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Becoming Like God

The Russian Ideal of Deification at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

Octavian Gabor

Ruth Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought: Between the Revolutions, 1905–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 232 pp.

One approach in describing the history of humanity is to trace the various and intricate ways in which humans have approached the theme of deification. Questions about the special connection between humanity and divinity are raised even prior to Christian thought. At the beginning, the approach had an epistemic flavor, focusing on the *source*, in the sense of cause (the Greek *aitia*) of knowledge. In Parmenides, for example, the youth searching for knowledge is led by the goddess Dike, who says in fragment B2, "Come now, and I will tell you, and you, hearing, preserve the story,/ the only routes of inquiry there are for thinking."¹ Parmenides seems to suggest that the ultimate source for knowledge is the goddess. Humans can also have this knowledge if they pursue divinity and accept the logos that the goddess imparts. If indeed this theme has always been in the background of the problem of understanding who we are, there is no surprise that Russian religious thinkers focused on it during a time of turmoil: the time between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. This is the period under scrutiny in Ruth Coates' *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*.

Coates believes that the main purpose of the Russian writers during this period of time was to respond to the question about overcoming death: "how to transform death into everlasting life."² In some sense, the interest of intellectuals in religious problems, or their appeal to religion in solving intellectual problems, led to the Russian religious renaissance, beginning around 1900 and continuing to 1922.

1. Patricia Curd's translation, quoted in Patricia Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides: Eleatic Monism and Later Presocratic Thought* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2004), 24.

2. Ruth Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought: Between the Revolutions, 1905–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

Coates recalls Karkkainen's claim that Eastern theology doesn't focus so much on guilt as on mortality as the main problem of humanity.³ I would add that even this mortality needs qualification: in the East, mortality is the manifestation of people's separation from God, and it is expressed in sickness. The cosmos, as we experience it, is for the Eastern Orthodox ethos corrupted, as a sick body that needs recovery. The only recovery that is genuinely available for this is deification. Anything else, regardless of what that may be, is still an experience of a diseased reality. The four Russian writers Coates studies (Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Nikolai Berdiaev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Pavel Florensky) are embedded in the cultural and theological atmosphere created by this model. It is a perspective that avoids the juridical approach in Western Christianity, where Christ's sacrifice is a payment for sins. The doctrine of deification recalibrates this payment in different terms: Christ takes on human nature so that humans can also, as much as this is possible, take on divine nature.

Coates points out that the first formal definition of deification was given by Dionysius the Areopagite, in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: "the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible."⁴ Certainly, the understanding of human salvation as deification did not begin with the Areopagite. Two centuries before him, Athanasius of Alexandria wrote the famous dictum, "the Logos became man so that man can become God."⁵

Coates points out that the idea of deification pre-dates Christianity. Of course, this does not mean that deification, as understood by Christian thought, is what the Greeks and the Romans thought of when they approached the notion of a deified emperor. In fact, one may say that what the Romans described as an emperor-god was the antithesis of the god-man who participates in divine nature through the grace of God, and never due to his own power. Still, Coates is correct in suggesting that the notion did not appear out of nothing. One may even consider the Aristotelian account of divine life in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he says that humans are called, *as far as this is possible* to live the life of the divine. This expression, "as far as this is possible," is parallel to Dionysius' definition of deification mentioned above, even if the Greek words are different.

Coates proposes that there is an implicit claim about human nature within the context of deification. She writes that the doctrine presupposes a "dynamic anthropology."⁶ The claim seems right at first sight, but it still depends on how we may define this notion. In her account, "dynamic anthropology entails an understanding of human nature as fluid and undetermined, and of the human will as essentially free, either to reject the approach of God or to accept it and cooperate with God in realizing His purpose for the person who is approached, and through that person, for the world."⁷ This dynamicity may be better understood, I believe,

3. Ibid., 27.

4. Cf. *ibid.*, 24.

5. See c. 54 of St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 167.

6. Coates, *Deification*, 31.

7. *Ibid.*, 31.

if we apply the Aristotelian model of potentiality/actuality. Human nature is complete; but its completeness presupposes the possibility of further becoming like God, not through its own power, but of being acted upon by a different nature, the divine one. Otherwise, if we mean by dynamic a nature that needs something else to be completed as human, we open the door to differences in quality between human beings. Instead, Orthodox Christian thought emphasizes the intrinsic value of each human being because of their belonging to this human nature, which has the ability of receiving and partaking of divinity.

Coates organizes her volume in six chapters. She begins with a study of deification in Patristic thought. Starting from Dionysius the Areopagite's definition mentioned above, "Deification is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible," the author develops the notion of deification working primarily from Norman Russell's *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*.⁸

The second chapter engages the nineteenth century, which created the basis from which the idea of deification flourished in the Russian renaissance. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first describes the monastic culture of nineteenth-century Russia, with a focus on spiritual eldership and hesychasm. The second delves into what may be the author whose work is most centered on the question of what a human being par excellence is, Fyodor Dostoevsky. I will refer more to Dostoevsky while engaging the other chapters.

In the third chapter, Coates analyzes *Tsar and Revolution*, a volume published by the Merezhkovskys, as she calls them, the group formed by Dmitry Merezhkovsky, his wife Zinaida Gippius, and their friend Dmitry Filosofov. The volume approaches the theme of deification from a political standpoint. Taken together, Coates says, "the essays represent a powerful and informed treatment of the political dimension of the deification theme, the age-old apotheosis of the emperor, and its significance for Russian cultural, political, and social story."⁹ *Tsar and Revolution's* thesis has two parts, according to Coates. The first is that the alliance of state and church is an experiment in theocracy. The second claims that this experiment is false, primarily because it replaces the man-God Christ with the tsar-god, and the kingdom of heaven with a kingdom of the earth. The solution of the Merezhkovskys was to have a revolution that leads to the absence of any temporal power. The autarchy in Russia stemmed from the combination of two powers in the hands of one man, the Tsar, which took place with Peter the Great. When he became the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, being at the same time a temporal and a spiritual leader, he replicated, according to the Merezhkovskys, the dual nature of Christ, human-divine. Of course, this is one of the ways in which the notion of deification can be corrupted in human thought. One of the best portrayals of this corruption appears in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, where Raskolnikov's attempt to become a super-human, or a Napoleon, as the text has it, is parallel

8. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

9. Coates, *Deification*, 84.

to the Tsar's approach to leading both the church and the state. Such status places him above humanity, for it gives him the power to make or lose life.

Coates points out that there are "two distinct conceptions of royal power" co-existing in Russia: "a religious conception of the tsar as the image of Christ as ruler and high priest, as Christ's deputy on earth; and a secular conception of the emperor as 'containing within himself all power and the source of all power,' a conception that evokes the pagan perception of Caesar as deified man, or earthly god." Of course, Merezhkovskys reveal both of them as "blasphemous distortion of Christian truth."¹⁰

The writings in *Tsar and Revolution* show a dichotomy between the true Christ, the two natures living in one person, and the imitation of Christ, which results in false god-men. Anyone who proclaims himself as the anointed one, the Christ, the god-man par excellence, is a false Christ. It is in this context that Michael Cherniavsky's proposal arrives: "the myth of the sacred ruler was counterposed by an equally significant and culture-shaping myth of land and people: the myth of 'Holy Russia.'"¹¹

Chapter 4 moves away from the connection between politics and deification to a more spiritualized account. Coates discusses one of Berdiaev's works, *Meaning of Creativity*. She believes that Berdiaev's view is influenced by the seventeenth-century German theosophist Jakob Boehme. Thus, the first part of the chapter is dedicated to Boehme's work, to show that Berdiaev's discussion of deification is done in Boehme's terms. While it is true that Boehme and Berdiaev "insist on a divine element in humans that for both is connected to their special status as children of God who share with him the quality of eternity,"¹² Berdiaev's work is more connected with patristic intellectual tradition.

In my mind, this chapter reveals the difficulties that the notion of deification brings forward. For example, one may ask this question: is there something internal to a human being that makes him able to be divine? In Berdiaev, according to Coates, the indwelling of Christ is the agent of deification, but it remains to be seen whether Christ is an agent in the sense that he accomplishes deification or in the sense that he "empowers us to express our natural divinity."¹³ Perhaps the very precise cutting between these two options is problematic, for it begins in separation. The fact that Christ and the human being cooperate is clear. It is also clear that the source for deification is divinity. The problem remains in whether this divinity was manifested or not prior to Christ's Incarnation. If it was prior, then the Athanasius' formula is no longer correct. If it was posterior to the incarnation, then we return to the classical understanding, that deification became possible only due to Christ's becoming human.

Coates notices that Berdiaev is mistaken when he suggests that there is a lack of anthropology in the writings of the church. He is not wrong, however, that Marxism

10. Ibid., 96.

11. Ibid., 107.

12. Ibid., 120.

13. Ibid., 124.

replaced Christian anthropology with a corrupted anthropology, in which the new god is the proletariat. One may even say that the notion of deification is so embedded into human thinking that we must always refer to a false god whenever we no longer have connection with the real one.

In Chapter 5, Coates introduces Sergei Bulgakov in his own words, as a Christian materialist with the ambition "to translate [the teaching of the Fathers] into the language of contemporary philosophical thought."¹⁴ While *Philosophy of Economy* may be the work in which Bulgakov introduces himself as such, it is still surprising that Coates focuses on it to explain deification. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Bulgakov opposed Marxism, and the development of the early twentieth-century Russian philosophy out of and against Marxism is a focus of Coates' volume.

Bulgakov, Coates notices, begins his volume with death. Coates associates this with the idea that "Orthodox spirituality is suffused with the pathos of death."¹⁵ Deification itself is an answer to death, Coates proposes. But economic activity is as well, since humans work primarily to struggle against death, to avoid it by providing resources for life.

Of course, there may be an equivocation in the use of the notion of death, and it can be debated whether this equivocation results from Coates's or Bulgakov's writings. For Orthodoxy does struggle against death, but the writings of the fathers, primarily those concerned with deification, bring forward a death of the soul. Economic struggle, on the other hand, is against physical death.

Coates shows that *Philosophy of Economy* is not primarily a book about deification, but one that uses the deification metaphor to explain other aspects of political and social life. I wonder, however, how much the metaphor helps in explaining processes that belong to this plan of existence. In deification, incarnation is essential: the movement from this plan of existence toward the spiritual one cannot be accomplished in the absence of incarnation. Any account of deification that does not include the first movement, that of the immortal taking on mortality, as in Athanasius' formulation, corrupts deification, even to the point of changing humans into different kind of beings. After all, Dostoevsky's approach to this in, for example, *Crime and Punishment* demonstrates what happens when man wants to become a super-human based on his own capacities.

This is also connected to how the notion of death is interpreted. Thus, even if all economic activity is directed toward the overcoming of death, no outcome of economic activity will ensure deification, not even immortality, since immortality is not by nature a property of humans. Instead, part of the idea of deification is precisely the fact that the one who is created and mortal by nature takes on attributes of the uncreated and immortal by nature. If humans can achieve the overcoming of death through economic activities, this can only mean that the incarnation itself is no longer needed.

14. Ibid., 143.

15. Ibid., 152.

Coates analyzes Bulgakov's claim that human activity is the means by which God brings the material cosmos into the divine life. She believes that his approach derives from his reliance on Schelling's philosophy, and this is actually the reason why the notion of deification at work is a corrupted one. Coates rightly points out that Bulgakov's focus on economics downplays the significance of incarnation, because if indeed humans are the one who, through their work, reconcile the created order with God, then there is no need for an incarnate savior. If Bulgakov's philosophy is understood in the description Coates provides, then she is perfectly right that the Orthodoxy at work in his writings is flawed. I wonder, though, whether this is due to evaluating a work of economics from the perspective of theology. If Bulgakov's purpose in his *Philosophy of Economy* is to explain the human drives in participating in work, then he is no longer called to show that the source of deification is grace: he needs to focus on economic principles only. Similarly, one may find different accounts of Aristotle metaphysical principles depending on whether these principles are spelled out in Aristotle's metaphysics or, let's say, in his works of moral philosophy. Different fields require different explanations and different focuses.

In fact, in *Unfading Light*, published in 1917, Bulgakov writes unequivocally about humans' lack of power in bringing about their own immortality. He writes,

Therefore with their own powers, no matter how great they might be, human beings cannot pull themselves out of the gulf of sin and render their nature healthy, but are doomed all the more to be stuck in the swamp of sin, drowning in the clutches of greedy nothing. It is a shortsighted error to think that simply in virtue of "evolution"—of time and "progress"—the good will be strengthened in humanity at the expense of evil, and thus humanity becomes all the more perfect by force of things, as if automatically. In reality only evil is accumulated in that way, while good is realized in the world only by free spiritual struggle. Therefore the divinization of humanity can by no means be achieved through the path of evolution.¹⁶

In the same book, Bulgakov emphasizes that economic approaches refer only to this plan of existence: "Everything economic in its coarse or fine sense is utilitarian; it pursues a practical goal that is limited by the interests of terrestrial being. All economic tasks, no matter how broad they might be, belong to the surface of *this* world, the current eon."¹⁷

With chapter six, we return to deification proper: the theology of Pavel Florensky, especially as it appears in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. If Bulgakov's view seemed to suggest that it is possible for humans to defy immortality through their own work, Florensky's book, in Coates' perspective, comes very close "to judging his contemporaries' religious

16. Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 350–351.

17. *Ibid.*, 365.

aspirations as a demonic exercise in 'self-deification.' "¹⁸ Indeed, Ruth Coates' main thesis is that Florensky understands deification in the context of the tradition of Christian mysticism, based on the Holy Fathers of the Church, and I take this to be a true assessment. But this raises the question: is any other concept of deification appropriate? Can we, for example, list among the concepts of deification that which stems from Bulgakov's philosophy of economy? In my mind, the answer is negative. This is not in the sense that we cannot use the term "deification" to describe the idea that humans may have access to something that does not belong to them by nature through their own work. Of course, a horse from a painting is a horse, but only in name, as Aristotle would say. Similarly, an eye that is not connected to a living body is an eye only in name, but it is not properly an eye because it does not do what an eye does. Corrupted notions of deification—primarily based in Marxist definitions—are also deification only in name, but they are not genuinely so because they do not do what deification does. Their action does not lead to humans' taking on another nature by grace, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead, the action of making oneself immortal through your own means is the opposite of deification, even if, on the surface, remains the same. This is because in deification, as it is understood in Orthodox theology, the agent of deification is essential.

This may suggest that writers who use deification differently than the Holy Fathers have a wrong understanding of it. While this may certainly be the case, this conclusion does not follow necessarily. It may be, as I think in Bulgakov's case, that these writers use metaphors based on deification to explain aspects of human existence that are in agreement with it. Human cooperation with God toward immortality is indeed understood within the context of deification, but this does not mean that their actions alone are deification. Thus, if we were to refer to economic activity as a means to obtain immortality, emphasizing that such work has the same purpose as deification, this is not intrinsically unorthodox unless it excludes the divine work that is a precondition of deification.

I think Fyodor Dostoevsky's work emphasizes precisely this aspect. His departure from Marxism—just like the departure of the majority of the writers about whom Coates writes—can be described, after all, as an acknowledgement of the brokenness of the deification account and a return to deification proper. This does not mean, though, that remnants of Marxist ideology are not to appear in their approaches, and thus Bulgakov's writings may be such a case.

Returning to Florensky, in his writings we recover the traditional orthodox approaches in which truth is a person. Thus, knowledge of truth becomes a question of partaking of the divine person in us, and so deification starts in the work of accepting the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, and a knowledge of that Person by partaking of his person in love. Thus, the epigraph of *Pillar and Ground*, as Coates notes, is the phrase of Gregory of Nyssa: "knowledge becomes love."

18. Coates, *Deification*, 205.

Coates' conclusion subsumes these approaches under what can be called, "human, all too human." She writes, "The millenarian hopes of the Merezhkovskys, Berdiaev, and Florensky were not realized. The new order swept in by the Revolution proved to be of the human, all-too human kind. Christ did not come to reign on earth; the age of the Holy Spirit did not dawn."¹⁹



Octavian Gabor is Professor of Philosophy at Methodist College. He works on Greek philosophy, Dostoevsky, and the notion of personhood. Recent journal articles and book chapters include: "Dostoevsky in Romanian Culture: At the Crossroads between East and West" (2024), "Responses to Divine Communication: Oedipus and Socrates" (2020), "Taming the Beast: Constantin Noica and Doing Philosophy in Critical Political Contexts" (2019), "Justice between Mercy and Revenge in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Plato's *Crito*" (2019), and "Constantin Noica's Becoming Within Being and Meno's Paradox" (2017). He has translated from French to Romanian and Romanian to English. His most recent translations are Andre Scrima's *Apophatic Anthropology* (2016) and Constantin Noica's *The Romanian Sentiment of Being* (2022, with Elena Gabor) and *Pray for Brother Alexander* (2018).

19. *Ibid.*, 208.