



1-1-2007

*The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition.* by Norman Russell

Jordan Vajda

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Vajda, Jordan (2007) "*The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition.* by Norman Russell," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 46 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol46/iss1/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

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

Reviewed by Jordan Vajda

The media attention given to the publication of *The Gospel of Judas* by the National Geographic Society<sup>1</sup> as well as the continuing success of *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown<sup>2</sup> both indicate an enduring fascination in the popular mind with the ancient, and often convoluted, history of Christianity. And while it may have come as a surprise for many, the fact remains that the ancient Christian world was as splintered and diverse as is the modern Christian world. One of the most basic distinctions to arise among the followers of Jesus of Nazareth in the century after his death had to do with the language spoken by the common person—Latin in the western parts of the Roman Empire, Greek in the east—and the ways that linguistic reality translated into different cultural and religious experiences of a common Christian inheritance. The ramifications of the split in thinking between the Greek-speaking east and the Latin-speaking west is quickly illustrated by examining that branch of Christian theology known as soteriology, which concerns itself with those doctrines having to do with the salvation of the human person.

Greek-speaking and Greek-writing churchmen in the east came to understand the doctrine of salvation in Christ as one that involved the deification of the human person; but what exactly did they mean when they described those redeemed by Christ as *gods*? The publication of Norman Russell's *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, based on his 1988 Oxford doctoral dissertation, is the definitive answer that provides an in-depth analysis of the Greek Fathers (church leaders and writers) through the seventh century CE.

The last comprehensive overview of the Greek Fathers on the question of salvation as deification was *The Divinisation of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, published in French in 1938 by Jules Gross and translated into English in 2000. While Russell reconfirms the central thesis of Gross, that the doctrine of deification is essentially biblical and not a

Hellenistic importation (*contra* Adolf von Harnack), he expands upon Gross by taking into account the nearly seventy years of scholarship that has arisen since 1938. Further, unlike Gross, Russell concerns himself with the questions prompting the ancient writings he studies, as well as the evolving nature of the actual vocabulary chosen to express the doctrine in question (chapter 1).

This study of the divine potential of the human person reviews the Graeco-Roman and Jewish parallels (chapters 2 and 3) and, after examining the first two centuries of the doctrine (chapter 4), concludes that “the idea of human beings becoming ‘gods’ entered Christian thought from Rabbinic Judaism” (112). The foundations established by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century CE are then developed by the Christian Church in Alexandria, Egypt (chapters 5 and 6), first by independent teachers such as Clement and Origen in the third century CE, then by bishops such as Athanasius and Cyril in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Next, the contributions of the fourth-century Cappodocians—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa—are presented (chapter 7). While the doctrine of deification “disappears from view” by the mid-fifth century CE (237), it is ultimately reclaimed in a definitive way for Christianity by Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century CE (chapter 8). Finally, an epilogue charts the course of the doctrine of deification into the modern period (chapter 9).

Special mention needs to be made about two parts of this book that will serve as aids for further study on the topic of deification: its second appendix and its bibliography. Appendix 2, *The Greek Vocabulary of Deification*, is an exhaustive listing through 500 CE of all the Greek nouns and verbs that express the concept of deification, their use by both Christian and non-Christian authors, as well as how those uses compare and contrast. The bibliography is, quite simply, exhaustive on the subject of deification in the Greek Fathers; and the entries include works published through the year 2004. Taken together, appendix 2 and the bibliography provide invaluable resources that no professional academic or educated layperson can afford to neglect.

For the Latter-day Saint reader in particular, two topics that appear only tangentially in the course of Russell’s analysis merit closer attention and will provide opportunities for new research and exploration: the evolution of church authority and hierarchy in ancient Alexandria, Egypt, and the unique role of those desert fathers as embodiments of an authority that flowed from revelatory experiences. When beginning to describe the development of the doctrine of deification in Alexandria, Russell briefly highlights the unique history and origins of the Christian church in

Egypt (115–16). He notes that no reliable evidence exists for the structure of the Egyptian Christian church prior to the last decade of the second century of the Christian Era precisely because of a Jewish revolt in the years 115–117 CE which, in its overthrow, had the effect of destroying not only Jewish life but that of the nascent Alexandrian Christian community as well.

Without a doubt, by the year 117 CE something had been lost. Russell comments:

The Church's recovery between 117 and 200 was slow. . . . In the development of the episcopacy, Bishop Demetrius is a key figure. He has been described as "clearly the first 'monarchical bishop'" in Alexandria (Pearson 1990: 209), or even "the Second Founder of the Church in Alexandria" (Telfer 1952: 2). Later tradition reports that at the start of his episcopate [189 CE] he was the only bishop in Egypt. By his death [232 CE] he had appointed three suffragans [assistant bishops]. His successor, Heralcas, consecrated a further twenty (Pearson 1990: 211 no. 64). These suffragans enhanced the power of the bishops of Alexandria. (116)

While it is a matter of certain faith among the Latter-day Saints that there was, in fact, a great apostasy in ancient Christianity—an apostasy that resulted principally from the loss of apostolic ministry and leadership—the descriptions provided by Russell on the fall and subsequent rise of the Christian church in ancient Egypt suggests lines of evidence that could be used to provide support for the LDS truth-claim that a "falling away" did occur (2 Thes. 2:3), which then necessitated "the restoration of all things" (D&C 86:10).

Another topic which will be of particular interest to Latter-day Saint readers revolves around the subject of ancient Christian monasticism. While summarizing the influences of Judaism with respect to the Christian doctrine of deification, Russell describes in passing the unique role and influence of the first monks in ancient Christianity and provides, by way of example, an incident in the life of Abba Pachomius (c. 292–348 CE):

Pachomius, for example, is credited with a heavenly visit during an ecstasy in which he witnessed Christ expounding the parables of the Gospel from a raised throne. Thereafter he was a man endowed with supernatural power. Whenever "he repeated the words and their commentary which he had heard from the Lord's mouth, great lights would come out in his words, shooting out brilliant flashes" (*V. Pach.* 86, trans. Veilleux, cited Frankfurter 1996: 178). Pachomius and those like him were men who had seen for themselves, who spoke with personal authority of the things of heaven. (78)

Thus, from an LDS perspective, the question can be raised: If the ancient Christian monks grew to be influential and revered figures among ancient Christians, was it because the monks lay claim to an

authority rooted in direct revelation from the heavens, the experience of which had passed away from the bishops (the emergent leaders of second-century Christianity) but which was nonetheless remembered as once having been existent and normative among earlier leaders of the Church, namely, the Apostles?

In a similar vein, appendix 1 (“Deification in the Syriac and Latin Traditions”) is suggestive of new possibilities for advanced, yet heretofore undone, research. Russell deliberately limits his area of focus: “This study aims to be as comprehensive as possible within reasonable limits, which would have been exceeded if the scope of the book had not been confined to the Greek Fathers” (9). Nevertheless, he does provide thumbnail sketches of the doctrine of deification among the Syriac and Latin Fathers. Clearly, then, the way remains open for other researchers and writers to mine the riches of Syrian and Latin Christianity and to do for them what Russell has done for the Greek Fathers. And in this arena of doctrine which, arguably, has so much in common with the LDS doctrine of exaltation—which also speaks to the divine potential of the human person—why should the work not be undertaken and pursued by the Latter-day Saints?

For anyone interested in ancient Christianity, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* by Norman Russell is required reading: whether summarizing trends of the last century, or providing a detailed examination of the first centuries of the Christian era, Russell masterfully provides a readable and yet thoroughly researched contribution to the question of human salvation as understood by the Greek Fathers. Ultimately, the topic under review is of the utmost importance, or so thought the Christians of centuries gone by—Maximus the Confessor once wrote, “The only real disaster that can befall us is the failure to attain deification” (295)—and with this publication Norman Russell helps all of us understand why so many in antiquity wrote so much about a doctrine that can still sound so foreign to the modern Christian ear.

---

Jordan Vajda (vajdaop@usa.net) received his MDiv and MA (theology) at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He is currently employed as Admitting Department Supervisor at the Children’s Hospital in Seattle, Washington.

1. Also to be noted: the publication of the text involved a cover story for the May 2006 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, an accompanying TV special, and the publication of still more books on this ancient Gnostic text. See also “A Latter-day Saint Colloquium on the Gospel of Judas,” *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 5–44.

2. As of Sunday, May 5, 2006, this novel had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 162 weeks.