

He Became What We Are: A Patristic and Dogmatic Analysis of the Incarnation as the Path to Theosis

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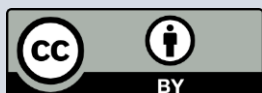
This article is a theological study that highlights the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ through patristic and dogmatic approaches within the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

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Abstract

The doctrine of the Incarnation has often been treated as a historical or abstract Christological doctrine, while its soteriological, ecclesiological, and anthropological significance within the Eastern Orthodox tradition has received comparatively limited attention, particularly in Indonesian theological scholarship. This article re-examines the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the Incarnation through a qualitative library study employing patristic and dogmatic theological approaches by analyzing the writings of the Eastern Church Fathers together with Orthodox dogmatic sources. The study argues that, for the Church Fathers and later Orthodox theologians, Christology is inseparable from soteriology, and that the hypostatic union serves not merely as a doctrinal definition but as the theological foundation of theosis, through which humanity participates in the divine life. The findings demonstrate that the Incarnation integrates Christological, Trinitarian, ecclesiological, liturgical, and anthropological dimensions into a unified vision of salvation centered on humanity's restoration and communion with God. By re-centering the Incarnation on its soteriological purpose, this study contributes to contemporary theological discourse by highlighting the enduring relevance of Eastern Orthodox theology for interdenominational dialogue and for addressing the secularization of Christmas.

Keywords: *incarnation of Christ; Eastern Orthodox theology; patristics; dogmatic theology; theosis*

INTRODUCTION

The Incarnation of Christ, commemorated in the celebration of His Nativity (Christmas), constitutes a foundational tenet of the Christian faith and has remained a central subject of theological reflection since the Early Church (Pawl, 2020). The event of God's incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ is not merely a historical occurrence within the narrative of salvation history, but also serves as the theological cornerstone for both Christological and soteriological doctrines across all Christian traditions (Nainggolan & Patalatu, 2025). Specifically, within the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Incarnation is understood not merely as a Gospel narrative, but

as a divine mystery profoundly contemplated in the patristic tradition and systematically articulated in the dogmatic theology that has been faithfully preserved through the centuries (Naumowicz, 2024).

This study arises from the awareness that patristic and dogmatic approaches within the Eastern Orthodox tradition offer profound contributions to the theological understanding of the Incarnation (Ioja, 2024). These approaches are marked by distinctive characteristics that set them apart from Western theological frameworks as well as from narrative readings of Scripture, even when those readings center on the Incarnation as recounted in the Nativity story (Vlachos, 2023). The focus of this paper is directed toward two main approaches within Eastern Orthodox theology. First, the patristic approach, which refers to the thought and writings of the Church Fathers (Louth, 2013; Romanides, 2004). In this study, particular attention is given to the Eastern Church Fathers, such as Athanasius of Alexandria, Epiphanius of Salamis, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John of Damascus, whose theological contributions serve as essential sources for articulating the understanding of the Incarnation of Christ in the post-apostolic era. Second, the dogmatic approach, which involves the systematic formulation of doctrine and theological teaching by Orthodox theologians, including the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils and the liturgical texts that inform ecclesial and spiritual life (Meyendorff, 2024; Pelikan, 2018; Ware, 1993), all of which are deeply connected to the doctrine of the Incarnation.

This paper does not merely aim to describe or present various theological perspectives, but seeks to examine how the patristic and dogmatic approaches mutually enrich one another in forming a holistic understanding of the Nativity of Christ within the context of Eastern Orthodoxy, particularly in Indonesia. The urgency of this study lies in the observation that theological reflections within Indonesian theological literature have been predominantly shaped by Western traditions, such as Roman Catholicism and various Protestant denominations (Lukito, 2012; Samarenna, 2017). Much of the existing literature on Christmas continues to focus primarily on biblical or historical aspects in general, without engaging the depth of patristic and dogmatic sources from the Eastern Orthodox tradition (Edwards, 2024; Naumowicz, 2024). Furthermore, contemporary understandings of Christmas have often reduced the feast to a festive, secular celebration, overlooking its profound theological and spiritual significance as a core tenet of the Christian faith (Pinastika, 2021; Sinaga et al., 2022). Amid the diversity of theological interpretations and the growing secularization of Christmas, this paper argues that the theological tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, encompassing the heritage of the Eastern Church Fathers and its dogmatic systematization, remains not only historically significant but also theologically relevant for the contemporary Church in addressing the challenges of the present age (Chistyakova & Chistyakov, 2023).

Based on the aforementioned background, this study seeks to address the following research questions: First, how did the Church Fathers understand the birth of Christ within a theological framework? Second, how does the dogmatic system of the Eastern Orthodox Church define the meaning of Christ's Incarnation?

This article argues that the Christological formulations preserved in the patristic tradition and articulated in Eastern Orthodox dogmatics were developed not merely to define the mystery of Christ's person, but to safeguard its soteriological purpose. A re-reading of the Church Fathers and Orthodox dogmatic theology demonstrates that the hypostatic union is inseparable from the doctrine of theosis: the precise confession that Christ is one person in two natures serves as the theological foundation for humanity's participation in the divine life. By synthesizing patristic and dogmatic sources, this study contributes to Indonesian theological scholarship while highlighting the continuing relevance of the Orthodox understanding of the Incarnation for contemporary theological dialogue and the challenge of Christmas secularization.

METHODS

This study integrates two branches of theology: Historical Theology and Systematic or Dogmatic Theology. Historical Theology is approached through Patristic Studies, which trace the writings of the Church Fathers (Fédou, 2019), including Epiphanius of Salamis, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John of Damascus. Dogmatic Theology is pursued through the examination of Eastern Orthodox doctrinal sources (Pelikan, 2018; Ware, 1993). The data collection in this study is conducted through library research (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

This methodology does not treat Historical Theology and Dogmatic Theology as isolated disciplines, but rather as complementary perspectives that mutually enrich one another and together form a coherent theological unity (Beardslee, 2017).. Historical Theology serves as the connecting link between apostolic teaching and the contemporary Church (Duesing & Finn, 2021), while Dogmatic Theology provides the ecclesial and theological framework necessary for interpreting the texts within the life of the Church (Streza, 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Theological Insights on the Incarnation from the Eastern Church Fathers

In this study, particular attention is given to five Eastern Church Fathers who specifically addressed the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ: Epiphanius of Salamis, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John of Damascus.

Epiphanius of Salamis (310–403)

Epiphanius of Salamis articulates that the Incarnation of Christ is a concrete reality in which the Word of God truly assumed human existence without forfeiting His divine nature. He firmly rejects any view that either separates the divine and human natures of Christ in an extreme manner or confuses and merges them indiscriminately. For Epiphanius, the Incarnation affirms that Christ is one person in two natures: divine and human, united without confusion or separation. He underscores that the Incarnation is the very heart of the Christian faith and the foundational basis for the development of Christian dogmatic tradition. Through

the Word becoming human, humanity itself is made capable of salvation, not merely through the forgiveness of sins, but by the glorification of human nature through union with Christ. The Incarnation, therefore, is not merely the embodiment of the Logos in human form; it is the very ground of humanity's redemption (Epiphanius of Salamis, 1990).

The theological significance of Epiphanius' teaching extends beyond the affirmation of orthodox Christology. His insistence that Christ is one person in two natures, without confusion or separation, safeguards the reality of salvation itself. Only if the incarnate Logos remains fully divine while truly assuming complete human nature can humanity be united with God without losing its own nature. Consequently, Epiphanius' Christological formulation is fundamentally soteriological: the doctrine of the Incarnation serves as the indispensable foundation for humanity's restoration and participation in the divine life, later articulated in Orthodox theology as theosis.

Athanasius of Alexandria (328–373)

Athanasius affirms that the Incarnation of Christ is not solely for the redemption of human sin, but ultimately for the union of humanity with God. The Incarnation stands as the tangible manifestation of God's infinite love and the divine mystery of salvation that renews the entirety of human existence. It brings restoration to human nature, which has been corrupted by sin. Through the Word becoming human, humanity is no longer destined to remain in a state of fallenness and sin. Rather, the Incarnation elevates human dignity by enabling communion with God (Athanasius, 2012).

The theological significance of Athanasius' Christology lies not merely in defending the full divinity of Christ against Arianism, but in safeguarding the possibility of humanity's participation in the divine life. If Christ were not truly God, He could not communicate divine life to humanity; consequently, theosis would be impossible. Athanasius therefore understood Christological precision as fundamentally soteriological rather than merely metaphysical.

Basil the Great (329–379)

Basil the Great made a significant contribution in emphasizing the intimate relationship between the Incarnation of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Basil explained that the Incarnation is the whole act of God. The Son of God became man while remaining in unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He rejected any view that sharply separates the individual hypostases of God in the work of salvation. The Incarnation is part of God's comprehensive plan of salvation, wherein sinful humanity is sanctified in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Incarnation elevates human nature to its true divine glory (Basil the Great, 1980).

Basil also stressed that the Incarnation of Christ is a deliberate and voluntary divine act, in which the Word of God (Logos) assumed human nature without losing His divine nature. Likewise, Christ's human nature is truly human, fully human, but united with His divine nature, without either nature being sacrificed. By assuming human nature, Christ brings not only the redemption of sin but also divine life, participation in the life of God that enables humanity to "become like God" (Basil the Great, 1962).

Basil's Trinitarian understanding of the Incarnation further demonstrates that salvation is not the isolated work of the Son but the unified economy of the Holy Trinity. The role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification confirms that the Incarnation reaches its fulfillment in humanity's participation in divine life, thereby reinforcing the Orthodox understanding of theosis.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390)

Gregory of Nazianzus extensively reflected on the uniqueness of Christ's Incarnation. The Incarnation is God's response to human fallenness, recognizing that the entire human existence corrupted by sin—body, mind, and spirit—must be assumed and saved. If any aspect of human nature is not taken up, then the totality of humanity cannot be saved. The Son of God, fully divine, was born in the flesh of a virgin and truly became human; yet, in His humanity, His divinity remained unchanged and unmixed. The Incarnation of Christ opens the way for humanity to become like God—not in essence or nature, nor by human effort or deeds, but through the grace of God. Through Christ's assumption of humanity, human beings are restored to a relationship that enables spiritual transformation and participation in divine life. Gregory viewed the Incarnation not merely as a historical fact but as the foundation for human glorification, redemption, and sanctification (Forgotten Books, 2018).

Gregory's famous axiom, "what is not assumed is not healed," reveals the soteriological necessity of the hypostatic union. Christ assumed the entirety of human nature precisely because salvation encompasses the restoration of the whole human person. Thus, the doctrine of the two natures is not a speculative formulation but the theological condition for complete human transformation.

John of Damascus (675–749)

John of Damascus addressed the Incarnation of Christ, including a robust defense of the divinity of Christ born of the Virgin Mary. He affirmed that Christ is the eternal Word of God, uncreated, consubstantial with the Father, without beginning or change. However, in the Incarnation, this Word assumed human nature fully, not partially or in part. The assumed human nature includes both body and soul (including a rational soul), as possessed by humans. Thus, Christ is "true God and true man" in His two natures, which are without confusion and without division. The Incarnation occurred in history by the power of the Holy Spirit and from the Virgin Mary, not by natural procreation (since there was no male seed). Through the Incarnation, humanity is saved; it occurs not because of humanity, but by the will of God. Therefore, the Incarnation of Christ is an act of divine grace, and through it, divine life becomes accessible to humanity. The Incarnation opens the way for fallen humanity to be restored to communion with God. Christ, as true God and true man, is the path to *theosis*: the union and glorification of humanity with God (John of Damascus, 1958).

John of Damascus demonstrates that the Chalcedonian confession preserves both Christ's full divinity and full humanity without confusion or separation. This doctrinal precision safeguards the possibility of communion between God and humanity, which the Orthodox tradition understands as theosis.

Theological Analysis of the Incarnation of Christ According to the Eastern Church Fathers

The foregoing examination of the Eastern Church Fathers demonstrates a remarkable theological coherence despite their different historical contexts and pastoral concerns. Although Epiphanius of Salamis, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John of Damascus articulated the mystery of the Incarnation from different perspectives, they consistently understood Christology as fundamentally ordered toward salvation. Their doctrinal formulations were never intended as abstract metaphysical speculation; rather, they served to preserve the reality of God's saving work in Christ. Consequently, the precision of Christological doctrine was inseparable from its soteriological purpose.

The Fathers unanimously affirmed that the eternal Logos truly became human without ceasing to be fully divine. This confession was not formulated merely to safeguard doctrinal orthodoxy against heretical distortions but to preserve the possibility of humanity's communion with God. If Christ were not fully divine, He could not communicate divine life to humanity; if He were not fully human, human nature could not be restored from within. The hypostatic union therefore constitutes the indispensable foundation of salvation because it unites the divine and human natures without confusion, separation, division, or change, making possible the restoration of humanity through participation in the life of God.

This soteriological orientation becomes particularly evident in the Fathers' understanding of theosis. Athanasius' famous affirmation that "God became man so that man might become god" expresses the theological logic underlying the entire patristic tradition. Gregory of Nazianzus further reinforces this principle through his insistence that "what is not assumed is not healed," thereby demonstrating that Christ's complete assumption of human nature is the necessary condition for the complete restoration of humanity. Likewise, John of Damascus' defense of the two natures of Christ protects not merely the integrity of Christological doctrine but also the reality of humanity's participation in divine life. Thus, theosis is not a secondary consequence of the Incarnation but its ultimate soteriological purpose.

Furthermore, the Fathers consistently interpreted the Incarnation within the broader economy of the Holy Trinity. The Incarnation is neither the isolated work of the Son nor a merely historical event but the unified salvific action of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father wills salvation, the Son assumes human nature, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies humanity through Christ. This Trinitarian perspective demonstrates that salvation is fundamentally participatory rather than merely juridical, inviting humanity into communion with the divine life through Christ.

Taken together, the witness of the Eastern Church Fathers reveals a coherent theological pattern. Christological precision exists because salvation depends upon it. Every major doctrinal affirmation concerning the person of Christ ultimately serves the same theological purpose: safeguarding the possibility of humanity's participation in divine life. Consequently, the doctrine of the Incarnation should be understood not merely as a

confession concerning who Christ is, but as the theological foundation for what Christ accomplishes in restoring humanity to communion with God.

Dogmatics of the Eastern Orthodox Church on the Incarnation of Christ

The dogmatics of the Eastern Orthodox Church encompasses two primary sources: the teachings of Eastern Orthodox theologians who have systematically formulated and articulated their theological arguments.

Michael Pomazansky (1888–1988)

In a systematic manner, Pomazansky situates the doctrine of the Incarnation at the very heart of Orthodox theology, not merely as a salvific event of the past but as a living and ongoing reality manifested in the life of the Church and the faithful. The Incarnation constitutes the path toward the restoration of human nature and participation in the divine glory (Pomazansky, 1984).

The Incarnation of Christ is neither a merely historical occurrence nor a speculative Christological theme, but the central mystery of salvation, inseparable from the entirety of the divine economy. He emphasizes that the Incarnation is a theological fact in which the eternal Word (*Logos*) assumed the fullness of human nature: body, soul, and rational mind, without abandoning or altering His divine nature. This union constitutes what is dogmatically known as the hypostatic union, the union of two natures, divine and human, in the one *Hypostasis* of Christ. Consequently, Pomazansky firmly rejects heretical positions such as Nestorianism, which posits two persons, and Monophysitism, which conflates the two natures.

Pomazansky sees the Incarnation as an integral part of God's eternal salvific plan. Through the Incarnation, God bridges the ontological chasm between Creator and creation. Fallen human nature is restored through the divine assumption of humanity by the *Logos*. Thus, the Incarnation cannot be considered apart from Christ's entire salvific mission, which culminates in His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. The Incarnation, moreover, is the work of the Holy Trinity: although it is the Son who became incarnate, the event itself is willed by the Father and effected by the power of the Holy Spirit, as affirmed in the Church's creeds and liturgy. The Virgin Mary plays an essential role as *Theotokos* (God-bearer), through whom God assumed human nature, not by human effort or merit, but by divine grace.

One of the crucial aspects of Pomazansky's teaching is the insistence that the Incarnation does not entail a change in the divinity of Christ. God remains immutable even as He assumes human nature. In the Incarnation, it is not the divine nature that is transformed, but humanity that is brought into participation in divine life. Accordingly, the Incarnation provides the ontological basis for the sanctification and existential transformation of humanity in Christ. It is the gateway to *theosis*, the process by which human beings are, by grace, made participants in the divine life.

Pomazansky also stresses that the doctrine of the Incarnation is not merely a rational theological construct but a mystery of faith lived out in the life of the Church. This truth is not only communicated through theological instruction but also through prayer, liturgy, and the

sacramental life of the Orthodox Church. Therefore, any understanding of the Incarnation is incomplete without full participation in the Church's spiritual life.

Pomazansky's contribution demonstrates that Orthodox dogmatics preserves the same soteriological orientation already evident in the Church Fathers. Dogmatic precision functions not as an abstract intellectual exercise but as the ecclesial preservation of the possibility of theosis.

Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958)

For Lossky, the doctrine of the Incarnation is central to the entire understanding of salvation and humanity's encounter with God. It is not merely a philosophical or dogmatic assertion, but a living reality that is experientially accessible to all the faithful (Lossky, 1991).

Lossky underscores that the Incarnation is the definitive act of divine self-revelation, in which the Triune God fully reveals Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ. The eternal Logos becomes fully human without ceasing to be fully divine. In the *hypostatic union*, there is no change, mixture, or diminishment of either nature; both divine and human natures coexist fully in the one person of Christ, the Son of God. This, for Lossky, is not merely a metaphysical reality, but the foundational basis for all human existence.

The Incarnation is intrinsically oriented toward *theosis*, the deification or participation of humanity in divine life. It is not merely about redemption or forgiveness, but about enabling humanity to "become like God," not in essence, but in communion, love, and holiness. Christ became man so that man might become a partaker of the divine life.

Moreover, the Incarnation is neither individualistic nor abstract, it is ecclesiological and cosmic. In the Church, the Body of Christ, the Incarnation continues to be manifested and experienced by the faithful. The Church becomes the locus where humanity encounters and progressively participates in the incarnate reality of Christ, journeying toward full communion with God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who enables humanity to respond to the Incarnation and undergo authentic transformation in Christ.

The Incarnation also signals the restoration of the entire created order. By becoming man, the Logos enters into history and the created cosmos to restore it to its original purpose. Thus, Christ is not only the Redeemer of humanity but also the cosmic center of a renewed creation. The Incarnation marks the beginning of an eschatological journey leading all creation toward its fulfillment in the eternal Kingdom of God.

The theological significance of Lossky's teaching lies in his insistence that the Incarnation is not merely a dogmatic formulation to be intellectually affirmed but the living foundation of humanity's participation in the divine life. By emphasizing the inseparable relationship between the hypostatic union and theosis, Lossky demonstrates that Christological doctrine is fundamentally soteriological. The union of the divine and human natures in the one Person of Christ makes possible the restoration of humanity without confusion of natures, thereby preserving both the transcendence of God and the genuine participation of humanity in divine life. Consequently, the mystery of the Incarnation becomes

the indispensable basis for the transformative communion between God and humanity that is experienced within the life of the Church.

John Zizioulas (1931–2023)

For Zizioulas, the Incarnation is both the starting point and foundational axis of the entire Trinitarian economy of salvation, culminating in the union of God and humanity in the Body of Christ. The Incarnation is not only a response to the fall but also a summons for human beings to become authentic persons in communion, persons who exist through being loved and who love in return, reflecting the relational life of the Triune God (Knight, 2016; Zizioulas, 2011). Zizioulas presents the Incarnation as a profoundly ontological event that defines the very structure of human existence and its relationship with God. In Jesus Christ, the transcendent God becomes immanent, entering history without ceasing to be eternal. The *hypostasis* of the Son assumes human nature to draw humanity into divine life. This participation in divine life is not about assimilation into divine essence, but about becoming “children of God” through communion with Christ. *Theosis* is made possible only through the ontological communion established by the Incarnation.

Furthermore, the Incarnation constitutes the theological basis of Orthodox ecclesiology. As *Theanthropos* (God-man), Christ constitutes the Church as His Body, where human beings are invited to partake in divine life. Within the Church, the faithful do not merely remember or commemorate the Incarnation, they participate in it concretely, especially through the sacraments, thereby entering into the fullness of life in communion with God.

Zizioulas further develops the patristic understanding of the Incarnation by interpreting it within an ontological and ecclesiological framework. His theology demonstrates that the hypostatic union establishes not only the possibility of individual salvation but also the formation of a new mode of existence grounded in communion. The Incarnation therefore creates the ontological foundation for humanity to participate in the relational life of the Holy Trinity through the Body of Christ. This perspective reinforces the article's central argument that Orthodox Christology serves a fundamentally soteriological purpose: the precise confession of Christ's person safeguards humanity's participation in divine life, which is actualized ecclesially through the sacramental life of the Church.

George Kapsanis (1935–2014)

Kapsanis affirms that the Incarnation of Christ is the central and essential event within the divine economy of salvation, opening the way for *theosis*, the union of humanity with God. The Incarnation represents the decisive point of contact between God and man, restoring human beings from their alienation due to sin and drawing them into union with divine life (Kapsanis, 2023). Kapsanis emphasizes that the Incarnation is not merely a historical fact or an abstract christological doctrine, but a historical-theological reality that transforms human life in its entirety. Through the Incarnation, God assumes the fullness of human nature—body, soul, and rational mind, without any diminution of His divinity. Christ is thus one Person in two natures, unconfusedly and inseparably united.

The primary goal of the Incarnation, for Kapsanis, is the restoration of humanity and its reintegration into communion with God. Through the Incarnation, fallen humanity is renewed and elevated to partake in divine life, what the Orthodox tradition calls *theosis*. This transformation encompasses not only redemption and forgiveness, but also the glorification and sanctification of human nature. Kapsanis also underscores the Incarnation as the supreme expression of divine love: “*God became man so that man might become god*” (θεὸς γέγονε ἄνθρωπος, ἵνα θεοποιηθῇ ὁ ἄνθρωπος). The Incarnation initiates a holistic process of salvation, including the recreation, redemption, and glorification of humanity.

Kapsanis provides a concise theological synthesis of the Orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation by explicitly reaffirming the classical patristic principle that “God became man so that man might become god.” His presentation illustrates that the Incarnation cannot be reduced to the forgiveness of sins alone but must be understood as the comprehensive restoration and glorification of human nature. In this respect, Kapsanis confirms the continuity between the Church Fathers and contemporary Orthodox theology: Christological precision is preserved because it safeguards the ultimate goal of salvation, namely humanity's participation in the divine life through *theosis*. His theology therefore exemplifies how Orthodox dogmatics remains inseparable from the Church's soteriological and spiritual vision.

Taken together, the contributions of Pomazansky, Lossky, Zizioulas, and Kapsanis demonstrate the remarkable continuity of Eastern Orthodox theology from the patristic period to contemporary dogmatic reflection. Although each theologian emphasizes different dimensions of the Incarnation—dogmatic, mystical, ecclesiological, or anthropological—they consistently affirm that the precise confession of Christ's divine-human person exists to safeguard the reality of salvation. Thus, Orthodox dogmatics does not preserve Christological doctrine as an abstract theological system but as the indispensable foundation for humanity's participation in the divine life through *theosis*.

The Incarnation of Christ in the Synthesis of Patristic Theology and Eastern Orthodox Dogmatics

The comparison between the writings of the Eastern Church Fathers and modern Orthodox dogmatic theologians demonstrates a profound continuity rather than a development of fundamentally new doctrines. Although separated by many centuries, theologians such as Michael Pomazansky, Vladimir Lossky, John Zizioulas, and George Kapsanis consistently preserve the same Christological and soteriological vision articulated by the Fathers. Orthodox dogmatics therefore functions not as an independent theological system but as the systematic articulation of the patristic understanding of the Incarnation within the life of the Church.

The most significant point of continuity lies in the inseparable relationship between Christology and soteriology. Throughout both the patristic and dogmatic traditions, the confession that Christ is one person in two natures is never presented as an abstract metaphysical proposition. Rather, it exists to safeguard the reality of salvation. Modern Orthodox theologians repeatedly affirm that the hypostatic union establishes the ontological basis for humanity's participation in divine life, thereby preserving the classical patristic

understanding of theosis. In this respect, Orthodox dogmatics remains faithful to the theological vision of Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John of Damascus.

This continuity also extends to the ecclesiological dimension of the Incarnation. Whereas the Fathers viewed the Church as the living continuation of Christ's incarnate presence, modern Orthodox theologians further develop this insight by emphasizing the sacramental and communal participation of believers in the life of the incarnate Christ. Lossky presents the mystery of the Incarnation as a living reality experienced within the Church's mystical life, while Zizioulas explains that participation in the Body of Christ establishes a new mode of existence grounded in communion with the Holy Trinity. Consequently, ecclesiology emerges not as a separate theological discipline but as the concrete realization of Christology within the life of the Church.

Equally significant is the continuity of the Orthodox understanding of salvation. Both the Fathers and contemporary theologians reject any reduction of salvation to a merely juridical act of forgiveness. Instead, salvation is understood as the comprehensive restoration, sanctification, and glorification of human existence through participation in divine life. Kapsanis explicitly reaffirms the classical patristic conviction that the purpose of the Incarnation is humanity's deification, thereby demonstrating that Orthodox theology continues to preserve the original soteriological orientation of patristic Christology.

The synthesis presented above demonstrates that the historical development of Orthodox theology is characterized by continuity rather than doctrinal innovation. From the Church Fathers to contemporary dogmatic theologians, every major Christological formulation ultimately serves the same theological purpose: preserving the reality of the Incarnation as the indispensable foundation of humanity's participation in divine life. Consequently, the doctrine of the Incarnation should not be understood merely as a historical confession concerning the person of Christ, but as the living center of Orthodox theology that unites Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, spirituality, and theosis into one coherent theological vision.

The Contribution of Eastern Orthodox Theology to Interdenominational Dialogue

The Eastern Orthodox understanding of the Incarnation offers an important theological contribution to contemporary interdenominational dialogue by recovering the intrinsic relationship between Christology and soteriology. While different Christian traditions have developed diverse emphases concerning the work of Christ, the Orthodox tradition consistently maintains that the mystery of the Incarnation cannot be separated from humanity's participation in the divine life.

Consequently, Orthodox Christology invites ecumenical theology to reconsider the Incarnation not merely as the historical beginning of redemption or as a preliminary stage leading to the Cross, but as the ontological foundation upon which the entire economy of salvation is established. Rather than positioning Eastern Orthodox theology in opposition to other Christian traditions, this perspective provides a complementary theological framework capable of enriching contemporary Christological reflection. Western theological traditions

have made significant contributions in articulating the doctrines of justification, grace, and redemption, while the Orthodox tradition emphasizes the transformative dimension of salvation through theosis. These emphases should not necessarily be understood as mutually exclusive but as complementary expressions of the inexhaustible mystery of Christ's saving work. Such a perspective encourages theological dialogue that moves beyond confessional polemics toward a deeper appreciation of the shared apostolic faith preserved within different Christian traditions.

The patristic consensus further provides an important common theological foundation for ecumenical engagement. The teachings of Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, and John of Damascus belong not exclusively to the Eastern Orthodox Church but to the undivided Church of the first millennium. Consequently, the recovery of patristic Christology represents not an appeal to denominational exclusivism but a return to the common theological heritage shared by Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and many Protestant traditions. Re-engaging these sources enables contemporary theological dialogue to be grounded in the classical formulations that historically shaped Christian orthodoxy.

Furthermore, the Orthodox understanding of the Incarnation offers a constructive response to contemporary tendencies that reduce Christianity either to ethical moralism or to exclusively juridical conceptions of salvation. By emphasizing the hypostatic union as the indispensable basis for humanity's participation in divine life, Orthodox theology presents salvation as a transformative communion with God rather than merely the resolution of legal guilt. This perspective broadens contemporary theological reflection by integrating Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, spirituality, and sacramental life into a coherent theological vision centered upon theosis.

Therefore, the contribution of Eastern Orthodox theology to interdenominational dialogue lies not primarily in proposing an alternative doctrinal system but in recovering the patristic conviction that every Christological confession ultimately serves the reality of salvation. The doctrine of the Incarnation thus becomes a shared theological foundation through which diverse Christian traditions may engage one another in mutual enrichment while remaining faithful to the apostolic witness concerning Jesus Christ, true God and true man, who became incarnate so that humanity might participate in the life of God.

Response to the Secularization of Christmas in Contemporary Contexts

The Orthodox understanding of the Incarnation provides a significant theological response to the increasing secularization of Christmas in contemporary society. Modern celebrations frequently reduce Christmas to a cultural festival characterized by commercial consumption, social entertainment, and sentimental expressions of goodwill. Although these practices may possess social value, they often obscure the central theological affirmation that the Nativity celebrates the eternal Logos who became truly human for the salvation and transformation of humanity. Consequently, the meaning of Christmas risks being detached from the mystery of the Incarnation itself.

From the perspective of Eastern Orthodox theology, such a reduction reflects a broader tendency to separate Christology from soteriology. When the birth of Christ is understood merely as the beginning of Jesus' earthly life or as an occasion for ethical reflection, the salvific purpose of the Incarnation is diminished. The Fathers consistently maintained that the eternal Son assumed human nature not simply to reveal God's love in an abstract sense but to restore fallen humanity through participation in divine life. Therefore, the celebration of Christmas should be understood as the liturgical proclamation of God's saving economy rather than merely the commemoration of a historical event.

The doctrine of theosis offers an important corrective to contemporary secular interpretations of Christmas. By affirming that "God became man so that humanity might become partakers of the divine nature," the Orthodox tradition presents the Nativity as the beginning of humanity's restoration and communion with God. The Incarnation therefore calls believers not only to remember Christ's birth but also to participate continually in the transformative life inaugurated through His becoming human. Christmas thus becomes an invitation to spiritual renewal, sacramental participation, and ongoing conformity to Christ rather than a temporary cultural celebration.

This theological vision also reorients Christian spirituality by integrating worship, doctrine, and ethical life. The liturgical celebration of Christmas is inseparable from the Church's sacramental life, ascetical discipline, and communal worship, through which believers participate in the mystery of the Incarnate Christ. In this way, Orthodox theology resists the fragmentation of Christian faith into isolated moral, emotional, or cultural experiences and instead presents the Incarnation as the living center of ecclesial existence.

Consequently, the Orthodox response to the secularization of Christmas is not merely a rejection of contemporary cultural practices but a recovery of the original theological meaning of the feast. By re-centering Christmas upon the mystery of the Incarnation and its soteriological purpose, the Church bears witness that the Nativity proclaims God's decisive act of entering human history so that humanity may be restored to communion with Him. The enduring relevance of the Orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation therefore lies in its capacity to preserve Christmas as a celebration of divine-human communion rather than merely a cultural or commercial event.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the Incarnation is characterized by the inseparable relationship between Christology and soteriology. Through a re-examination of the writings of the Eastern Church Fathers alongside the systematic reflections of modern Orthodox dogmatic theologians, the study has shown that the doctrinal precision of the Incarnation was never intended as an abstract metaphysical exercise. Rather, the Church consistently articulated the mystery of Christ's divine-human person in order to safeguard the reality of salvation, culminating in humanity's participation in the divine life through theosis.

The analysis further reveals a profound continuity between patristic theology and contemporary Orthodox dogmatics. Although theologians such as Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, John of Damascus, Vladimir Lossky, John Zizioulas, and George Kapsanis wrote within different historical contexts, they consistently affirm that the hypostatic union constitutes the indispensable ontological foundation of human restoration. Consequently, Orthodox Christology should be understood not merely as a doctrinal confession concerning the identity of Christ but as the theological basis for the transformation of humanity and its communion with God.

This synthesis also demonstrates that the doctrine of the Incarnation possesses enduring significance beyond the historical controversies that shaped its formulation. The Orthodox theological vision offers a constructive contribution to contemporary theological discourse by recovering the patristic integration of Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, spirituality, and sacramental life. In doing so, it provides a valuable framework for interdenominational dialogue, encourages renewed engagement with the common patristic heritage of the undivided Church, and offers a coherent theological response to the secularization of Christmas by re-centering the celebration upon the mystery of the Incarnation and its soteriological purpose.

Finally, this study contributes to Indonesian theological scholarship by introducing a more comprehensive engagement with the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which remains comparatively underrepresented in contemporary theological literature. Future studies may expand this research by exploring the relationship between the Incarnation and other central themes of Orthodox theology, such as sacramental theology, ascetical spirituality, and ecclesiology, as well as by comparing Orthodox Christology with contemporary Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Oriental Orthodox perspectives. Such studies would further enrich ecumenical theological dialogue and deepen contemporary Christian reflection on the mystery of the Word made flesh.

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