

“Life in Christ and in the Spirit:”

Theosis and Holiness in a postmodern secular context

An Eastern Orthodox spirituality perspective

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Abstract

Living at the second decade of the new millenium, humanity all over the globe is confronted with a desperate situation. Religious but also political, national, ideological conflicts and many other kinds of divides and forms of fanaticism occupy a central place in the daily news reports. In addition, neo-liberal economic orthodoxies, the increasing environmental and immigrant crisis, social, gender or racial inequality, a strong tendency towards populism in politics and a crisis of liberal democracies, put in jeopardy the very dignity of human being. Furthermore a thorough disenchantment of the contemporary world ensuing from the radical evolution of strict sciences and technology, which seek to satisfy our material needs and dominate our secular culture by an almost purely naturalistic and immanent outlook, created a profound absence of depth or lack of meaning, a certain spiritual and moral crisis. The later being already diagnosed by several thinkers provokes our awareness of searching for what is missing in our western (post)secular societies.

Paradoxically, however, and despite this situation, a renewed interest in matters under the rubric of spirituality both in the world and in academia is strongly indicated by the increasing number of publications, conferences etc., dedicated to different aspects of the topic. A bold *return of religion or religions* in the public sphere and a general *spiritual* renaissance, clearly a post modern phenomenon, begs for our attention. And, if religion itself as it is evident by the various wars or terrorist activity in the name of God provoke almost immediately a polarized reaction, this is

not the case with the concept and the phenomenon of spirituality, which became quite popular in both ecclesiastical and secular circles, especially in nowadays. The definition, however, of spirituality is not an easy task. Although “the label ‘spiritual’ tends to be invoked by those purveying a heterogeneous range of products and services, from magic crystals, scented candles and astrology to alternative medicine, tai chi and meditation courses”, at the same times it follows the *homo sapiens* “since its earliest cultural deposits and before”. This vagueness of the term “spiritual” or “spirituality” makes clear that it brings with it a broader sense than religion, as the latter understood at least in the theistic traditions. This sort of “indefiniteness” of spirituality ascribes to it a sense of “mystery” and apophatic understanding as soon as one needs to pass through a certain *experience* in order to get an inner glimpse of it. In spite of the considerable number of descriptions one can find with regards to spirituality today, ranging from secular, or political spirituality to feminist and from traditional religious to a certain modern lifestyle trend, or collective to individual orientation, at the end spirituality remains “open to the future”, expressing thus its clear apophatic nature and “eschatological” orientation.

But what about “life in Christ and life in the Spirit”? What a particular Christian point of view that of the Eastern Orthodoxy, could contribute to a new understanding of spirituality in our age, an understanding compatible with the dominant secular worldview?

It often appears that the major Churches and traditions (Eastern Orthodoxy included) have been stuck on traditional theological discourse about their glorious medieval and patristic past, establishing thus a pattern or rather a stereotype of *theosis* and holiness, two fundamental concepts in traditional (Orthodox) Christian imagination, that primarily fit to another and certainly not to this side of the world. For instance, the formal ecclesiastical process of canonization, not without exceptions, deals with saints, the life of whom has been written as though they were belonging to another state of humanity, to an elite group, namely male ascetics of the desert, figures that embodied holiness in a way impossible for the most of the ordinary people, who live today in the midst of the so to say immoral dark of our *secular age*. The same is also true with *theosis* which from the very beginning created negative reactions due to its “exotic” connotations with the *apotheosis* of the ancient world or even considered as arrogant and shocking to modern ears in view of the

overwhelming knowledge and power human being seems to experience today. There is then an evident “crisis of sanctity,” or clear-cut rejection of any *theosis* terminology and reality, in our time that urgently calls for a radical re-envisioning or re-contextualization of their meaning from a Christian theological point of view.

In this introductory, in character, paper an attempt is made to reflect on the way, or rather on the prerequisites upon which a fresh understanding of holiness and *theosis* should be formulated in our secular setting and in view of the further challenges posed by religious pluralism and modernity. By firstly setting out our methodological starting point, a general critical overview of the context within which such a discussion is situated will be then provided. Subsequently, I intend to briefly describe the anthropological type relevant to our discussion so as to finally provide the necessary spiritual prerequisites from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, of how one could define holiness and *theosis* in our present era.