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## Deification and the Spiritual Progress in Chrysostom and Augustine

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### *Introduction*

From the beginning of the Patristic period, the discourse of deification (θέωσις or θεοποίησις, literally, “being made God”) is to play an important part, not only in the moral progress of the human soul towards its perfection, but also in the transformative union of divinity and humanity. By the late second century the Christian formula of deification language becomes commonplace, for instance, with Irenaeus of Lyon who interpreted the ‘gods’ in Psalm 82:6 as an imitator of God who has become a god, with reference to the Pauline “adoption.”<sup>1</sup> While in the sixth century the first ‘strict’ definition of deification was provided by Dionysius the Areopagite who confirmed that “Now the assimilation to, and union with, God, as far as attainable, is deification,”<sup>2</sup> it is possible to chart the impact on the teaching of deification in the fourth and fifth centuries in the east and west Mediterranean society. In this paper, I shall examine in what ways John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo dealt with the teaching of deification and how they gave voice to a theological investigation, thereby considering the basis of their vision respectively.

### *John Chrysostom*

Along with the Orthodox emphasis upon the salvific-economic mission of the Son of God, John was deeply concerned about human participation in the divine being. This can be described, arising from his interest in the spiritual progress of Christians, as a deification (θέωσις or θεοποίησις) of human beings. In this regard, John’s view of deification clearly stands in the tradition of the Eastern Church. However, given the scarcity of the use of deification language, the critical observations and remarks have been made about a lack of interest in the ethical and soteriological discourse of John’s writings.<sup>3</sup> The issue concerns whether or not works of John support the assertions by

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1 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.6.1. See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 105-110.

2 Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.3 (PG 3,376; Eng. trans. bib. + page): “Greek text.”

3 Jules Gross, *La divinisation du chrétien d’après les pères grecs: contribution historique à la doctrine de la grâce* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1938); Eng. trans., *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul A. Onica (Anaheim, CA: A & C Press, 2002) 200, 206; Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 237; Pak-Wah Lai, ‘John Chrysostom and the Hermeneutics of Exemplar Portraits’ (PhD diss., Durham University, 2010), 141-142.

some scholars who have supplied us with the suggestion that Antiochenes were unconcerned about the theme of deification.

In *Homilies on Genesis*, in particular *Homily 8*,<sup>4</sup> John deals ostensibly with Genesis 1:26, “Let us make a human being in our image and likeness.” He maintains that, with reference to the following verse in Genesis, the “image” (εἰκὼν) expresses “human being [in this case, ἀνήρ] as having control of everything on earth, [...] under whose authority everything falls.”<sup>5</sup> Like other Antiochenes, Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia,<sup>6</sup> the “image” is coupled with the notion of rule and authority. It is noteworthy that, not only interpreting the meaning of εἰκὼν, but John is keen to clarify the passage in Genesis comprehensively. In *Homily 9*,<sup>7</sup> the interpretation moves on to the aspect of human power, where the “likeness” (ὁμοίωσις) is essentially used to denote the potential to become like God.

As the word “image” indicated a similitude of command, so too “likeness,” with the result that we become like God to the extent of our human power (κατὰ δύναμιν ἀνθρωπίνην ὁμοίους ἡμᾶς γίνεσθαι Θεῷ)—that is to say, we resemble him in our gentleness and mildness and in regard to virtue.<sup>8</sup>

Echoing the tradition of the Alexandrians and Cappadocians,<sup>9</sup> the stress is placed on the distinction between the “image” of God and the human potential for divine likeness. In fact, John’s employment of the phrase “to the extent of our human power” reminds us of the framework taken by Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromata*, where the distinction between the image and likeness of God enabled him to make the ascetic interpretation of the soul’s ascent to divine likeness. By the fourth century, for instance, both Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus accepted the view that “so far as is possible with human nature” Christians should “be made like God,”<sup>10</sup> accompanied by moral effort. Thus, despite sharing the similar interpretation of the “image” with the Antiochenes, John’s indebtedness to the Alexandrian tradition seems to be clear with regard to the attainment of divine likeness as a hallmark of the spiritual progress.

While in his Genesis homilies attributing the “image” exclusively to the male (ἀνήρ) by reference to 1 Corinthians 11:7-12, in *Homily 3 on Colossians* John’s exegesis of Genesis

4 *In Gen. hom.* 8, 9-10 (PG 53,72d-73a): “Greek text.” Eng. trans. by Robert C. Hill, in FC 74 (1986).

5 FC 74, 110.

6 Diodore, PG 80,107-10; PG 80,260-62; Frederick G. McLeod, *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999) 59-61. [human being, in this case, ἀνήρ, thus exclusion of the woman].

7 *In Gen. hom.* 9, 7 (PG 53,78b).

8 FC74, 120.

9 Lai, ‘John Chrysostom,’ 135-136.

10 Basil of Caesarea, *De spiritu sancto*, 1.2 (trans. NPNF2, 8). See also Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration*, 4.71; Basil, *De spiritu sancto*, 15.35-36; *Hom. Ps.* 33.3; 44.2 (PG 29,357C, 389C); Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 211-212.

1:26 provides the common frame of human progression towards the salvation of Christians, that is, the position of both male and female in common. Progressing in the Colossians text, John reaches 1:15-16, where Paul confirms that Christ is the exact image of God, thus being entirely divine.<sup>11</sup>

Paul, discoursing as we showed of the dignity of the Son, says these words: “Who is the Image of the invisible God.” Whose image then will you have Him be? God’s? Then he is exactly like the one to whom you assign Him. [...] For an image, so far as it is an image, even amongst us, ought to be exactly similar, as, for example, in respect of the features and the likeness.<sup>12</sup>

Human salvation will be attained by the progress and perfection of humanity. Given that Christ is the image of God in which Adam was created, the salvation can be defined as the restoration of humanity into the “exact image” of God. Paul’s words in Colossians 3:9-10—“Seeing that ye have put off the old man with his doings, and have put on the new man, which is being renewed unto knowledge after the image of Him that created him.”<sup>13</sup>—provide John with the distinction between the corruption of human nature and the human nature in its original state.<sup>14</sup>

for ever as he farther advances, he hasteneth (ἐπιίγεται) not on to old age (γῆρας), but to a youthfulness (νεότητα) greater than the preceding. For when he hath received a fuller knowledge, he is both counted worthy (ἀξιούται) of greater things, and is in more perfect maturity (ἀκμμάζει), in higher vigor (ισχύει); and this, not from youthfulness alone, but from that “likeness” also, “after” which he is. Lo! the best life is styled a creation, after the image of Christ: for this is the meaning of, “after the image of Him that created him,” for Christ too came not finally to old age (οὐ πρὸς γῆρας ἐτελεύτησεν), but was so beautiful as it is not even possible to tell.<sup>15</sup>

Paul’s statement of the “new man” becomes the focus of John’s view of the spiritual progress. Not only to the acquirement of a “fuller knowledge” from the moral viewpoint, but also John’s attention is devoted to a “creation, after the image of Christ.” Yet, it is also clear that Christ “came [...] to a youthfulness.” It implies that the process of Christ’s recapitulation as a human being was effected. Thus, in the correlation between the completion of Christ’s work and the encouragement to the ongoing spiritual progress, the renewal of humanity is confirmed in a participation in the “likeness” of Christ as νέος, as being defined as the continual deepening of spiritual life.

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11 For John’s teaching of Christ’s divinity, see Melvin Edward Lawrenz, III, ‘The Christology of John Chrysostom’ (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1987) 41-79.

12 *In Col. hom.* 3 (PG 62,317; NPNF1,270).

13 *In Col. hom.* 8 (PG 62,352; NPNF1,294).

14 Lai, ‘John Chrysostom,’ 147, n. 58. *Hom. in Rom.* 13.19 (PG 60,510 l.25-29).

15 *In Col. hom.* 8 (PG 62,353; NPNF1,295).

*Augustine of Hippo*

In contrast to its prominence within the tradition of the Eastern Church, Augustine’s concern with the teaching of *deificatio* (θεώσις) seems not to be primarily expressed in the corpus of his writings. But, despite the assumed distinction between the Eastern and Western theology with regard to this theme, seminal articles (Victorino Capánaga and Gerald Bonner)<sup>16</sup> have directed our attention to the problem of deification in his works. With the careful examination of Augustine’s use of the deification language, some scholars have given the total of eighteen instances, as well as the philosophical and theological perspective that is indispensable to find an approach to the locus of deification in Augustine’s thought. In his treatment of deification, Augustine shows how this language serves as integral and inseparable from the themes he explored, such as the problems of creation, sanctification, Christology, and soteriology.

Augustine’s earliest reference to deification is found in his letter around 388-390, addressed to his close friend Nebridius. Augustine established a firm friendship with Nebridius who shared the decision to lead a monastic life of sorts with a group of serious laymen in North Africa. He had followed Augustine to Milan where they experienced the crucial period of his conversion. At the time when they entered into correspondence (*Epp.* 3-14), Nebridius remained in Carthage and Augustine, now as a baptised Christian, settled a community for the realisation of his ideal of a monastic way of life. In his reply to Nebridius, Augustine warns him that the planning of this kind of dangerous journey is not appropriate for “a man who ponders that one last journey, which is called death, the only one, as you understand, that we should truly ponder.”<sup>17</sup> His advice is that Nebridius should avoid involvement with public affairs and seek to enjoy the break away from “a life of busyness.”

do I think this great good is granted, namely, that amid uproar and restless comings and goings they achieve the familiarity with death that we are seeking. For in leisure both of them would be permitted to become godlike. [...] Since you have often experienced the pleasure of the life of the mind when it dies to a love that is bodily, will you, then, deny that the whole of human life can become free from fear so that it is rightly called wise?<sup>18</sup>

In the argument that the phrase “in leisure [...] to become godlike,” that is, to achieve deification in a life of scholarly retreat, is derived from Porphyry’s *Sententiae*, Augustine’s use of deification is taken to be in a purely philosophical sense.<sup>19</sup> But, although the

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16 Victorino Capánaga, ‘La deificación en la soteriología agustiniana,’ in *Augustinus Magister*, t. 2 (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1954) 745-754; Gerald Bonner, ‘Augustine’s Conception of Deification,’ *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 37 (1986) 369-86.

17 Aug., *Ep.* 10.2 (CCSL 31,24; Works(NY) II/1,33).

18 Aug., *Ep.* 10.2-3.

19 Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 329; David Vincent Meconi, *The One Christ: St. Augustine’s Theology of Deification* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013) 83-84.

engagement with Neoplatonic texts draws his attention to a pagan exhortation to the internal recognition of one’s own divinity, it may be rather likely that Augustine considers the “leisure” depicted there as correlating with Christian way of life. In the contemporary treatise *True Religion* (in 390, written before his ordained to the priesthood in 391), Augustine insists that the quest for communion with God must be constructed “in simplicity of heart.”<sup>20</sup> Approvingly citing Psalm 46:10 “Be still and acknowledge that I am the Lord,” he entertains the hope that God “gave them the right to become sons of God.”<sup>21</sup> This reading of deification language tells us the circumstances in which Augustine was looking to the future of his new community so as to foster the collaboration between the pursuit of scriptural reading, asceticism, and prayer.

In a homily on Psalm 81, “God has stood up in the synagogue of gods,” Augustine begins with the catechetical passage on a recapitulative view of deification. This sermon 23B (= Dolbeau 6) was delivered to the congregation of Carthage probably in the winter of 403-404.<sup>22</sup> In the confrontation with pagan practices of idol worship, which were still widespread in the North African community, Augustine had to direct his attention to the matter and exhorted his audience in Carthage to leave off idolatry. It is interesting to note that, with drawing a sharp distinction between those gods made by the hands of a craftsman and those made by God, that is, “god-making God” (*deus deificator*),<sup>23</sup> he is showing God as the one not only giving life but also deifying.

To what hope the Lord has called us, what we now carry about with us, what we endure, what we look forward to, is well known [...] We carry mortality about with us, we endure infirmity, we look forward to divinity. For God wishes not only to vivify, but also to deify us. When would human infirmity ever have dared to hope for this, unless divine truth had promised it?<sup>24</sup>

Augustine encourages the congregation that, while all human beings desire the divine perfection and immortality, God’s promise that they will be made gods can be accomplished. From the comparison and integration of the vivification of human beings with the deification of those made in his image, he confirms that the expectation to a deifying activity of God is achievable. Because it is not empty promise and God alone makes it.

Still it has not enough for our God to promise us divinity in himself, unless he also took on our infirmity, as though to say, “Do you want to know how much I love you, how certain you ought to be that I am going to give you my divine reality? I took to myself your mortal reality.” We mustn’t find it incredible, brothers and sisters, that human beings

20 Aug., *De uera religione* 35.65: “in simplicitate cordis.”

21 An allusion to John 1:12, in Aug., *De uera religione* 35.65 (Works(NY), 1/8,73).

22 See F. Dolbeau, *Augustin d’Hippone: Vingt-six sermons au peuple d’Afrique*, Collection des études augustiniennes. Série antiquité, 147 (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2009<sup>2</sup>) 452-454.

23 *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).2 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons*, 460; Works(NY) 3/11,38).

24 *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).1 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons*, 459; Works(NY) 3/11,37).

become gods, that is, that those who were human beings become gods. [...] The Son of God became a son of man, in order to make sons of men into sons of God.<sup>25</sup>

The emphasis on the fulfilment of God’s promise leads to the vision of the future for the congregation: God becomes one of them. Augustine refers to the perfect humanity as the means with which God assumes the deification of human infirmity to the god-like existence. In the combination of the deification language with Pauline form of adoption, it is proclaimed that what has already taken with the incarnation will be “made manifest at a definite time.”<sup>26</sup> The end and future of the Church community is confirmed by the positive aspect of the message of God’s deifying activity.

### *Concluding remarks*

This brief overview of the teaching of deification in the writings of John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo gives some indication of the prevalent features of their approach to the teaching of deification, which was mentioned above. Despite of the paucity of the use of deification language, it is to be reminded that the proper locus for deification is determined by their scriptural interpretation as well as by their concern about Christian way of life. Aside from the moral and soteriological answer to the continual progression of Christian’s soul, to the human potential for divine likeness, and to Christ’s work of recapitulation, there seems to be a crucial aspect both writers do not ignore in their writings. It is the communal and liturgical setting in which they consider a new way of the relationship between divine and human beings in the humanity of Christ. In fact, several aspects, dealt with in this overview, contribute to the edification and stimulation of their readers and congregations. In this vein John and Augustine concur with the teaching of deification within the sacramental life and practice of the faith community. Despite the limited influence of John in the Latin church and Augustine’s influence vice versa, it was as if their congregations and readers were, through the communicative nexus of the letters and homiletic discourse, tied together and encouraged to have the hope of things to come.

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25 *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).1 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons*, 459; Works(NY) 3/11,37).

26 *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).1 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons*, 459; Works(NY) 3/11,38): “certo tempore apparebit.”