

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 26 | Issue 5

Article 12

12-1-2009

An Eastern Orthodox Conception of Theosis and Human Nature

Jonathan D. Jacobs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Jacobs, Jonathan D. (2009) "An Eastern Orthodox Conception of Theosis and Human Nature," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 5 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss5/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

AN EASTERN ORTHODOX CONCEPTION OF THEOSIS AND HUMAN NATURE

Jonathan D. Jacobs

Although foreign—and perhaps shocking—to many in the west, the doctrine of theosis is central to the theology and practice of Eastern Orthodoxy. On the Orthodox view, the goal of human existence and the purpose of creation is that God unite himself to creation with humanity at the focal point. In this paper, I explore an account of human nature inspired by a robustly metaphysical reading of the Orthodox conception of theosis.

Although foreign—and perhaps shocking—to many in the west, the doctrine of theosis is central in the theology and practice of Eastern Orthodoxy. Theosis is “the ultimate goal of human existence”¹ and indeed is “a way of summing up the purpose of creation”:² that God will unite himself to all of creation with humanity at the focal point.

What are human persons, that they might be united to God? That is the question I explore in this paper. In particular, I explore an account of human nature inspired by an Eastern Orthodox conception of theosis. In section 1, I present a theological vision of theosis in the Eastern church. In section 2, I offer an interpretation of what it might mean for human nature to become deformed by the Fall and transformed by the Incarnation. Then, in section 3, I present an (admittedly speculative) account of human nature, based on a robustly metaphysical reading of an Orthodox conception of theosis. On that account—to overly simplify things, and postponing important qualifications—we might say that a human being is the union of soul and body *with God*. Finally, given that account of human nature, I offer in section 3 some brief reflections on the prospects of a scientific anthropology.

1. *Theosis*

The concept of theosis (or deification or divinization) is not explicitly used in Scripture, but it is rooted therein.³ “I said you are gods,” the Psalmist

¹G. I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), p. 12.

²A. Louth, “The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, ed. M. J. Christensen and J. A. Wittung (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2007), p. 36.

³In this section, I draw heavily from J. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (London: The Faith Press, 1964); J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal*



has God say when addressing humans, “sons of the most high—all of you” (Psalm 82:6). And Peter tells us of the “exceedingly great and precious” promise that we will become “partakers of the divine nature” (1 Peter 1:4).

What was hinted at in Scripture became explicit in the early church. Irenaeus of Lyons claimed that God “became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.”⁴ Clement of Alexandria says that “he who obeys the Lord and follows the prophecy given through him . . . becomes a god while still moving about in the flesh.”⁵ “God became man,” Athanasius famously tells us, “so that men might become gods.”⁶ Cyril of Alexandria says that we “are called ‘temples of God’ and indeed ‘gods,’ and so we are.”⁷ Basil claims that “becoming a god” is the highest goal of all.⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus implores us to “become gods for his sake, since he became man for our sake.”⁹ Such quotations are a small selection of the many and varied appeals to theosis in the early church.

Theosis is not merely an Eastern teaching; it is *catholic*. The *Catechism* of the Roman Catholic church, for example, quotes Irenaeus and Athanasius, as above, but also Aquinas when he says that “[t]he only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods.”¹⁰

But while talk of becoming gods is widespread in the early church, it’s not clear there was widespread agreement about the nature of theosis. Norman Russell speaks broadly of four uses of the language of theosis in the early church.¹¹ The “nominal” use applies “god” to humans merely as a title of honor. The “analogical” use applies the term to humans by analogy, as, for example, the wise man is a god to the fool. On the “ethical” use, the term is applied to humans who become like Christ through refinement of their character, when they have become similar in certain respects to Christ. Finally, on the “realistic” use, the term applies to humans whose nature has been, in some sense, transformed in virtue of participation in or union with God.

Themes (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974); V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976); P. Nellas, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997); J. Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers* (Anaheim, CA: A & C Press, 2002); K. Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002); N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Christensen and Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*.

⁴*Against Heresies* 5, Preface.

⁵*Stromateis* 7.

⁶*De Incarnatione* 54.

⁷*Dialogues on the Trinity* 7.

⁸*De Spiritu Sancto* 9.

⁹*First Oration*.

¹⁰From the *Catechism*, Section 2, Article 3, Paragraph 1, 460. The Aquinas quotation comes from *Opusculum* 57.

¹¹Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*.

It is this later, metaphysical, understanding of theosis that came to dominate in the east. On this view, to become a god is to become transformed by uniting ourselves to God. As Louth puts it,

What is envisaged is a transformation, a transfiguration, of human beings. Those are big words, but what is certainly meant is a real change: a change that is the result of coming to share in the life of God.¹²

Orthodox theology wants to speak of this change in terms of ontology, not because this change involves a conversion into something other than human, but rather because the change involved is fundamental, radical, a re-building of what it is to be human from the roots up.¹³

This last, realistic sense of theosis is the sense I am interested in. It is certainly not the only legitimate understanding of theosis, not even in Eastern Orthodoxy itself. It is, nevertheless, the dominant view in the east. Because of this, and because I think it has interesting implications for an understanding of human nature, I shall hereafter speak only of the realistic sense of theosis. In particular, I shall understand theosis as, first, the transformation of the human person and, second, participation in or union with God.

1.1 *The Image*

To better understand this conception of theosis, let us begin by considering the Eastern doctrine of the image of God. Genesis tells us that man was created in the image of God. In the early church, the image in man is identified in a variety of ways: our moral virtues, our rationality, our free will, for example, or the immortality of the soul. Later, in the Eastern church, the image of God in man came to be understood, not as any one part of a human person, but the whole of the person.

This static description of the *image* of God in man is coupled with a dynamic description of the *likeness* of God in man. Man was created perfect, not in finality, but in the sense of perfect potentiality. He did not possess his end, union with God, but was rather called to it. Thus "[t]he perfection of our first nature lay above all in this capacity to . . . be united more and more with the fullness of the Godhead."¹⁴ As a result of this unrealized capacity, we can say that "man at his first creation was innocent and capable of spiritual development."¹⁵ Hence, according to the Eastern church, humanity's perfection was something it was called to realize fully. The image is "a gift within man but at the same time a goal set before him, a possession but also a destiny."¹⁶

¹²Louth, "The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology," p. 37.

¹³Ibid., pp. 39–40.

¹⁴Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 126.

¹⁵Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 52.

¹⁶Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 37.

One way to interpret the claim that our destiny is union with God is to suppose that, as Ware puts it, “man has God as the innermost center of his being.”¹⁷ Human persons have what Nellas calls a “theological structure.”¹⁸ According to this conception, a human person is not fully his or herself apart from God. According to Meyendorff, “[m]an has been created not as an autonomous, or self-sufficient, being; his very *nature* is truly itself only inasmuch as it exists ‘in God’ or ‘in grace.’”¹⁹ Meyendorff calls this essential feature, which I’ll return to below, humanity’s *openness* to God.

1.2 Union Without Confusion: Essence, Energy and Hypostasis

Humanity’s openness to God is an openness to participation in or union with God. Following Gregory Palamas,²⁰ we may distinguish three types of union (without confusion) with God. Union in essence holds only amongst the three hypostases of the Trinity, who are united (one essence) without confusion (three hypostases).²¹ Hypostatic union holds between the divine and human natures of Christ. Here, again, there is union (one hypostasis) without confusion (two natures). Finally, there is union in energy between the deified person and the divine energies.

To understand this later form of union without confusion, unique in Eastern thought, we must first understand the distinction between essence and energy.²² In his essence, God is transcendent, unknowable, incommunicable. But the divine energies are immanent, knowable, communicable. The divine energies are the activities of God, divine operations or manifestations. They are not the effects of God; nor are they emanations *from* God. They are “God Himself in His activities”²³ and “natural processions of God Himself.”²⁴ These uncreated energies are not personal beings, but are rather manifestations or modes of existence of a personal being.²⁵ As Ware puts it, “essence signifies the whole God as he is in himself; the energies signify the whole God as he is in action.”²⁶

¹⁷Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 52.

¹⁸Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 42.

¹⁹Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 138.

²⁰See, especially, *Capita* 75, where he distinguishes three “realities” in God: essence, energy and the three divine hypostases.

²¹Some in Eastern Orthodoxy think that this very same type of union, union in essence, was intended to hold among human persons. See, for example, Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*; and J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).

²²See K. Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed: The Apophatic Way and the Essence-Energies Distinction,” *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1975), pp. 125–136; and D. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) for further discussion.

²³Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 22.

²⁴Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 54.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

²⁶Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 22.

Though human persons by their very nature are open to union with God, they are not capable of union with God *in his essence*. If human persons were united to the essence of God, they would be God by nature, and hence God would not be triune but a multitude. Neither are human persons capable of being united hypostatically to one of the persons of the Trinity, for that sort of union is unique to the Son.²⁷ Theosis is, therefore, union with God in his energies according to the Eastern church. This energetic union is not a “fusion or confusion”;²⁸ neither is it an “ontological commingling of the divine with the human nature.”²⁹ It is, rather, a genuine union of God, in his energies, with human persons.

1.3 *The Fall*

God placed Adam on the path to such a union, but unfortunately Adam chose a different path. What God offered Adam through grace—union with himself—Adam pursued on his own accord. In doing so, he re-oriented himself away from union with God; he turned from “God-centeredness to self-centeredness.”³⁰

While Adam’s sin did not destroy the image of God in man—it was “obscured but not obliterated”³¹—his sin did, according to the Eastern church, effect a *change in human nature*.³² It is this distorted nature, not original guilt, that Adam passed on to future generations.³³ In this sense, sin introduced a kind of sickness needing healing, not merely a legal debt needing payment. Because of this sick or “mutilated”³⁴ nature, man was no longer capable of union with God. “The original natural chasm between God and man”—which man was called to bridge through grace—was “insuperably widened” after the Fall.³⁵ The Fall had thus “rendered man inferior to his vocation.”³⁶

In short, the Fall caused human nature itself to become deformed. The descendants of Adam were thus incapable of being deified without some dramatic change—a restoration or recreation of human nature.

²⁷See, among many others, Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 70, for this sort of argument.

²⁸Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 22.

²⁹R. G. Stephanopoulos, “The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis,” in *The New Man: An Orthodox and Reformed Dialogue*, ed. J. Meyendorff and J. McLelland (New Brunswick: Agora Books, 1973), p. 150.

³⁰Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 59.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 61.

³²See below for a discussion of what it might mean for a nature to be changed.

³³See J. Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin* (Ridgewood, NJ: Zephyr Publishing, 1998) for further discussion.

³⁴Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 125.

³⁵Stephanopoulos, “The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis,” p. 155.

³⁶V. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), p. 74.

1.4 The Incarnation

That is what, according to the Eastern church, Christ accomplished in the Incarnation. Christ took upon himself human nature and united it to the divine nature, thereby transforming it. "Recasting human nature as if it were a shattered and ruined statue, He raised it up new, spiritual, and imperishable."³⁷ It is for this reason that it would be appropriate to refer to the birth of Christ as the birthday of the human race,³⁸ for it was at the moment of the union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ that human nature was remade.³⁹

God's ultimate goal of union with humanity was never destroyed, but the means of achieving the goal were changed on account of the Fall. "What man ought to have attained by raising himself up to God, God achieved by descending to man."⁴⁰ This achievement, the change in human nature accomplished by Christ, is not human nature's destruction, but its transformation. Were Christ to have destroyed human nature and created a new nature, akin to but numerically distinct from human nature, then Christ would not have saved humanity, but destroyed it. It was the purpose of humanity, itself—not some other, similar nature—that Christ fulfilled. "[T]he vocation of the first Adam was fulfilled by Christ, the second Adam."⁴¹

Of course Christ did not achieve the deification of each individual human person. Rather, he accomplished the transformation of human nature, so that those who acquire this new nature are once again *capable* of theosis. The deification of particular human persons still requires the grace of God and their cooperation (in the sacramental life, ascetic discipline, and so on). But the Incarnation set back on the path to theosis those who acquire this transformed human nature.

1.5 Baptism

How, then, are we to acquire this transformed human nature? According to the Eastern church, it is through the sacrament of baptism. "Through baptism man's biological being actually participates in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism is literally a new birth in Christ and in this sense a new creation of man."⁴²

For this reason Gregory Palamas speaks of baptism as the resurrection of the soul that had died as a result of the Fall. It is the first resurrection,

³⁷Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 113.

³⁸See *On the Nativity of Christ*, attributed to Basil.

³⁹Of course this does not entail that Christ's human nature was, at the moment of his birth, both transformed and deified.

⁴⁰V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), p. 136.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 133–134.

⁴²Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 121.

followed by the second resurrection of the body.⁴³ Baptism, then, is not merely for the forgiveness of sins, though it is that. It is also “an ontological event; it refashions and completes [man’s] created being.”⁴⁴ It is therefore quite appropriate to speak, as Maximos the Confessor does,⁴⁵ of baptism as a second form of generation. Our first birth makes us sons of Adam; our second, sons of God.

Baptism, of course, is not sufficient for theosis. Rather, baptism, the putting on of a new nature, makes theosis once again possible. It re-orientes us toward God. The journey to union further requires the grace of God and a person’s cooperation (the sacramental life, ascetic discipline, and so on).

1.6 Summary

Theosis is the union of a human person with God in his energies. Theosis was our original purpose and was written into our nature, but the Fall deformed our nature and made theosis impossible. God therefore united himself to human nature, in the person of the Son, and transformed it so that we are once again capable of union with him. The transformation of each of our own natures is accomplished in the sacrament of baptism, but theosis itself requires the grace of God and each person’s cooperation.

2. The Transformation of Nature

What might it mean for human nature to be *changed* or *transformed* by the Fall and again by the Incarnation? If human nature were literally changed, it would no longer be *human* nature.⁴⁶

Maximos the Confessor, in speaking of this nature “instituted afresh,” speaks of it as a new *mode* of existence.⁴⁷ It is, in that sense, not a different nature, but a different way of having the nature, a different way of being human. There are, on this way of understanding the talk of changes in human nature, at least two ways of being human: the before-the-Fall way and the after-the-Incarnation-and-baptism way.

One possible way to better understand these different ways of being human is to consider the concept of a normative kind introduced by Nicholas Wolterstorff.⁴⁸ A norm-kind, for Wolterstorff, is a kind that can have properly and improperly formed instances. He is primarily concerned with the thesis that art works are norm-kinds—so that, say, a poorly performed instance of a symphony is still an instance of that symphony—but

⁴³*Triads*, 1.

⁴⁴Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 124.

⁴⁵To *Thalassios: On Various Questions*, 61.

⁴⁶I’m thankful to Terence Cuneo and David Bradshaw for helping me see the importance of this point.

⁴⁷David Bradshaw pointed this out to me. See *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, ed. P. M. Blowers and R. L. Wilken (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).

⁴⁸See N. Wolterstorff, “Towards an Ontology of Art Works,” *Nous* 9 (1975), pp. 115–142. My thanks to Terence Cuneo for this suggestion.

we can abstract away from his specific considerations and apply the concept to human nature. Improperly formed instances of a kind are incorrect, damaged, malfunctioning. This captures nicely the view of fallen human nature under consideration; it is deformed, mutilated. After the Fall and before the Incarnation and baptism, instances of the kind human, human persons, are no longer capable of union with God. They are malfunctioning. So the relation between pre- and post-Fall human nature seems to mirror the relation between properly and improperly formed instances of a norm-kind.⁴⁹

3. Human Nature

What should one who accepts this view of theosis say about human nature? The central question, it seems to me, is how we should understand what Meyendorff calls the openness of human nature to God. I suggest we understand it in this way: God is—or, properly speaking, the divine energies are—metaphysically built into the structure of true human nature.

Recall how humanity's openness to God is characterized. Human persons are said to have a theological structure, with God at the center of their being. It is tempting to interpret this idea in a metaphysically innocent way. Perhaps all that it means to be open to God in this way is that human persons have a natural disposition to desire to be close to God, and feel empty when they are far from him. Or perhaps all that it means is that we are incapable of fulfilling our vocation without God's help.

But it is difficult to square these deflationary conceptions of the openness of humanity to God with the idea that the openness thesis, as we might call it, is a *metaphysical* or *ontological* claim. It is not merely a claim about our psychology; it is a metaphysical claim about our very being. It is a claim about what it is to be a human being, just as we might claim that what it is to be an atom is to be composed of protons, neutrons and electrons related in a certain way.

Furthermore, when we are distant from God, the result is not merely psychological. It is ontological. Absent from God, the claim is, we are not fully human. As Ware puts it, "[t]o believe that man is made in God's image is to believe that man is created for communion and union with God, and that if he rejects this communion he ceases to be properly man."⁵⁰

⁴⁹A full articulation of the transformation of human nature, however, requires discussion of the relation between pre-Fall and post-Incarnation human nature. If the Incarnation simply restored it to its original state, then the distinction between properly and improperly formed instances of a norm-kind would sufficiently capture the distinction between pre-Fall and post-Incarnation human natures, since they would be identical. But there is some sense in which the post-Incarnation human nature is better than pre-Fall human nature. As Ware puts it, the Incarnation "effects more than a reversal of the Fall. . . . When God becomes man, this marks the beginnings of an essentially new stage in the history of man, and not just a return to the past. The Incarnation raised man to a new level; the last state is higher than the first" (Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 70). I leave a full discussion of this issue for another time.

⁵⁰Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 52.

Similarly, Nellas claims that when a human person “denies God he denies himself and destroys himself.”⁵¹

So it is difficult to square any deflationary interpretation of the openness of humanity with the metaphysical nature of the claim—difficult, but not impossible. No doubt one could interpret the openness thesis in a non-metaphysical or non-ontological way, and in a manner consistent with orthodoxy and the spirit of Eastern Orthodoxy. But I would like to consider what it might be like to interpret the openness thesis in a metaphysically robust way. It seems to me that one can undergo a sort of gestalt shift once one attempts this. All manner of phrases or sayings that we normally interpret as mere analogies can suddenly jump out as surprisingly ontological claims about God’s literal presence in each human person. Eastern Orthodox Christians are accustomed to praying, “O heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things. . . .” We are told, in Acts 7:28, that it is in God that “we live and move and have our being,” and, in 1 Corinthians 6:19, that “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.” In 1 John 4:15, we are promised that “he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.”

How might we take seriously—literally!—this presence of God in the believer? One way, I suggest, is to interpret the openness thesis in a robustly metaphysical way. What, then, might that look like? Consider, for the sake of comparison, a fairly traditional account of human nature in the west, hylomorphism, according to which the human person is the union of soul and body. The soul is the form of the body. While most forms cannot exist independently of that of which they are the form, because the intellectual soul has capacities that are not dependent upon the body, it can exist separately. Nevertheless, the human person is not the soul; nor is she the body. The human person is the union of the soul and body. At death, when the soul and body separate, the body ceases to exist (as a human body), but the soul continues on.

Compare this, briefly, to substance dualism, according to which the human person is identical with the soul. The person *has* a body, but is not identical with it. The soul, on this view, is an independent substance capable of existing without the body. Hence, the human person is capable of existing without the body.

The debate between dualism and hylomorphism—whether the soul is the form of the body or an independent substance—is orthogonal to the issue at hand concerning the openness thesis. Either view, it seems to me, can accept the understanding of the openness thesis that I propose. Nevertheless, it’s helpful to consider the relationship between the human person and her body that is proposed by the hylomorphist. What should the hylomorphist say about the human person after death but before the resurrection of the body? The person, if she continues to exist after death at all, exists in an incomplete way. For if she were supposed to exist in

⁵¹Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 42.

a complete manner, then the distinction between dualism and hylomorphism becomes blurred. The human person just is the soul, if the soul is all that exists with which to be identical. (Note here that I am not at present objecting to either dualism or hylomorphism. I am rather trying to clarify the nature of the relationship between the human person and her body, were hylomorphism correct. Whether dualism or hylomorphism is consistent with other Eastern Orthodox teaching I will leave for another discussion.)

The hylomorphist, it seems, should say that either the human person ceases to exist after death—an option difficult to square with, say, the doctrine of the communion of saints—or that the human person continues to exist but in an incomplete or unnatural way. As Aquinas says, the disembodied soul has an “aptitude and a natural inclination” to be reunited with the body.⁵² Only after the resurrection of the body does the human person exist fully, as it is her nature to be.

I propose that we think of the relationship between the human person and divine energies similar to the way that the hylomorphist thinks of the relationship between the human person and her body. Just as the body is literally a metaphysical component of a fully human person, so too those who accept the Eastern conception of theosis outlined above should think that the divine energies are literally a metaphysical component of a fully human person. But just as the human person can perhaps exist in an incomplete manner apart from her body on the hylomorphist conception, so too a human person can exist in an incomplete manner apart from union with God.

For ease of presentation, let’s adopt the hylomorphic account of the human person. (What I say can, I think, be accepted *mutatis mutandis* by dualists.) Taking into account the openness thesis, we should say that a human person is the union of soul and body⁵³ with the divine energies. Human nature had, prior to the Fall, and has through baptism, a natural inclination to such union with God. To the extent that a person is not united with God—the divine energies do not penetrate a person’s very being—the person is not fully human.

Indeed, Maximus the Confessor explicitly adopts a similar proposal in his discussion of what it might mean to be, in Gregory of Nazianzus’s phrase, a “part of God.”⁵⁴ Whereas I have suggested that God is united to the full human person, body and soul, Maximus suggests that God is united to the soul: “He becomes to their souls like a soul related to a body.” This difference, I think, is not relevant for present purposes. What is important is that, according to Maximus, the whole of God is present in, united to, the whole of the deified human person.

⁵²*Summa Theologica*, I, 76, 1, ad 6.

⁵³Again, it does not matter for present purposes whether one thinks of the human person as a union of soul and body or as just the soul or even as just the body. Whatever one says there, one can then say that that thing is united to the divine energies.

⁵⁴*Ambigua* 7. The phrase comes from Gregory’s *Oration* 14.

Union seems to be the sort of thing that can come in degrees. One can, it seems, be more or less unified with God. Hence there is a clear conception of how a human person can be more or less human—she can be more or less united to God. The result seems to be that being a human person, on this view, is gradable. On the one extreme stands fallen human nature, not only not united with God but incapable of union with him. On the other stands transformed and deified human nature, fully united with God—the exemplar of which is Jesus Christ.

This view of human nature, I think, fits well with an Eastern Orthodox conception of theosis. Human nature, as Meyendorff puts it, “does not possess an autonomous existence, but *supposes* grace and communion with God, in order to fulfill its own true destiny . . . ,”⁵⁵ Man’s “true humanity is realized only when he lives ‘in God.’”⁵⁶ Human nature was created incomplete, with an openness to God, and each human person was called to fill that open place in their being with God—to become deified and *thereby* to realize fully her own human nature.

3.1 Objections and Replies

It might be objected that union between God and man would blur the distinction between creator and creature, a distinction that must be maintained if we are to remain orthodox. But it should be clear that the type of union proposed here does no such thing. It is a union between humanity and the divine energies, not God in his essence. Such an energetic union is a species of a type of union, the other species of which are union in essence and hypostatic union. In each case, there is union without confusion. If the other sorts of genuine union can be accomplished without confusion, it’s not clear why the union proposed here can’t be accomplished without confusion as well.

A second possible objection is that this view of human nature, claiming as it does that those who are not baptized are not fully human, is demeaning to non-Christians. In response, it should be noted that the proposal is that human nature is a spectrum, and each of us falls short on that spectrum. Each of us, that is, not merely those who are not baptized, is less than fully human.

A third objection, I think, is more serious. *Full* union with God, it is often claimed, is impossible since God is infinite. If that were true and full human nature requires complete union with God, then it looks as though it would be *impossible* to be fully human. But, first, it’s not clear to me that full union with God is impossible, since the union proposed here is union with the divine energies not union with God in essence. In fact, Nellas speaks of our call to “transcend the limited boundaries of creation and become *infinite*.”⁵⁷ Second, even if full union were impossible, I’m not sure

⁵⁵Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 121.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵⁷Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 28, emphasis added.

that the result is too problematic. For even if full human nature were impossible, it would still be possible to become ever more human, as union with God becomes a fuller and fuller reality.

If we combine this third objection, though, with the claim that union with God does not come in degrees—it's all or nothing—the problem becomes more serious. For then it looks as though none of us are or ever will be—or even ever *can* be—human at all. And that, surely, is a result we should reject. What we should not say, then, is *both* that full union with God is impossible and that full union with God is necessary to be a human person.

This seems to force a choice. We can either say that union with God comes in degrees, and hence perhaps being a human is a matter of degrees, or we can say that union with God is all or nothing, and it is the *capacity* for union with God that is essential to human nature. It seems to me that the former option is preferable. The later option, for example, entails that fallen human nature, since it is incapable of union with God, is after all not genuinely *human* nature.

4. Scientific Anthropology?

I turn now to some brief reflections on the role of science in anthropology. What role does science play in our efforts to learn about human nature? There is a clear sense that, if humanity truly has a theological structure as we have been claiming, science has a limited role in our understanding of human nature.

First, as Lossky puts it, in our world “the decrepitude of the old Adam too often hides from our eyes the incorruptibility of the new Adam.”⁵⁸ If we are seeking to understand human nature by observation of this fallen world, we are, according to Nellas, “searching for something which is natural in the midst of what is unnatural.”⁵⁹ True human nature, transformed and deified, is rarely witnessed in this world. “That which empirical observation calls ‘human nature’ is in biblical and patristic teaching”⁶⁰ not true human nature.

It is only when our nature is transformed and deified, says Ware, that “we see revealed the full possibilities of our human nature.” Before then, “the true implications of our personhood are still hidden from us.”⁶¹ The full reality of human nature, therefore, is not revealed by scientific observation, but is rather “illuminated inwardly.”⁶² For it is there that we will find God himself. “[F]or man God is not an external ‘principle’ (*archē*) on which man depends, but truly and in reality his ontological origin (*archē*)

⁵⁸Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, p. 184.

⁵⁹Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 43.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶¹Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, pp. 70–71.

⁶²Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 41.

and consumation."⁶³ Hence it is by becoming what we truly are that we most fully learn about true human nature.

This is consistent with a scientific understanding of *fallen* human nature, of course. But, second, according to the Eastern church theosis transforms the entire human person, including her sense perceptual capacities. Hence the deified are those who see things as they truly are. (This is why, for example, icon writers copy the icons of those iconographers who are truly holy, since it is theirs whose sight has been transformed.) Clearly, then, our fallen faculties do not fully reveal to us things as they truly are, even the nature of fallen human nature.

Does this entail a general skepticism about our epistemic situation prior to theosis? I think not. Our current epistemic situation is not unlike that of an autistic person. Autistic persons can perceive much in the world, and indeed often have a more finely tuned ability to perceive *some* things. But autistic persons do not have the sort of abilities others have when it comes to perceiving persons. They may be able to see facial expressions, for example, and describe them accurately in detail, but they cannot see them for what they truly are, expressions of emotion, say. Similarly, our fallen sense capacities need not be unreliable in general in what they deliver for them to be defective. It may be that we can see things in the world accurately, we just cannot see them for what they truly are.

Science, then, is limited in what it can deliver regarding knowledge of human nature. It can be, and indeed is, vital regarding our knowledge of fallen human nature. And it can help us understand *part* of true human nature. But because true human nature is not merely biological but theological, knowledge of true human nature requires theology. And since theology cannot be divorced from experience, in the Eastern church, knowledge of true human nature requires mystical union with God.

5. Conclusion

The doctrine of theosis is central to the Eastern church. It is not surprising, therefore, that it should have implications for an Eastern understanding of various other topics, including our understanding of human nature. According to the doctrine of theosis, human persons are created for the purpose of union with God. One way to interpret this is to say that God is, quite literally, a component of true human nature. A true human person, on such an understanding, is the union of soul and body with God.⁶⁴

St. Louis University

⁶³Ibid., p. 42.

⁶⁴I'd like to thank Terence Cuneo, Rico Vitz, Peter Feldmeier, Fr. Jonathan Proctor and Fr. Steven Solaris for comments on earlier drafts of the paper. I'd also like to thank Eleonore Stump and members of the audience at the "Science and Human Nature: Russian and Western Perspectives" conference at Baylor University for helpful conversation. Finally, special thanks are due to David Bradshaw, for helpful conversation and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.