

Personhood, *Theosis* and a spirituality of the secular
An Eastern Orthodox 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. Since 11/9, religious but also political, national, ideological conflicts and many other kinds of divides and forms of fanaticism increasingly 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. Moreover, 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, if any, in our western (post)secular societies. Paradoxically, however, and despite this reality, a renewed interest in matters under the rubric of spirituality both in the world and in academia is strongly indicated by an increasing number of publications and conferences. A bold *return of religion or religions* in the public sphere and a general *spiritual* renaissance is clearly a post modern phenomenon that truly begs for our attention. And, if religion as it is evident by the various wars in the name of God provokes almost “immediately a polarized reaction,” this is not the case with the concept and the phenomenon of spirituality, which recently became quite popular in both ecclesiastical and secular circles. 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,”¹ at the same time it follows the *homo sapiens* “since its earliest cultural deposits and before.”² This vagueness of the term “spiritual” or “spirituality” makes clear its broader sense in comparison to 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 an *apophatic* understanding as soon as one needs to pass through a certain *experience* in order to define it. In spite of the considerable number of descriptions one can find with regards to spirituality today, ranging from a secular, or political spirituality to a feminist one and from traditional religious to a certain modern lifestyle trend, or from a collective to an individual orientation, spirituality remains “open to the future,”³ acquiring thus a clear *apophatic* and eschatological, I can say, perspective.

In this light, what is the particular point of view, that Eastern Orthodoxy, could contribute to a fresh 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*, the most precious concept in Orthodox Christian imagination, that primarily fits to another and certainly not to this side of the world. This is quite true with especially *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 almost evident 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. What is needed then is a new perspective that goes beyond the religious standards stereotypes to consider *theosis* as a boldly escapist or exclusivist ideal, by conceiving it rather, as a “universal call” beyond ecclesial or denominational boundaries.

¹ J.Cottingham and Lombaard Spirituality, Sense

² Lombaard Spirituality, Sense

³ Lombaard Spirituality, Sense

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 *theosis* should be formulated in our secular setting and in view of the further challenges posed by religious pluralism and modernity. By firstly describing the context within which such a discussion is situated, a definition of the anthropological type relevant to our discussion will be then offered. Subsequently, I intend to briefly describe the ontological conditions of *theosis* so as to finally provide the ground arguments upon which a spirituality of the secular should be located.