light of that end for which God created us.”<sup>53</sup> Perhaps Anselm considered the possibility that perfection might be the end-point in creaturely human destiny.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), considered the greatest of the scholastics, wrote extensively on the topic of grace, and in the process provided some support for theosis. In a reference to *2 Peter*, he wrote: “The gift of grace surpasses every capability of created nature, since it is nothing short of a partaking of the Divine Nature.”<sup>54</sup> However, Aquinas was more interested in the beatific vision, which—in a departure from its Platonic origins—he believed to be attained when the soul is reunited with the body and sees God “face to face.”<sup>55</sup> The relationship between grace and theosis was discussed in more detail by the 20th-century Jesuit scholar Karl Rahner. Rahner asserted that grace “accomplishes in humanity a divinizing participation in God’s being.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, grace is “the innermost and enduring deification of the world.”<sup>57</sup>

Protestantism became openly hostile toward contemplation and mysticism, and whatever elements of mystical theology might have survived in the Church of Rome were soon suppressed in the new churches of the West. Notwithstanding, bold attempts have been made to find evidence of theosis in the works of Martin Luther and John Calvin.<sup>58</sup> To do so, it was necessary to reexamine their writings and distinguish their own comments from what became Lutheran and Calvinist dogma. It was also necessary to

dilute the notion of deification from participation in the divine nature to some kind of “union with Christ.” Even then the outcome has not been persuasive. Calvinist teachings on the depravity of fallen human nature can more easily be depicted as the very antithesis of theosis.

Anglicanism, which sought to position itself somewhere between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, was more sympathetic to theosis. Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626), one of the Caroline Divines, spoke of “The great promise of the Old Testament . . . that He [Christ] should partake of our human nature; and the great and precious promise of the New, that we should . . . partake of His divine nature.”<sup>59</sup> Our opportunity to do so was established by Christ’s incarnation and continued through its extension in the Eucharist.

John Wesley (1703–91), whom history remembers as the founder of Methodism, in fact remained an Anglican clergyman throughout his ministerial life. He was inspired by the work of Clement of Alexandria and also studied theosis in its Eastern Orthodox context. Wesley supported the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith, but he also insisted that even after a person’s justification “sin remains in him, yea, the seed of all sin, till he is sanctified.” Throughout life, Wesley declared, “a believer gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace.”<sup>60</sup> Wesley and his hymn-writer brother Charles believed that sanctification, which was “freely given us” by God, could make a Christian “perfect in love.” Their doctrine of sanctification, affirmed by later generations of Methodists, became “a domesticated (or democratized) version of the more ancient doctrine” of theosis.<sup>61</sup> We shall see later that John Wesley also shared important insights on when deification might be achieved.

Richard Meux Benson (1824–1915), who founded the Society of St John the Evangelist, an Anglican religious order, pursued the theme of theosis as “glorification of the creature.” Glorification was made possible

by Christ's incarnation, which itself was the preordained outcome of creation:

Creation by the Word implies the incarnation of the Word as necessary to the glorification of the creature by the Word, so as to justify according to our finite experience and contemplation the act of Eternal wisdom from whence creation sprang. The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation meets this necessity and shows the moral purpose of Creation in its successive developments to be worthy of the wisdom of God.<sup>62</sup>

Arthur Michael Ramsey (1904–88) studied Eastern Orthodox theology for many years before becoming archbishop of Canterbury in 1961. He too approached theosis from the standpoint of divine glory. That glory was expressed openly in the transfiguration but was manifest throughout Christ's time on earth, even in the crucifixion. Moreover, Ramsey declared that God "who created the world for his glory will glorify His creatures and lead them to glorify Him. The end is a new creation, forged from out of the broken pieces of a fallen creation, filled with glory and giving glory to its maker."<sup>63</sup> Participation in the divine glory can come in a variety of ways, notably through the Eucharist, which "unites those who partake with the glory of Christ as He now is—risen [and] ascended."<sup>64</sup> "[T]he eucharistic worship of the Church," Ramsey explained, "is on its godward side a participation in God's glorifying of the Father, and on its manward side a receiving of God's glory—the glory of the Cross."<sup>65</sup>

Meetings between Ramsey and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople led to formation of Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Discussions (AOJDD), an ecumenical commission that met from 1973 through 1989. The commission examined a range of theological issues and published several "agreed statements." Its Moscow Statement of 1976 addressed the topic of theosis, beginning with the general comment that:

God is both immanent and transcendent. By virtue of the divine self-revelation,

man experiences personal communion with God. By faith and through obedience he shares truly in the divine life and is united with God the Holy Trinity. By grace he enjoys the pledge and first-fruits of eternal glory.<sup>66</sup>

The commission affirmed a tradition of support for theosis in both East and West: "To describe the fullness of man's sanctification and the way in which he shares in the life of God, the Orthodox Church uses the Patristic term *theosis kata charin* (divinization by grace)."<sup>67</sup> "Anglicans," the report continued, "do not reject the underlying doctrine which this language seeks to express; indeed, such teaching is to be found in their own liturgies and hymnody." Part of that hymnody, of course, was the work of Charles Wesley. Despite its affirmation of theosis the commission felt compelled to include a warning: "[H]owever close this union [with God] may be, there remains always an all-important distinction between God and man, Creator and creature, infinite and finite."<sup>68</sup> Whether Bulgakov would have agreed is an interesting question.

The topic of theosis also came up in the AOJDD's Dublin Statement of 1984. The commission affirmed that members of the church "are united with Christ and with each other through participation in the Eucharist." "Through this union," it added, "they are being conformed to his true humanity, filled with his divinity, and made 'partakers of the divine nature.' In its totality the Church incorporates both living and departed in the communion of the saints."<sup>69</sup> The statements of the AOJDD and similar ecumenical commissions provide semi-authoritative summaries of the beliefs of both sides and show the extent to which eastern and western theological opinion has converged over the last 100 years.

Clearly, theosis is not unknown in the West. But it has had virtually no impact on religious beliefs and practices, and few western Christian clergy or laypersons would know what the concept means. Even in the scholarly circles where theosis has been explored,

it is a weaker concept than in the eastern churches. Notwithstanding some variation, theosis is generally interpreted in the West as becoming *like* God or Christ rather than becoming divine. Attempts have recently been made to link theosis with Carl Jung's theory of individuation.<sup>70</sup>

## The Intermediate State

Most of us are unlikely to achieve theosis in this life. Gregory of Nyssa, Vladimir Lossky, and others insisted that it is attainable only after death. Yet there is also a sense that one's entire life is the pathway to deification. If theosis is possible for more than a tiny fraction of the human family, further opportunities must exist where the process can be completed.

Church father Irenaeus suggested that opportunities for spiritual growth extend beyond the grave. A century later, Origen (185–254), Plotinus' classmate in the Neoplatonic school of Ammonias Saccas, took up the theme and laid the groundwork for what became the doctrine of purgatory. Purgatory (Latin: *purgare*, "to cleanse or purify") was viewed as a place or state where the soul could be cleansed prior to entry into heaven. Belief in continued growth encouraged the practice of prayers for the dead.

Over the course of the Middle Ages, notions of purgatorial cleansing gathered steam and also took on an increasingly punitive quality, culminating in the 14th century with the vivid images in Dante Alighieri's *Purgatorio*.<sup>71</sup> The mature doctrine was outlined by the Council of Florence (1431–37), and reaffirmed by the Council of Trent a century later. Purgatory was declared to be a state of temporal punishment for sins which had been forgiven by the sacrament of penance, but which still required "satisfaction." Foresighted people could invest in indulgences and chantry masses in the hope of

reducing their sentences in purgatory.<sup>72</sup> Well-wishers could pray for their souls with similar hopes.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity never embraced the doctrine of purgatory, but it retained the notion of continued opportunity for spiritual growth, including growth toward theosis. A modern writer explained: "[I]t is the Orthodox understanding that sanctification continues on, in some way, into the world beyond—especially in the beginning stages of the next life. The Church believes that our prayers for the departed can help them in this process of healing and purification."<sup>73</sup> The same writer explained the continued sanctification as a process of "cleansing and purifying," adding: "This purification process in no way involves undergoing punishments for confessed and repented sins. To the Orthodox, God's boundless love and mercy make such an idea quite preposterous."<sup>74</sup> The nature of the post-mortem experience was rarely discussed in the older Orthodox literature. Unexpectedly, we find the most extensive discussions in the West.

The Protestant Reformers rejected the notion of purgatory, partly because it lacked scriptural support and partly because of distaste for chantries and indulgences. Neither did they allow any further opportunities for spiritual growth. A person's fate, they insisted, was sealed at the point of death—with the consequence that praying for the dead was pointless. Official Protestant doctrine offered a stark heaven–hell dichotomy, with no provision for borderline cases.<sup>75</sup> Whether the wicked deserve hell, or the righteous merit heaven, continues to be debated by moral theologians. The doctrine of double predestination, in which certain souls were predestined to be saved and the rest to be damned, further complicated considerations of divine justice.

A viable alternative to purgatory was suggested by John Wesley. Wesley sought to counter the prevalent evangelical belief in “instant conversion” by emphasizing progressive sanctification throughout life and also after death. Sanc-

tification might continue in an “intermediate state” between death and the resurrection of the body. Following Orthodox precedents, the intermediate state was not punitive, like the purgatory of the Council of Florence; it was a state of rapid learning. We shall learn more about God’s nature and works “in an hour,” Wesley wrote, “than we could in an age, during our stay in the body.”<sup>76</sup> “We cannot tell,” he added, “how we shall then exist, or what kind of organs

we shall have: the soul will not be encumbered with flesh and blood; but probably it will have some sort of ethereal vehicle.”<sup>77</sup>

Wesley’s concept of intermediate state was slow to gain acceptance in the Church of England. An 18th-century colleague,

Augustus Toplady, condemned it as “your new-fangled doctrine of the intermediate state of departed souls.”

James Strong (1822–94), Methodist biblical scholar better known for his *Concordance*, provided the most detailed discussion of the intermediate state. In *The Doctrine of a Future Life* (1891) he cited numerous scriptural passages in support of continued consciousness after death. The intermediate state, he said, could be understood as a condition of “enjoyment as in a pleasant dream of interior consciousness.”<sup>78</sup> The stories of the widow’s son, Jairus’ daughter, and

Lazarus showed that persons could temporarily return from the intermediate state, though they remembered nothing of their experience. Strong pointed to the work of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg

who claimed ability to see into that realm. As to the length of time spent in the intermediate state, Strong speculated that it could be “immense,” but the soul would experience it “in the twinkling of an eye.”<sup>79</sup>

Assertions that theosis is impossible until after the resurrection create interest in Strong’s remarks on the nature of the resurrected body. In a discussion that the Apostle Paul would have applauded, Strong dismissed suggestions that it will be composed of the same atoms that comprised the mortal body. It will be a glorified body “animated by the same soul” and perfect vehi-

cle.<sup>80</sup> In Christ’s case, the marks of the crucifixion showed the “minute correspondence” between his resurrected body and the body that died on the cross. However, his glorified body—whose form was anticipated by the transfiguration—was able to pass through closed doors, and he was free from pain, disease, and other human limitations.<sup>81</sup> The glorified bodies of the saints, Strong continued, are evident from the “luminousness” with which they are portrayed. Their bodies are “infused and dominated by their higher mental and moral nature, instead of serving merely as organs for earthly and fleshly purposes.” “Every purpose of creation effected, every ambition realized, every end consummated, nothing will exist to break the even flow of joyful existence.”<sup>82</sup>

Two nineteenth-century Anglican clergymen lent their support to the intermediate state: John Henry Newman and Lloyd Russell. Newman (1801–90) preached on that topic

**[A]comprehensive system of Christian esotericism could appeal to large numbers of practicing Christians whose questions are not being answered by traditional doctrine. It could also appeal to significant segments of the esoteric community who recognize Christianity’s continued relevance in the Aquarian Age and its role in the New World Religion when ‘The living Christ will assume His rightful place in human consciousness.’**

in 1836, nine years before he converted to Roman Catholicism. The sermon was based on the passage in *Revelation*, which stated that martyrs “should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.”<sup>83</sup> Another relevant text was: “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord . . . that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them.”<sup>84</sup> Newman portrayed the intermediate state as a place where imperfect souls “may have time for growing . . . and perfecting the inward development of the good seed sown in their hearts . . . a time of maturing that fruit of grace.”<sup>85</sup>

Lloyd Russell, vicar of the Church of the Annunciation, Chislehurst, England, preached on the intermediate state in 1885. The departed, he declared, “are in possession of consciousness, memory, and sensibility to pain and pleasure” and must experience “progressive purification of the soul.” Otherwise, he insisted, “we must conclude either that that absolute holiness is not a necessity for admission to Heaven, which is contrary to Scripture, or else that each person when he dies is at once fitted either for the Presence of God or the abode of the lost.”<sup>86</sup> Issues of divine justice clearly were on his mind.

The subject of the intermediate state was addressed in ecumenical dialogue between the Anglican and Eastern churches. In its Dublin Statement the AOJDD linked the concept to traditional beliefs in Eastern Orthodoxy. Citing the passage “from glory to glory” in *2 Corinthians*: the commission declared: “[I]n the view of the Orthodox and also of many Anglicans, further progress and growth in the love of God will continue for ever.”<sup>87</sup> “After death,” the AOJDD emphasized, “this progress is to be thought of in terms of healing rather than satisfaction or retribution . . . [W]e are agreed in rejecting any doctrine of purgatory which suggests that the departed through their sufferings are making ‘satisfaction’ or ‘expiation’ for their sins.”<sup>88</sup> The commission added: “The traditional practice of the Church in praying for

the faithful departed is to be understood as an expression of the unity between the Church militant and the Church triumphant, and of the love which one bears to the other.”<sup>89</sup>

## Synthesis with Esoteric Teachings

Building a synthesis of understanding of human destiny based on Christian doctrine and modern esoteric teachings would require more than agreement on terminology, though that would be a necessary beginning. It would require convergence in longstanding and treasured beliefs—not all uniform within either the Christian or the esoteric traditions. Which opinions on each side should be represented in a synthesis, and what would be the impact of setting others aside? Underlying the whole endeavor would be concern over the salability of any synthesis that might emerge. How many Christians and how many esotericists would be willing to embrace such a synthesis? These various questions cannot all be addressed, still less resolved, here; but a few areas can be identified where progress could be made.

Christian theologians are not unanimous in their understanding of the human condition and the purpose of Christ’s incarnation. One belief is that humanity is hopelessly mired in sin and that Christ died on the cross just to save a few souls from eternal damnation. This article, by contrast, has examined a well-developed belief that humanity has a divine destiny and that Christ’s incarnation was a preordained mission to quicken the approach to that destiny. Gregory of Nyssa and Bulgakov affirmed that the primary purpose of Christ’s incarnation was to effect, what esotericists would call, a major initiation of the human race. Esotericists should not be averse to the notion of theosis, understood as a major stage in human spiritual evolution.

Western apologists generally have viewed theosis as some form of union with Christ or acquisition of Christ-like characteristics

through piety, service, and moral choice. Eastern apologists envision a more profound transformation of human nature and its

future potential. They assert that the quickest way to achieve theosis is through rigorous ascetic and contemplative practices; for them, hesychasm has provided the best way. But the West is not without its own contemplative tradition. In either case, theosis may be attainable by a few individuals in this lifetime. For a greater number it would be attained after physical death, perhaps after the resurrection of the body, which Aquinas assumed to be necessary for the soul to be complete. The possible interpretations of “resurrection” will be discussed in due course.

Christ’s descent into human form, according to the stronger forms of theosis, permanently expanded or transformed human nature. That descent, customarily described by the theological concept of *kenosis*, or Christ’s “emptying” of his divine attributes, and *theosis*, the reciprocal elevation of human nature, were viewed as complementary concepts.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, some kind of personal “kenosis” was seen as a prerequisite for theosis. John of the Cross captured that sense of personal kenosis when he spoke of the need to rid oneself “of every mist and stain” of creaturely existence.<sup>91</sup> Esotericists would recognize a comparable need, though the object of the kenosis probably would be the thrall of the lower self.

Esoteric students should find several points of agreement with Bulgakov’s partial reinstatement of the divine *nous*, so long as the *nous* is defined as something more than just the rational mind. Furthermore, the eastern understanding of theosis reminds us of Platonic and modern esoteric teachings that anticipate a return to the divine realm after the sojourn in physical existence. Importantly, as Lossky pointed out, theosis has a group implication; it is not to be regarded as a reward for individual sanctity but as an event that unites the whole of humanity more firmly with the Trinity. Perhaps we see a resonance with the Platonic notion of

shared origins in the primeval divine emanation. Certainly we see resonance with modern esoteric teachings of the future synthesis of humanity.

The Protestant doctrine of immediate disposition to heaven or hell, the Roman Catholic doctrine of a retributive purgatory, and the notion of an intermediate state of healing and continued sanctification represent a significant progression of ideas—though they did not appear in that chronological order. Notions of the intermediate state bring Christian doctrine closest to the understanding of ongoing human progress promoted by esotericists from Plato onward.

Christian apologists were reluctant to speculate on where the soul would reside or what experiences it might have in the intermediate state. Esotericists would want to press Christians to acknowledge the possibility that souls could incarnate in new bodies as part of the healing and sanctification process. It may well be possible to reconcile belief in the intermediate state with belief in reincarnation, and the acquisition of a new body would certainly be one interpretation of “resurrection.” Esotericists would agree with Strong’s comment on the length of time spent in the intermediate state but might challenge his suggestion that the time would pass “in the twinkling of an eye.”

Traditional Christian doctrine in both West and East declares that each individual is granted only one probationary lifetime. But that doctrine may not have been pervasive in early Christianity. Church father Origen, who was influenced by Platonic philosophy, taught that the soul preexisted the body. He may also have believed in reincarnation.<sup>92</sup> The Second Council of Constantinople was convened in 553 primarily to condemn

Origenian preexistence as heretical. Its declaration is often cited as implying condemnation of reincarnation, but no ecumenical council has formally declared belief in reincarnation heretical. The major denominations continue to promote the one-lifetime doctrine, despite growing belief in a reincarnational cycle among Christians and non-

Christians alike, as a result of the New Age movement and more serious esoteric studies. What changes may be accommodated in the future remains to be seen.

The intermediate state has a strong correlation with the *Bardo*, described at length in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.<sup>93</sup> Indeed the word “Bardo” literally means “intermediate state.”<sup>94</sup> The Bardo is believed to be a state of existence between death and rebirth in which the disembodied consciousness has a series of experiences—frightening or healing, according to the individual’s progress on the spiritual path—through which it moves toward “liberation.” Conventionally it is divided into three phases: the *chikhai bardo*, or “bardo of the moment of death”; the *chonyid bardo*, or “bardo of the experiencing of reality”; and the *sidpa bardo*, or “bardo of rebirth.”<sup>95</sup> Rituals performed and prayers offered by survivors, analogous to Christianity’s requiem and prayers for the dead, are believed to facilitate the individual’s progress.

Opportunities for further work include reconciling theosis with one or more of the planetary initiations.<sup>96</sup> A possible candidate would be the third initiation, in which “conscious recognition of the monad becomes possible.”<sup>97</sup> A better candidate would be the fifth initiation, the level of “relative perfection” in human evolution. Christian esotericists sometimes equate the fifth initiation with Christ’s resurrection, providing a neat sequence from the nativity (the first initiation) through the ascension (the sixth). Trans-Himalayan teachings, however, suggest that Christ attained either the sixth or the seventh initiation at his resurrection.<sup>98</sup> The seventh initiation is termed the “true resurrection.”<sup>99</sup>

Bailey commented that that fifth initiation “is the true time of emergence from the tomb of darkness and constitutes an entrance into a light of an entirely different nature to any hitherto experienced.”<sup>100</sup> That light could very well be the “divine light” reported by the hesychasts, whether or not “emergence from the tomb” refers to resurrection.

The rare individuals believed to have attained theosis in their lifetimes may have been new masters. James Strong’s comments on the resurrected body could be compared with esoteric teachings on the *mayavirupa*, the glorified bodies manifested by fifth-degree initiates.<sup>101</sup>

The most serious obstacle to synthesis lies in the description of Christ’s natures and personhood. The Chalcedon decree essentially ended the development of christology; the only significant addition came in 680 when the Third Council of Constantinople decreed that Jesus Christ had both a human and a divine will. Enduring Christian dogma declares that Jesus Christ was, and remains, a single hypostasis, or “person,” with two distinct natures and two wills. Bulgakov spoke of “two streams of life” without separation but also without confusion.<sup>102</sup> Church leaders insist that the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity, which also underlies the Christian understanding of theosis, was demanded by the redemptive act.

Trans-Himalayan teachings describe “Jesus Christ” as the union of two human individualities, both of whom attained individualization on this globe, the latter “only” two (or possibly three) initiatory grades above the former.<sup>103</sup> Christian theologians would not regard that description of Christ as sufficiently divine—though “divine” and “God” are imprecisely defined in Christian doctrine. They would also react to suggestions that the human–divine union was only temporary. Esotericists stress, however, that Christ carried with him the Second Aspect energy and intent of the Planetary Logos; they also stress that the union was no ordinary partnership.

## Concluding Remarks

The concepts of theosis and the intermediate state offer more favorable prospects for narrowing the gap between Christian doctrine and modern esotericism than do better-known Christian teachings on human destiny. On the other hand, the human condition and the afterlife are just two of

many issues that have divided Christianity from esoteric philosophy over the centuries.

A viable system of esoteric Christianity, with a robust philosophical and ethical foundation, would need to provide satisfactory answers to all or most of the major questions of ultimate concern. Much work clearly remains to be done to reach that goal. Esoteric Christianity is still in its infancy, relative, say, to the esoteric Buddhism that developed in the 19th century. But important steps were taken in the 15th through 17th centuries, with the Hermetic Kabbalah and Rosicrucianism, and in the early 20th century, with Christian Theosophy. Work has continued, and further progress should come quickly as interest increases among practicing Christians and informed esotericists.

The difficulties involved in bridging the gap between Christian doctrine and esoteric teachings should not be underestimated, but several considerations encourage us to try. First, Christ's incarnation bridged the ontological gap between Creator and created. By comparison, securing consensus among sincere human beings on issues like their own destiny should be relatively easy. Second, the Sixth Ray is passing out of manifestation, and narrow ideologies--symptomatic of its crystallizing phase--continue to weaken. Third, and probably resulting from the second, sectarian polemic among Christian denominations, with histories marred by centuries of mutual antagonism, is at an all-time low, and mutual understanding at an all-time high. In particular, the degree of convergence already achieved between western and eastern Christianity has exceeded expectations.

Bridging the gap will require more than just scholarship and negotiation. Attempts to reduce issues extending over multiple levels of reality to a set of intellectual formulas are futile. We no longer believe, as Plato did, that man's highest faculty is the rational mind. Differences in describing Christ's incarnation and similar matters may be irresolvable at an intellectual level. But synthesis may be possible at the buddhic level.

Inspiration from still higher levels may be forthcoming, once the will exists to let it happen. Meditation, prayer, and contemplation will all be needed. When Henry Hill, bishop of Ontario, was appointed co-chair of the AOJDD in 1980, he moved to an ecumenical Benedictine priory where Anglican, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and other Christians shared a communal life of contemplation. Silent prayer, he commented, "unites us more deeply than our schisms can divide."<sup>104</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Church's prominent role in developing and promoting the strong concept of theosis—along with its vibrant mystical theology with many other accomplishments—is highly significant. A passage in Alice Bailey's teachings referred to Russia's ongoing role in the spiritual evolution of the planet:

Out of Russia . . . will emerge that new and magical religion about which I have so often told you. It will be the product of the great and imminent Approach which will take place between humanity and the Hierarchy. From these two centers of spiritual force, in which the light which ever shineth in and from the East will irradiate the West, the whole world will be flooded with the radiance of the Sun of Righteousness.<sup>105</sup>

Even if a synthesis of understanding on major theological/philosophical issues can be achieved, it is unlikely to be embraced by Christians of all persuasions, or for that matter by esotericists of all stripes—witness the "christianization" controversy in the Theosophical Society a century ago. Some esotericists and many others are hostile to Christianity because of repression and violence carried out in its name. They should note the distinction made by Pavel Florensky, Bulgakov, and others in the Orthodox tradition between the *mystical church*, which lies outside space and time, and the *historical church* that struggled through the centuries, often failing to live up to its archetype.<sup>106</sup> Other esotericists regard all religion as a thing of the past, a remnant

of the Path of Aspiration, unworthy of anyone committed to discipleship.

Notwithstanding, a comprehensive system of Christian esotericism could appeal to large numbers of practicing Christians whose questions are not being answered by traditional doctrine. It could also appeal to significant segments of the esoteric community who recognize Christianity's continued relevance in the Aquarian Age and its role in the New World Religion when "The living Christ will assume His rightful place in human consciousness."<sup>107</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Plato's *psyche* corresponded to the ancient Egyptian *ka* and the Judaic *nefesh*. In the western mystery tradition the nonphysical component of the human constitution, extending from the etheric vehicle upward, was referred to as the *astral body*, on account of the "twinkling stars" clairvoyants saw in the etheric aura. Writers in the trans-Himalayan tradition unwisely applied "astral" to the emotional/desire body, which clairvoyants describe as being filled with clouds of fog or smoke!

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Kittel *et al.*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 1,343. Diacritical marks removed.

<sup>3</sup> Helena P. Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, 1889; reprint (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1972), 110. Parenthesis in original.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar* (New York: Lucis Publ. Co., 1922), xv. Also Charles W. Leadbeater, *Man Visible and Invisible*, 1925, reprint (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1971), 16–20. Note that in trans-Himalayan teachings "Logos" corresponds to "God" rather than Christ.

<sup>5</sup> See for example John F. Nash, *The Soul and Its Destiny* (Bloomington, IL: Authorhouse, 2004), 89–121.

<sup>6</sup> The trinitarian doctrine was formulated by the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381). Hypostases, or distinct divine realities, can be compared with the *partzufim* of the theoretical Kabbalah.

<sup>7</sup> Eastern Orthodox Christianity retains the original Nicene language that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. The western

church modified the creed to state that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son.

<sup>8</sup> That doctrine is referred to as "creationism" (carefully distinguished from the meaning assigned by modern anti-evolutionists). Thomas Aquinas strongly promoted the creationist belief.

<sup>9</sup> Fourth Council of Constantinople, canon 11 and preamble. Online: [http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0869-0869\\_Concilium\\_Constantinopolitanum\\_IV\\_Documenta\\_Omnia\\_EN.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0869-0869_Concilium_Constantinopolitanum_IV_Documenta_Omnia_EN.pdf).

The council is not regarded as a major ecumenical council, and some historians claim that the outcome was distorted by voting irregularities. Nevertheless, the notion of the binary human constitution became entrenched in western Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin's teachings on the human condition are often summarized by the acronym TULIP, standing for "total depravity," "unconditional election," "limited atonement," "irresistible grace," and "perseverance of the saints."

<sup>11</sup> Calvin promoted "single predestination," which referred to the predestination of the elect to heaven. "Double predestination," which asserted that all other souls were predestined to hell, was developed by his successors in the Reformed Church.

<sup>12</sup> Nathan R. Kerr, "St. Anselm: *Theoria* and the Doctrinal Logic of Perfection," *Partakers of the Divine Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 184.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth S. Guthrie (ed.), *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Publishers, 1988), 90.

<sup>14</sup> Many other cultures deified secular rulers, including China, Japan and Tibet.

<sup>15</sup> *Isaiah* 41:23. All scriptural citations in this article are from the King James Bible.

<sup>16</sup> *Psalms* 82:6.

<sup>17</sup> *John* 10:34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:14.

<sup>19</sup> *Galatians* 2:20.

<sup>20</sup> *2 Corinthians* 3:18. See the discussion in Stephen Finlan, "Can We Speak of *Theosis* in Paul?", *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 68–80.

<sup>21</sup> *Hebrews* 12:23.

<sup>22</sup> *2 Peter* 1:2–4a. Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book VI, §38.3. See also book V, §1:8.

- <sup>24</sup> Vladimir Kharlamiv, "Rhetorical Application of *Theosis* in Greek Patristic Literature," *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 121.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.
- <sup>26</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration*, §21:1.
- <sup>27</sup> J. A. McGuckin, "The Strategic Adaptation of Deification," *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 105–7.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.
- <sup>29</sup> *John* 1:14.
- <sup>30</sup> McGuckin, "The Strategic Adaptation of Deification," 97. Italicization in original. The term *anakephaliosis* was little used after the patristic era, but Paul Tillich revived it in his *History of Christian Thought* (1972).
- <sup>31</sup> The fifth- or sixth-century Syrian Neoplatonist who used the pseudonym "Dionysius the Areopagite" is best remembered for his work on divine emanation through the angelic hierarchies.
- <sup>32</sup> Elena Vishnevskaya, "Divinization as Perichoretic Embrace in Maximus the Confessor," *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 134–6.
- <sup>33</sup> Cyril was dead by the time debate over Christ's dual nature came to a head. Although the orthodoxy of his teachings was questioned retroactively, he was honored as a saint by both Rome and Constantinople. The Copts regarded him as their spiritual father because of his teachings on the merged natures.
- <sup>34</sup> *John* 6:53–8.
- <sup>35</sup> Stephen J. Davis, "The Coptic-Arabic Tradition of Theosis," *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 168.
- <sup>36</sup> Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1963/1997), 64. Ware, an Englishman, converted to Greek Orthodoxy and eventually became known as Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia.
- <sup>37</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 196.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 221–2.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 213–5.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.
- <sup>43</sup> John F. Nash, "Sophia: the Gnostic Heritage," *The Esoteric Quarterly*, Fall 2009, 29–39.
- <sup>44</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 1933, translation (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2008), 187.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.
- <sup>46</sup> Boris Jakim, "Sergius Bulgakov: Russian *Theosis*," *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 253.
- <sup>47</sup> Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 408.
- <sup>48</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press, 1937), 108–9. Emphasis in original.
- <sup>49</sup> Quoted in Boris Jakim, "Sergius Bulgakov," *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 252.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.
- <sup>52</sup> John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, §V.7.
- <sup>53</sup> Kerr, "St. Anselm: *Theoria* and the Doctrinal Logic of Perfection," 178.
- <sup>54</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part I–II, §112, 1. Aquinas attributed the statement "God was made man, that man might be made God" to Augustine rather than Athanasius.
- <sup>55</sup> For Aquinas's discussion of the beatific vision see his *Summa Theologiae*, Part I–II, §92, 1. See also *1 Corinthians* 13:12.
- <sup>56</sup> Francis J. Caponi, "Karl Rahner," *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 263.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.
- <sup>58</sup> Jonathan Linman, "Martin Luther: 'Little Christs for the World,'" *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 189–99. J. Todd Billings, "John Calvin: United to God through Christ," *ibid.*, 200–18.
- <sup>59</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, *Ninety-Six Sermons*, reprint, Oxford: Parker, vol. 3, 109. The Caroline Divines were a series of churchmen who preserved the sacramental form of Anglicanism through the period of the English Civil War, bracketed by the reigns of Charles I and II.
- <sup>60</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 1777, §17.
- <sup>61</sup> Michael J. Christensen, "John Wesley: Christian Perfection as Faith Filled with the Energy of Love," *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 223. Parenthesis in original.
- <sup>62</sup> Richard M. Benson, "The Virgin Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Foundation of the Christian Religion." Online: <http://anglicanhistory.org/benson/virginbirth.html>.
- <sup>63</sup> A. Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, 1949, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 89.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

- 65 Ibid..
- 66 Anglican–Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Discussions (AOJDD), Moscow Agreed Statement, 1976, §I, 1–3. Online: [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/orthodox/docs/pdf/the\\_moscow\\_statement.pdf](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/orthodox/docs/pdf/the_moscow_statement.pdf).
- 67 Ibid. Parenthesis and italicization in original
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 AOJDD, Dublin Agreed Statement, 1984, §4(a). Online: [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/orthodox/docs/the\\_dublin\\_statement.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/orthodox/docs/the_dublin_statement.cfm).
- 70 Pia Chaudhari, master’s thesis, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, 2009.
- 71 *Purgatorio* is the second part of the trilogy *The Divine Comedy*.
- 72 Indulgences were offered by the papacy for various kinds of good works, including making certain pilgrimages, serving on crusades, and donating money. Chantries were sums of money paid to the church for masses to be said, often in perpetuity, for beneficiaries.
- 73 David C. Ford, “Prayer and the Departed Saints,” 1. Online: [http://www.holy-trinity-church.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=70&Itemid=131](http://www.holy-trinity-church.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=70&Itemid=131).
- 74 Ibid., 2.
- 75 See the discussion in John F. Nash, *Christianity: the One, the Many* (Bloomington, IL: Xlibris, 2007), vol. 2, 214.
- 76 Wesley, “Letter to Miss B,” April 17, 1776, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (New York: Harper, 1827), 322.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 James Strong, *The Doctrine of a Future Life* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1891), 57.
- 79 Ibid., 65.
- 80 Ibid., 70.
- 81 Ibid., 73–8.
- 82 Ibid., 82, 86–7.
- 83 *Revelation* 6:11.
- 84 Ibid., 14:13.
- 85 John H. Newman, “The Intermediate State,” *John Henry Newman: Parochial and Plain Sermons* (Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 1997), 720–1.
- 86 H. Lloyd Russell, “The Intermediate State and Prayer for the Departed,” *Sermon, All Soul’s Day, 1885* (London: Guild of All Souls, 1885), 8.
- 87 AOJDD, Dublin Agreed Statement, §72.
- 88 Ibid.
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 See the extensive discussion in Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 213–47. The doctrine of *kenosis* is based on *Philippians* 2:7.
- 91 John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, §V.7.
- 92 John H. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976), 393–5.
- 93 The book is attributed to the eighth-century Tibetan mystic Padmasambhava.
- 94 No records suggest that John Wesley knew of the *Bardo*, but his choice of the term “intermediate state” is highly significant.
- 95 Graham Coleman, *et al.*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Penguin Books 2005.)
- 96 For an in-depth discussion of the initiatory path see Alice A. Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations* (New York: Lucis Publ. Co., 1960.)
- 97 Alice A. Bailey, *The Externalization of the Hierarchy* (New York: Lucis Publ. Co., 1957), 158.
- 98 Bailey indicated in *Initiation, Human and Solar* (p. 17) that Christ has attained the sixth initiation. But in *The Rays and the Initiations* (p. 730) she stated that he attained the seventh initiation at the resurrection.
- 99 Bailey, *The Rays and the Initiations*, 643.
- 100 Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar*, 644.
- 101 See for example Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* (New York: Lucis Publ. Co., 1934), 761. Also Bailey, *The Externalization of the Hierarchy*, 697.
- 102 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 244.
- 103 See for example Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar*, 45–9. Also Charles W. Leadbeater, *The Inner Life*, 1910, abridged reprint (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1978), 6–8. Christian theologians refer to division of the person of Jesus Christ as Nestorianism. It was condemned as heretical by the First Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451).
- 104 “Bishop Henry Hill Devoted Years of Study and Dialogue to Orthodoxy,” *AnglicanJournal.com*, October 25, 2006.
- 105 Alice A. Bailey, *The Destiny of the Nations* (New York: Lucis Publ. Co., 1949), 61.
- 106 See the discussion in Nash, *Christianity: the One, the Many*, vol. 2, 280–5.
- 107 Bailey, *The Externalization of the Hierarchy*, 202.