

6

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

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 the holistic care of 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 ‘[n]ow 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 the ways in which

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¹ See Kolbet 2010, 7–9 and 41–46; Malherbe 1992.

² Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.6.1. For the discussion of Psalm 82:6 by Irenaeus, see Russell 2004, 105–110. See also Schnurr 1969.

³ Dionysius the Areopagite, *Hier. eccl.* 1.3; PG 3, 376A; trans. Parker, 71: ἡ δὲ θέωσις ἐστὶν ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσις τε καὶ ἔνωσις.

⁴ For the overview of the teaching of deification in the fourth and fifth centuries, see Lot-Borodine 1970; Gross 2002; Russell 2004; and Meconi 2013.

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 the deification (*θέωσις* or *θεοποίησης*) of humanity. 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, 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' (*Ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν, καὶ κατ' ὁμοίωσιν*).⁶ With reference to the following passages, he interprets the 'image' (*εἰκών*) and the human being as follows.

So 'image' refers to the matter of control, not anything else, in other words, God created the human being as having control of everything on earth, and nothing on earth is greater than the human being, under whose authority everything falls.⁷

As it was for Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, so for John 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, 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

⁵ Gross 2002, 200 and 206; Russell 2004, 237; and Lai 2010, 141–142.

⁶ See John Chrys. *Hom. Gen.* 8 9–10; PG 53, 72d–73a; FC 74, 110–111.

⁷ John Chrys. *Hom. Gen.* 8 9; PG 53, 72; FC 74, 110: *Κατὰ τὴν τῆς ἀρχῆς οὖν Εἰκόνα φησὶν, οὐ κατ' ἕτερόν τι καὶ γὰρ πάντων τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἄρχοντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐδημιούργησεν ὁ Θεός, καὶ οὐδὲν τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐστι τοῦτου μείζον, ἀλλὰ πάντα ὑπὸ τὴν ἐξουσίαν τὴν τοῦτου τυγχάνει.*

⁸ See McLeod 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 Rylaarsdam 2014, 124–127.

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, as Christ also says, ‘Be like your Father in heaven.’¹⁰

Echoing the tradition of the Alexandrians and Cappadocians,¹¹ 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 unto God’,¹² accompanied by moral efforts to lead them upward. Thus, while sharing a similar interpretation with the Antiochenes, John’s indebtedness to the 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 (*ἀνῆρ*) by reference to I 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.¹³

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 if as a man’s image, say so, and I will have done with you as a madman. But if as God and God’s Son, God’s image, he

¹⁰ John Chrys. *Hom. Gen.* 9 7; PG 53, 78; FC 74, 120: “Ὅσπερ Εἰκόνα εἶπε τῆς ἀρχῆς δηλῶν εἰκόνα, οὕτω καὶ Ὁμοίωσιν, ὥστε κατὰ δύναμιν ἀνθρωπίνην ὁμοίους ἡμᾶς γίνεσθαι Θεῷ, κατὰ τὸ ἡμερον λέγον καὶ πρᾶον ἐξομοιοῦσθαι αὐτῷ, καὶ κατὰ τὸν τῆς ἀρετῆς λόγον, ὥσπερ καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς φησι, Γίνεσθε ὁμοιοὶ τοῦ Πατρὸς ὑμῶν τοῦ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

¹¹ See Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 2.125.4–5; and Basil *Spir.* s. 1.2.

¹² Basil *Spir.* s. 1.2; PG 32, 70B; NPNF 2.8, 2: ὅτι πρόκειται ἡμῖν ὁμοιωθῆναι Θεῷ, κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ἀνθρώπου φύσει. See also Gregory of Nazianzus *Oratio* 4 71; Basil *Spir.* s. 15.35–36; *Homiliae in Psalmos* 33.3; PG 29, 357C and 44.2; PG 29, 389C. Cf. Russell 2004, 211–212.

¹³ For John’s teaching of Christ’s divinity, see Lawrenz III 1987.

shows the exact likeness. [...] 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.¹⁴

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.’)¹⁵ confront John with the contrast between the corruption of human nature and human nature in its original state.¹⁶

for ever as he farther advances, he hasteneth (*ἐπείγεται*) 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 (*ἀκμάζει*), 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.¹⁷ [Italics mine]

Paul’s statement of the ‘new man’ becomes the focus of John’s view of the perfection of the likeness of God. John’s attention is devoted not only to the acquisition of a ‘fuller knowledge’ from the moral viewpoint, but also to a ‘creation, after the image of Christ’. It is made explicit that Christ ‘came [...] to a youthfulness’. This implies that the process of Christ’s recapitulation as a

¹⁴ John Chrys. *Hom. Col. 3*; PG 62, 317, 318; NPNF 1.13, 270: *Περὶ τῆς τοῦ Υἱοῦ ἀξίας διαλεγόμενος ὁ Παῦλος ταῦτά φησιν, ὡς περ καὶ ἀπεδείξαμεν Ὅς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου. Τίνος οὖν αὐτὸν οἶει λέγειν εἰκόνα εἶναι; Εἰ μὲν τοῦ Θεοῦ, καλῶς Θεὸς γὰρ καὶ Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Θεοῦ δὲ εἰκὼν τὸ ἀμαράλλακτον δεῖκνυσιν [...] Τὴν γὰρ εἰκόνα, καθὸ ἐστὶν εἰκὼν, καὶ παρ’ ἡμῖν ἀπαράλλακτον δεῖ εἶναι, οἷον τῶν χαρακτήρων καὶ τῆς ὁμοιώσεως.*

¹⁵ John Chrys. *Hom. Col. 8*; PG 62, 352; NPNF 1.13, 294: *Μὴ ψεύδεσθε εἰς ἀλλήλους. Ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον σὺν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν.*

¹⁶ See Lai 2010, 147 n. 58. See also *Homiliae in epistolam ad Romanos* 13.19.

¹⁷ John Chrys. *Hom. Col. 8*; PG 62, 353; NPNF 1.13, 295: *ὅσα γὰρ ἂν προῖη, οὐ πρὸς γῆρας ἐμείγεται, ἀλλὰ πρὸς νεότητα μεῖζονα τῆς προτέρας. Ὅταν γὰρ πλείονα λάβῃ τὴν γνώσιν, καὶ μᾶλλον μειζόνων ἀξιούται, καὶ μᾶλλον ἀκμάζει, καὶ μᾶλλον ἰσχύει, οὐχ ἀμὸ τῆς νεότητος μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῦ εἶδους πρὸς ὃ ἐστὶν. Ἴδου κτίσις ἡ ἀρίστη μοιτεία λέγεται. Κατ’ εἰκόνα Χριστοῦ τοῦτο γάρ ἐστι. Κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν ἐπὶ καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς οὐ πρὸς γῆρας ἐτελεύτησεν, ἀλλ’ οὕτως ἦν καλὸς, ὡς μηδὲ εἶναι εἰπεῖν.*

human being was executed. Thus, in the correlation between the completion of Christ's work and encouragement to the ongoing spiritual progress, the renewal of humanity is confirmed in a participation in the 'likeness' of Christ as *νέος*, defined as a continual deepening and formation of a Christian way of life.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

In contrast to its prominence within the tradition of the Eastern Church, concern with the teaching of *deificatio* (*θεώσις*) seems not to be strongly expressed in the corpus of Augustine's writings. That said, 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 Augustine's works.¹⁸ Following careful examination of Augustine's use of deification language, some scholars have given a total of eighteen instances, as well as a philosophical and theological perspective that is indispensable to finding an approach to the locus of deification in Augustine's thought.¹⁹ In his treatment of deification, Augustine shows how this language is integral and inseparable from the themes he explores 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 his 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 had remained in Carthage and Augustine, now as a baptised Christian, had 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 was inappropriate for 'a man who ponders that one last journey, which is called death, the only one, as you understand, that we should truly ponder'.²⁰ His advice is that Nebridius should avoid involvement in public affairs and seek to enjoy the break away from 'a life of busyness'.

¹⁸ Capánaga 1954; Bonner 1986.

¹⁹ For the analysis of Augustine's eighteen instances of the deification language, see Puchniak 2006; Meconi 2013, 79–134.

²⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 10.2; CCSL 31, 24; WSA 2/1, 33: *hominis, de illa una ultima quae mors uocatur cogitantis, de qua uel sola intellegis uere esse cogitandum.*

But neither to those who are swept off to such administrative positions by the love of temporal honour nor to those who seek a life of busyness, when they are not holding office, 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?²¹

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.²² However, while, the engagement with Neoplatonic texts draws his attention to a pagan exhortation to the internal recognition of one’s own divinity, it may rather be likely that Augustine considers the ‘leisure’ depicted there as being led to a Christian way of life.²³ In the contemporary treatise *True Religion* (in 390, written before he was ordained to the priesthood in 391), Augustine insists that the quest for communion with God must be constructed ‘in simplicity of heart’.²⁴ Appropriately 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’.²⁵ This reading of such 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.

Another interesting use of deification language is found in a homily on Psalm 81 ‘God has stood up in the synagogue of gods’, in which he begins with an exposition of a catechetical passage on a recapitulative view of deification. This *Sermon* 23B (= Dolbeau 6) was delivered to the congregation of Carthage

²¹ Aug. *Ep.* 10.2–3; CCSL 31, 24–25; WSA 2/1, 33–34: *sed neque his qui ad huiusmodi administrationes temporalis honoris amore raptantur, neque rursus his qui cum sunt privati negotiosam uitam appetunt, hoc tantum bonum concedi arbitror, ut inter strepitus inquietosque conuentus atque discursus cum morte familiaritatem quam quaerimus faciant; deificari enim utrisque in otio licebat. [...] cum expertus saepe sis quam dulce uiuat, cum amori corporeo animus moritur, negabis tandem totam hominis uitam posse intrepidam fieri, ut rite sapiens nominetur?*

²² Russell 2004, 329; Meconi 2013, 83–84.

²³ See Foillet 1962; and Teske 1992.

²⁴ Aug. *Vera rel.* 35.65; CCSL 32, 229; WSA 1/8, 73: *in simplicitate cordis.*

²⁵ An allusion to John 1:12, in Aug. *Vera rel.* 35.65; CCSL 32, 230; WSA 1/8, 73: *dedit eis potestatem filios dei fieri.*

probably in the winter of 403–404.²⁶ 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 abandon idolatry. It is interesting to note that, in drawing a sharp distinction between those gods made by the hands of a craftsman and those made by God, that is, ‘god-making God’,²⁷ 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, I don’t doubt, to your graces. 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?²⁸

Augustine encourages the congregation by affirming 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 this infirmity. Then, he confirms that the expectation of a deifying action from God is achievable, because it is not an 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.²⁹

The emphasis on the fulfilment of God’s promise leads to a vision of the future for his congregation: God becomes one of them. Augustine explains perfect

²⁶ See Dolbeau 2009, 452–454.

²⁷ *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).2; Dolbeau, ed., 460; WSA 3/II, 38: *deus deificator*.

²⁸ *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).1; Dolbeau, ed., 459; WSA 3/II, 37: *Ad quam spem uocauerit nos dominus deus noster, quid modo geramus, quid toleremus et quid expectemus, notum esse non dubito caritati uestrae. Gerimus mortalitatem, toleramus infirmitatem, expectamus diuinitatem. Vult enim deus non solum uiuificare, sed etiam deificare nos. Quando hoc sperare humana infirmitas auderet, nisi diuina promitteret ueritas?*

²⁹ *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).1; Dolbeau, ed., 459; WSA 3/II, 37: *Parum tamen fuit Deo nostro promittere nobis in se diuinitatem, nisi et nostram susciperet infirmitatem, tamquam dicens: ‘Vis nosse quantum te diligam, quam certus esse debeas daturum me tibi diuinum meum? Accepi mortale tuum’. Non nobis uideatur incredibile, fratres, deos fieri homines, id est <ut> qui homines erant dii fiant. [...] Filius dei factus est filius hominis, ut filios hominum faceret filios Dei.*

humanity as the means by which God assumes the deification of human infirmity to god-like existence. In the combination of deification language and the Pauline form of adoption, it is proclaimed that what was already taken with the incarnation will be 'made manifest at a definite time'.³⁰ The end and the future of the community of the faith are confirmed by the positive aspect of the message of God's deifying activity.

CONCLUSION

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 remembered 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 answers to the issue of progress in Christian life, the human potential for divine likeness and Christ's work of recapitulation, there seems to be an indispensable aspect of the discourse of deification that both writers acknowledge in their writings. This is the communal and liturgical setting in which they attempt to open up a new way of constructing the relationship between divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. In fact, several aspects can be discerned in 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 strong influence, it is as if the listeners were, through the communicative nexus of the letters and homiletic discourse, tied together and encouraged to have hope of things to come.

³⁰ *Serm.* 23B (= Dolbeau 6).1; Dolbeau, ed., 459; WSA 3/II, 38: *certo tempore apparebit.*