

[MJTM 9 (2007–2008) R8–R10]

BOOK REVIEW

Gross, Jules, *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*. Translated by Paul A. Onica. Anaheim, CA: A&C Press, 2002. xxvii + 306 pp.

“Among the Greek fathers the seeds of a doctrine of divinization contained in the New Testament fell on a soil all the more fertile to receive them and make them fruitful due to the religious and philosophical conceptions which they held from Hellenism” (p. 95). This citation sums up the author’s purpose, which is to isolate and analyze the details of a theological tradition which long ago fell out of favour in the Western church. What Gross proposes, he delivers: a thorough and useful discussion of the early development of the doctrine of *theosis*. He is at pains to demonstrate that, while divinization has parallels in pagan Greek thought, the doctrine developed in a uniquely Christian form from the time of Irenaeus onward. This tenet has proved more congenial to the Eastern Church, where it is still held, albeit in a mature form attained in the fourteenth century (p. x).

An extensive discussion in the Introduction (pp. xiii–xvi) of the existing literature is well-rounded, yet the translator gives no indication that Gross could not have taken advantage of the Nag Hammadi texts, whose discovery still lay a decade in the future when he wrote. The original tome’s datedness is also revealed by the confessional tone which permeates, if not taints, the text. Gross’s theological loyalties lie close to the surface, providing standards to which he expects the theologians he studies more or less to conform. To speak, as he does, of Saint Justin and Tatian’s being “obviously in error” (p. 116), or of the normative centrality in theology of “ecclesiastical tradition” (pp. 121, 131, 154, 183), sounds hopelessly authoritarian to increasingly post-modern ears. Despite this, the contours of Gross’s discussion

appear to be solid and still useful. Indeed, Gross's book is endorsed as remaining authoritative in relatively current (1997) scholarship, including the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (p. xv) and René Laurentin's *L'Esprit Saint, cet inconnu* (p. xiii).

The question arises who would invest considerable time and energy into the translation of a work almost two-thirds of a century old. A&C Press is an imprint of Living Stream Ministry, the publishing arm of a fellowship of "Local Churches." Living Stream publishes the vast literary production of two twentieth century Chinese preachers, Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. Their works stress the "mingling" of Christ's divine nature with believers' human nature, a form of *theosis*. Onica does not claim that his fellowship's ideas come from the sources delineated by Gross (p. x), but merely points out that orthodox thinkers have come to similar conclusions. The concept of divinization, with its ecclesiological implications, is suggested as a counterweight to the rampant individualism and often superficial character of North American evangelicalism (pp. xiii, xviii). This suggestion, in turn, raises the question of the translator's objectivity. Is, for example, the use of "mingle" (passim) an appropriate translation of Gross's original? The underlying words are forms of *melanger* and *meler*, both of which may be translated appropriately as "mingle." The impact of any potential nuance to the translation is more significant in terms of "Local Church" readers (who may perceive that their particular doctrinal formulations are more antique than they actually are) than it is upon the average reader, who will not lose the text's sense.

Physically, the book is a well-bound hard-cover with an attractive dust-jacket; the text is well-set with no apparent "typos." A Subject Index is provided, but the reader is not informed that it is not exhaustive. Onica, a graduate of the University of Toronto, is to be congratulated for this highly readable English text, with few of the stilted turns of phrase which often afflict translations (although a handful of Latinisms find their way in; e.g. "inamissable" on pp. 266, 272, and "qualificatives" on p. 232). He tends to employ gender-neutral language, with the notable exception of referring to God (who is referred to as "He"

or “Him”). In sum, despite the book’s relative antiquity, and whatever the goals of those who covered the expense of its translation and publication, it is a valuable contribution to the English literature on the subject and may function as a primer to the issue.

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