

AN ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF
VLADIMIR LOSSKY'S DOCTRINE OF *THEOSIS*

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This dissertation analyzes and evaluates the doctrine of *theosis* as it is presented in the work of Vladimir Lossky, one of the leading contemporary spokesmen for Orthodox theology. Two main questions set up the purpose of the study: Is Lossky's soteriological position biblical, and is Lossky's understanding of *theosis* in agreement with the tradition he belongs to.

The method of study is historical-analytical. First, the development of the idea of *theosis* is traced in the Greek Fathers, in the Byzantine tradition (mainly Gregory Palamas), and in Lossky's immediate antecedents in the Russian religious tradition. This historical background identifies two major deviations in the understanding of salvation against which Lossky holds his position: a juridical view of salvation in Western theology on the one hand, and *panentheosis* of Russian sophiological school, on the other.

Analysis of Lossky's teaching of *theosis* reveals that it is a remarkably unified system, where Christian epistemology, Trinitarian theology, Christology, anthropology, soteriology, and ecclesiology are held together by a common theme, which is attaining union with God. Lossky argues the ontological (real, not metaphorical) character of *theosis*, although he affirms that in his union with God man is not dissolved into an impersonal reabsorption into the divine nature as it is in Neoplatonism. In affirming the ontological character of *theosis*, Lossky exploits two crucial distinctions that were made in Orthodox theology: essence/energy and person/nature.

In evaluating the main biblical and theological (philosophical) presuppositions for Lossky's view of *theosis*, the criteria of adequacy and internal consistency are used. The weakness of Lossky's system with regard to his dealing with the Scripture is seen in the author's rigorous apophaticism as the only way to the true knowledge of God, in his selective use of the Scripture and interpreting the selected material by means of the philosophical categories, and excluding the covenantal, sacrificial, and substitutive language of the Bible from his vocabulary. Lossky's employment of the metaphysical categories, such as essence, energy, and *hypostasis*, taken from the different historical and philosophical milieus, shows a lack of internal consistency in his system, creating a tension between essence/energy and person/nature distinctions. It seems that in describing a reality of *theosis*, Lossky fails to integrate two models (essence/energy and person/nature) in a unified system that would demonstrate a close interrelation of the concepts of 'essence', 'energy', and 'person'.

However, Lossky's doctrine of *theosis* with its synthesis of Christology and Pneumatology, his wholistic anthropology, his teaching on the personhood and understanding of reality as being in a relation to God, are very relevant in the experience of the contemporary Church in both East and West.