

The Concept of Deification in Greek and Syriac

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The early patristic authors dealt with the idea of deification in varying circumstances, in relation to different questions, and in more than one language. This article examines Syriac and Greek discourses and vocabularies related to deification in Early Christian and Post-Chalcedonian sources, concentrating on the Syriac tradition, which is less studied. The comparison illustrates certain similarities and differences. The most striking difference is, perhaps surprisingly, that in the Syriac tradition, the idea of deification is prevalent but specific terms to indicate it are almost never used. The incommensurability of the discourses exemplifies the conceptual difficulties at the emergence of the schisms between the Greek and Syriac speaking parts of Christendom.

Keywords: *Deification, divinization, theosis, Greek, Syriac, Chalcedonian*

It is typical for theological authors of the past that they thought themselves to be designating universal truths with a neutral medium, that of language. Yet any exercise in theological discourse is thoroughly dependent on the structure, vocabulary and associations of the particular language that is being used, more than realised by those who are accustomed to operate with one language only.

In this article, I discuss the concept of deification in Greek and Syriac traditions, both early Christian and post-Chalcedonian. The basic aim is to outline the relevant common and diverging features of the two discourses, even though the peculiarities and differences in the source material, as well as in the scholarship, make a comparison in the traditional sense of the word rather unworkable. In the background, there is the fundamental question whether the possible differences are caused, to some extent at least, by languages themselves, i.e. linguistic factors. Even though the topic is focused to one single concept, it is related to wide theological, linguistic and cultural developments, and it must be admitted that the conclusions can hardly be more than loose estimations. For the same reason, however, the case provides an example of conceptual differences and terminological problems between Greek and Syriac thought-worlds during the Chalcedonian schism.

The research history on the topic is rather uneven, to say the least. The Greek sources are well known, and the idea of deification in them is

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exhaustively studied;¹ therefore, it is neither necessary nor possible to go into all details here. Since the Syriac sources are less known and seldom utilised in studies on deification, I shall concentrate more on the Syriac material, yet keeping in mind the comparative perspective, which is unavoidable for the simple reason that the Greek terminology sets the parameters for any Christian discussion on the idea of deification.

Deification in the Greek sources

In the Greek tradition, there is considerable variation of terminology, and the history of the usages is rather complicated.² Most of this complexity, however, is de facto quite irrelevant, since the various terms obviously refer to the same idea. There are so many expressions, especially verbs, for the deification process in Greek that it would be entirely artificial to consider them referring to different realities, or even to the same reality in essentially different ways. For all practical purposes, the divergent terms seem to function in similar ways, and the differences are insignificant etymological nuances with no distinctive function. If there are some slight differences, it is in the particular contexts in which they are used, not in the meanings of the words themselves.

It is remarkable, however, that the idea of deification was originally and for some time expressed without any specific term. In the surviving material, Irenaeus seems to have been the first to present the basic idea. He combined the coming of Christ into our state of being and the becoming of man into His state of being, connecting these two with a causal relation: Christ “through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself”.³ Rather similarly, Clement of Alexandria declared “Word of God became man, that you might learn from man how man may become God (ἄνθρωπος γίνεταί θεοῦ)”.⁴ Clement denoted

¹ In addition to the publications quoted below, one may mention: Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person*, New York, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1987; Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, Milton Keynes, Paternoster 1999; Stephen Thomas, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, New Jersey, Gorgias Press 2007. Perhaps the best introduction to the subject is: Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*, New York, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press 2007.

² See e.g.: Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2006, p. 333-344.

³ Irenaeus, *Adv. haer. V (praef.)*; *Adv. haer.* 3, 19, 1, SC 34. For discussion, see: Mark Edwards, “Growing like God: Some Thoughts on Irenaeus of Lyons”, in: Mark Edwards, Elena Ene D-Vasilescu (eds.), *Visions of God and Ideas on Deification in Patristic Thought*, New York, Routledge 2017, p. 37-51.

⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptikos* 1, 8, SC 2. For discussion, see: G. W. Butterworth, “The Deification of Man in Clement of Alexandria”, in: *JTS* 17 (1916), p. 157-169.

this process with the help of verbs θεόω,⁵ θεοποιέω and ἐκθεόω,⁶ the last one of which he used as the first Greek author. However, the second century fathers did not denote the idea with nouns such as θεοποίησις or θέωσις.

The cultural context of the Greek fathers in the late antiquity was rich in corresponding ideas: polytheistic myths and cults were famous for their idea of *apotheosis* (ἀποθέωσις). Remarkably, the fathers determinedly tried to avoid Hellenistic vocabulary that was associated with polytheism. It is telling that even though Clement used three different verbs for Christian deification, he had still another one for pagan contexts: ἐκθειάζω, a term with a taste of “deeming (someone) divine”.⁷ This, however, does not tell about an essential difference in the meaning of words themselves; it rather reveals an intention to make a difference between the Christian and pagan ideas of deification by the utilisation of different terms. Origen underlined the same difference in explicit terms.⁸

The scholars have repeatedly stated that the Christians categorically refused to use the concept of *apotheosis*.⁹ In fact, there is a noteworthy exception. Gregory Thaumaturgos in his eulogy to Origen, in describing a soul that is pure and glorious enough to see the divine *nous* in itself, stated that such a soul is on the way towards deification (ἀποθέωσις).¹⁰ Had the word been strictly forbidden by his master, Gregory would not have used it. Ultimately, there was no reluctance towards the word as such, but mainly a need to keep the processes of pagan and Christian spirituality apart.

Athanasios the Great is sometimes presented as the father of *theosis*,¹¹ which is peculiar for two reasons: he did not use the word, and his most famous formulation was adopted from Irenaeus. In his celebrated wording, the Son “became human (ἐνηνθρώπησεν) so that we might be defied

⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.*, 4, 152 (1), SC 463.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 6, 14 (113), 7, 16 (101); *Paed.*, 1, 98 (3), PG 8. Discussion in: Bogdan Gabriel Bucur, *Angelomorphic Pneumatology: Clement of Alexandria and Other Early Christian Witnesses*, Leiden-Boston, Brill 2009, p. 48-50.

⁷ Clement presents a dozen of such cases. See: N. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, p. 122.

⁸ “Those whom God has honoured with the title of God, and who partake of His divinity (μετέχοντας τῆς θεότητος αὐτοῦ), are very different from all the gods of the nations which are demons”. See: Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 7, 65, SC 150.

⁹ E.g.: John McGuckin, “The Strategic Adaption of Deification in the Cappadocians”, in: Michael J. Christensen, Jeffery A. Wittung (eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: the History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic 2007, p. 95.

¹⁰ Gregorios Thaumaturgos, *In Origenem oratio panegyrica*, PG 10, 1084C.

¹¹ For instance, Alister E. McGrath in his influential work *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell 2011, p. 339, claims that Athanasios used the term *theosis*.

(θεωποιηθῶμεν).¹² Given that deification is a dynamic process, it makes sense that Athanasios expressed it primarily with verbs. He favoured the verb θεοποιέω ('to make someone a god'), in addition to its derivations such as the noun θεοποίησις that was his own speciality – and the first Christian noun for the idea of deification. Athanasios used it especially in *Contra Arianos*, always in the Christian sense, but when he discussed non-Christian deifying aspirations in *Contra gentes* he preferred θεοποιία. Correspondingly, he used the verb ἐκθειάζω ('to turn into god') only in the connection of non-Christian cults.¹³ Thus Athanasios firmly aimed to underline the difference of Christian and non-Christian deification by the choice of words, even though the Christian vocabulary was far from being fixed. Probably he was not aware of the fact that θεοποιέω had been used by some non-Christians such as Middle Platonist Lucian¹⁴ in the second century.

Finally, it was Gregory the Theologian who introduced and championed for the classical noun θέωσις, which appears more than twenty times in his writings. However, he was very flexible in creating and employing expressions such as θεοποιέω, θεοποιός, θεόν ποιέω ('to make so. god'), θεός εἰμί ('to be god'), θεός γίγνομαι ('to become god'), in addition to more peculiar expressions in his poetry.¹⁵ On the whole, *theosis* was for the Cappadocian fathers not only a theological conclusion but also a part of their project of constructing Christian Hellenism. They aimed to present the Christian teaching in an intellectually coherent and charming way for the pagan intelligentsia, and deification language was useful in this respect.¹⁶

It may be somewhat perplexing for modern scholars that the patristic authors seem to have managed centuries without actually *defining* the concept. The first one to provide a definition was Pseudo-Dionysios (c. 500) for whom θέωσις is "being as much as possible like and in union with God".¹⁷

¹² Athanasios, *De Incarnatione* 54, 3, PG 25, 192B.

¹³ Athanasios uses θεοποιέω at least 33 times in a Christian context.

¹⁴ E.g.: *Luciani Samosatensis Opera*, Vol. 1, Leipzig, B. G. Teubneri 1896.

¹⁵ Vladimir Kharlamov, "Rhetorical Application of *Theosis* in Greek Patristic Theology", in: M. J. Christensen, J. A. Wittung (eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, p. 123.

¹⁶ This is of course a general observation dealing with their overall motives and inspiration rather than a specific claim that could be verified explicitly from their remarks on deification. See e.g. V. Kharlamov, "Rhetorical Application", p. 125, and the discussion in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press 1993, p. 90-92.

¹⁷ ἡ δὲ θέωσις ἐστὶν ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσις τε καὶ ἕνωσις. Pseudo-Dionysios, *Eccl. hier.*, 1, 3, PG 3, 376A. Deification in Pseudo-Dionysios is thoroughly studied in: V. Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole: The Concept of Theosis in the Theology of Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite*, Eugene, Wipf & Stock 2009. See also: Filip Ivanovic, "Union with and Likeness to God: Deification According to Dionysius the Areopagite", in: M. Edwards, E. Ene D-Vasilescu (eds.), *Visions of God*, p. 118-157.

The definition creates some illusory exactness, given that it is dependent on the concepts of ἀφομοίωσις and ἔνωσις that are themselves in need of further definition and clarification. The brilliance of definition, however, is in its functional relativity (“as much as possible”). Pseudo-Dionysios’ definition gives a handy description for the idea that had been expressed in Greek with various nouns, several verbs, as well as without a one-word indicator.

Deification language seems to be in odd relation with Chalcedon. The first oddity is that in spite of painstaking championing for the term by Gregory the Theologian, the most authoritative father of the time, the deification terminology is almost totally unused in the fifth century sources, the heyday of Chalcedonian discussions. The most noteworthy mid-fifth century exception is an oddity provided by Diadochos of Photike, θεωθέω,¹⁸ a most extraordinary verb indeed.

The second oddity is that, after more than a century of silence, the word θεώσις re-entered the discussion, and through the work of Pseudo-Dionysios and Maximus the Confessor it became a key term of Orthodox spirituality. The question is, then, why was there such a silence? One reason might be that the development was a side effect of Chalcedonian problem: θεώσις and related terms did not belong to the Christological jargon proper, but they seem to have had some potentiality to serve the “monophysite” cause. One might have asked: if an ordinary human being may become deified so that humanity is united with divinity and penetrated by it, is it then not obvious that in the case of the Son, this is true in the ultimate sense? And on the other hand, the pro-Chalcedonians stressed that the “monophysites” should be explicit in talking about the full reality of Christ’s humanity, since what is not assumed, is neither saved nor deified. As for the “Nestorian” sector, they could use deification in the case of Christ (see below), which in turn made it somewhat unworkable in the case of Christians.

However that may be, the instances of silence show that it is entirely possible to discuss Orthodox spirituality in full with no deification terminology whatsoever. This is mostly due to the peculiarly supreme, exclusive, perfectionist and idealistic character of the term, which makes it somewhat elitist if applied in practice. It is telling that almost no one has used it about himself. Deification terms constitute an integral part of Orthodox spirituality, soteriology and eschatology, and they have pedagogic and even anagogic functions – but sociological terms they are not. There can be no category of “divinised persons”, except perhaps in retrospect, in the case of saints. The

¹⁸ Diadochos of Photike, *Ascen.* 6 in: *Œuvres spirituelles*, SC 5, p. 168. Discussed in: N. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, p. 246-248.

more open expressions (e.g. Christ-centred exchange formulas) seem to be less perfectionist, and in that sense more realistic and more pragmatic, than the specific terminology explicitly relating to divinity.

To sum up, deification may be expressed in Greek with nouns θεοποίησις (Athanasios) and θέωσις (Gregory the Theologian, Pseudo-Dionysios), in addition to a big number of verbal expressions such as θεοποιέω (Athanasios, Gregory the Theologian), ἐκθειάζω (Athanasios), θεόω, θεοποιέω, ἐκθεόω (Clement), θεωθέω (Diadochos), θεόν ποιέω, θεός εἰμί and θεός γίγνομαι (Gregory the Theologian).

When one looks at the big picture, it is remarkable that deification was hardly ever the main topic of discussion. Instead, it appeared on Christological, soteriological and spiritual deliberations without systematic treatment or definitions – and caused no schisms. Overall, the usages are very Christ-centred. Humanity is presented as the object of deifying action of divine grace; human beings are not subjects deifying themselves. In other words, the question for which deification provided an answer was not “What can I become?” but rather “For what did Christ come, ultimately?” From the human point of view, the ultimate problem to which deification provided an answer was neither sin nor meaning of life, but rather how to overcome death and perishableness.

Deification in the early Syriac sources

When we move to Syriac-speaking world, there is no fundamental difference in spirituality and ascetic orientation, even though Syriac Christianity had many characteristic features of its own. The world of language, however, is very much different, and this applies to the history of the idea of deification as well.

The early history of deification in the Syriac sources roughly parallels to the Greek tradition, even though the earliest Syriac material cannot be considered fully patristic by character. In *Acts of Thomas*, dating to circa 220–240, there is embedded a prayerful that praises

Jesus, who clothed himself with the body (*ḥbaš pagra*) and became a man (*ḥwā barnāšā*) and manifested himself to us all, so that we would not separate from his love (*nefroš men ḥubbeh*).¹⁹

In Syriac, the metaphor of clothing does not imply docetic propositions but is a typical image for profound metamorphoses. In the Greek version, it is translated, “Jesus who took a form (ὁ τύπον λαβών)”. For our topic,

¹⁹ *Acts of Thomas* 72. The Syriac text in: William Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: edited from Syriac Manuscripts with English translations*, Amsterdam, Philo Press 1968. [Originally, London-Edinburgh 1871]. The Greek text in: Richard Adelbert Lipsius, Maximilian Bonnet (eds.), *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 2.2, Leipzig, Mendelssohn 1903.

however, the most relevant aspect is the general logic of the sentence: reaching unity with Christ's love is presented as the function of His incarnation. The actual scheme of deification remains unpronounced, but it is easy to see the idea in appearance. One may imagine an early kerygmatic tradition that roughly corresponds to the formulations of Irenaeus.

The idea appears in a more explicit form in another early text of unknown dating, *Odes of Solomon*, which may well be even remarkably older than Acts of Thomas. It represents warm and charismatic spirituality, which is rich in exchange formulas. In one ode, Christ himself declares, "Give yourselves (*nafs^ekōn*) to me, and I will give myself (*nafsⁱ*) to you."²⁰ The response of the poet in another ode reads, "Because I love the Son, I shall become a son."²¹ The reciprocal principle of salvation economy is a crucial theme in the ode 7:

He became like me, that I might partake²² in Him,
 In form (*ba-dmūtā*) He was considered like me,
 that I might put Him on.²³
 [...]
 Like my nature He became, that I might understand Him.
 And like my form, that I might not turn away from Him.²⁴

Thus the earliest Syriac sources seem to be at home with the idea, even though almost nothing certain is known of the early use(rs) of these poetic and prayerful texts. It is noteworthy that the idea of human-divine exchange is at home with warm and intimate expressions of mystical, prayerful poetry. The wordings of *Odes of Solomon* are probably the earliest surviving expression of the idea, even though the scholars of deification have not paid attention to this fact. Remarkably, the early uses appear in poetical and prayerful texts that belong to the heart of spirituality but are marginal in terms of dogmatic thought.

²⁰ *Odes of Solomon* 9:2. Syriac text and translation in: James H. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1973. The manuscript images in: Rendel Harris, Alphonse Mingana, *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon, Vol. 1: The Text with Facsimile reproductions*, Manchester-London-New York, Longmans, Green & Co 1916. See also *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon, Vol. 2: The Translation with introduction and notes*, Manchester-London-New York, Longmans, Green & Co 1920. In such formulations, one may see some thematic parallels with the Gospel of John.

²¹ *Odes of Solomon* 3:7.

²² Charlesworth translated "receive Him" which sounds somewhat "evangelical". The verb *n'sab* basically means 'to take', but it also means to 'assume', 'partake', which is a rather evident meaning in this context. The first person imperfect with third person suffix also happens to be approximately similar to the corresponding form of the verb *sebah*, 'to resemble (Him)'.

²³ *Odes of Solomon* 7:4.

²⁴ *Ibidem* 7:6.

Deification in Ephrem the Syrian

Prominent Lutheran theologian Adolf von Harnack in his influential works ridiculed the Greek fascination for deification, abruptly condemning it as a pagan influence that damaged the actual message of Christianity.²⁵ Therefore, it is remarkable that there is a relevant counter-example: an Eastern Church father who lived most of his life outside the Roman Empire and did not know Greek. In that sense, Ephrem the Syrian, the most important figure of Syriac-speaking early Church, can be said to represent “Semitic theology”, even though this has sometimes been over-emphasised in a bit romantic fashion.²⁶

A contemporary to Athanasios the Great, Ephrem was a remarkable champion for the Nicæan orthodoxy in the East, and his vision was biblical, based on salvation history – and untouched by Platonic influences. However, some of Ephrem’s poetical Christological expressions turned out to be problematic in post-Chalcedon atmosphere.²⁷ In his famous hymns, Ephrem presented a plenty of incarnation-centred formulations, and the result is strikingly similar to the formulas of Irenaeus and Athanasius, though expressed in different wordings. The dynamics of deification is an elementary part of Ephrem’s overall message, summarised in his *Hymns on faith*:

For he gave us divinity,
we gave Him humanity.²⁸

God came down and became like us (*etdammi lan*),
So we could turn and become like him.²⁹

²⁵ Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck 2005, p. 132-133 [144-146].

²⁶ For an analytical discussion on different approaches to Ephrem, see: Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem’s Art of Symbolic Theology*, New Jersey, Gorgias Press 2006, p. 33-69. Ute Possekel in her *Evidence of Greek philosophical concepts in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian*, CSCO 580, Louvain, Peeters 1999, has shown that Ephrem was familiar with some kind of Aramaic tradition of Stoic philosophical thought. This indirect Stoic connection, however, is not of much relevance for Ephrem’s discussion on deification, which is based on incarnation and Christian fundamentals.

²⁷ For discussion, see: Aaron Michael Butts, “Manuscript Transmission as Reception History: The Case of Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373)”, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 25 (2/2017), p. 281-306.

²⁸ *d-allāhūteh yabḥ lan*, (‘)nāsūtā yḥabn leh Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymnen de fide*, 5, 17, CSCO 154-155, Louvain 1955. Author’s translation.

²⁹ Idem, *Hymnen de fide*, 37, 2. Translation by Jeffrey T. Wickes in: *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Faith*, FC 130, Washington, Catholic University of America Press 2015, p. 213.

Similarly, in *Hymns on nativity*, Christ “descended and became one of us that we might become heavenly.”³⁰

On several occasions, Ephrem discussed the theme with the help of the paradise narrative (Gen 1–3). The fall was caused by the will to attain the divinity by rising over the will of God, but the method chosen led to the loss of divinity instead. This was essentially a temporary condition, but since man was unable to rise by his own will, “Grace clothed itself in the likeness of Adam, in order to bring him to His likeness.”³¹ The whole sacred history is culminated in the divinization of man, which is the ultimate function of descent of God. For Ephrem, the Second Adam was God by nature, the first Adam becomes god by grace.

The Most High knew that Adam
wanted to become (*nehwē*) a god (*allāhā*),
He sent His Son who put him on
in order to grant him his desire.³²

The same dynamics of exchange in the states of being appears in many of Ephrem’s writings, at times finding a more metaphorical expression: “Divinity (*allāhūtā*) flew down / to rescue and lift up humanity”.³³ Ephrem also made the differentiation between the divinity “of nature” in the case of God and “of grace” in the case of men.

In the same way, participation in divinity is present in the *Hymns on Epiphany*,³⁴ a collection that to some extent originates from Ephrem and in any case represents early Syrian baptismal theology. Christian baptism is understood in relation to the baptism of Christ, as participation in His baptism. The divinity settles into water, and in baptism, man is able to enter the same blessed water into which the presence of Christ has “mixed the divinity”.³⁵ This is how the idea of deification may function in concrete terms in a sacramental context.

³⁰ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymnen de nativitate*, 3, 16, CSCO 186-187, Louvain 1959.

³¹ Idem, *Hymnen de paradiso*, 11, 6, CSCO 174-175, Louvain 1957. I have slightly modified Brock’s translation in *Hymns on Paradise*, New York, SVS 1990, p. 156. For discussion on the deification in *Hymns on paradise*, see: Christopher Buck, “Sapiential Theōsis: A New Reading of Ephrem the Syrian’s Hymns on Paradise”, in: *The Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 9 (2/1995), p. 80-125.

³² Idem, *Carmina nisibena*, 69, 12, CSCO 92-93, Louvain 1961, 1963.

³³ Idem, *Hymnen de virginitate*, 48, 17-18, CSCO 223-224, Louvain 1962. Translation in: Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, New York, Paulist Press 1989, p. 455.

³⁴ Discussed in Serafim Seppälä, “Baptismal Mystery in St. Ephrem the Syrian and Hymnen de Epiphania”, in: David Hellholm et al. (eds.), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 176, Berlin-New York, Walter de Gruyter 2011, p. 1139-1177.

³⁵ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymnen de Epiphania*, 4, 5.

In short, the deifying character of participation in Christ was evident for Ephrem. Nevertheless, he had no actual term for deification. Even though he leads the reader to the threshold of the concept of deification in many occasions, he always leaves the actual word unmentioned. For instance, in *Hymns on Paradise*, he first compares body, soul (*naṣṣā*), spirit (*tar'itā*) and divinity (*allāhūtā*) with each other, then concluding: “In the end the body will put on the beauty of the soul, the soul will put on that of the spirit, while the spirit shall put on the very likeness of (God’s) majesty (*d̄mūtā derbbūtā*).”³⁶ In other words, Ephrem does not complete the analogy with a term implied by the continuum of soul, spirit and divinity; instead, the last expression is modified into a somewhat more cautious form.

Deification in the post-Chalcedonian Syriac sources

In spite of the prevalence of the idea, actual terms for deification appeared into Syriac only after Chalcedon, more or less due to Greek influence. Paradoxically, Greek influences started to spread into Syriac literature after the parting of ways in the aftermath of Chalcedon, and deification terminology is a part of that process. The uses are very sporadic, however.

According to Sebastian Brock, the earliest occurrence of a precise verb for deification was in Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523), who was widely read in Greek, known of his translation of the four Gospels (508). Therefore, Greek influence is likely in his use of the verb *etallah*, ‘to become deified’. According to Philoxenus,

The Word, who is God, wished to make humans into children of God, we confess that he was emptied, became flesh, and was completely inhumanized (*etbarnaš*), in order to recreate the entire human being in himself, and because he became human in us, we too have been deified (*etallahan*) and become children of the Father.³⁷

In effect, *etbarnaš* and *etallah* function as equivalents of ἐνηθρώπησεν and θεωποιηθῶμεν used by Athanasios. The idea can be considered as part of the Syrian Orthodox doctrine, for expressions very similar to Philoxenus are found in their liturgical books, as well as those of Maronites.³⁸

Moreover, the traditional poetical approach did not vanish but various authors also continued the tradition of Ephrem in the post-Chalcedonian

³⁶ Idem, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 9, 20. *Tar'itā* also means ‘intelligence’, ‘thinking’.

³⁷ Philoxenus of Mabbug, *Tractatus tres de Trinitate et Incarnatione*, CSCO 9, Louvain 1961, p. 171. Latin translation in: CSCO 10, Louvain 1907, p. 129, lines 9-15. Discussion in: N. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, p. 323, who had received the information from Sebastian Brock.

³⁸ For details, see N. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, p. 323.

era. For instance, an anonymous Hymn for Epiphany, dating to the end of the fifth century, portrayed the unity of the poet and Christ by applying the traditional clothing metaphor with the help of Song of Songs:

Jesus is mine and I am His.
He has desired me:
He has clothed Himself in me,
and I am clothed in Him.
With kisses of His mouth has He kissed me
and brought me to His Bridal Chamber on high.³⁹

It is characteristic for the Syriac tradition that for half a millennium, almost all references to deification appear in poetical, more or less prayerful texts. This of course applies to Syriac theology as a whole, for poetical language remained the main vehicle of theological expression for centuries. In any case, there was still no term for *theosis* in Syriac.

Deification in East Syrian mystical theology

The East Syrian mystical theology had its heyday during the seventh and eighth centuries. Flourishing from Qatar to Armenian mountains, the tradition is renowned for its profundity and mystical vigour. However, even the mystics managed without championing for a term for deification. Nonetheless, there did appear a literal equivalent for *theosis* in Syriac, *metall'hānūtā*, but it was extremely seldom employed. A rare exception is in the writings of a seventh century mystic Symeon the Graceful, who is known for his medical knowledge.

(He) came down from the height of His greatness to the lowliness of our abasement, in order to raise us from earthliness to spirituality by uniting (*h^alīlūtā*) the divinity that is in us (*allāhūtā d-ban*) with the highest Divinity. In this way, through His humility He might give us, by grace, confidence to understand and know our deification (*metall'hānūtān*), our formation in His image, and the likeness of God, in which we were created at the beginning, through the divinity that is in us.⁴⁰

In addition, Symeon declares that the Divine Providence (*b^elūtā allāhaytā*) “governs all, deifies all (*mall'hat kul*), perfects all, illuminates all”, and by its perfect goodness “penetrates all, sustains all, and infuses all with the desire

³⁹ Sebastian P. Brock, “An Anonymous Hymn for Epiphany”, in: *Parole de l'Orient* 15 (1988-1989), p. 173 (Syriac), p. 176 (translation).

⁴⁰ The Syriac text in: Alphonse Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, Woodbrooke Studies 7, Cambridge, Heffer & Sons 1934, p. 167a. Author's translation.

of unification (*ḥūyādā*) with the Godhead (*rēšūt allāhūtā*).⁴¹ The vision is solemn and bold by its all-penetrating character, and belongs to the gems of the East Syrian monastic literature.

As a rule, however, the idea was expressed in other ways. The idea of deification is implied when the word ‘god’ itself is used for man, as Isaac of Nineveh (seventh century) did in stating that the ascetic “labours and humility make man a god (*allāhā*) on the earth.”⁴² It is up to the reader, however, whether this is taken as a crystallisation for the doctrine of *theosis*, or merely a metaphor for something essentially less. Moreover, there is no clear difference between metaphorical and non-metaphorical in this case, given that ‘divinity’ does not refer to an exactly similar reality in the case of man and in that of God. In the end, all God-talk is more or less metaphorical in itself. Correspondingly, the adjectival use may refer to the same direction: when the holy men are called ‘divine’ (*allāhāyā*), the idea of deification is present. However, this is often not a necessary conclusion, given that the adjective has a wide usage in both Greek and Syriac. Indeed, Isaac of Nineveh uses the word ‘divine’ more than 200 times in his homilies,⁴³ in which it often functions as a general term for spiritual, holy and sacred.

Of all the East Syrian mystics, John of Dalyatha (eighth century) was probably the most daring, and certainly the one with the most aesthetic touch. Sublimely and boldly, he taught one to become a “god in God”. This happens by continuously bearing the yoke of the Lord in one’s heart and marvelling at this greatness in the mind,

until it become radiant with his glory and be transformed into the Archetype and you become a god in God (*allāhā b-allāhā*), having obtained the image of your Creator by the union (*ḥadyūtā*) which likens to Him.⁴⁴

John of Dalyatha was very much a poet by his mentality, and many of his wordings are rather unique. However, also a bit more prosaic seventh century mystic, Sahdona, described likewise how God has made us “to acquire the radiance of his likeness (*zīwā da-dmūteh*), adorning us with the glory of his divinity (*b-šubḥā d-allāhūteh*) – or rather, making us an authority like his

⁴¹ A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, p. 167a. Authors translation.

⁴² The Syriac text in Paul Bedjan, *Perfectione Religiosa*, Paris, Otto Harrassowitz 1909, p. 95.

⁴³ My calculation based on the texts edited by P. Bedjan, *Perfectione Religiosa*, and Sebastian Brock, *Second Part*, CSCO 554, Louvain, Peeters 1995.

⁴⁴ John of Dalyatha, *Letters*, 29, 1, in: Mary Hansbury, *The Letters of John of Dalyatha*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 2, Piscataway, Gorgias Press 2006. For a comprehensive analysis on the spirituality of John of Dalyatha, see: Robert Beulay, *L’Enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha: mystique Syro-Oriental du VIIIe siècle*, Théologie historique 83, Paris, Beauchesne 1990. The stage of union is discussed in pp. 297-487.

own within creation.”⁴⁵ In his letters, Sahdona marvelled at deification with a series of question that proclaim the mystery:

What is this profound and ineffable mystery of the economy of Christ that God, for a one like me, has impoverished himself to become a man and to be called like me in order to make me a god (*lī allāhā ne^cbed*), rising me into his likeness?⁴⁶

It is noteworthy that Sahdona preferred the expression ‘make me a god’ to actual deification terms in a context where one might have expected the latter. Nevertheless, the expression is also a rare case of deification speech in the first person singular, which creates a strange affinity with the ecstatic utterances (*shaṭḥiyāt*) known from slightly later Sufism, such as Abu Yazid Bistami’s (d. 874) famous “glory to me”, or “I am the Truth”, i.e. “I am God”, by al-Hallāj (d. 922).⁴⁷

In addition to these usages, Syriac mystics were bold in using terms of ‘unification’ and ‘commingling’ with God. Of these two, the latter term is stronger. It is one of the structuring principles in the *Book of Holy Hierotheos*, a sixth century work influenced by Neoplatonism, that “unification” (*ḥadyūtā*) still implies a certain amount of twoness, but in “commingling” (*ḥ^abīkūtā*) there is full inseparableness.⁴⁸ Other terms for commingling include *ḥultānā*, *ḥ^alīḥūtā*, both from the root indicating ‘mixing’,⁴⁹ and *ṣawtāfūtā*, which may also be translated as communion, participation or in more modest terms, fellowship.⁵⁰

It is curious why, in the middle of all this mystical fervour, the actual term for deification remained almost unused. Even the mystical *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, in spite of its basic idea of ontological unification and disappearance of all divisions, did not employ the term. One may suggest the first reason to be a simple morphological coincidence: *metall^hhānūtā* seems to have a slight taste of “making oneself a god” and thus a “would-be-divinity”.⁵¹ In

⁴⁵ Sahdona, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8, 63, CSCO 252, Louvain 1965. Translation: Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on the Spiritual Life*, CSS 101, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications 1987, p. 228.

⁴⁶ Idem, Letter 5, 26 in *Oeuvres spirituelles* IV, CSCO 254, p. 82. French translation by André de Halleux in: CSCO 255, p. 77.

⁴⁷ For a brief discussion, see: Michael Anthony Sells (ed.), *Early Islamic Mysticism*, The Classics of Western Spirituality 86, Mahwah, Paulist Press 1996, p. 212-214. The classical study on the topic is: Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, New York, State University of New York Press 1985.

⁴⁸ Fred S. Marsh (ed. & tr.), *The Book of Holy Hierotheos*, Oxford, Williams and Norgate 1927, p. 112 (124).

⁴⁹ Symeon the Graceful in: A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, p. 167a.

⁵⁰ Charlesworth translated ‘fellowship’ in *Odes of Solomon* 4:9, 21:5.

⁵¹ These two can be expressed exactly in Finnish with the words “jumalteleminen” and “jumaltuminen”. In English, there is no way to express such nuances.

any case, the word is long and clumsy. (One may recall that in Greek it was the shortest noun that prevailed.)

In general, the Syriac milieu was in terminological matters more conservative and traditional than the Greek one with its endless philosophical subtexts providing new openings and associations. In addition to general cultural features, the very structure of Indo-European languages encourages to make new derivations with prefixes (i.e. ἀποθέωσις, ἐκθέωσις, not to mention Pseudo-Dionysios' terminology) as well as compound words (e.g. θεοποίησις), but Semitic languages do not have such options. Accordingly, the conservatism against new terminology is partly caused by the morphological structure of Semitic languages, and therefore extremely hostile towards the introduction of loan words.

Theological and cultural factors are more difficult to estimate. The dogmatic tendency to keep divinity and humanity strictly separated, characteristic for the East Syrians, might explain why there was no urge to have such a term. But if this is correct, then the West Syrians, labelled as monophysites, should have been employing the term all the more. And this is not the case.

Among the West Syrians, there seems to be only some sporadic use of the deification terminology. The leading intellectual character of his time, Patriarch Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) in his writings on mystical theology described, quoting East Syrian fathers, how the innermost (*hawnā*) is united (*methallat*) to God (*b-allāhā*) in prayer.⁵² In a related work, *Book of the Dove*, Bar Hebraeus described how the spiritual life in silence and solitude “makes gods” and leads to complete unification and mixing, using the boldest terminology available:

Such solitude is called by the teachers a solitude that makes gods (*allāhē*), for through it the mind acquires complete unification (*ḥadyūtā*) and perfect mingling (*ḥultānā gmīrā*) with God (*d-ballāhā*), and vision and knowledge of Him whose glory is exalted over the world, without visible vision and without knowable knowledge.⁵³

It is telling, however, that also Bar Hebraeus was influenced by Greek fathers, and the extract seems to have a vague reference to Pseudo-Dionysios.

⁵² Bar Hebraeus, *Ethikon*, 1:5 in: Herman Teule (ed.), CSCO 535, Leuven, Peeters 1993. The quotation is from John of Dalyatha. The Syriac *hawnā* corresponds roughly to the Greek *nous*. Both lack a proper equivalent in English. The standard translations ‘mind’ and ‘intellect’, as translated by Teule in this context, refer to somewhat less profound, and more conscious aspect of man than *hawnā* or *nous*. See also: *Ethikon* 3, 3.

⁵³ Idem, *Ethikon seu Moralia*, in: Paulus Bedjan (ed.), Paris, Otto Harrassowitz 1898, p. 492. Translation of: Arent Jan Wensinck, *Book of the Dove*, Leyden, Brill 1919, p. 103, slightly modified.

Thus, it may be that the East Syrians used the concept of deification and related ideas more – but this question is in an evident need of further studies. In any case, the lack of term prevailed before the emergence of Monophysite and Nestorian controversies in the fifth century, so it must have something to do with the wider cultural and linguistic milieu; the phenomenon cannot be explained with Christological factors only.

A relevant theological factor, however, is that in the East Syrian Christology, the concept of deification, specifically in the form *metallābhūta*, was used in connection with Christ: the humanity of Christ went through deification in its union with the Logos.⁵⁴ This does not imply adoptionism (a man turns into God);⁵⁵ I would rather say that difference is at paradigmatic level. The East Syrian paradigm is dynamic and based on the category of *becoming* rather than being. That is to say, in Christ there is not only divinity and humanity in *being* but there is a full parallelism of God's *becoming* man and man's *becoming* God. And if this be the case, who then would dare to claim that man may become divine in the same sense as Christ? Therefore, even the mystics preferred the vocabulary of unification and commingling instead of deification.

One may also argue that the Syriac speakers were more sensitive in relation to the polytheistic context and certain “creation of human gods”. But why? The religious context was not less or more polytheistic in the Syriac-speaking areas than in the Greek ones – in fact, the context was not only similar but it could even be the very same milieu (e.g. Western Syria, Palestine). And it was the Greek fathers who were more pedantic in the use of dogmatic terms, yet a wide selection of terms for deification was not problematic for them. Therefore, I would claim that the basic reason for the reluctance to use *metall'hānūtā* was its linguistic clumsiness and slightly awkward associations. Moreover, in the early centuries this was probably accompanied by attitudes inherited from the (non-Hellenic) Jewish roots of Syriac theology.

Some analytical reflections

Finally, I discuss the phenomenon from another perspective, with more analytical intent, and with some remarks on the (post-)Chalcedonian context of discussion. Overall, the concept of deification is a logical outcome of several theological ideas and spiritual processes such as *imago Dei*, participation in

⁵⁴ For discussion, see: Vittorio Berti, “Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée Ier: la perspective du patriarche”, in: *Les mystiques syriaques*, Études Syriaques 7, Paris, Geuthner 2011, p. 171.

⁵⁵ This was at odds with the Byzantine Orthodoxy. According to Gregory the Theologian (*Or.* 38, 13, PG 36), the human flesh of Christ was deified at the moment of incarnation, and in that sense Christ can be considered both deifier and deified, but there was no any growth into divinity whatsoever.

Christ and indwelling of the Spirit.⁵⁶ All these are processual and dynamic in nature, and advancement in any of them unavoidably leads *somewhere*. And one may well conclude: if polishing of the original image of God in man, increase of the participation in the Son and intensification of the Spirit's presence in man do not lead into what one may call 'deification', then there is not much logic in Christian thought.

Deification of human nature is not only a doctrinal difficulty and existential challenge; it also opens linguistic and semantic problems. One might say that the deification-related thought in Greek and Syriac sources had a common direction but different roads that went parallel ways. Certainly, the idea of deification was a central thought for a big number of Syriac authors, like Ephrem and the East Syrian mystics, but still they all were reluctant to use a specific term for it. Instead, they expressed it either with an exchange formulas corresponding to those of Irenaeus, Athanasios and others, or with the commingling terminology, in the case of mystics.

Comparison of the Syriac and Greek ideas of deification does not straightforwardly enable one to construct semantic analyses of the deification terms and their usages in both languages. Instead, the challenge presented by the Syriac tradition is the almost total lack for a single word for deification. In fact, on the basis of the Syriac texts one may derive a peculiar question: how can an idea survive and function without a verbal concept to denote it? And given the many-sided and profound discussion on the phenomenon in the Syriac sources, the question might rather be: why was it not necessary to use an explicit linguistic concept? Could there even be some – spiritual or intellectual – advantages in discussing an idea without an abstraction to denote it? In Greek, the exchange formulas appeared spiritually somewhat “less elitist” and certainly humbler than explicit deification terms, as suggested above. Certainly, there was no pressing need to have such a term.

Philosophically speaking, there is an interesting difference at stake. To create a word for an inner process generates an impression that somewhere in the world of abstractions there exists a specific *entity* that the word refers to. However, such a noun is merely a conceptual abstraction of life-long existential process, not a substance existing on its own. In that sense, it may in fact be even more “exact” to talk about deification in verbs and sentences (especially, exchange formulas) rather than marking it with a noun, which may create an appearance of exactness and certain ontological closedness, which remains on the level of language, however. This remark is quite Witt-

⁵⁶ Sahdona described how God has “mixed into our bodies the gift of his grace, causing the fire of his Holy Spirit to burst into flames in us”. Sahdona, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8, 64. Translation of this section in: S. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers*, p. 228.

gensteinian, and it arises some interesting perspectives to the doctrinal pinpointedness of the Chalcedonian era.

Namely, it may appear natural to think that in the fourth century, with the emergence of the specific terms for deification, a novel idea and a new reality came into being. Yet the reality was just the same as it had been before, and as it continued to be for Syriac-speakers without such a term. A new term for the old reality is in essence not more than a practical tool for discussion, but it easily creates the impression of a particular reality and a separate entity, a metaphysical substance. However, when using such a concept one does not refer to a specific entity but to the constituents of discussion – again, in Wittgensteinian sense – that deal with the old realities, albeit on a more abstracted level.

This is approximately what happened to a cluster of philosophical, anthropological and theological concepts in the Christological debates of the Chalcedonian era. A lively and breathing discussion was turned into still images full of abstractions and seemingly exact constructions that were in need of definitions with words in need of further definitions. The paradoxical mystery of Christ was oftentimes treated with more or less philosophical concepts such as *fysis*, *prosopon* and *hypostasis* as if these terms were unproblematic in themselves, and as if they had exact references in the inner being of man. Or to be more exact: their use creates the illusion that inside man there are such fixed entities as *fysis*, *prosopon* and *hypostasis*, although these rather represent abstractions of certain inner functions and activities. This is feasibly misleading even in the case of ordinary man, not to mention the case of divine-human subject. Even when the aspects of paradoxicality and mystery were acknowledged as the basis of Christology, they were often forgotten during the discussion, and abstract concepts were employed with an almost mathematical intention. However, it is remarkable that the deification terminology caused less problems, mainly because it operates somewhat outside the core of Christology, but possibly also because it is processual by nature: deification terms do not mark closed entities but inner processes and their outcome, and this may make the demand for exact meanings somewhat less likely. However that may be, the demand of exact meanings is an implicit, paradigmatic prerequisite of theological schisms.

When abstractions are taken into use, it creates the illusion that each one of them refers to its own entity in the world of ideas. In other words, inexact phenomena are described with terms that are comprehended as exact ones. In the Chalcedonian era, the result was a conceptual mess – a sea of confused speculation with a number of separated islands of semantic clarification. Up to our days, the different traditions have therefore carried on the memory of their own island; having lost the unity that used to prevail before the flood.