Deification and the Foundation of Spiritual Progress in John Chrysostom and Augustine

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Introduction

From the beginning of the Patristic period, following the classical traditions of philosophical therapeutic discipline, the discourse of deification (θέωσις or θεοποίησις, literally, "being made God") was to play a crucial part in a holistic care for the intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth known as psychagogy (spiritual guidance for the direction of the soul).[1] By the late second century the Christian language of the transformative union of divinity and humanity became commonplace with Irenaeus of Lyon. He interpreted the 'gods' in Psalm 82:6 as an imitator of God who became a god, with reference to the Pauline "adoption."[2] While in the sixth century the first 'strict' definition of deification was given by Dionysius the Areopagite who confirmed that "Now the assimilation to, and union with, God, as far as attainable, is deification,"[3] it is possible to chart the impact on the teaching of deification in the fourth and fifth centuries in the eastern and western Mediterranean.[4] 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 and considered the basis for their view of human perfection.

John Chrysostom

Along with the Orthodox emphasis on the salvific-economic mission of the Son of God, John was deeply concerned about human participation in the divine. Arising from his interest in the pedagogical method by which the Word leads humans to salvation, this would be described as a deification (θέωσις or θεοποίησις) of humanity. In this regard, John's view of

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[1]   See Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Series 17 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) 7-9 and 41-46; Abraham J. Malherbe, 'Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament,' *ANRW* 2.26.1 (New York: de Gruyter, 1992) 267-333.

[2]   Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.6.1. For the discussion of Psalm 82:6 by Irenaeus, see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 105-110. See also G. M. Schnurr, 'On the Logic of the Ante-Nicene Affirmations of the Deification of the Christian,' *Anglican Theological Review* 51 (1969) 97-105.

[3]   Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.3 (PG 3,376). English trans. is taken from *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. John Parker, vol. 2 (London: James Parker, 1899) 71.

[4]   For the overview of the teaching of deification in the fourth and fifth centuries, see e.g., Myrrha Lot-Borodine, *La Déification de l'homme, selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, Bibliothèque œcuménique 9 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1970); Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul A. Onica (Anaheim, CA: A & C Press, 2002); Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*; David Vincent Meconi, *The One Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America press, 2013).

deification clearly stands in the tradition of the Eastern Church. However, given the scarcity of the use of deification language, critical observations have been made about a lack of interest in the ethical and soteriological discourse of John's writings.[5] The issue concerns whether or not his writings support the assertion by some scholars that Antiochenes were unconcerned about the theme of deification.

In his eighth *Homily* on Genesis, John deals with Genesis 1:26, "Let us make a human being in our image and likeness."[6] He maintains that, with reference to the following passages, the "image" (εἰκών) expresses "human being (ἀνήρ) as having control of everything on earth, […] under whose authority everything falls."[7] Like other Antiochenes, Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, the "image" is coupled with the notion of rule and authority.[8] It is clearly admitted that the meaning of the εἰκών is discerned by exploring what is most important to Christians, that is, the union with God. John interprets the text for God's teaching that leads to a virtuous way of life.[9] In *Homily* 9, 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.[10]

> 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.[11]

Echoing the tradition of the Alexandrians and Cappadocians,[12] the stress is placed on the distinction between the "image" of God and the human potential for divine likeness. 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 example, 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,"[13] accompanied by moral efforts to lead them upward. Thus, while sharing the similar interpretation with the Antiochenes, John's indebtedness to the

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[5]   Gross, *Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, 200 and 206; Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 237; Pak-Wah Lai, 'John Chrysostom and the Hermeneutics of Exemplar Portraits' (PhD diss., Durham University, 2010) 141-142.

[6]   *In Gen. hom. 8*, 9-10 (PG 53,72d-73a). English trans. is taken from Robert C. Hill, in FC 74 (1986).

[7]   FC 74, 110.

[8]   See Frederick G. McLeod, *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999) 59-61.

[9]   For the tension between Gen. 1:26 (the first creation account) and 2:7 (our origin is dust), in particular the humble truth of divine revelation in these passages which reconciles divine love for humanity with the virtue of humility, see David Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 124-127.

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

[11]   FC74, 120.

[12]   Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 2.125.4-5; Basil of Caesarea, *De spiritu sancto*, 1.2.

[13]   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, *Doctrine of Deification*, 211-212.

Alexandrian tradition seems to be clear with regard to the spiritual guide to a heavenly way of life.

While in his Genesis homilies attributing the "image" exclusively to the male (ἀνήρ) by reference to 1 Corinthians 11:7-12, in his third *Homily* on Colossians John's exegesis of Genesis 1:26 provides a common frame of human progression, that is, the position of both male and female in common. Within the Colossians text, John reaches 1:15-16 where Paul confirms that Christ is the exact image of God, thus being entirely divine.[14]

> 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.[15]

Human salvation will be attained by the highest perfection of humanity. Provided 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."[16]) confront John with the contrast between the corruption of human nature and the human nature in its original state.[17]

> for ever as he farther advances, he hasteneth (ἐπείίγεται) not on to old age (γῆρας), but to a youthfulness (νεόότητα) greater than the preceding. For when he hath received a fuller knowledge, he is both counted worthy (ἀξιοῦται) of greater things, and is in more perfect maturity (ἀκμμάάζει), in higher vigor (ἰσχύύει); 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 ἐτελεύύτησεν), but was so beautiful as it is not even possible to tell.[18] [Italics mine]

Paul's statement of the "new man" becomes the focus of John's view of the perfection of the likeness of God. Not only to the acquisition of a "fuller knowledge" from the moral viewpoint, but also John's attention is devoted to a "creation, after the image of Christ." It is made explicit that Christ "came […] to a youthfulness." It implies that the process of Christ's recapitulation as a human being was executed. Thus, in the correlation between the completion of Christ's work and the encouragement to the ongoing spiritual progress, the

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[14] 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.

[15] *In Col. hom.* 3 (PG 62,317; NPNF1,270).

[16] *In Col. hom.* 8 (PG 62,352; NPNF1,294).

[17] Lai, 'John Chrysostom,' 147, n. 58. *Hom. in Rom.* 13.19 (PG 60,510 *l*.25-29).

[18] *In Col. hom.* 8 (PG 62,353; NPNF1,295).

renewal of humanity is confirmed in a participation in the "likeness" of Christ as νέος, as being defined as continual deepening and the formation of a Christian way of life.

Augustine of Hippo

In compared with its prominence within the tradition of the Eastern Church, Augustine's concern with the teaching of *deificatio* (θέωσις) 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 (written by Victorino Capánaga and Gerald Bonner) have directed our attention to the problem of deification in his works.[19] 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.[20] 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.

His earliest reference to deification is found in his letter written around in 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 devout 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."[21] 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?[22]

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[19]   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.

[20]   For the analysis of Augustine's eighteen instances of the deification language, see Robert Puchniak, 'Augustine's Conception of Deification, Revisited,' in Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (eds.), *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*, Theological Monographs Series 22 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006) 122-133; Meconi, *One Christ*, 79-134.

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

[22]   Aug., *Ep.* 10.2-3.

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.[23] But, although the 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 being led to a Christian way of life.[24] 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."[25] 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."[26] 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 the prayer.

Another interesting use of the deification language is found in a homily on Psalm 81 "God has stood up in the synagogue of gods" in which he begins with the exposition of a 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.[27] 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 status quo of the community 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*),[28] 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?[29]

Augustine encourages the congregation that, while all human beings express a desire for the highest perfection and immortality, God's promise that they will be made gods can be accomplished. First he refers to human "infirmity" as the mortality of human beings and shifts the attention of his audience to another possibility of vivifying the infirmity. Then he

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[23]   Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 329; Meconi, *One Christ*, 83-84.

[24]   See Roland J. Teske, 'Augustine's Epistula X: Another Look at *Deificari in Otio*,' *Augustinianum* 32 (1992) 289-299.

[25]   Aug., *De uera religione* 35.65: "in simplicitate cordis."

[26]   An allustion to John 1:12, in Aug., *De uera religione* 35.65 (Works(NY), 1/8,73).

[27]   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, 2009²) 452-454.

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

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

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 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.[30]

The emphasis on the fulfilment of God's promise leads to the vision of the future for his congregation: God becomes one of them. Augustine explains 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."[31] The end and the future of the community of the faith is confirmed by the positive aspect of the message of God's deifying activity.

Concluding remarks

This overview of the teaching of deification in the writings of John and Augustine gives some indication of the prevalent features of their approach to the teaching of deification. Given 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 interest in a Christian way of life. Aside from their answer to the progress in the Christian life, to the human potential for divine likeness, and to Christ's work of recapitulation, there seems to be an indispensable aspect of the discourse of deification which both writers do not ignore in their writings. It is the communal and liturgical setting in which they attempt to open a new way of constructing the relationship between divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. In fact, several aspects could be discerned with the edification and stimulation of the congregation. In this vein, John and Augustine concurred in representing 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 the listeners 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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[30]   *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).1 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons*, 459; Works(NY) 3/11,37).
[31]   *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).1 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons*, 459; Works(NY) 3/11,38): "certo tempore apparebit."

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