

What Is ‘Religion’, What Is ‘Theosis’, and How Are They Related?

NOTIONS OF RELIGION IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN AND MEDIAEVAL WORLDS

During my last year at my London grammar school, I attended a class in Latin poetry conducted by the headmaster. In his book-lined study, a small group of pupils read with him *De rerum natura* – ‘On the nature of things’ – by the great Epicurean philosopher-poet of the first century BC, Titus Lucretius Carus. Not far into the first book of the poem, after a catalogue of crimes committed, according to Greek mythology, in the name of religion, we came to the line: *tantum potuit religio suadere malorum*, ‘to such great evils was religion able to impel people’ (1.101).¹ ‘Mark this line well’, said my headmaster, and I have never forgotten it. At the time, its meaning seemed perfectly clear: the superstitious element in pagan religion could persuade people to undertake evil acts in the mistaken conviction that they were pleasing the gods. Later, I came to see that the point Lucretius was making was more philosophical. What he meant by *religio* included not only superstitious awe but also conscientious conviction, moral obligation, and regard for the sacred.² As an Epicurean, Lucretius was a materialist who wanted to free his readers from anxieties such as the fear of death. Any supernatural concern that prevented the mind from attaining a detached state of tranquillity was to be deplored.

¹ The Penguin Classics translation by R. E. Latham renders the line: ‘Such are the heights of wickedness to which men are driven by superstition.’

² These are the primary meanings of *religio* as used by Cicero (who probably edited Lucretius’s poem for publication).

In his contempt for religion, Lucretius was in a minority. The dominant philosophy in Late Antiquity was Platonism, and the Platonists took religion and the existence of the gods for granted. For them, the gods occupied a celestial realm remote from human concerns; the cultic side of religion (until the time of Iamblichus) was of little interest. Once when Plotinus (205–270) was asked by one of his senior students to accompany him to the temples on the feasts of the gods, he replied: 'They ought to come to me, not I to them' (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, trans. Armstrong). The spirits (δαίμονες) that lurked in the temples were very inferior beings to a philosopher whose guardian spirit, as an Egyptian priest living in Rome had once declared, was actually a god.

Christian writers sought to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable aspects of *religio*. The rhetorician Arnobius of Sicca, writing at the end of the third century AD, makes a distinction between *religio* as 'religion' and *religio* as 'superstition' through interiorising the former ('opinion constitutes religion') and relegating the latter (*superstitio*) to external cultic acts (*Adv. nationes*, 7, 37). The etymological origin of the word *religio* was also investigated as a guide to its fundamental meaning. Cicero connected *religio* with the verb *relegere*, 'to read over again', in the sense of 'pondering what pertains to God' (*De deorum natura*, 2, 28). Writing in the first decade of the fourth century, Lactantius, a former student of Arnobius, questions Cicero's etymology, preferring to connect *religio* with *religare*, 'to bind': 'We have said that the name of religion is derived from the bond of piety, because God has tied man to himself, and bound him by piety' (*Divinae institutiones*, 4, 28, trans. Fletcher). Augustine suggests alternative derivations, either (following Lactantius) from *religare*, 'to bind together', in that religion binds human beings to God (*De vera relig.*, 55; *De civ. Dei*, 10, 1; *Retract.* 2, 13, 19), or (following Cicero but interpreting the word differently) from *relegere*, taken to mean 'to re-elect', consciously to make a new choice: 'by our re-election . . . we direct our course towards him with love (*dilectio*), so that in reaching him we may find our rest, and attend our happiness because we have achieved our fulfilment in him' (*De civ. Dei*, 10, 3; trans. Bettenson). For Augustine (as for Cicero), religion is therefore closely associated with worship, which in Latin is *cultus*. In this connection, finding the term *cultus* too broad because it can also refer to relations between human beings, Augustine turns to the Greek. The various Greek equivalents for *cultus* seem to him preferable, especially *thrēskeia* (θρησκεία), which he says is the Greek word which Latin translators habitually render as *religio* (*De civ. Dei*, 10, 1).

Biblical use of the word *thrēskeia* is rare, occurring in the Septuagint only in two deuterocanonical works composed originally in Greek, the Wisdom of Solomon and Fourth Maccabees.³ Both were written in the early first century AD, probably in Alexandria and Antioch, respectively, at a time when the emperor Caligula was demanding worship from the Jews. In the Wisdom of Solomon, *thrēskeia* refers to the worship of the ruler (14.17) or of idols (14.27). In Fourth Maccabees, it is put into the mouth of Antiochus when he refers to the ‘religion of the Jews’ (5.7, 13). Nor is the word *thrēskeia* commonly used in the New Testament.⁴ According to Luke, Paul declares ‘I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion (θρησκεία) and lived as a Pharisee’ (Acts 26.5). And in the Letter to the Colossians, Paul (if he is indeed the author) warns his readers, again in a Jewish religious context, against the cult (θρησκεία) of angels (Col 2.18). The only other New Testament text in which ‘religion’ is mentioned is the little ethical treatise in the wisdom tradition known as the Epistle of James. There the author says: ‘Religion (θρησκεία) that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained in the world’ (James 1.27).⁵ Thus, in the New Testament, ‘religion’ refers – not always positively – to a ‘cult’ or a ‘faith’ in the modern sense, a defined system of belief, worship, and moral conduct. It is not comparable with the act of faith-trust (πίστις), which is the wholehearted acceptance of the Christian kerygma.

The rather sparse references to religion (θρησκεία) in the Greek literature of the Late Roman Empire are in harmony with the usage of the Septuagint and the New Testament. In the Greek version of the Acts of the second-century Scillitan martyrs, it is Saturninus, the pagan proconsul, not Speratus, the Christian defendant, who describes his own practice of piety as a religion (*Acta Scillit. mart.*; ed. Robinson 1891: 113). Several pagan authors use ‘religion’ to refer to worship offered to the gods (e.g., CH XII, 23, Schiavoni, 2018: 230; Iamblichus, *De vita Pythagorica*, 3, 6,

³ The early Israelites had no word for ‘religion’, which in modern Hebrew is *dat*. The word *dat* enters the canon of Scripture for the first time, as a loan-word from Persian, in the Book of Esther, where it is put in the mouth of King Ahasuerus at 1.13 and of his chief minister Haman at 3.8. The Septuagint and the modern English versions translate this as ‘laws’ (νόμοι), referring to the laws and customs of the Jews as opposed to those of the Persians. *Dat* still signified law (both divine and human) in mediaeval Hebrew.

⁴ As K. L. Schmidt says in his article in Kittel, ‘This paucity is quite striking in relation to the whole sphere of Gk. literature’ (1965: 155).

⁵ In all three cases, the Vulgate translates θρησκεία as *religio*.

32). The Christian authors of Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium who speak of 'the Christian religion' (ἡ τῶν Χριστιανῶν θρησκεία) include Clement of Rome, who gives a summary of the Christian faith (with an emphasis on moral conduct) introduced by the words 'the religion defined by him is the following' (*Clem. Hom.*, 7, 8, 1); Cyril of Alexandria, who frequently refers to 'the religion of the Christians' and 'our holy religion', especially in Book VII of his refutation of Julian the Apostate;⁶ and Dionysius the Areopagite, who commends 'the more-than-wise truth of our religion' (*Letter* 7, 3: τὴν ὑπέροσον τῆς θρησκείας ἡμῶν ἀλήθειαν). By the ninth century, in the context of the Iconoclast Controversy, Theodore the Stoudite is able to speak of 'our religion handed down by our fathers' (*Letter* 71, 63: ἡ πατροπαράδοτος ἡμῶν θρησκεία). But θρησκεία is also applied to other systems of belief, to pagan cults (Athanasius, *Contra Gent.*, 23, 37 and 29, 37; Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.*, 2, 6, 1; John Damascene, *Expos. Fidei*, 77, 29), Judaism (Eusebius, *Demonst. Evangel.*, 6, 3, 4), Islam (John Damascene, *De haeres.*, 100), and even Christian heresies such as Arianism (Socrates, *Hist. eccl.*, 5, 12, 18 and 6, 6, 8). Among Greek speakers, the orthodox Christian faith is described quite often as a 'religion' when it is contrasted with other bodies of doctrine or organised forms of worship but rarely when it is considered in itself as the path to salvation.

In the early mediaeval Latin West, *religio* was used most widely of the cult of a saint. Drawing on the sense of 'binding together', it also signified a religious order. When qualified by *universa*, it indicated Christendom as a whole. These meanings were enriched in the later Middle Ages by Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274). In the second part of Part Two of his *Summae theologiae*, he devotes a section (question 81) specifically to the topic of religion. In the first article, he considers 'whether religion directs man to God alone'. After reviewing the different theories of the etymology of the word and the discussions of *religio* by his predecessors, particularly Augustine, he concludes that it does indeed direct man to God alone. It is therefore a virtue because 'it belongs to religion to pay due honour to someone, namely, to God' (*Summa theol.*, II, iia, q.81, art. 2). Moreover, it is a moral virtue, because unlike a theological virtue, which is focused on the last end, it concerns things that contribute towards that end. Thus, religion is equivalent to sanctity, which 'differs from religion not essentially but only logically' (*Summa theol.*, II, iia, q.81, art. 8).

⁶ For example, 1, 34; 2, 23; 5, 1; 5, 13; 6, 31; 7, 8; 7, 22; 7, 26; 7, 30; 7, 38.

Knowledge of the Thomist notion of religion as a moral virtue entered the Greek East through the translation of the *Summa theologiae* made in the fourteenth century by the statesman Demetrios Kydones (c. 1324–c. 1398) with the assistance of his brother, the monk Prochoros (c. 1333/34–1369/70) of the Great Lavra.⁷ Thomas's *religio* was translated as θρησκεία; but although the translations of the Kydones brothers were widely read, the sense of θρησκεία as a virtue did not take root. Among the Greeks, *religio* in the moral sense was, and remained, *theosebeia* (θεοσέβεια), 'religious feeling' or 'reverence for God'.⁸ Although only once mentioned in passing in the New Testament (1 Tim 2.10), the use of θεοσέβεια in the Septuagint, especially in Job ('truly, the fear of the Lord [θεοσέβεια], that is wisdom' [Job 28.28, NRSV]) and in Sirach ('but godliness [θεοσέβεια] is an abomination to a sinner' [Sirach 1.24, NRSV]), ensured its prominence in Greek Christian literature. From the second century onwards, θεοσέβεια was commonly regarded as the opposite to pagan superstition or false religion, *deisidaimonia* (δεισιδαιμονία), and indeed became the usual term for the Christian faith when the latter was not being considered in terms of a doctrinal system. Gregory Palamas (c. 1296–1357), for example, in all his voluminous writings never once uses the word 'religion' (θρησκεία) but often refers to 'reverence towards God' (θεοσέβεια).⁹ Even though θρησκεία never became a moral virtue among the Orthodox, Thomas's definition of religion in relation to faith, religion being not faith but 'a solemn declaration of faith through certain external signs' (*fidei protestatio per aliqua exteriora signa*: τῆς πίστεως διαμαρτηρία διὰ τινῶν ἕξωθεν σημείων, in Kydones's translation), did in fact harmonise well with the Greek tradition (*Summa theol.*, *secunda secundae*, qu. 94, 1).

By the early fifteenth century, the way Greeks and Latins understood 'religion' had much in common. On the philosophical level, both sides saw 'religion' as referring mainly to the external expression of belief, in the case of Aquinas as a system of signs pointing to faith (*protestatio per aliqua exteriora signa*; *Summa theol.*, *secunda secundae*, qu. 94, 1), in the

⁷ For an overview of the influence of Aquinas on Byzantine thinkers, see Plested, 2012: 63–134.

⁸ In the fifteenth century, George Gemistos Plethon made θεοσέβεια the first of his 'special virtues' after the four 'general virtues' of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. On this, see Hladký, 2014: 153.

⁹ In the *Letter to His Church* (§ 7, line 14), written while he was in captivity among the Turks, Palamas refers to the Christian religion as τὸ σέβος ('worship' or 'adoration', hence 'religion', 'the Christian religion' being indicated by the definite article).

case of the Greeks as the 'activity' of faith (ἐνέργεια πίστεως).¹⁰ On this level, religion was the system of doctrine and worship that defined a 'faith community'. George Gennadios Scholarios (c. 1405–c. 1472), the first patriarch of Constantinople under Ottoman rule, brings together two of the then current senses of 'religion', that of cult and that of the expression of feeling, with his own definition of θρησκεία: 'worship and reverence of any kind with regard to God' (λατρεία καὶ τὸ ὁποιοῦν σέβας περὶ Θεόν) (*Grammatica, Oeuvres completes*, vol. 2, 456). We thus enter the modern world with a definition that treats religion as an empirical reality and indeed as basically a human phenomenon. This is an approach that would be developed extensively in modernity and beyond.

PHILOSOPHICAL NOTIONS OF RELIGION IN THE MODERN AGE

The fundamental shift of outlook marked by the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Kant's 'critical' revolution in philosophy, the French Revolution, and the rise of scientific disciplines relying on objective methods of investigation created a chasm between the pre-modern and the modern worlds. Some continuities with the older ways of treating the topic of religion did persist, but the new intellectual climate gave rise to a variety of new approaches developed by philosophers and social scientists in the conviction that critical analysis and rational explanations of human phenomena such as religion are the best way to give us insight into whatever truth they contained.

In 1781, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) published the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, his epoch-making investigation into the possibility of metaphysics. His reflection on the concept of God caused him to reject traditional proofs of God's existence such as the ontological argument (on the grounds that this argument merely relates two concepts to each other, not a concept to a reality) without, however, denying the reality of religious experience. Although religion (*Religion*) fell outside the scope of theoretical reason, it nevertheless fulfilled a practical need as the path to the highest good. This pragmatic approach to religion was to exercise profound influence throughout the nineteenth century.

Kant's pragmatism was profoundly uncongenial, however, to his younger contemporary, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Coming from a pietistic Moravian background, Schleiermacher developed a

¹⁰ George Gennadios Scholarios, *Contra simoniam II Oeuvres completes*, vol. 3, 243.

philosophy of religion as ‘feeling’ (*Gefühl*), specifically a feeling of absolute dependence (*Abhängigkeitsgefühl*), understood not as emotion but as insight or intuition unmediated by any intellectual concept. Such intuitive ‘feeling’ does not, however, remain a purely inward matter; it is manifested in actions and is thus open to investigation by the natural sciences. Schleiermacher was strongly opposed by his fellow Berlin professor, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). The intellectual world of 1820s Berlin was polarised between conservative evangelicals and philosophical rationalists. Hegel attempted, from a liberal Lutheran standpoint, to steer a middle path. He defined religion ‘as “a mode of consciousness” that seeks to establish the truth of the relationship between man and God’.¹¹ Religion and speculative philosophy, for Hegel, were not in opposition. Both dealt with God as the manifestation of a spiritual principle: religion doing it through images and representations, philosophy in a more developed way through conceptual analysis. The philosophical system resulting from Hegel’s analysis was not a static one. The spiritual principle, *Geist*, becomes self-conscious in humanity and evolves towards higher forms through the dialectical process for which Hegel is celebrated, that of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The higher unity thus achieved emphasises the dynamic immanence of the divine in human life, an immanence that is realised by a rational process.

Hegelian idealism dominated philosophical thinking on religion for the rest of the nineteenth century. In Germany, the Old Hegelians developed the conservative side of Hegel’s religious thinking and had no problem with the official Lutheranism of the Prussian state. The Young (or Left) Hegelians, who included Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) and Karl Marx (1818–1883), were altogether more radical. In 1841, Feuerbach published a book which was to be very influential in the second half of the nineteenth century, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, translated into English in 1854 (by Marian Evans, five years before her debut as the novelist George Eliot) under the title *The Essence of Christianity*, in which he presented what he called ‘the true anthropological essence of religion’ as the projection of human qualities on to an imaginary divine being. Feuerbach’s critique of religion was adopted by Karl Marx, who saw religion as an element in the development of human self-awareness. Marx famously declared that ‘religion is the opiate of the masses’, but this must not be taken as a contemptuous dismissal of religion. He saw religion as

¹¹ Dickey, 1993: 309, citing Hegel’s preface to the second edition of *The Encyclopaedia* (1827).

'the expression of real suffering' and a protest against it. 'Religion', he said, 'is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions'.¹² Nevertheless, religion remains a human construct, a product of intellection.

A turn away from Hegelian idealism was marked in the early twentieth century by Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), whose *Das Heilige* (1917) was translated into English as *The Idea of the Holy* in 1923 and has never been out of print. Otto claimed that his fundamental insight, namely, that humanity's primary religious experience is the experience of the numinous (a word he coined himself from the Latin *numen*, 'divine power' or 'divine majesty'), came to him during a visit to a Jewish synagogue in Morocco in 1906. Like Schleiermacher, whom he admired, he rejected discursive reasoning as the path to a sense of God. It is the non-rational aspects of religion that have priority, among them the sense of the holy. But the holy is itself associated with moral goodness and is thus the product of conceptual thought. Behind the holy lies the numinous, which is beyond moral concepts, beyond intellection itself – a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. This 'wholly other' power or dynamic energy (*mysterium*) that evokes dread (is *tremendum*) and yet at the same time captivates (is *fascinans*) transcends conceptual thought. Otto's claim that this sense of divine awe is a Kantian a priori category has not been found convincing, but it cannot be denied that he brought to the debate on the nature of religion a powerful account of religious consciousness.

Otto impressed Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the founder of the 'descriptive science' of phenomenology, which sought to treat the object as pure phenomenon by investigating the structures of consciousness and conditions that make experience possible. The topic of religion, however, was 'bracketed' (set to one side) by Husserl and most phenomenologists. The most notable exception was Max Scheler (1874–1928), whose application of the phenomenological approach to the topic of religion has proved very influential. Religious experience for Scheler is a given that cannot be derived reductively from anything else. Nor can its reality be established analytically or by the application of the empiricist's principle of verification. Openness to the divine is simply a fundamental aspect of being human. In his important *Vom Ewigen in Menschen* (1921), translated into English as *On the Eternal in Man* (1960), he argues that what makes religious experience possible is the presence of the eternal in

¹² From Karl Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', 171, cited by J. Raines, in Raines, 2002: 5.

humankind. All human beings are theomorphic in their essential structure through the presence of the eternal within them. If prevented from fulfilling this innate reaching out to the absolute through the experience of love, they will latch on to some substitute or other.

A different philosophical approach, but with a similar focus on the human yearning for self-transcendence, arose in France with Émile Boutroux (1845–1921). For Boutroux, the essence of religion (*religion*) lay in the strange human claim to be able to go beyond that which characterises society and the individual (Magnin, 1937: 2261). With this claim as his starting point, Boutroux reflected on the mechanical determinism of the science of his day and found it wanting. The human yearning for self-transcendence, he felt, is not necessarily an illusion. It could be correlative to a capacity capable of fulfilling it. This capacity would enable the human person to co-operate with a higher being and surpass him/herself. Religion advances from the obligation of the human person to surpass him/herself to the power of actually doing so: ‘Whoever participates in the life of God is in possession of the power of truly surpassing nature, of creating. Religion is creation, creation that is beautiful and salutary, in God and by God’ (Boutroux, 1926: 224–27; cited by Magnin, 1937: 2262). ‘Religion, in short’, says Boutroux, ‘is the effort to enhance, to enlarge and transfigure the very basis of our nature, thanks to this power that enables us to participate in a mode of being other than our own, a mode that wants to embrace infinity itself: love’ (Boutroux, 1925: 97; cited by Magnin, 1937: 2264).

Boutroux developed his ideas partly in reaction to William James (1842–1910), whose Gifford Lectures of 1900–1902, published in 1902 as *Varieties of Religious Experience* and translated into French in 1905, have remained very influential.¹³ James had expressed the belief (in Lecture 20) that the visible world belongs to a larger spiritual world from which it derives its significance and that the purpose of human life is to attain union or ‘harmonious relation’ with ‘the higher universe’. James’s recognition of a personal need in human beings for transcendence resonated with Boutroux’s convictions, but his dwelling on psychological states (‘I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products’ [1902: Lecture 18]) was regarded by Boutroux as too individualistic and too

¹³ For an excellent discussion of James’s continuing importance, see Taylor, 2003.

narrow.¹⁴ Boutroux himself believed that there were other paths besides the emotions leading to God, paths that were epistemic (metaphysics), aesthetic (art), and self-transcending (religion).

Boutroux's student, Henri Bergson (1859–1941), was, like his teacher, opposed to scientific determinism. He came to international attention in 1907 with his book *Évolution créatrice*, translated into English in 1911 as *Creative Evolution*, in which he argues that evolution is governed not by a Darwinian mechanism of natural selection but by a life force that he calls the *élan vital*. A living dynamism is also at the heart of his teaching on religion. On this front, he opposes Kant's moral philosophy, which he sees as a stifling closed system limited to a particular society. Against Kant, he sets an 'open' morality not intended, like Kant's 'closed' morality, to ensure social cohesion but to allow for intuition, artistic creation, and mystical ascent. These two moralities reflect two different kinds of religion, a closed morality corresponding to a static religion, and an open morality corresponding to a dynamic religion. In his last book, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, published in 1932, Bergson sets out a religious version of the *élan vital* ('life force'), which finds its highest expression in mysticism. Some beings have been called into existence, he says, who are destined to love and be loved. They are the creative energy before it is defined by love. They are distinct from God, who is this energy itself. They have arisen in the portion of the universe that is our planet in order to triumph over materiality and finally return to God. These are the mystics, who have opened a path for others to follow (1932: 276). Catholic critics did not approve of this deification of the mystic as the only genuine exemplar of dynamic religion. It is perhaps not coincidental that in 1910, when Bergson was appointed to a chair at the Collège de France, his first course of lectures was on Plotinus.

Bergson went out of fashion as the next generation of French philosophers turned their attention to the work of Husserl and Heidegger. But in the 1960s, there was a revival of interest in him. Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) claims that, along with Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Bergson's *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* enables us still 'to think religion in the daylight of today without breaking with the philosophical tradition' (Derrida, 2002: 78; cited by Raschke, 2005: 3). 'Derrida goes on to say that his project for "thinking religion" is

¹⁴ James defined religion as 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine' (1902: 31).

drawn from “the famous conclusion of the *Two Sources*, the memorable words that ‘the essential function of the universe . . . is a machine for the making of gods’” (Raschke, 2005: 12, citing Derrida, 2002: 77).

The way Derrida ‘thinks religion’ is through textual criticism, or, as he puts it, the ‘deconstruction’ of texts.¹⁵ The conceptual oppositions that the linguistic structures of texts conceal lead us into meanings beyond those intended by their authors. The ‘myth of presence’ is the assumption that we gain our most complete understanding of something when it alone is fully present to our minds. In fact, we need to do much more: we need to take into account all the contexts and associations of what it is that we are focusing on. With regard to religion, Derrida rejects Wittgenstein’s injunction to silence.¹⁶ *Il faut parler*, ‘one must speak’, and to speak is to respond to the promise implicit in religion. Derrida plays with the root meanings of *religio* (which he understands in one of the etymological senses given by Augustine, that of ‘binding together’ or ‘reconnecting’) and *sacramentum* (in the sense of a ‘sworn oath’) with the result that he declares that there is no religion without coming into unity (*alliance*) and without promise to bear witness (*promesse de témoigner*). That, he says, is the horizon where *religio* begins.¹⁷ Where it goes from there is not so clear. Some have seen an affinity in Derrida with the apophatic tradition, others have spoken of ‘a religion without religion’, for Derrida seems to weave together a suggestive ‘archive’ of images, sounds, and gestures, and yet he rejects all philosophical or theological assertions about the divine. The post-secularist ‘resurgence’ of religion in which Derrida became interested in the last years of his life is not simply a return to an earlier intellectual stance but is highly subjective and deliberately full of ambiguities.

SOCIOLOGICAL, ANTHROPOLOGICAL, AND CULTURAL NOTIONS OF RELIGION

Late nineteenth-century philosophical reflection on religion, particularly in its French form, led to the scientific study of religion as a human phenomenon. The sociological study of religion goes back to Émile

¹⁵ ‘Derrida’s term alludes, deliberately, to Heidegger’s project of the destruction (*Destruction*) of the history of ontology’: Richmond, 1995: 180.

¹⁶ Nault, 1998: 133, with reference to Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, proposition 7.

¹⁷ Nault, 1998: 142, citing Derrida, 2002 (in the original French, ‘Foi et savoir’, 43).

Durkheim (1858–1917), who, like Bergson, had been a student of Émile Boutroux. It was perhaps Durkheim's studies with Boutroux that planted in him the seeds of his conviction that social facts could not be reduced to the sum of individual behaviours. Durkheim's functional definition of religion is set out in his massive study of totemism among one of the indigenous peoples of Australia: 'A religion is an interdependent system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred things, that is to say, things that are set apart, forbidden, beliefs and practices that unite all who adhere to them in a single moral community called Church' (1912: 65).¹⁸ The fundamental distinction for Durkheim is between sacred and profane. The sacred is experienced communally and the communal has priority over the individual. The actual content of belief is secondary, for 'it is the Church of which he is a member that teaches the individual what these personal gods are, what their role is, how one enters into relationship with them, how one must honour them' (64).

By contrast, Durkheim's German contemporary, Max Weber (1864–1920), sought to discover what religion actually meant for those who adhere to it. His key term is *Verstehen*, 'to understand', in the sense of to undertake a participatory and interpretative examination of the various manifestations of religion in order to understand what these signify for believers. Conceptual distinctions, however, cannot be avoided, and Weber makes a number of them, notably between asceticism and mysticism and between salvation and theodicy, which he was able to apply heuristically in his celebrated study, 'Die protestantische Ethik und der "Geist" des Kapitalismus' (1922), translated into English as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), to show how Calvinist anxiety about predestination in the early modern age could be alleviated by the positive evidence of divine election provided by success in business.

A related 'scientific' way of looking at religion is as a cultural system. In an influential essay first published in 1966, the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), defines a culture as 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life' (1973: 89)¹⁹ and a religion as 'a system of symbols

¹⁸ The word 'Church' (*Église*) is used here in a generic sense.

¹⁹ The thinking of Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) seems to lie behind this. Compare his famous dictum, 'the symbol gives rise to thought' (Ricoeur, 1967: 247–57).

which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' (90). Religion is thus fundamentally a set of interrelated symbols that communicates a particular world-view. Through its symbols, each religion provides its adherents with a 'model of reality' that makes the world intelligible to them and provides them with coordinates by which they can orientate their life.

In the course of the twentieth century, the sociology of religion, focusing on its comparative study, became an established academic discipline. This development has not been without its critics, who object to the construction of 'religion' as a cross-cultural analytical category supposedly free from ideological concerns. In the opinion of the British scholar Timothy Fitzgerald, who has spent his teaching career in university departments of religious studies, 'religion is really the basis of a modern form of theology, which I will call liberal ecumenical theology, but some attempt has been made to disguise this fact by claiming that religion is a natural and/or supernatural reality in the nature of things that all human individuals have a capacity for, regardless of their cultural context' (2000: 4–5). Fitzgerald argues that religion is generally approached in an ethnocentric fashion, on the assumption that the defining feature of religion is a common belief in the transcendent or the divine, without regard for the fact that Judaeo-Christian categories cannot be used cross-culturally. 'Religion', in his view, has no distinctive analytical validity. It is an ideological category that arose in the nineteenth century in connection with the growth of colonial empires and the need to impose Western values on them, including the distinction between religion and non-religion.

MODERN THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUES OF RELIGION

Most theologians nevertheless accept the analytical validity of the word 'religion'. They would agree with the British philosopher Richard Swinburne, who offers a definition of religion ('in the normal sense of the English word familiar to most of us') as 'an institutionalised system of belief and practice to which people belong, the practice of which is designed to secure their ultimate well-being and that of (at least) all the members of the religion' (2013: 54). The pluralism implied in a functional definition of this kind raises a problem. If Christianity is simply one

religion among others, what does this make of its claim to be *the* religion? This was a question addressed by Karl Rahner, who presciently saw pluralism in a globalised world as presenting a greater threat to Christianity than religion's denial (1966: 116). Wishing to maintain, on the one hand, that there is no salvation apart from Christ ('according to Catholic teaching the supernatural divinisation of man can never be replaced merely by good will on the part of man but is necessary as something itself given in this earthly life' [123]), and, on the other, that salvation is intended by God for all human beings, Rahner concludes that all members of non-Christian religions must be regarded as 'anonymous Christians' and that the task of missionaries is to bring this to explicit consciousness (131).²⁰

This is an approach to religion that despite its Christocentric concern accepts a sociological (some would say an imperialistic) construction of religion. At the opposite pole, though no less influenced by a secularising – in this case Freudian – construction of religion, is the approach of the Greek philosopher-theologian Christos Yannaras, who sees the category of religion in purely negative terms. In a book provocatively entitled *Against Religion*, he defines religion 'as humanity's natural (instinctive) need (1) to suppose that there are factors that generate existence and existent things, together with the evil that is intertwined with the fact of existence and (2) to extrapolate from this rational supposition methods and practices for the "management" of the supernatural factors, so that hopes of humanity's unending happiness are built up' (2013: 3). Religion is thus in essence the human creation of a psychological comfort zone.

By this definition, Yannaras appears to take up a position similar theologically to that of Karl Barth, who in Section 17 of his *Church Dogmatics* rejects the way the Christian faith has been treated as a species of the genus religion (2013: 3).²¹ For Barth, religion is *Unglaube*, unbelief, or lack of faith, an attempt to replace the gift of God's self-communication with a human construct. As such, religion is idolatrous. Barth, however, does admit the existence of *true* religion, which is the creation of the Holy Spirit and within which the believer receives justification by the operation of divine grace. Yannaras is more radical than Barth in refusing to recognise any acceptable version of religion at all. For him religion (the word *θρησκεία* is still the current Greek term) is actually a

²⁰ This view has been very influential among Christian theologians of all denominations.

²¹ For a good English translation of this section of *Church Dogmatics*, see Barth, 2013.

hindrance to authentic Christian faith-trust (πίστις), which is a mode of existence freed from egoism and natural determinism (2013: 37).

A different theoretical approach was proposed by the American Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck (1923–2018) in an influential book, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, first published in 1984. Drawing on Clifford Geertz and modern linguistic theory, Lindbeck proposes a ‘cultural-linguistic’ model of religion, which he claims combines the first two approaches (which I have illustrated with Swinburne and Yannaras, the former of which he would characterise as ‘cognitive-propositional’ and the latter as ‘experiential-expressive’) to propose a conceptualisation of religion as a ‘comprehensive interpretative medium or categorical framework’ that not only expresses but also shapes and moulds the believer’s experiences (2009: 18, 65). This model treats a religion in postmodern fashion as a cultural construction analogous to a language with its own grammatical structure: ‘religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures (insofar as these are understood semiotically as reality and value systems – that is as idioms for the construing of reality and the living of life)’ (3). All religions cannot all be reduced to the same common core. Each religion is different because each has its own grammar, which enables its adherents to be religious in a particular way through ritual, prayer, and the giving of example, which are normally, in Lindbeck’s view, much more important than doctrine (20). He summarises religion, according to his model, as ‘idioms for dealing with whatever is most important – with ultimate questions of life and death, right and wrong, chaos and order, meaning and meaninglessness’ (25).²²

PERENNIALIST AND ESOTERICIST NOTIONS OF RELIGION

Even though ‘religion’ as the content of religious studies programmes may be a nineteenth-century ideological construct, the conviction that regardless of their being embedded in particular cultural contexts all religions have as their common core a universal sacred wisdom is deeply rooted. This is expressed most powerfully in the idea of the *philosophia perennis*, the perennial philosophy. The idea goes back to the Renaissance, when Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola taught that the *Hermetic Corpus* together with the Neoplatonist philosophers and the

²² For an application of this approach to the Early Church, see Theissen, 1999.

Greek Fathers expounded the same *prisca theologia*, the same ancient and eternally valid theological wisdom.²³ The popularisation of this wisdom, however, belongs to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the foundation of the Theosophical Society in 1875 and its offshoot, the Anthroposophical Society, in 1913. The leading figure of the former in its early days was Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, known as Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891), a Russian clairvoyant and esotericist with extensive connections among the nobility of her native country, where the writings of the German mystic Jakob Boehme (c. 1575–1624) made the Russian intelligentsia receptive to her ideas. The Anthroposophical Society was founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), originally a disciple of Blavatsky, who broke away on account of his dissatisfaction with the Theosophical Society's deepening rapport with Indian religion.²⁴ Steiner's ideas, like Blavatsky's, also resonated in Russia, where they influenced such Orthodox theologians as Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) and Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944). The esoteric teaching of both Blavatsky and Steiner was based on their personal visionary experiences. For them, particularly for Steiner, religion was the quest of the inner 'I' to attain the highest level of spiritual development through withdrawal from everything transitory. Comparable ideas about realising the divine, or quasi-divine, kernel of the individual were further popularised in the West by such writers as René Guénon (1886–1951), Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), and Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998).

THE TURN FROM RELIGION TO SPIRITUALITY

A phenomenon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries noted by many authors is a turning away, like the perennialists, from 'organised religion' to a personal quest for meaning through individual religious experience. In many bookshops today, titles that used to be found on shelves marked 'Religion' or 'Theology' are now to be found in a section called 'Mind, Body, Spirit'. A shift has taken place in the cultural paradigm of religion: 'we see a new model in which the sacred is intimate and close, a felt resonance within the self, and a deep and radiant presence in the natural world' (Tacey, 2004: 79). This new model of religion has

²³ The term *philosophia perennis* was first used by the Italian humanist Agostino Steuco in 1540.

²⁴ In 1878, the headquarters of the Theosophical Society were moved to Madras (now called Chennai) in India.

abandoned the traditional divide (traditional at least in the West) between sacred and profane, holy and unholy. It regards spiritual identity as quite distinct from religious affiliation. One's spiritual identity is not inherited from the tradition in which one was brought up but is constructed personally, partly by going beyond the traditional forms of Western religion to their origins and partly by searching eclectically among Eastern (Eastern Christian as well as Asian) spiritual teachings.

The new category of 'spirituality' has appealed to people searching for answers to the eternal questions about the meaning of life. Atheistic secularism, once assumed to be the normal fall-back human condition once religious faith begins to recede in the face of scientific progress, is now itself understood to be a nineteenth-century ideological construction. Religion is back as 'spirituality'. Inevitably, this spirituality has been exploited commercially in today's market-oriented world, both by its teachers and by its consumers, who are often large corporations seeking to improve the commitment and productivity of their employees. What has been called 'the commodification of religion as spirituality' (Carrette and King, 2005: 15) is a development that has latched easily on to the individualised search for meaning and self-transcendence in our consumerist society.

This search for meaning is often highly eclectic, drawing not only on Western religious teaching but also choosing elements from the Hindu, Buddhist, Sufic, or Eastern Orthodox traditions. Together with the subjectivisation and commodification of religion this has resulted in specific traditions no longer being 'owned' by the communities that created them but being available for selective appropriation in accordance with personal choice. Hesychast practices and the use of the Jesus Prayer are a case in point. These elements of Orthodox tradition have been adopted by a broad range of communities and movements, not only Roman Catholic but also Evangelical and esotericist.²⁵ Theosis, as we shall see, has followed a similar trajectory of reception.

THE MEANING OF THEOSIS IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHURCH FATHERS

Turning now to the second term of our binary, theosis, we may define it in a broad sense as a theological motif with roots in very early Christian

²⁵ For a review of the literature, see C. D. L. Johnson, 2010: 46–87.

tradition that seeks to express the content of salvation and its place in the divine economy as an interpenetration of God's life with ours. The term itself, as already mentioned, originated in the fourth century AD but its core meaning, 'becoming divine', goes back to the very origins of Christianity in first-century Judaism. The catastrophic Jewish revolt against Roman rule in the first and second centuries, which resulted in the suppression of much that was characteristic of Jewish life, including the Temple, sacrifices, pilgrimages, zealot movements, and contemplative communities such as the one at Qumran that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, changed the character of Judaism. Only the Rabbinic form survived, its quietist emphasis on the study of Torah, prayer, and good works posing no political threat to the imperial government. Yet Rabbinic Judaism in this period was spiritually very fruitful, with the rise of Merkavah mysticism (ascent in the spirit to the throne-chariot of God) and the development of new speculations about the inner meaning of texts such Psalm 82:6 that fed straight into nascent Christian thinking on the divine destiny of the baptised.²⁶

Recent studies in the New Testament (Blackwell, 2016; Byers, 2017) have demonstrated that an appreciation of the role of the deification motif is important if we are to gain a proper understanding of such fundamental constituents of Christianity as Pauline soteriology and Johannine ecclesiology. Paul's discussions of glory, immortality, adoption, and conforming to Christ's image (primarily in Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 3–5, but also in Colossians 2, Galatians 3–4, 1 Corinthians 15, and Philippians 2–3) have been shown by Ben Blackwell to be themes, drawn from both the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds, that enable believers to participate through Christ in the divine attributes and so enter into a divine sphere of existence. Andrew Byers has argued convincingly for an equally participatory ecclesiology in the Fourth Gospel. The Johannine community is called to participate in the divine interrelation of Father and Son, the correlation of the Shema, 'YHWH is one' (Deut 6.4), with Jesus's prayer 'that they may all be one' (John 17.21), characterising the children of God as participants in the dyadic relationship of Father and Son through the operation of the Spirit.

Towards the end of the second century, deification becomes an important theme in Irenaeus of Lyon. Focusing on the realisation in humanity of the image and likeness of God, he is the first to enunciate the so-called

²⁶ For a fuller discussion of this, see Russell, 2004: 53–78.

exchange formula: because of his infinite love for us, Christ ‘became what we are in order to make us what he is himself’.²⁷ That is not to say that we attain identity with Christ. What we attain is a community of life with him. Through his incarnation, Christ assumed our human nature; through our incorporation into Christ by baptism, we receive a share in his divine nature, which means principally a share in the properties of immortality and incorruption. This entry into the deified life through baptism is consolidated and deepened through participation in the Eucharist. Early Latin and Greek liturgical texts contain many allusions to the exchange formula.²⁸

The second century also saw the entry of a new element into the Church’s understanding of deification, that of spiritual ascent through moral development, intellectual application, and ascetic effort. This begins with Clement of Alexandria, who was the first to use the term ‘deification’, *theopoēsis* (θεοποίησις). Following the example of the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, Clement combined the Platonic injunction to flee from this world to the other by ‘becoming like the divine so far as possible’ (*Theaetetus* 176b) with the biblical statement that God created humankind in the divine image and likeness (Gen 1.26) to teach a doctrine of salvation as deifying assimilation to God through participation (another Platonic concept) in Christ’s incorruption and moral excellence. Through the contemplation of intelligibles and the attainment of dispassion, in tandem with participation in the Church’s sacrifice of worship and praise, the Christian ‘studies to be a god’.

The philosophical foundations laid by Clement were built on (without acknowledgement) by Origen, the greatest Christian thinker before the golden age of the Church Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries. Origen was not a convert from pagan philosophy, like Clement, but a biblical exegete, who developed his teaching through his meditation on Scripture. He nevertheless reveals an impressive philosophical competence in his more speculative writings, his discussions of the nature of participation

²⁷ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies* V, Praef. For the Pauline thinking on which Irenaeus draws, see 2 Cor 8.9 and Phil 2.6–8. On Irenaeus’s teaching on deification, see Blackwell, 2016: 35–70; Edwards, 2017a.

²⁸ On the Latin liturgical tradition, see Ortiz, 2019a. There is nothing as concise on the Byzantine liturgical tradition in this field, but useful discussions may be found in Gregorios, 2009. For comparable material in one of the branches of the Oriental Orthodox tradition, see Daggmawi, 2009.

in his *On First Principles*, providing him with a sound basis on which to elaborate the theme of deification in his works of exegesis. Deification for Origen is not principally a matter of philosophical ascent.²⁹ It is a dynamic participation in the divinity of the Father through sharing ecclesially in the spiritualising operation of the Spirit and the filialising work of the Son. The Spirit makes us holy so that the Son can make us sons and gods. The relationship of participation means that there is no danger of ontological confusion between Creator and creature, because participation entails two distinct terms, the participant and the participated in.

The fourth-century Greek Fathers, in turn, build on Origen. Their main concern is Christological, specifically the challenge to catholic Christianity presented by those who would make the Son ontologically inferior to the Father for the sake of preserving the transcendence of the divine. Origen had seen the Son as deified in relation to the Father but as deifying in relation to us. In view of the widening chasm, however, in the generation after Origen between the uncreated godhead and the created natural order, Christ could no longer be seen as himself deified, otherwise he would fall on the created side of the uncreated/created divide. At the same time, Christ's deification of the believer was found by Athanasius and others to be a compelling argument for the uncreatedness of Christ himself. That Christ can make created human beings sons and gods was not disputed. Athanasius argues that he can only do so if he is of the same uncreated nature as the Father. Believers are able to participate in the deified human nature assumed by the Logos through their assimilation to him by baptism and participation in the sacramental life.³⁰

Athanasius's Christological arguments, which were so decisive in establishing the Nicene faith, were taken over by the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, who attempt to combine them with the Platonic doctrine of the soul's ascent to God. Each does so, however, in a different way. Basil holds that the primary aim of the Christian life is to give glory to God but after that is to become like God so far as possible. Becoming like God through a moral and ascetic life gradually spiritualises the believer leading to the attainment of deification as an eschatological state. Like Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus emphasises the importance of the imitation of

²⁹ Origen's differences from Platonism are brilliantly discussed by Edwards, 2002.

³⁰ For an excellent discussion of the Alexandrian tradition on deification, see Edwards, 2017b.

God through the practice of virtue. This imitation renders believers akin to God, which results ultimately in their transcending the limitations of human life and coming to ‘mingle’ with the purest light. There is also a parallel process of ascent to the divine that is achieved liturgically. Christ deified the humanity that he assumed; this deified humanity is appropriated by the believer through baptism and nourished by the Eucharist. Deification, through following the contemplative life in tandem with the liturgical life, is thus the goal of every serious Christian. Gregory of Nyssa’s emphasis is different again because he prefers to speak of *participating* in the divine attributes rather than of *mingling* with them. Deification for him is primarily a Christological term. He seems to have been wary of compromising the transcendence of God by attributing deification unequivocally to human beings, although, like Gregory of Nazianzus, he does extend deification to believers through their reception of the sacraments.

The ecclesial context of deification is thus sketched in only lightly and in a somewhat exploratory way by the Cappadocians. It was Cyril of Alexandria who fully integrated the theme of spiritual ascent to union with God with that of the corporeal participation attainable through Christ in the new ecclesial life inaugurated by him. Deification is a dynamic movement encompassing the entire trajectory of human life beginning with its emergence from non-existence into created existence and ending with its transformation in Christ through which it comes to share in the divine attributes of holiness, righteousness, and freedom from corruption and decay. A key concept for Cyril is that of participation. In his mature work he drops the technical terms of deification, preferring to rely on the Petrine expression, ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet 1.4), which he sees as correlative to the Pauline emphasis on Christ’s coming to share in our human nature (Heb 2.14), ‘for the divine nature is God the Word together with the flesh’ (*Com. on John* 6.1.653d). Salvation is in essence participation through the Spirit in Christ, who unites in himself the ‘two vastly discrete things of the divine and the human’ (*Com. on John* 6.1.653e) and is thus participation in Christ’s relationship with the Father. At the centre of this dynamic participation is the Eucharist. Cyril moves away from divinising contemplation to focus on the role of the practice of the virtues and the reception of the Eucharist as the path to theosis.³¹

³¹ For an outstanding study of deification in Cyril, see Keating, 2004.

Deification in the Latin Fathers

Long regarded as a peculiarly Eastern perspective on salvation, deification has come to be seen in recent years as also embedded firmly within the Western tradition. The earliest studies were on Augustine, who uses the verb *deificare* (but not the noun *deificatio*) more frequently than any of his Latin predecessors, albeit still quite rarely in relation to the bulk of his writings.³² Since then, work has also been published on Hilary of Poitiers and Ambrose of Milan, and, in a recent collective volume, on a representative range of Latin patristic writers.³³ What they all have in common is a commitment to the ontological transformation of human nature (not just its juridical justification) made possible for us by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Word of God. Christ became human that we might become divine. The Latin Fathers are more prone than their Greek counterparts to use mercantile imagery to express this exchange, but on the thematic level they convey the same message.

This fundamental unanimity follows naturally from the dependence of the Latins on the Greek tradition, the language of Christianity even in the West being Greek, of course, until well into the third century. Yet there is a difference in emphasis in the Latin Fathers compared with the Greek. The Latins did not have the same access as the Greeks to the Greek philosophical traditions, nor, apart from Hilary and Ambrose, who were good Hellenists, were they able to immerse themselves in Origen, whose importance for the Greek tradition on deification has already been noted. Some Latins also seem to have been wary of the technical language of deification. Even Rufinus, an eager champion of Origen, tones down the language on occasion.³⁴

The Emergence of Theosis as a Doctrine

So how did theosis advance from being a pervasive theological theme (from being widely deployed, we might say, as a *theologoumenon*) to being a defined ecclesiastical doctrine (a *didaskalia* or *dogma*)? The line of

³² The pioneer study of deification in Augustine is Capánaga, 1954. Later studies include Bonner, 1986 and 1990; Chadwick, 2002; Russell, 2004: 329–32; Meconi, 2013; and Haflidson, 2019.

³³ The earliest study on Hilary is Wild, 1950, now superseded by Sidaway, 2016 and 2019. On Ambrose, see Dunkle, 2019. For overviews of the Latin patristic tradition, see Bardy, 1957; Fokin, 2014; Ortiz, 2016; and, for a more extended treatment, Ortiz, 2019b.

³⁴ For more details on this, see Russell, 2019a.

development, as we shall see in Chapter 2, runs from Dionysius the Areopagite, through Maximus the Confessor and John Damascene, to Gregory Palamas. In these writers, theosis becomes integral to the theological structure of their thought. Defined dogma, however, arises only from the resolution of controverted teachings. It was only in Palamas's time, in the fourteenth century, that theosis became a matter of doctrinal controversy requiring an official pronouncement on its meaning and significance. At the Constantinopolitan Council of 1351, the patristic tradition on theosis was examined and those who claimed that the deity arising out of the gift of the Spirit was a created deity were condemned.³⁵ The saints who have been deified by union with God were defined as truly participating in the uncreated Godhead, not in the divine essence (because that would abolish their distinction from God) but in the divine energy.³⁶

Modern Orthodox have naturally taken their cue from the synod of 1351, which although not an ecumenical council – ecumenical councils require the participation of Rome, which last occurred at the Nicene council of 787 – was nevertheless a council of the utmost solemnity whose findings were incorporated into the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*, a list of proscribed errors read each year on the first Sunday of Lent. It is thus that deification comes to be defined by modern Orthodox as ‘the religious ideal of Orthodoxy’ (Kern, 1950: 394, cited by Mantzaridis, 1984: 12), as the realisation of humanity's true existence (Nellas, 1987: 15), as a doctrine that ‘by the place it occupies in Orthodox theology, determines the shape of that theology’ (Louth, 2007: 43).

MODERN RETRIEVALS OF THEOSIS

Is there a continuous history? It depends on how broadly theosis is defined. Although studies such as those of Blackwell and Byers have demonstrated that the theme of deification is not confined to writers who use the technical terms, it does make a difference, as Andrew Louth has said, whether or not you have a word for it (2020: 837). In Orthodoxy, even if the modern retrieval of theosis has accompanied the retrieval of Palamite theology, the word itself is present in texts such as Gregory of Nazianzus's *Orations* and Maximus the Confessor's *Ambigua* that have been read and studied in every generation. In 1782,

³⁵ Synodal Tome of 1351, paragraph 36 (Karmiris, 1968: 394; trans. Russell, 2020: 357).

³⁶ Synodal Tome of 1351, paragraph 40 (Karmiris, 1968: 396–98; trans. Russell, 2020: 361–63).

when Nikodemos the Hagiorite published these and other patristic spiritual texts in the *Philokalia*, his intention, as he reveals in the Preface, was to encourage the ascetic orientation of his readers towards the attainment of theosis. Yet in the early twentieth century, knowledge of deification in Greek and Russian academic circles was rare. It needed the retrieval of deification by different routes – by Florensky and Bulgakov developing the ideas of Soloviev, by Popov recovering the teachings of the Greek Fathers, by the Russian émigrés in Paris writing in French for a broad audience, by Stăniloae working on his Romanian translation of the *Philokalia* – for the Orthodox to reappropriate a central feature of their theology. These activities have also benefitted Western Christians, whose current broad awareness of theosis has been influenced by contact with Orthodox scholars and by acquaintance with Orthodox theological texts. Also important in the Western context since the Second World War is the revival of patristic studies and the renewal of philosophical interest in such ideas as Kant's making of the transcendent immanent or Bergson's *élan vital*.

HOW ARE RELIGION AND THEOSIS RELATED?

Theosis is not tied to any specific version of religion but it has different contours according to which version is under consideration. A taxonomy of religion might help us see this more clearly. Setting aside dismissive views of religion from Lucretius to Freud that have regarded religion as at worst harmful to humanity's interests and as at best an emotional prop with no basis in reality, we may group the different ways of understanding religion under four headings: phenomenal-theological (marked by a tension between θεοσεβεία and θρησκεία), experiential-philosophical (focusing on making of the transcendent immanent in actual experience), ethical (treating *religio* as a moral virtue), and semiotic (understanding religion in symbolic terms as a system of signs).

Under the first heading, the phenomenal-theological, *theosebeia* (θεοσεβεία), 'piety', 'reverence towards God') is pitted against *thrēskeia* (θρησκεία), the doctrines, rites, and structures that constitute a 'faith community'. Theosis in this context relates to *theosebeia* alone. It is not an external mark of religion but teaches a particular mode of appropriating salvation through faith. The thematic approach to deification belongs here. It may be noted, incidentally, that in the modern Greek context *theosebeia* is no longer available as a suitable term, having been used in the nineteenth century by Theophilos Kairis (1784–1853) as the basis for

the name of his new theosophical religion, Theosebism, and has been replaced by *eusebeia* (εὐσεβεία).

The second way of understanding religion, in experiential-philosophical terms, relates to the actual experience of transcendence even in this life. It is the experience of transcendence that leads to theosis, the bond with the divine realised through the transcendent-immanent. But personal experience is needed *plus* 'the phenomenology of religion', cult and tradition, which are more than philosophising. The Palamite mode of theosis fits this understanding of religion, as does the Eckhartian.

The third way, which treats religion as a moral virtue, focuses on the final end. As Augustine puts it, to reconsider (*relegere*), to make a new choice is to direct ourselves towards God because our happiness and fulfilment lie only in him. In this case, theosis is to find the true fulfilment of our being in God.

The fourth way, the semiotic, which considers religion as a system of external signs, treats theosis as an element in a 'language' of participation in God. This is a way of discussing theosis favoured by many modern scholars, as it does not entail taking any position in advance on its experiential value.

The following chapters will focus on the first and second ways of relating theosis to religion, the phenomenal-theological and the experiential-philosophical. It is these ways that have proved most fruitful historically and that account today for the draw of theosis far beyond the walls of the academy.