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Salvation as justification and deification

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Abstract

Many Christians in the Western tradition would find the idea of salvation as the deification of man alien because the concept of justification by faith has played such a central and influential role in Western soteriologies. There is, however, a renaissance of the concept of deification or theosis in contemporary theology even outside its traditional home in Eastern Orthodoxy. Many Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians have discovered that although the two metaphors, justification and deification, emphasise different aspects of salvation, they are not incompatible with each other. In addition, theologians in the Western tradition are arguing that although the forensic and declarative aspect of justification is important, justification also has a transformative aspect. An exploration of the transformative aspect of justification has resulted in the discovery of interesting ways in which this concept can be brought closer to that of theosis in the Eastern tradition.

The language of salvation

> I say, 'You are gods' (Ps 82:6). This phrase from the Old Testament, quoted by our Lord Himself (Jn 10:34), has deeply marked the spiritual imagination of Orthodoxy. In the Orthodox understanding Christianity signifies not merely an adherence to certain dogmas, not merely an exterior imitation of Christ through moral effort, but direct union with the living God, the total transformation of the human person by divine grace and glory – what the Greek Fathers termed 'deification' or 'divinisation' (*theosis*, *theopoiesis*). In the words of St Basil the Great, man is nothing less than a creature that has received the order to *become God*.[1]

These words by the Orthodox Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia summarise the distinctive focus of Eastern Orthodoxy's soteriology on *theosis*, an emphasis which can be traced to the writings of the Christian Fathers of the age immediately succeeding the New Testament period. The understanding of salvation as the deification of man may sound alien to Western Christians, particularly of the Protestant variety, who are more accustomed to a

[1] Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, Foreword to Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p. 7 (emphasis his).

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soteriology centred on the concept of justification by faith. Several factors have contributed to the different approaches and emphases of Eastern and Western soteriologies, even though Christians from both traditions read the same scriptures and share a common spiritual and theological heritage. As John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias have pointed out, 'The language of the Scriptures is . . . not univocal, and in the course of time biblical terms took on new connotations or overtones (sometimes assuming a life of their own), as they were filtered through Christian experience and thought.'[2] The Protestant tradition has its roots primarily in the Western Catholic tradition, which developed independently of the East for a thousand years before the Reformation. After the seventh century and the rise of Islam, Eastern Christianity was isolated from the West. In addition, Orthodoxy had no first-hand experience of the spiritual and theological concerns of the Reformation, which took place only in Western Christendom.

Without a doubt, the concept of justification 'is central to Pauline and Augustinian theology and virtually dominates the Western theological tradition'.[3] When Augustine was developing his soteriology, 'the East experienced the rise of Byzantium, but the West knew the trauma of the fall of Rome in the fifth century'.[4] This historical experience has meant that the West had to ask the question about the justice of God more than the East, and this has profoundly influenced and even shaped the soteriologies of Latin Christianity. Thus, as Paul Hinlicky has so perceptively shown, the two images – justification and deification – answer two different questions which must not be confused with each other. Latin theology's doctrine of justification answers the fundamental question: 'Where in history is the justice of God?' Deification, on the other hand, answers questions such as: 'Why has God created life? . . . What is the purpose and goal of existence? . . . Why has God entered into human existence? Why has Christ condescended to communion with us?'[5] In addition, some scholars have pointed out that Orthodox theology's lack of interest in justification may be due to the fact that the Eastern Churches never developed an interest in Roman law.[6] The West's insistence on justification as the fundamental metaphor of salvation may arguably be attributed to its historical entrenchment in Roman law.

[2] John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias (eds), *Salvation in Christ: A Lutheran–Orthodox Dialogue* (Augsburg: Fortress, 1992), p. 17.

[3] Paul R. Hinlicky, 'Theological Anthropology: Toward Integrating *Theosis* and Justification by Faith', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34/1 (Winter 1997), p. 48.

[4] Ibid., p. 45.

[5] Ibid., p. 51.

[6] Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Doctrine of Justification* (2nd edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4.

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The profound language barrier between the theologians of the two traditions became most evident in the sixteenth century when the first contacts were made between the reformers and the patriarchs of Constantinople. It was not that the reformers did not know Greek, but rather that biblical and theological terms have assumed different meanings for the two traditions. For example, the term 'justify' in the Augsburg Confession was translated as 'sanctify' in the version sent to Jeremiah II, the patriarch of Constantinople.[7] This mistranslation cannot be reduced to semantics, for it suggests profound theological differences between the two traditions. While justification by faith is central to Protestant soteriology, there is almost no mention of the idea in the history of Orthodox theology.[8] Thus, although Luther famously insisted that the doctrine of justification is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls, and although Calvin described it as the 'hinge on which all true religion turns', there is not even a mention of the idea in the great doctrinal manual of the Eastern Church, *De Fidei Orthodoxa*, penned by one of its most eminent theologians, John of Damascus. The way in which the two traditions understand justification is also markedly different. While Protestants, following certain interpretations of the Lutheran doctrine, tend towards a forensic and juridical understanding of justification, the Orthodox concept of justification is inextricably bound to forgiveness of sin and deliverance from death. Furthermore, the Orthodox do not see 'justification' and 'sanctification' as two distinct works of God but as one divine action.

These differences have led some theologians to argue that justification by faith and *theosis* are 'the pivots of two distinct discourses' which employ very different vocabularies and sets of concepts. As George Vandervelde has put it, 'The language of justification by faith is unimaginable without reference to notions such as alienation, guilt, hostility, and sin. Its starting point is the fallen human condition as it stands before God's judgement and grace.'[9] The language of deification, however, can function without sin. It is not that sin is kept out of the picture in *theosis* soteriology, but rather that it is not its primary axis. The concept of reconciliation, so fundamental to Western soteriology, is replaced by the concept of participation in the Eastern tradition. For the Orthodox, sin merely signals the rupture of the original destiny of humankind, which is deification. Because participation is the

[7] Meyendorff and Tobias, *Salvation in Christ*, p. 19.

[8] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One in God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), p. 6.

[9] George Vandervelde, 'Justification and Deification – Problematic Synthesis: A Response to Lucian Turcescu', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 37/2 (Winter 2001), p. 74.

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centre of gravity of *theosis* soteriology, its emphasis is not sin–reconciliation but mortality–immortality, creaturely life–divine life. The Dutch Lutheran theologian K. Zwanenpol explains:

> In the soteriology of the Greek Fathers and Eastern Orthodoxy we clearly find different emphases. Central to it is a divinisation which must bridge the chasm between human existence and the life of God. This chasm is considered to be a 'natural' distance between God and humanity, by virtue of which human existence is characterised as 'alienated' or 'perishable'. Of course sin is not left out of consideration, but it is conceived as a doubling of the distance by which God and humanity are separated from each other. Accordingly, in this soteriology the forgiveness of sin and the elimination of guilt has the function of creating a precondition for making divinisation possible at all.[10]

These differences notwithstanding, there is a renaissance in the concept of deification or *theosis* in contemporary theology even outside its traditional home in Eastern Orthodoxy. Catholic theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Catherine Mowry LaCugna[11] have made creative use of the concept in developing their soteriologies and their visions of Christian existence. As Protestants reread their heritage through the church catholic, including Eastern Orthodoxy, there is a growing consensus that the idea of union is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, Christian symbols of salvation, and must therefore be reclaimed and reappropriated. Since the idea of union is not entirely foreign to mainline Protestant theology, as we shall see, the concept of deification, in the view of F. W. Norris, 'should be viewed by Protestants not as an oddity of Orthodox theology but as an ecumenical consensus, a catholic teaching of the Church, best preserved and developed by the Orthodox'.[12] This is equally true of the concept of justification, which can be traced to the Apostle Paul. Thus, although deification and justification emphasise different aspects of salvation, and although they are two distinct metaphors with different sets of cognates, they are not antithetical to each other. Instead, there is a profound coherence between the two concepts, which, when taken together, can bring about a deeper understanding of the saving work of God.

[10] K. Zwanenpol, 'Luther en Theosis', *Luther Bulletin* 2 (1993), pp. 69–70.

[11] See Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1991).

[12] F. W. Norris, 'Deification: Consensual and Cogent', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43/4 (1996), p. 422.

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Salvation as deification

We begin by examining the doctrine of deification as it is presented by the early church Fathers and preserved by the Orthodox tradition. The teaching of the Fathers is succinctly encapsulated in the axiom: 'God became human (without ceasing to be God) that humanity might become God (without ceasing to be human)'. Although it was Irenaeus who first formulated this axiom,[13] it is found in the writings of a number of the Fathers of the church including Athanasius,[14] Gregory of Nazianzus[15] and Gregory of Nyssa.[16] According to Vladimir Lossky, this axiom sums up the very essence of Christianity, namely, 'an ineffable descent of God to the ultimate limit of our fallen condition, even unto death – a descent of God which opens to men a path of ascent, the unlimited vistas of the union of created beings with Divinity'.[17] The term *theosis* or deification summarises the soteriological consequence of the incarnation for humanity and the world articulated in the second part of the formula. Deification is therefore the process of transformation from death in the flesh to life in the divine.

Following the early Fathers, Orthodox theologians maintain that there are sufficient passages in the Bible about human participation in God for *theosis* to be seen as an important image of salvation. The *locus classicus* is 2 Peter 1:4: 'Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.' Although 2 Peter speaks of the 'divine nature' in this passage, Orthodox theologians argue that what is meant here is not the transcendent divine being (*ousia*) which is incommunicable, but the divine energies, the communicable attributes of God.[18] Orthodox theologians point to a number of other passages in the Bible which either allude to deification or directly refer to it. Passages from the Old Testament include Exodus 43:30 where Moses' face shone, and Exodus 7:1 which says that Aaron became a god to Pharaoh. In the New Testament, a host of texts from the Johannine corpus is used to substantiate the doctrine of deification (John 3:8; 14:21–3; 15:4–8; 17:21–3; 1 John 3:2; 4:12). A frequently cited

[13] *Adversus haereses*, 5, preface. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 Volumes. Edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian literature, 1885–96. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951–1956; Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:526.

[14] *De incarnatione verbi*, p. 54.

[15] *Poema dogmatica*, 10.5–9.

[16] *Oratio catechetica magna*, p. 25.

[17] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), p. 97.

[18] John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias, 'Christ "in us" and Christ "for us" in Lutheran and Orthodox Theology', in Meyendorff and Tobias, *Salvation in Christ*, p. 20.

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passage is John 14:17: 'But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.' Orthodox exegetes' use of the spiritual interpretation of scripture has meant that they are largely unperturbed by the objection that some of these texts are taken out of context. In addition, as Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out, the idea of deification goes beyond the individual passages of the Bible:

> The purpose of the Lord's Prayer was to point to the mystery of deification. Baptism was 'in the name of the life-giving and deifying Trinity'. When the guests at the wedding in Cana in Galilee . . . said that their host had 'kept the good wine until now', they were referring to the Word of God, saved for the last, by which men were made divine. When, in the Epistles of the same apostle John, 'The Theologian', it was said that 'it does not yet appear what we shall be', this was a reference to 'the future deification of those who have now been children of God'. When the apostle Paul spoke of the 'riches' of the saints, this too, meant deification.[19]

Although the Bible does not refer to deification as much as the Eastern Orthodox theologians would sometimes lead us to understand, it is nonetheless an important image of salvation.

The christological basis for the doctrine of *theosis*, which was alluded to above, must now be elucidated. The deification of human beings is made possible because the second person of the Trinity has emptied himself (*kenosis*) and taken up human flesh. 'The descent (*katabasis*) of the divine person of Christ', writes Lossky, 'makes human persons capable of ascent (*anabasis*) in the Holy Spirit.'[20] The relationship between the redemptive *kenosis* of the Son and the human vocation of *theosis* is such that, even if Adam and Eve had not sinned, the incarnation was still necessary. According to Gregory of Nyssa, in the incarnation the Eternal Word 'infused himself into our nature'[21] and was 'mingled with humanity'[22] in order that he might receive our human characteristics of finiteness and mortality. But through this mingling and communication of idioms, the humanity of Christ, enhypostasised in the Logos, is penetrated by the divine energies. It is thus deified, although it never ceases to be human. As Norman Russell explains, 'The humanity taken up into the divinity may be transformed and endowed with incorruptibility but it is still human.'[23] It is in this deified humanity of Christ that human

[19] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christianity*, The Christian Tradition, 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 10.
[20] Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, p. 97.
[21] *Oratio catechetica*, p. 27.
[22] Ibid., p. 26.
[23] Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 229.

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beings are called to participate and to share in its deification. Maximus the Confessor puts forward this same view, based on the Irenaean-Athanasian exchange principle, when he writes that 'the whole man should become God, deified by the grace of God-become-man, becoming whole man, soul and body, by nature, and becoming whole God, soul and body, by grace'.[24]

All the Fathers emphasised that the union between human beings and God, which results in the deification of the former, is made possible by grace. The Fathers also emphasised that this union must not be understood in a pantheistic fashion in which the human being and God become ontologically and essentially one. Maximus, for example, maintains that, although humanity is capable of rising 'above nature' into a new mode of existence as it were,[25] the divine essence remains inaccessible.[26] The emphasis on grace is found in Gregory Palamas' exposition of the doctrine of deification. Gregory stresses the inviolability of the ontological divide between human beings and God when he asserts that '[We become] entirely God in body and soul through grace and through the divine radiance of the blessed glory'.[27] By making the connection between deification and grace, and by contrasting grace and nature, Gregory Palamas wishes to point out that the participation of the divine nature by grace in human deification is not the same as the possession of divinity by nature. The Confessor makes the same point when he argues that in Christ 'there dwells in bodily form the complete fullness of deity by essence', while in deified human beings 'the fullness of deity dwells by grace whenever we have formed in ourselves every virtue and wisdom . . . in faithful reproduction of the archetype'.[28] The emphasis on grace also implies that deification is not something that human beings can bring about through their own efforts – it is a divine gift. This comes across clearly in the Palamite doctrine of *theosis*: 'through this grace [of the Spirit] the mind comes to enjoy the divine effulgence and acquires an angelic or godlike form'[29] and 'It is through grace that the "entire Divinity comes to dwell in fullness in those deemed worthy"'.[30]

Deification and justification

Attempts have been made by Orthodox theologians to integrate their understanding of salvation as deification with the Western soteriological

[24] Quoted in Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), p. 164.

[25] Lars Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p. 88.

[26] *Ambiguorum liber*, p. 34.

[27] *Triads*, 3.3.13.

[28] *Capita theologiae et oeconomiae*, 2.21.

[29] *Triad*, 3.3.13.

[30] Ibid., 1.3.20.

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emphasis on the concept of justification by faith. In an important paper which has generated some ecumenical dialogue, 'Soteriological Issue in the 1999 Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification: An Orthodox Perspective', Orthodox theologian Lucian Turecescu criticises his own tradition for passing over the notion of justification too readily. He presents the complementarity of justification and deification by arguing that salvation is a two-stage process in which justification 'is not the end of the process but its beginning'. He maintains that the 'Orthodox do not account properly for the process of reconciliation; instead, they jump rather quickly to the second part of the process of salvation, deification'.[31] Two criticisms may be directed at Turecescu's understanding of the concept of justification. First, most Western (especially Lutheran) theologians do not see justification as merely the first phase of salvation but its ground.[32] While justification is surely the sinner's entrance into communion with God, it is not a stage in the process which can be left behind, but the foundation for Christian existence. Second, Turecescu's concept of justification conforms to the standard Western emphasis on its declaratory aspect, while neglecting its transformative aspect, which is equally important. It is this aspect of the doctrine which makes possible its creative integration with *theosis*.

The traditional interpretation of Luther's doctrine of justification has always emphasised its forensic nature. This emphasis has become the hallmark of Lutheranism and the main difference between Lutheranism and Catholicism. Two reasons have been given for the emphasis on forensic justification. The first has to do with the profound influence of the Formula of Concord's (FC) interpretation of Luther's teaching on justification. According to FC, the divine indwelling follows the antecedent justification by faith. Thus for the theologians of the FC, justification has to do with the divine favour and not with the divine indwelling which makes sinners righteous. As Simo Puera explains, this understanding of justification differs significantly from Luther's:

> Justification is the same as absolution, the declared forgiveness of sin. The imputation of Christ's obedience to us has the effect of changing the position of the sinner *coram Deo*. One is accepted as a child of God and as an inheritor of eternal life. Contrary to Luther, however, the FC excludes gift, the renewal of a Christian and the removal of sin, from the doctrine (locus) of justification. The FC indeed mentions gift, but at the same time it defines the gift in a radically limited sense compared with

[31] Lucian Turecescu, 'Soteriological Issues in the 1999 Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification: An Orthodox Perspective', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38/1 (Winter 2001), p. 67.

[32] Vandervelde, 'Justification and Deification', p. 74.

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> Luther. The gift is faith: the right knowledge of God, confidence in him, and the security that God the Father considers us righteous because of the obedience of Christ. So, gift means in the FC only the reception of forgiveness, knowledge of faith and confidence (*fiducia*), a gift that I would call a *donum minimum*.[33]

The separation of grace and gift and the consequent emphasis on the forensic aspect of justification found in the FC received philosophical support from the neo-Kantianism of the nineteenth century. Following Immanuel Kant in separating God's being from his effects, Lutheran theologians rejected all ontological speculations on the 'essence' of things. Consequently, it is claimed that only the effects of God on the believer can be known. The idea of the 'real presence' of Christ in the believer and the union between God and the human being in Christ, so important in the theology of the reformers, became totally foreign to Lutheran theology. The domination of the FC's interpretation of justification and the wide and comprehensive influence of the neo-Kantian theological school has therefore meant that 'gift, and the effective aspect of justification have lost their ontological context in Lutheran theology'.[34]

Luther did not have a problem with including both the forensic and effective aspects in his doctrine of justification. As Simo Puera has shown, these two aspects are best expressed by the conceptions of grace (*gratia*, *favor*) and gift (*donum*) in Luther's theology. Grace denotes that the sinner is forensically declared to be righteous, while gift refer to the sinner being made effectively righteous. For Luther, both the forensic and effective aspects of justification are made possible by Christ – grace and gift are not only given through Christ but in Christ and with Christ.[35] According to Luther, grace is the external good; it is God's mercy (*misericordia Dei*) and favour (*favor Dei*). Gift, on the other hand, is the internal good, opposing the corruption of human nature. Gift therefore refers to righteousness (*iustitia*), but also faith of/in Christ (*fides Christi*). As a divine donation, this gift effects a real renewal (*renovatio*) in the sinner, enabling him to conquer concupiscence and purifying the sinner from sin (*sanitas institiae*). The difference between Luther's concept of justification and that expounded in the FC is that in the latter the doctrine of justification includes only God's favour. It is concerned only with imputed righteousness, and excludes the concept of gift, the renewal of the

[33] Simo Puera, 'Christ as Favour and Gift (donum): The Challenge of Luther's Understanding of Justification', in Car Braaten and Robert Jenson (eds), *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 45.
[34] Ibid., p. 46.
[35] Ibid., p. 44.

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sinner.[36] Influenced by the FC, Lutheran theology, observes Bruce Marshall, tried to cope with this problem by assigning Luther's 'forensic' language to 'justification' and his 'transformative' language to 'sanctification'.[37]

Transformation, however, is an important aspect of justification for Luther. As Simo Puera has pointed out, 'Justification is not only a change of self-understanding, a new relation to God, or a new ethos of love. God changes the sinner ontologically in the sense that he or she participates in God and in his divine nature, being made righteous and "a god".'[38] Unlike the FC, Luther refuses to remove all transformative elements from the concept of justification. For him, if justification is not bound up with new life in Christ, which makes the believer holy, then the believer has to look for it elsewhere since salvation is not possible without holiness. Luther therefore teaches that by faith the believer is united with Christ *extra nos*, and this union is such that the believer is transformed, becoming a new self, and sharing in the righteousness and victory of Christ. In short, believers actually take on the qualities and attributes of Christ. 'Christ himself', writes Bruce Marshall, 'becomes our "form", "colouring" us with his victorious righteousness and life as truly as whiteness colours a surface to which the colour white adheres.'[39] Using the imagery of light, Basil the Great conveys the same idea: 'When a sunbeam falls on a transparent substance, the substance itself becomes brilliant, and radiates light from itself. So too Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by him, finally become spiritual themselves.'[40] This is the vision of the transformation of the sinner in Christ which is central to Luther's concept of justification. The justified believer, although still a sinner, is gradually being transformed until he or she is completely changed into the form of Christ (*conformitas Christi*) in the resurrection.[41] The *sine qua non* of this transformation is the *unio cum Christo* effected by the justifying grace of God.

The self-giving of God in Christ has a prominent place in the soteriology of Luther. The self-giving of God is realised when Christ indwells the sinner through faith and unites himself with him. Thus united with Christ, the believer becomes a partaker of Christ, which for Luther refers to the

[36] Ibid., p. 45.

[37] Bruce Marshall, 'Justification as Declaration and Deification', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4/1 (March 2002), p. 18.

[38] Puera, 'Christ as Favour and Gift', p. 48.

[39] Marshall, 'Justification as Declaration and Deification', p. 19.

[40] St Basil the Great of Caesarea, quoted by Michael J. Christensen, 'The Problem, Promise and Process of *Theosis*', in Michael Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung (eds), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 23.

[41] Puera, 'Christ as Favour and Gift', p. 62.

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deification of the believer. '[T]he notion that Christ present in the Christian' explains Tuomo Mannermaa, 'occupies a much more central place in the theology of Luther than in the Lutheranism subsequent to him. The idea of a divine life in Christ who is really present in faith lies at the very centre of the theology of the Reformer.'[42] Mannermaa maintains that the doctrine of the *inhabitatio Dei* in Luther's theology is analogous to the doctrine of *theosis*. And it is in Luther's emphases on justification as transformation, the union of the believer with Christ, and the indwelling of God in the believer by faith that the most profound convergences between the reformer's concept of justification and the Orthodox doctrine of deification are to be found. Although the reformer, like Gregory of Nyssa before him, prefers the language of participation to that of deification, it is clear that *theosis* is the culmination of his train of thought. Thus, in his *Sermon on the day of St Peter and St Paul* (1519), Luther maintains: 'For it is true that a man helped by grace is more than a man; indeed, the grace of God gives him the form of God and deifies him, so that even the Scriptures call him "God" and "God's Son".'[43] And in words reminiscent of those of Athanasius, Luther wrote in his Christmas sermon of 1514:

> Just as the word of God became flesh, so it is certainly also necessary that the flesh become word. For the word becomes flesh precisely so that the flesh may become word. In other words: God becomes man so that man may become God. Thus power becomes powerless so that weakness may become powerful. The logos puts on our form and manner.[44]

Union with God

It is the concept of the believer's union with God in Christ which serves as the common ground between the soteriologies of the Protestant tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy. Implied in this concept is that of deification which plays a dominant role in the Orthodox understanding of human salvation. But as our discussion so far has indicated, deification is not foreign to the Protestant doctrine of salvation even if it uses different idioms to describe this reality. Luther, for example, prefers terms like 'presence of Christ in faith', 'participation in God', 'union with God' and even *perichoresis*. But the central idea of the believer's transforming union with God by grace is integral to Luther's soteriology and that of the Protestant tradition. As I have pointed

[42] Tuomo Mannermaa, 'Why is Luther so Fascinating?' Modern Finnish Luther Research', in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (eds), *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 2.

[43] Luther's Works, eds Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–86), 51:58.

[44] Quoted in Kärkkäinen, *One with God*, p. 47.

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out, this is brought out by the effective aspects of the reformer's doctrine of justification which unfortunately has been eclipsed by later theologians. This same emphasis can be found in John Calvin who taught that, after receiving the 'forensic' pardon of God, the adoption of the believer is realised, and he is now freed from the 'severe requirements' of the law so that he can truly be a child of God. The believer now 'participates' in God through the 'secret power of the Spirit',[45] i.e. the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As J. Todd Billings has pointed out, 'In Calvin, the "forensic" imputation of Christ's righteousness and the mystical union with Christ are held in the closest possible relationship – one is unthinkable without the other.'[46]

It may be argued that the reformers present a particular model of *theosis* by drawing from the language of participation found in John, but especially in Paul. Justification and *theosis*, then, means the 'participation' of the believer in Christ, which of course also refers to the believer's participation in God, since Christ is God. Although the idea of the believer's participation in God can be traced to Irenaeus, it was Origen who first gave it its metaphysical rationale. The details of Origen's doctrine should not detain us. What is of moment is that Origen, and the patristic theologians after him, understood the participation of humans in God in natural and supernatural terms. Put differently, for Origen, both the doctrines of creation and salvation inform the concept of participation. From the standpoint of creation, participation is to be understood as natural and as concerning beings qua beings. All creatures which exist, Origen insists, do so because they participate in him who is, and who is the originator of all that is.[47] However, there is also a supernatural participation which comes about because of the free human response to the operations of the Trinity. It is in this narrow sense that the Christian is a *logikos* through his participation in the Logos.[48] Origen's vision of the supernatural human participation in God is thoroughly trinitarian. As Norman Russell explains, 'By a parallel process of filiation, which is participation in the Son, and spiritualisation, which is participation in the Spirit, the Christian can arrive at deification, which is ultimately participation in the Father.'[49]

It is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity which serves as the basis for the theological concept of participation. 'For what the human body of the Logos suffered', Athanasius writes, 'this the Logos, being united to the

[45] *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.11.5.

[46] J. Todd Billings, 'John Calvin: United to God through Christ', in Christensen and Wittung, *Partakers of Divine Nature*, p. 209.

[47] *De principiis*, 1.3.6.

[48] *In Gen.* 16:1: 'He who dies to sin and the world is made alive by the Logos and receives another life.'

[49] Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, p. 149.

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body, ascribed to himself in order that we might be enabled to participate in the deity of the Logos.'[50] By the *communicatio idiomatum*, the incarnation has made deification possible: by participating in the humanity of the incarnate Logos, we participate in his impassible divinity because the flesh of the incarnate Word has been endowed with divinity, just as his divinity has been endowed with humanity. In the words of the Apostle Paul, we clothe ourselves with incorruption and immortality (1 Cor 15:53). This same thought is found in Maximus the Confessor. Because the man Jesus is hypostatically God, in him there is a *perichoresis* or *circumincessio* of the divine and the human. This *circumincessio* also reaches the human being in Christ, according to Maximus, although not according to nature but by grace.[51] Put differently, by becoming flesh, that is by making for himself a 'temple' from the body of the Virgin, the Word appropriated humanity for himself as an 'instrument' (*organon*), which enables him to recreate human nature and to offer the restored humanity to the Father through his sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. This *organon*-concept is central to the christology and soteriology of Athanasius and Maximus. As Aloys Grillmeier explains, this concept enables Athanasius 'to stress the living power of the Logos in redemption and at the same time to emphasise his transcendence, without relinquishing any of the closeness of the community of Logos and sarx'.[52] This reconciling exchange is given poetic expression by Ephrem the Syrian in his *Homily on the Lord*: It is He who was begotten of Divinity,

according to His nature,
and of humanity,
which was not according to His nature,
and of baptism,
which was not His habit;
So that we might be begotten of humanity,
according to our nature,
and of divinity,
which is not according to our nature,

[50] *Ep. Epict.*, 6.

[51] 'In the same way which the soul and the body are united, God should become accessible for participation by the soul, and through the soul's intermediary, by the body, in order that the soul might receive an unchanging character, and the body, immortality; and finally that the whole man should become God, deified by grace of the God-become-man, becoming whole man, soul and body, by nature, and becoming whole God, soul and body, by grace', Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*. *PG* 91:1088C. Quoted by Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 164.

[52] Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)* (London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975), p. 318.

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and of the Spirit,
which is not our habit.[53]

At this juncture, we must clarify that the communication between creature and God based on the participation of the former in the latter by grace must not be identified with the christological *communicatio idiomatum*. It must be understood only in an analogical way. But this idea is found in the theology of the reformers, and may arguably be seen as the concept which undergirds their soteriologies. In Luther, this concept is profoundly linked with the notion of *inhabitatio Christi* which I have already discussed. But it is also the basis for Luther's concept of *unio personalis*, which is so central to the reformer's doctrine of justification. In his lectures on Paul's letter to the Galatians, Luther wrote: 'The life that I now live, he lives in me. Indeed, Christ himself is the life that I now live. In this way, therefore, Christ and I are one.'[54] In Luther's soteriology, therefore, the union of Christ and the believer is real: the 'old self' has died, and is replaced by Christ. Christ is 'in' the believer and 'remains' in him. What is presented here is therefore the ontological nature of the presence of Christ, in which Christ as freedom, righteousness, and life drives from the believer sin, death, and the curse through his presence. In this regard, the *unio personalis*, as Mannermaa has rightly asserted,

> is perhaps the most intensive of the expressions Luther uses to describe the union between Christ and the believer. This image, which is close to mysticism, is an integral part of Luther's doctrine of justification. The idea of the personal union is not to be regarded as a provisional or incidental exaggeration in Luther, who often emphasises the idea of *unio* precisely when polemicizing the scholastic notion of justification. This idea of the union of persons thus points to something essential in the Reformer's theology.[55]

All this brings into focus the idea of the exchange effected by the incarnation of the Word which is so integral to the doctrine of deification. The formula, which is succinctly articulated by Athanasius in *De incarnatione*, that 'he [the eternal Son] became human that we might become divine', also forms the basis of Western theology's concepts of participation and union. For Luther, participation finds expression in the notion of the 'happy exchange' in which Christ takes upon himself the sinful person of a human

[53] 'Homily on Our Lord', 2.1, in *St Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, ed. K. E. McVey, trans. E. G. Matthews, jun., and J. P. Amar (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), p. 276.
[54] *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), *Luther's Works*, 26:167.
[55] T. Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 41.

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being and bestows his own righteous person, as we have seen. Calvin likewise speaks in the *Institutes* of the divinising of humanity through the humanising of divinity through the *mirifica communitatio* or 'wonderful exchange' whereby

> having become with us the Son of Man, he has made with himself sons of God. By his own descent to the earth he has prepared our ascent to heaven. Having received our mortality, he has bestowed on us his immortality. Having undertaken our weakness, he has made us strong in his strength. Having submitted to our poverty, he has transferred to us his riches. Having taken upon himself the burden of unrighteousness with which we were oppressed, he has clothed us with his righteousness.[56]

This has led at least one interpreter of the Reformed tradition to conclude that it 'interprets "deification" precisely in the same way as Athanasius in the *Contra Arianos*'.[57] Quoting John Calvin, T. F. Torrance points out that the believer can only partake in all the benefits of Christ if there is 'real and substantial union' with Christ. And, referring to the 'reconciling exchange', Torrance adds that it is only in the incarnate Christ that believers are made to participate in the life of God himself.[58]

Taken together, the two metaphors of justification and deification significantly broaden and deepen our vision of salvation because they enable us to appreciate more fully the scriptural teaching. When these concepts are subjected to rigorous exegesis, they will help us to understand one of the oldest symbols of salvation in the Christian tradition, namely union with God. God, by his grace, does not only declare sinners righteous on the basis of the accomplished work of Christ. By that same grace, and through the agency of his Spirit, he draws sinners to the closest possible relationship with him. This he does by indwelling the believer by his Spirit and by enabling the believer to participate in the divine life, and therefore be 'partakers of divinity'. Informed and shaped by the metaphors of justification and deification, the reality of the believers' union with God through Christ means that, in their salvific relationship with God, believers do not only know God through his effects, but also – and most profoundly – in and through his personal, transforming presence, which includes their participation in the divine essence through the uncreated energies of God so that they are taken into the very life of the Trinity itself.

[56] *Institutes*, 4.17.2.
[57] T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 184.
[58] Ibid., p. 186.

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