

# ANTHROPOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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## Spiritual Quest of Ukrainian Thinkers of the 16th – Early 17th Centuries in the Context of the Doctrine of Theosis

**Purpose.** The main purpose of this research is to analyse and study the development of individual spirituality within the context of theosis doctrine in the religious-anthropological studies of Ukrainian philosophers from the 16th to the beginning of the 17th century. **Theoretical basis.** The basis of the research is determined by modern methodological approaches to examining the correlation between philosophical and religious visions regarding the representation of views on deification among representatives of contemporary global philosophical-religious thought, as well as among representatives of Ukrainian religious-philosophical thought of the 16th and early 17th century. **Originality.** The paper analyses the unique views of Ukrainian thinkers on the role of theosis in shaping individual spirituality. **Conclusions.** The spiritual development of individuals, according to contemporary religious-philosophical authors and Ukrainian thinkers from the 16th to the 17th centuries, consists of self-discovery and moral growth as a means of approaching God. This serves as the basis for understanding human sanctity and life purpose, where the path to God is linked with renouncing worldly desires and striving for union with Him. The state of theosis is perceived as a personal experience, a collaboration between humans and God. The primary purpose of asceticism is to attain grace, which leads to the transformation of will. The doctrine of theosis influences the formation of a theocratic idea in culture and expands the understanding of internal experience due to the pursuit of spirituality. Theosis is a transformation of anthropological reality that goes beyond natural limits. This process constitutes a stage of spiritual growth that involves cultivating fear of sin, self-observation, and overcoming passions. One of its key aspects is interpreting closeness to God as cooperation between humans and the Divine, crucial for realizing divine grace. Considering the question of theosis draws attention to the importance of spiritual values and the search for meaning in life, especially in complex and unpredictable circumstances accompanying military conflicts, which Ukraine is currently facing.

*Keywords:* theosis; deification; spiritual development; grace; self-discovery; moral growth; self-improvement; religious anthropology

### Introduction

Reflection on the meaning of existence and strategies for self-improvement have always accompanied the development of mankind. That is why researchers often pay attention to the actual aspects related to spiritual development, in particular, through the analysis of mystical experience that is revealed to the adherents of the Christian church. Therefore, in our opinion, Eirini Artemi is right to point out in her study that Christian anthropology and doctrine are the basis for understanding human nature and achieving godhood:

The human flourishing and the positive psychology should have their  
foundations on Christ and the revelation of divine Truth into people

through prophets, church fathers, apostles and the incarnation of Logos... the Christian anthropology should walk near the progress of medical technology and theories about the human flourishing and the positive psychology, but it should have as only compass the words of Christ and the teaching of the apostles and fathers. Christian should examine everything concerning human nature the potential to become like God. The human flourishing should be based on the realization of Triune God's likeness within each person. (Artemi, 2020, p. 99)

The relevance of the topic of spiritual development of the individual in the context of the doctrine of theosis is of particular importance in the context of the war in Ukraine. The current situation in the country poses not only physical challenges to people, but also encourages them to deeply rethink their life values, search for the meaning of existence and ways of self-improvement. The spiritual aspects associated with the phenomenon of theosis are becoming an important resource for maintaining mental health, strengthening spiritual strength and finding inner balance in difficult living conditions.

The teachings of Ukrainian thinkers about deification help society find inner peace and support in spiritual values during the trials of war. The religious and philosophical heritage of famous religious scholars, spiritual teachers, and philosophers helps people find inner strength, optimism, and faith in the future even in the most difficult times. Therefore, the study and discussion of spiritual growth in the context of theosis is important both for personal development and for maintaining the spiritual well-being of Ukrainian society.

Our research will examine the relationship between the pursuit of personal spiritual development based on the doctrine of theosis and the level of spiritual self-realization in the Ukrainian context. The hypothesis assumes that individuals who understand and implement the principles of theosis have a deeper understanding of their spiritual path, a higher level of psychological comfort and the ability to achieve harmony in their own existence, which can contribute to a higher quality of life and overall well-being.

In our study, we refer to the work of modern foreign and domestic researchers of the phenomenon of theosis, in particular, Ron Cole-Turner (2018), Oskari Juurikkala (2020), Eirini Artemi (2020), Ruslana Mnozhynska (2020), Harvey Egan (1978) and others.

### **Purpose**

This research is aimed to analyse and study the development of individual spirituality within the context of the doctrine of theosis in the Christian anthropological studies of Ukrainian thinkers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as well as to reveal the impact of this concept on the formation of spirituality and self-identification of a person in Ukrainian society.

### Statement of basic materials

Metropolitan Hilarion (1954) (I. Ogienko) emphasised that for God, man is a unique creature, designed to fulfil a special mission – to rule the world and express the divine nature. People are endowed with special gifts and abilities that distinguish them from other creatures. These words of Hilarion refer to the concept of deification, or theosis, which is the Christian doctrine of human's union with God and their ability to grow spiritually through the action of divine grace.

The doctrine of deification is crucial for the study of theology and holiness. It assumes that a person can receive Divine energies and unite with God, which is the basis of holiness. Origen identifies certain moral qualities that reflect the characteristics of God's image in man: justice, moderation, temperance, wisdom, and the desire to learn, which are essential to God and can exist in man through work and likeness to God. According to Origen, theosis is the main goal of human life, which is to restore the image of God and his likeness in oneself. This cognition, accompanied by an ascetic renunciation of material passions and worldly joys, reflects the enlightenment of the mind by divine wisdom (Edwards, 2023).

The doctrine of deification in its earliest forms was considered in the theology of Byzantium, in particular in the writings of St. Athanasius the Great and the Cappadocian Fathers: St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Basil the Great, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, in the period between the First and Second Ecumenical Councils. This doctrine gained particular importance during the polemics with the Arians, when the meaning of the Divine Incarnation and its importance for human salvation was realised. The union of the Divine and human natures in one Person, i.e. the Incarnation, enables man to achieve union with God and to become like Him through grace. This happens thanks to the Divine energies. However, the next challenge for Byzantine theology was to understand how these energies are perceived and act in the creature, especially in human nature.

The doctrine of deification was developed in the writings of Maximus the Confessor. Also important is the doctrine of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite about the good will of God, namely, the providence of God, which destined the creature for transformation, salvation and union with the Deity, the origin that put a good being in it. Maximus the Confessor speaks of the original destiny of human nature for deification, since the desire for it is contained in the natural beginning of man, their natural logos. This is the image and likeness of God, in which God creates man. The contradiction that can arise from the way of human existence, from the original sin, is overcome through the interpenetration of the divine and human natures in Christ. When a person follows Christ and aligns his or her will with the natural logos, he or she becomes involved in the Divine and ultimately achieves deification (Juurikkala, 2020). This doctrine of deification, which is part of the Orthodox tradition, is the basis of the understanding of holiness according to St. John Damascene.

Italian Doctor of Theology Oskari Juurikkala examines the ontological problem of theosis from two perspectives: the relationship between the finite and the infinite and the relationship between human nature and sin. The scholar clarifies these problems with the help of the thoughts of St. Maximus the Confessor on the distinction between the nature of a thing and the way it exists. In other words, Maxim's theological anthropology explains that the consequences of sin should not affect human nature, but the peculiarities of life. Theosis is seen not as a change in human nature, but as a change in the way of existence through its restoration and elevation by grace (Juurikkala, 2020).

Theosis should be seen as a significant historical doctrine of the Church because of its historicity and biblical nature, since the doctrine and practice of deification were present not only

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among Eastern theologians but also among prominent theologians and religious movements in the West (Medved, 2019). The Romanian researcher Goran Medved (2019), in particular, emphasises that the concept of theosis emerged in the patristic era, and in the Middle and Late Middle Ages, Eastern theologians considered theosis as a key doctrine that became the basis of salvation (p. 32).

Thus, the Eastern Church considers the doctrine of union with God (theosis, deification) to be the ultimate goal of humanity's restoration (Louth, 2023). This continuous and eternal process is manifested in the reception of the Holy Spirit by a person and his or her experience within the life of the Church. This approach allows Christians to personally perceive spiritual benefits, make spiritual achievements, and participate in the sacraments that contribute to the unfolding of life and connection with the divine. The doctrine of the experience of the Holy Spirit is developed through spiritual perception, which is reflected in the legacy of Gregory the Theologian and Symeon the New Theologian (1980). Gregory the Theologian pays special attention to the idea of human deification, which is manifested in moral actions (Monk Adrianos, 2015). This experience of communion with God is based on the real spiritual experience of Eastern Christianity, which is passed down through generations.

The American theologian Ron Cole-Turner notes that contemporary theological research on the meaning of theosis or deification often fails to take into account the contemporary cultural context in which ordinary Christians try to put these concepts into practice. The use of a wide range of practices for personal development raises expectations that can distort the understanding of theosis. These techniques are usually aimed at expanding the self, whereas theosis is based on the idea that true spirituality is about becoming like God through selfless love. The theology of theosis calls for the renunciation of the self, for self-depletion, rather than for the expansion of the self. Therefore, if theosis defines the Christian life, then the active use of technology for personal development may be associated with inattention to Christian values (Cole-Turner, 2018).

The American patrologist Norman Russell shows how the role of Dionysius the Areopagite was key not only in Byzantium but also in the late medieval West, where he reinforced the turn to the individualistic inner. Russell (2024) also links theosis to the changing conceptions of religion in the modern era.

It should be noted that deification takes place in two ways: apophatic method through mystical ecstasy and cataphatic method through positive reasoning about God and the Incarnation through the descent of the Deity in the Powers of the Theophany (Egan, 1978).

Thus, the spiritual development of a person encompasses the interaction of his or her internal forces and divine energies, which leads to the growth of the divinity of a person and the gradual full disclosure of his or her personality. In the theosis manifested in Hesychasm, a new understanding of human energy emerges, where a person is not self-sufficient but is focused on striving towards God and unity with Him.

The British theologian M. C. Benitan asserts that the synchronisation of the human will with the divine will, that is, the union of the human and divine will, is the pinnacle of the virtue of obedience, and that this union, in turn, is the path to deification. The scholar notes that the fundamental word for deification is the following statement: The soul becomes God from God through participation in him and in his attributes (Benitan, 2023).

The American scholar David C. Wang explores both modern and ancient Christian meditation practices, paying particular attention to Christian practices that emerge outside of Western contexts (e.g. John Cassian, Evagrius of Pontus, and Anthony De Mello). The scholar notes that the

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central issue concerns the tension between the transcendental and the therapeutic, since the practice of Christian contemplation is traditionally associated with the ultimate goal of union with God, and the content of Christian consciousness must begin and end with the Transcendent. The scholar argues that Eastern Orthodox spirituality speaks not only of unity (genesis) with God as the goal of meditation, but also of theosis – direct participation in the life of God. The researcher also notes that Christian religious practices, including meditation practices, contribute to improving public health and have a positive impact on global communities (Wang, 2024).

Australian Catholic theologian Damien Casey explores the relationship between life and death through the theology of theosis. The author uses the theological principles of Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa to demonstrate how the doctrine of theosis creates a comprehensive theology that is essential to our lives, restoring the values of Latin theology. Particular attention is paid to Irenaeus' understanding of the historical development of humanity as a necessary process of growth and maturation in our journey to God. Gregory of Nyssa develops Irenaeus' vision of theosis by proposing the idea of infinite "stretching out" (of *epectasia* – limited being), which allows participation in the infinity of the Divine, thereby confirming the connection between ontology and morality (Casey, 2015).

Theosis, or the concept of unity with God, came to Kievan Rus through translations of works by Byzantine church authors (Athanasius the Great, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Dionysius the Areopagite, John Damascene, and others). O. Kyrychok (2020) emphasises that the concept of theosis and the Christological dogma had a great influence on the formation of the theocratic idea in the culture of Rus. Love of wisdom plays a significant role in the discovery of the image of God in man and the achievement of deification through ascetic growth and service to people in accordance with the call and will of God.

For the Christian scribe of ancient Rus, knowledge, which is an important part of theosis, consisted in interpreting the truth expressed in the Logos. The scribes of Kievan Rus, like those of Byzantium and South Slavic countries, perceived the word as a symbol of the world and achieved mystical mergence with God through 'intelligent' prayer. This idea of the word can be traced in the allegorical works of ancient Russian scribes (Metropolitan Hilarion, Cyril of Turov, Clement of Smolyatych, and others) (Hudzenko, 2019).

From the standpoint of the vision of the relationship between God and man, Ukrainian humanists interpret the problem of self-knowledge as a way of self-realisation and deification, achieving spiritual stability and freedom, happiness in life, and liberation from moral evil (Sinkovyich, 2022). They also emphasise the role of the heart as the centre of spiritual life and the driving force that determines this path of transformation (Mnozhynska, 2020).

It should be noted that representatives of Ukrainian philosophical thought of the late 16th and early 17th centuries can be divided into those who supported the ideas of Neoplatonism and Hesychasm, and those who defended the philosophy of Neoplatonism. Meletius Smotritsky, Kyrylo Tranquillion-Stavrovetsky, Lavrentii Zizanii, and Kasjan Sakowicz were committed to Neoplatonism. And Iov Pochaevsky, Iov Knyahynytskyi, Isaiah Kopinsky, and especially Ivan Vyshenskyi preferred the ideas of hesychasm. It is worth noting that both movements emphasised the importance of human free will in achieving theosis. In addition, both the Hesychasts and the Neoplatonists attached great importance to the inner mystical experience and the state of ecstasy, as the most complete manifestation of the path to theosis.

In particular, the church figure Gerasim Smotrytsky showed a tendency to hesychasm by emphasizing self-absorption through concentrated prayer in solitude, which led to the "discovery" of

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the inner man that reflected God, or to deification. It is from the contemplation of the imperishable light that the deification of man begins. On the path of spiritual growth, the theologian advises: "...always follow the holy example in your bright youth, and prepare the temple of your body so that it becomes the profit of the Holy Spirit" (authors' transl.) (Smotrytsky, 1587). The main goal of human life is to direct one's efforts towards understanding the essence of God, which is revealed to a select few who are able to curb their sinful passions through a "silent conversation" with God. Emphasising the importance of the mystical experience of communion with God, in his book "The Key of the Kingdom of Heaven", Gerasim Smotrytsky (2005) suggests that "But when you pray, enter into your inner room, and having shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (p. 2).

Meletius Smotritsky, a bishop, church leader, and writer, notes that the deep mystery of faith, on which salvation is based, is the origin of the Holy Spirit. The theologian contrasts Western metaphysics with Eastern metaphysics, which is based on the ascetic ascent to the knowledge of the divine. In his opinion, Western metaphysics is rationalistic and focused on philosophical (rather than sensual) comprehension of God as the ultimate reality (Smotritsky, 1610, p. 125). Thus, with regard to the way of knowing God, the church leader emphasises that "the basis of the religious unity of the Church of Christ, the one Lord, is to know the supreme shepherd, to unite with him in faith and charity..." (authors' transl.) (Thomson, 1998).

The unity of man with God, his or her individual salvation, or theosis, was recognised by the Ukrainian religious figure, Orthodox monk Ivan Vyshenskyi, as the main goal of life. He argued that this is achieved through a person's desire for God and active spiritual activity on the way to improving moral qualities (Hudzenko, 2019; Lytvynov, 2012). According to I. Vyshenskyi (1986), the life of those who have cognised theosis looks like this: "Having received the Holy Spirit, all know everything, and safely preach the sacrament of faith, and manage, leading from unbelief to faith, human salvation" (authors' transl.) (pp. 64-65).

Kyrylo Tranquillion-Stavrovetsky (1988), a seventeenth-century church and educational figure, praising the "intelligent soul", says that "God gives us wise light generously to all..." (authors' transl.) (p. 300). The philosopher considers God to be an infinite, incomprehensible world source: "by incomprehension I comprehend the incomprehensible God" (Shynkaruk, 1988, p. 213). The theologian reflects: "...know thyself, as being such a wonderful and intelligent creature, in the likeness and image of God, with intelligence and immortality of reverence from God and with a place among the fallen angels in the fellowship seated" (authors' transl.) (Shynkaruk, 1988, p. 208). Thus, the statements about self-knowledge and unity with God and angels testify to the deep spiritual development of the theologian and reflect the understanding of the uniqueness of human existence in the divine context.

According to Iov Pochaevsky, a person can and should come closer to understanding God's essence by controlling his or her passions, as the main aspect of sinful state. "What the only begotten Son of God has done, do also according to your human strength, that you may be the cause of peace for yourself and for others" (authors' transl.) (Iov Pochaevsky, 1884, p. 156). The key to the practical understanding of hesychasm, the rapid advancement in Christian spiritual life, the highest level of spiritual development is the Sinai "Ladder of Paradise", which symbolises the ladder for the ascent of sinful man to God, the basis of which is "freedom from anger, fasting and chastity" (Kichi, 2002, p. 15). Thus, Iov Pochaevsky emphasises the importance of controlling one's passions as a key aspect of approaching the understanding of God's essence. This approach shows a focus on spiritual development and inner harmony, which is the basis for achieving communion with God.

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The Cleric of Ostroh believed that the spiritual essence of man reveals the Divine truth, which can be understood as the key to the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. The discovery of this transcendent truth occurs through intuitive insight by means of spiritual communication with God during self-knowledge (Tymoshenko, 2013).

In his works, the Athonite mystic Isaiah Kopynsky explores the topic of ways and methods of self-knowledge, understanding the Divine and the world around us in the context of the Gospel doctrine. The main work of I. Kopynsky is "Listvycia Dukhovnoho po Bozi Inocheskoho Zhytelstva" (The Ladder of the Spiritual Living in God for the Monks) also known as "Spiritual Alphabet", published in 1710 (Isaiah, 1710, p. 3). In this work, the theologian discusses the meaning of human life on earth, as well as the question of sinfulness and virtue. The philosopher emphasises that cognition of the environment and self-knowledge is achieved through self-absorption by turning to "intelligent action":

The work of intelligence, by which we can draw nearer and more perfectly join the Lord, is this: to know above all things visible and intelligible, from whom and for what purpose they were created and by whom they are moved and enriched, and to understand them truly. The same to yourself and all that is about you. The same is true for God and all his goodness. (authors' transl.) (Hrushevskyi, 1995, pp. 536-537)

Through intelligent action, using wisdom to guide our minds, we have the opportunity to draw closer to God and become united with him. This contributes to our understanding of the external world, self-knowledge, and knowledge of the Lord. According to the theologian, there are several types of "mind": "There is a difference in the mind, as in all external things. There is a mind that is perfect spiritual, and a mind that is mediocre – soulful; and a mind that is gross – carnal" (authors' transl.) (Hrushevskyi, 1995, p. 538). Through inner observation, a person understands himself or herself more deeply and comprehends the surrounding natural world. The ultimate goal of spiritual self-improvement is union with God in grace:

For as long as you work, as long as you do, you will not see, as long as you do not come to the perfect consciousness of yourself, you will not unite yourself with God by love. But when you know yourself, when you are united with God in love, then you will not have to do any feat and labour. Then you will always be in peace, joy, and merriment. (authors' transl.) (Hrushevskyi, 1995, pp. 540-541)

Thus, I. Kopynskyi's views are similar to early hesychastic Byzantine theology. For him, the path to self-knowledge is the path of theosis, a process that transforms man into the divine.

To summarise, we note that, according to the above-mentioned Ukrainian philosophers of the 16th-early 17th century, the main purpose of spiritual life in a religious context is to understand the essence of God and achieve unity with Him through self-knowledge, control of passions, and spiritual practice. It should be emphasised that Ukrainian thinkers of the historical period under consideration attached great importance to the phenomenon of theosis in the life of the believer.

### Originality

The originality of this article lies in the analysis of the relationship between the spiritual development of the individual and the doctrine of theosis in the context of Christian anthropological studies of Ukrainian thinkers. In particular, special attention is paid to the unique views of Ukrainian thinkers on the role of theosis in the spiritual formation of the individual. This approach expands our understanding of the influence of spirituality on the formation of identity and worldview in the Ukrainian cultural context.

### Conclusions

Analysing the views of representatives of modern world religious and philosophical thought, as well as Ukrainian thinkers of the 16th and early 17th centuries on the spiritual development of man, we come to the conclusion that for them, deification is approaching God through self-knowledge and moral improvement. This idea was considered the life goal of a person and was fundamental to understanding holiness. The way to knowing God was associated with the renunciation of worldly passions and the desire for unity with Him. Theosis, as the doctrine of union with God, was defined as the ultimate goal of humanity's restoration according to the teachings of the Eastern Church. This state was perceived as a subjective experience of the individual, which was seen in hesychasm as a synergy between man and God. The main task of asceticism was to obtain grace, which led to the transformation of the human will. The doctrine of theosis influenced the formation of the theocratic idea in the culture of Rus, and love of wisdom played an important role in the development of God's image. For philosophers and thinkers of the period, deification was the ultimate result in self-knowledge. They attached great importance to inner mystical experience and sought to experience spiritual ecstasy as the highest state on the path to theosis.

Thus, theosis is a transformation of anthropological reality that goes beyond the natural state. It involves mysticism and asceticism, and hesychasm views theosis (deification) as an inner experience of the human personality. This process is a stage-by-stage path of spiritual growth, which includes cultivating fear of sin, overcoming passions, contemplation, acceptance of Christ with full love for Him, and other aspects. One of the key aspects of hesychasm is the interpretation of deification as a cooperation between the energy of man and God, where their interaction is important for the realisation of divine grace, which completely dissolves the human will. Consideration of the research topic allows us to understand that deification and spiritual development are not limited to external circumstances or political realities. They are an internal process that depends on a personal attitude to moral values and self-knowledge. Ukrainian thinkers of the 16th and early 17th centuries, exploring theosis, emphasised the importance of inner experience, the search for spiritual harmony, and independence from external circumstances. Therefore, at the present time, when Ukraine is facing difficult challenges, consideration of the issues of spir-



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itual development and the search for meaning through the prism of the doctrine of theosis can contribute to supporting people, helping them overcome fear and insecurity, as well as finding inner stability and peace of mind.

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## Духовні пошуки українських мислителів XVI – початку XVII ст. в контексті вчення про теозис

**Мета.** Основна мета цього наукового дослідження полягає у вивченні та аналізі розвитку духовності особистості в контексті вчення про теозис у релігійно-антропологічних дослідженнях українських філософів XVI – початку XVII століття. **Теоретичний базис.** Підґрунтя дослідження визначають новітні методологічні підходи до вивчення співвідношення філософського та релігійного бачення репрезентації поглядів на обоження у представників сучасної світової філософсько-релігійної думки, а також у представників релігійно-філософської думки України XVI – початку XVII століття. **Наукова новизна.** У роботі проаналізовано унікальні погляди українських мислителів на роль теозису у формуванні духовності особистості. **Висновки.** Духовний розвиток особистості для сучасних авторів релігійно-філософських досліджень та українських

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мислителів XVI – XVII ст. полягає в самопізнанні та моральному зростанні як засобах наближення до Бога. Це становить основу для розуміння святості та життєвої мети людини, де шлях до Бога пов'язують із відмовою від світських прагнень та устремлінням до єднання з Ним. Стан теозису сприймається як особистий досвід, співпраця між людиною та Богом. Основна мета аскези полягає в здобутті благодаті, що призводить до трансформації волі. Доктрина теозису впливає на формування теократичної ідеї в культурі та розширює розуміння внутрішнього досвіду внаслідок прагнення до духовності. Теозис є перетворенням антропологічної реальності, що виходить за межі природного. Цей процес складає етап духовного зростання, що передбачає виховання страху перед гріхом, самоспостереження та подолання пристрастей. Один із його ключових аспектів – тлумачення близькості до Бога як співпраці між людиною та Божественним, що є важливим для реалізації божественної благодаті. Розгляд питання теозису дозволяє звернути увагу на важливість духовних цінностей та пошуку сенсу в житті, особливо у складних та непередбачуваних обставинах, що супроводжують воєнні дії, в умовах яких зараз опинилась Україна.

*Ключові слова:* теозис; обоження; духовний розвиток; благодать; самопізнання; моральне зростання; самовдосконалення; релігійна антропологія

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