

Identifying Deification: Methodological Reflections in Response to the Oxford Handbook of Deification

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Abstract: This paper offers a reflection on methodological issues surrounding the historical study of deification in response to the approach proposed in the *Oxford Handbook of Deification*. The paper contextualises the *OHD*'s proposal in light of previous attempts to address the question of how to define/identify the concept of deification. The *OHD*'s proposal offers a promising new approach to this issue that can be helpfully understood by analogy to Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblance'. This paper argues in support of this view of deification as a 'family resemblance concept' while also suggesting an emendation to the *OHD*'s proposal by considering deification as involving claims about theological language.

Introduction

The publication of the *Oxford Handbook of Deification* (henceforth *OHD*) is a landmark moment in scholarship on deification in the Christian tradition. I firmly believe that it will function as a new starting point for future studies on the topic, alongside Norman Russell's 2004 study *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (which remains invaluable for its meticulous documentation of the language of deification in early Christian authors, even if elements of its narrative are now somewhat outdated).¹ The breadth of topics covered and the high quality of the contributions make it a useful compendium

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¹ Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

and reference point for future researchers. I found many stimulating (and sometimes provocative) insights in the individual chapters which I hope will provoke new lines of research going forward. It seems to me, however, that the real significance of this volume is twofold. First, the *OHD* confirms and consolidates various scholarly developments in the study of deification from the past century or so. In so doing, it offers an invaluable snapshot of the state of the field while also (perhaps more importantly) providing an opportunity for broader historiographical reflection on the history of scholarship on deification (as well as an occasion for reflection on new directions of travel going forward). Second, the *OHD* raises important methodological questions for scholars of deification and provides its own clear approach to these questions. In particular, the *OHD* offers a new and promising (but not entirely unproblematic) approach to the nettlesome problem of how to define deification and identify instances of the concept in historical thinkers and texts. It is the latter I wish to focus on in this response. In what follows, I will first seek to contextualise the methodological approach outlined by the handbook editors in light of previous attempts to address the question of defining or identifying the concept of deification, highlighting what I believe to be distinctive and valuable in their approach. I will then suggest an emendation to their approach by focusing on considering deification as involving claims about theological language.

The methodological approach of the *OHD* in context

One of the major contributions of the *OHD* is its efforts to sketch out a more rigorous and precise methodology for identifying the presence of the concept of deification in a given text or author. This methodological question has come to the fore in more recent scholarship on the topic, with Norman Russell, Gösta Hallonsten, Paul Gavrilyuk and Daniel Keating providing particularly important treatments of this question in recent decades.² Broadly speaking, scholars have chosen between one of two approaches: the ‘lexical’ approach and the ‘typological’ approach.

The lexical approach limits its attention to the use of a ‘deification terms’ (chiefly θεωσις/θεοποίησις in Greek and *deificare* in Latin). This is the approach Russell largely adopts in his landmark study of deification in the Greek patristic tradition. While acknowledging the limitations of word studies, Russell notes that

² Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, pp. 1–15; Russell, ‘Why does Theosis Fascinate Western Christians?’, *Sobornost* 34 (2012), pp. 5–15; Gösta Hallonsten, ‘Theosis in Recent Research: A Renewal of Interest and a Need for Clarity’ in Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2007), pp. 281–93; Paul Gavrilyuk, ‘The Retrieval of Deification: How a Once-Despised Archaism Became an Ecumenical Desideratum’, *Modern Theology* 25 (2009), pp. 647–59; Daniel A. Keating, ‘Typologies of Deification’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17 (2015), pp. 267–83.

‘Usage determines meaning’ and so ‘Deification’s meaning cannot be established a priori or by generalising from a few examples’.³ As such, his book focuses on discussing every instance of the terms *θέωσις*, *θεοποίησις* etc. until the end of the fourth century (along with ‘significant examples from the fifth and sixth centuries’) in order to establish ‘the full range of usages’ and thereby determine what the language of deification meant for early Christian authors. Yet the lexical approach has limitations, as noted by the editors in the introduction to the *OHD*: ‘it is rather limiting to discuss deification only in the texts where the relevant terms are present, but not the relevant concepts’ (*OHD*, p. 3). The difficulties of maintaining a purely lexical approach are further highlighted by the fact that there is no settled terminology for speaking about deification: whereas the term *θέωσις* becomes standard in later Byzantine tradition, this term is first coined by Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth century then not used again until the sixth century; Gregory himself uses it alongside a range of other terms, including *γίγνομαι θεόν* (‘to become a god’), *θεοποιέω* (‘to make a god’), *θεόν τελέω* (‘to perfect as a god’) and *θεόν τεύχω* (‘to form into a god’).⁴ The terminology is simply not sufficiently fixed and stable to support a purely lexical approach.

For these reasons, the majority of scholars who have addressed this methodological question – including the editors of the *OHD* – have opted for a typological approach, with the key question being *which* typology or definition to adopt rather than *whether* one should take such an approach. Broadly speaking, the typological approach seeks to offer a rough working sketch of the *content* of the concept of deification and uses this sketch as a guide to determine the presence of the theme of deification in a given author or text (even in the absence of deification terminology). This approach comes with its own risks and challenges. First of all, there is the danger of producing a rough sketch or working definition of the concept of deification which is overly narrow and/or anachronistic. This pitfall is particularly evident in some of the older scholarship on deification, especially that associated with the Russian emigré school of Lot-Borodine, Lossky and Meyendorff, who frequently assimilate the concept of deification with the doctrine as articulated by Gregory Palamas and his successors, thereby making the essence-energies distinction a necessary criterion when determining whether a given text or thinker espouses the concept of deification.⁵ This approach has continued to be defended even into the 21st

³ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, p. 8.

⁴ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, pp. 214–15.

⁵ Myrrha Lot-Borodine, ‘La doctrine de la déification dans l’Église grecque jusqu’ au XIe siècle,’ *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 105, 106, 107 (1932, 1933); Vladimir Lossky, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l’Église d’Orient* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), published in English as *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1957); Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1963); John Meyendorff, *A study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. George Lawrence (London: Faith Press, 1964). See Paul Gavrilyuk’s entry on ‘20th-Century Russian Orthodox Theologians’ in the *OHD*, pp. 450–65.

century. So, for instance, in his 2007 article ‘Deification in Contemporary Theology’ Roger Olson states that ‘if deification has any standard, the definition provided by the Eastern Orthodox tradition must be taken very seriously’.⁶ For Olson, this means that one can only truly speak of a theologian as espousing deification if they make use of the essence-energies distinction. Yet such a definition is patently anachronistic: it leaves no room for considering how patristic theologians develop their own theologies of deification in their own historical contexts with a different set of conceptual tools and distinctions. The result is a definition of deification which is overly restrictive. As Daniel Keating puts it, ‘care should be taken not to define or circumscribe deification in such a way that its primary exponents among the Fathers are effectively pushed outside its boundaries’.⁷

The other danger with the typological approach, however, is that we end up with an overly loose or generalised sketch or definition of deification. Paul Gavriluk puts the problem well in an earlier study, when he notes that historical studies of the deification will often begin with a broad working definition of deification which is then used to determine the presence of this theme in particular theologians and texts.⁸ Without a precise methodology for identifying instances of ‘deification’, the term risks becoming a ‘meaningless placeholder’. As the handbook editors put it: ‘if deification means anything and everything, then it explains nothing’ (*OHD*, p. 4).

In attempting to avoid these two dangers, Gösta Hallonsten argues for the need to distinguish between deification as a ‘theme’ (or set of ‘themes’) and deification as a fully-fledged doctrine. Whereas we may identify the presence of various deification ‘themes’ in an author or text (e.g. participation, adoption, union with God, etc.), it is another thing to say that a given author or text espouses the doctrine of deification. For Hallonsten, the latter is a more precise and developed concept referring to ‘the integral doctrine of deification as presented by the Eastern tradition’⁹ and includes (inter alia) several specific anthropological claims, as well as a commitment to a Platonic metaphysics of participation, a synergistic view of grace and the essence-energies distinction. Paul Gavriluk endorsed this approach in a 2009 essay, suggesting that the doctrine (as opposed to the theme) of deification includes ‘synergistic anthropology, sacramental realism, and essence/energies distinction’.¹⁰ Yet both authors still offer a definition of the doctrine of deification which is (in my view) over-determined, in that it fails to allow for the sheer diversity of perspectives on

⁶ Roger Olson, ‘Deification in Contemporary Theology’, *Theology Today* 64 (2007), pp. 186–200, 193.

⁷ Keating, ‘Typologies of Deification,’ p. 282. The editors of the *OHD* quote Keating approvingly on this point (*OHD*, p. 4).

⁸ Gavriluk, ‘The Retrieval of Deification,’ pp. 649–54.

⁹ Hallonsten, ‘*Theosis* in Recent Research,’ p. 287.

¹⁰ Gavriluk, ‘The Retrieval of Deification,’ p. 655.

deification in early Christianity and, in making the essence-energies distinction constitutive of the ‘developed’ doctrine of deification, marginalises patristic witnesses to the ‘doctrine’ as offering (at best) an embryonic version of the later doctrine.¹¹

More fundamentally, I am sceptical of the underlying assumption that there is a single, developed ‘doctrine of deification’ which is susceptible to definition. Here I am inclined to agree with Keating: ‘I would prefer speaking of a “theology of deification” rather than a “doctrine of deification” in these patristic authors, in large part because the term “doctrine” can give the impression of something highly systematic and well worked-out– something that is true of *none* of the Fathers who stand as the pillars for our understanding of deification. Yet I believe we can say that Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Cyril, and even Augustine and Leo (to name a few) offer a genuine *theology* of deification in their writings’.¹² Nor do I think we find a single doctrine of deification in later periods: after all, the doctrine is never formally defined by an ecumenical council and, as many of the entries in the *OHD* illustrate, there continues to be a genuine diversity of perspectives on deification in all ecclesial traditions right up to the present day, with no single account of deification predominating to the extent that it becomes normative.

Against this background, the *OHD* editors offer a refreshing and distinctive methodological approach which recognises the flexibility and diversity of Christian approaches to deification without rendering the concept so loose as to become all-encompassing and meaningless. At the heart of their approach is the proposal that the concept of deification is best identified through the presence of common ‘markers’, as opposed to a fixed definition. According to the editors, a marker ‘occupies a middle ground between a “constituent or necessary element,” on the one hand, and “desirable but not necessary element,” on the other’ (*OHD*, p. 4). I must admit, I am not entirely sure what the middle ground between ‘necessary’ and ‘not necessary’ is supposed to be – I would have thought this a binary distinction – but the basic point is clear enough all the same. The key idea seems to be that these markers jointly (and sometimes individually) indicate the presence of deification themes in the thought of a given theologian; the more of these markers are present in a thinker, the clearer and more developed the concept of deification is likely to be (although this is not necessarily the case, nor does the presence of just one or two markers necessarily indicate a ‘thin’ account of deification, although typically this is the case); while none of these markers is a necessary constituent element of the concept of deification, some of these markers may be sufficient for the presence of the concept of deification in a given thinker, depending on the context.

¹¹ For these criticisms, see Keating, ‘Typologies of Deification,’ pp. 274–8.

¹² Keating, ‘Typologies of Deification,’ p. 277.

In short, the idea seems to be one of the concept of deification as a kind of ‘family resemblance’.¹³ Just as members of the same family will share in a range of family traits without a single trait necessarily being shared by all members, so too Christian accounts of deification comprise a ‘family’ of concepts with various shared ‘markers’ yet without having a single essential marker shared by all accounts; and, just as some members of a family (those nearer the ‘core’ of the family) may have more distinctive traits than other members (distant relations – those near the periphery), so too some accounts of deification will feature more of these markers while others will feature only one or two (without there necessarily being a single ‘core’ account which exhibits all these markers, just as there is not necessarily a single ‘core’ family member who exhibits all the family traits). This strikes me as a far more promising approach to the study of deification, one that allows scholars to recognise the full diversity of thought in the Christian tradition without reducing talk of deification to an empty and meaningless platitude.¹⁴

Is there a ‘core marker’ for deification? Understanding deification as a claim about theological language

While I am very sympathetic to a non-essentialist approach which views deification as a ‘family resemblance’ concept, I have found myself wondering if there is not perhaps a core ‘marker’ which, while perhaps not a *necessary* constituent element of the concept of deification, is maybe the central marker around which the other markers ‘cluster’, as it were. In this regard, I am struck by the absence in the editors’ list of markers by what I consider to be the most crucial (if not strictly essential) claim in any account of deification: that there are certain circumstances or conditions under which the creature (or, perhaps, more broadly, a being that is not eternally and/or self-subsistently divine) can receive the name ‘god’ and can legitimately be called ‘a god’ (or ‘divine’) in a sense which is not purely nominal or metaphorical. That is to say, deification at its heart involves a claim about theological language, specifically a claim that the name ‘god’ can be predicated of beings other than the one true God, together with an explanation of how/under which conditions this can occur.

Now, it seems to me that this claim is a strong contender for central ‘marker’ for deification for a number of reasons. First of all, it explains why some authors

¹³ On the notion of ‘family resemblance’, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, P.M.S. Hacker & J. Schulte eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), §§66–7 (pp. 36–7). The handbook editors do not use the language of ‘family resemblance’, nor do they engage explicitly with Wittgenstein’s thought on this matter. Nonetheless, it seems to me that this framework accurately captures the kind of work the language of ‘markers’ is supposed to achieve.

¹⁴ It is to the great credit of the editors that we see this approach exemplified in many of the contributions to the handbook itself.

are generally considered to be key exponents of the concept of deification even though they do not use the classic ‘terminology’ of deification. Take Irenaeus, for example: while he does not use the language of *θέωσις* or *θεοποίησις* (or cognates), he does speak of the creatures as ‘gods’ (*θεοί*) on the basis of Psalm 81 (LXX).¹⁵ Second, it seems to me that the *absence* of this central marker explains some paradigmatic cases where scholars are reluctant to attribute the concept of deification to a figure who (nevertheless) makes use of some of the other prominent ‘markers’ of deification. One such example, is Theodore of Mopsuestia who, despite making use of the exchange formula and concepts of participation, appears to have been reluctant to admit that any creature – even Christ’s human nature – could ever be called ‘god’ in anything more than a titular sense.¹⁶ Another example would be Karl Barth, who is adamant on the non-deification of Christ’s humanity and of human beings in general (who, as creatures, are irreducible ‘non-deity’ and ‘differentiation’), despite the notions of participation, communion with God and hypostatic union playing a prominent role in his christology and soteriology.¹⁷ What differentiates Barth from other theologians, in whom the presence of these ‘markers’ signals their engagement with the concept of deification, is precisely Barth’s refusal to use the language of deification or speak of the creature as ever coming to be or be called ‘a god’.¹⁸

A third reason for adopting the predication of the name ‘god’ of creatures as our central ‘marker’ for deification is that early Christian discussions of deification appear to have arisen, in large part, out of the need to explain the predication of the name ‘god’ (*θεός*) of creatures by scripture. Take, for instance, Origen’s famous remarks on the scriptural use of the name ‘god’ in his *Commentary on John* 2.17. There, Origen introduces deification language precisely in order to explain how it is that multiple beings other than the one true God come to be called ‘gods’ by scripture:

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.3; cf. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, p. 107.

¹⁶ Adrian C. Pirtea, ‘The Syriac Fathers,’ in the *OHD*, pp. 137–57, 143; cf. Frederick G. McLeod, ‘The Christological Ramifications of Theodore of Mopsuestia’s Understanding of Baptism and the Eucharist,’ *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002), pp. 37–75.

¹⁷ See Bruce McCormack, ‘Participation in God, Yes; Deification, No.’ in Bruce McCormack, ed., *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 201–33 and Cambria Kaltwasser, ‘Karl Barth’s Critique of Deification,’ in the *OHD*, pp. 466–79.

¹⁸ Of course, defenders of deification might reasonably point out that this refusal itself stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of deification (in particular, Barth appears to have inherited from Ritschl the notion of deification as involving the absorption and transformation of the individual human being into God in a manner which obliterates the Creator-creature distinction). Nonetheless, it seems to me that we must respect the position he actually holds rather than speculate on how his views may have differed if he held a different (‘correct’) understanding of deification, and so the observation that he misunderstood the meaning of ‘deification’ does not warrant the claim that that Barth implicitly affirms deification.

Their problem can be resolved in this way. We must say to them that that at one time ‘the God’ (ὁ θεός) is very God (αὐτόθεος), wherefore also the Saviour says in his prayer to the Father, ‘That they might know you, the only true God’ (Jn. 17:3). On the other hand, everything besides the very God (τὸ αὐτόθεος), which is deified (θεοποιούμενον) by participation (μετοχῆ) in his divinity, would more strictly be called not ‘the God’ (ὁ θεός), but ‘god’ (θεός).¹⁹

Origen treats deification as involving at its core a claim about theological language: to be deified is to be called ‘god’ on account of one’s participation in the divinity of the one true God. Indeed, Origen frequently brings up the concept of deification precisely in order to explain the use of the name ‘god’ in scripture.²⁰ He even draws on ancient grammatical discussions of homonymy in order to explain the sense in which the name ‘god’ is predicated by scripture of creatures other than the one true God, distinguishing between the ‘strict’ or ‘primary’ (*principaliter*/κυρίως) use of the name ‘God’ to designate ‘Him of whom are all things, by whom are all things, and in whom are all things’, from the ‘secondary’ (*dixerim*) and ‘improper’ or ‘catachrestic’ (*abusive*/καταχρηστικῶς) use of the name to designate deified creatures (viz. the angels and the saints).²¹

¹⁹ Origen, *Commentary on John* 2.17, translated by Ronald E. Heine, *Origen: Commentary on the Gospel according to John, Books 1–10*, FotC 80 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), pp. 98–9 (with alterations). Greek text is from Cécile Blanc (ed.), *Commentaire sur saint Jean, I d’Origène*, SC 120 (Paris: Cerf, 1996), p. 216.

²⁰ See, for instance, Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.37; *Homilies on Exodus* 6.5; *Homily on Psalm 81*. Cf. Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, pp. 144–7; Lorenzo Perrone, “‘Et L’homme Tout Entier Devient Dieu’: La Déification Selon Origène à La Lumière Des Nouvelles Homélie Sur Les Psaumes”, *Teologia Y Vida* 58 (2017), pp. 187–220; Benjamin Zakhary, ‘Μετοχῆ Θεότητος: Partakers of Divinity in Origen’s Contra Celsum’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 32 (2024), pp. 315–40.

²¹ Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prol. 2.34, translated by R. P. Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, ACW 27 (New York: Newman Press, 1957), pp. 34–5: ‘the word “God” is used primarily (*principaliter*) of Him “of whom are all things, by whom are all things, and in whom are all things” (1 Cor. 8:6), so that it declares plainly the power and nature of the Trinity (*virtutem et naturam trinitae*). But by a secondary (*dixerim*) and so to speak improper (*abusive*) usage scripture describes as gods ‘those to whom the word came’ (Jn. 10:35), as the Saviour affirms in the gospels. The heavenly powers (*coelestes virtutes*) also seem to be called by this name when it is said “God hath stood in the congregation of gods; and, being in the midst of them, He judges gods” (Ps. 82:1). By a third usage (*tertio*), false rather than improper (*non abusive se falso*), the daemonic gods of the Gentiles are so styled when Scripture says “All the gods of the Gentiles are devils” (Ps. 95:5)’. Latin text is from Marcel Borret, Luc Brésard, and Henri Crouzel (eds.) *Origène: Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, vol. 1, SC 275 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1991), pp. 114, 116. For Origen’s use of ancient grammatical and philosophical theories of homonymy, see Bernhard Neuschäfer, *Origene als Philologe* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, 1987), pp. 221–3 and Robert Somos, *Logic and Argumentation in Origen* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2015), chapter 5.

This distinction becomes commonplace in the fourth-century, with both non-Nicene and pro-Nicene theologians making a distinction between the strict and loose or homonymous predication of the name god, where the loose predication of the name ‘god’ is understood as resulting from the creature’s participation or union with the one true God and consequent deification.²² We find perhaps the most striking example of the concept of deification presented as a claim about theological language in the (late-fourth century?) *Apocriticus* of Macarius Magnes, in which the author draws on a technical Aristotelian account of homonymy to distinguish the strict predication of the name ‘God’, which can only occur with hypostases which share in the ‘formula of the essence’ (λόγος τῆς οὐσίας) associated with the name ‘God’, and the homonymous predication of the name ‘god’, which occurs when creatures are ‘deified’ (θεοποιῶν) by their ‘participation in’ (μετουσίᾳ) and ‘relationship to’ (θέσσει) God, acquiring divinity in the same manner that iron acquires heat when placed in a fire.²³ For early Christian authors, then, the concept of deification served as a way of explaining how the name ‘god’ comes to be predicated of creatures. It is arguably this claim about theological language that unites otherwise diverse approaches to deification in early Christian literature.

Fourth, and finally, many of the other ‘markers’ for deification given by the handbook editors are frequently deployed by early Christian theologians precisely to explain this central claim – that is to say, to explain how it is that the creature can receive the name ‘god’. For instance, Origen appeals to the concept of participation precisely in order to explain how creatures other than the ‘one true God’ (i.e. the Father) come to be called ‘gods’ (θεοί) by scripture. So, in the famous passage from his *Commentary on John* quoted above, Origen states that it is the participation (μετοχῆ) of the creature in the divinity of the one true God that accounts for their being called ‘gods’ by scripture. He offers the same explanation in the sixth of his *Homilies on Exodus*

‘Who’, the text says, ‘is like you among the gods, O Lord? Who is like you, glorious among the holy ones, marvellous in majesty, doing prodigies?’ (Exod. 15:11). The words ‘Who is like you among the gods?’ do not compare God to the images of the Gentiles nor to the demons, who falsely appropriate the name of gods to themselves, but mean those gods who by grace and participation (*per gratiam et participationem*) in God are called gods. Scripture also speaks elsewhere of these gods: ‘I said, “You are gods”’, (Ps. 81:6, LXX), and again, ‘God has stood in the congregation of the gods’ (Ps. 81:1, LXX). But although these are susceptible of God and appear to be

²² See, for instance, Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstration of the Gospel* 5.4.9–10; Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians* 1.9.1–2; Didymus the Blind, *Fragments on the Psalms*, 135–6.

²³ Macarius Magnes, *Apocriticus* 4.26. Greek text is from Richard Goulet (ed.), *Macarius le Magnes: Le Monogénès* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2003), vol. 2, p. 238.

given this name by grace (*hoc nomine donari per gratiam uideantur*), nevertheless no one is found like God in either power or nature.²⁴

To give another example, Eusebius of Caesarea appeals to the notions of participation and indwelling in order to explain how the Son is deified so as to receive the name ‘god’ from the Father, who alone is God in the ‘strict’ sense:

According to this, then, the true and only God must be one, and alone owning the name (προσηγορίας) in the strict sense (κυρίως). While the second, by participation (μετουσίᾳ) in the being of the true God, is thought worthy to share his name, not being God in-himself (οὔτε ὦν καθ’ ἑαυτόν), nor having subsistence existing apart from the Father who deifies (θεοποιούντος) him, and not called God apart from the Father, but altogether being, living and existing as this, through the presence of the Father in him (διὰ τὸν ἐν αὐτῷ πατέρα), and being together with the Father and being deified (θεοποιούμενος) from and through him, and holding his being as well as his divinity not from himself but from the Father. Wherefore we are taught to honour him as God with the Father, through the God dwelling in him (διὰ τὸν ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικοῦντα θεόν), as we see these prophecies before us intend.²⁵

For Eusebius, the Son’s participation in the Father – and, conversely, the Father’s indwelling of the Son – serves to explain the deification of the Son by explaining how the Son comes to receive the name ‘God’, which properly speaking belongs to the Father alone. To give yet another example, Gregory Nazianzen, in his *Fourth Theological Oration*, appeals to the notion of union with God (specifically ‘mixture’) in order to explain how Christ’s humanity comes to receive ‘the name above every name’ on account of its union with the divine Word:

His being called ‘Servant’ (Is. 49:3) and ‘serving many well’, (Is. 53:11) and that it is a great thing for him to be called ‘Child of God’ (Is. 49:6; cf. Lk. 1:32) follow the same rule. For in reality he was serving the flesh, and birth, and our passions for the sake of our liberation, and for that of all those who he rescued from the dominion of sin. What is greater for lowly human than to be weaved (πλακῆναι) with God, and to become God from the mixture (γενέσθαι θεὸν ἐκ τῆς μίξεως), and what’s more to be visited from the

²⁴ Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* 6.5, translated by Ronald E. Heine, *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* FotC 71 (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2002), pp. 290–2. Latin text is from Marcel Borret (ed.), *Origène: Homélie sur Exode*, SC 321 (Paris: Cerf, 1985), p. 182.

²⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstration of the Gospel* 5.4.9–10, translated by W. J. Ferrar, *The proof of the gospel: being the Demonstratio evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea* (London: SPCK, 1920), pp. 245–6. Greek text is from Ivar A. Heikel (ed.), *Eusebius Werke VI: Die Demonstratio Evangelica*, GCS 23 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913), p. 225.

Dayspring on High, so that even ‘the Holy One who is to be born’ (Lk. 1:36) is called ‘Son of the Most High’ (Lk. 1:32; cf. Is. 49:6), and to him is given ‘the name which is above every name’ (τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντων ὀνομα) (Phil. 2:9)? And what could this [name] be but ‘God’(θεός)? And that ‘every knee should bow’ (Phil. 2:10) to the one who was ‘emptied’ (Phil. 2:8) for us, co-blending (συγκεράσαντι) the image of God with the ‘form of a servant’ (Phil. 2:7), and that ‘all the House of Israel shall know that God has made him Lord and Christ’ (Acts 2:36)? For all this was achieved by the activity of the Begotten, and by the goodwill of the Begetter.²⁶

As each of these examples illustrate, early Christian treatments of deification frequently appeal to concepts such as ‘participation’, ‘indwelling’ and ‘union’ to explain how it can be that creatures can come to receive the name ‘god’. There is often, then, an explanatory priority, wherein the other ‘markers’ for deification are brought into a thinker’s account of deification precisely in order to explain this more fundamental linguistic fact. This explanatory priority lends further weight to my suggestion that the predication of the name ‘god’ of creatures is not just one marker of deification among many, but is the central marker around which the other markers cluster.

Conclusion

What is the upshot of all this? In one sense, my suggestion that we should view the central ‘marker’ of deification to be a claim about theological language, and specifically about the predication of the name ‘god’ of creatures (or beings that are not self-subsistently divine), is perfectly in keeping with the approach set out by handbook editors. After all, despite the importance I am placing on it I do not wish to suggest this claim as *the* (or even *a*) necessary constituent element of deification. While I have suggested that some of the other markers often exist in an explanatory relationship to this, more central marker (around which the other markers could be said to ‘cluster’), it equally seems to me that these other markers come to take on a life of their own, such that one can see them as signifying the presence of the concept of deification even in the absence of a clear and explicit claim that the creature can (under certain circumstances) legitimately be called ‘god’.

At the same time, focusing on this claim as the central marker of deification does point us back towards a more lexical methodological approach. If the central marker of deification is a particular claim about theological language, then the best way to track the concept of deification is to track the way theological language is used in different authors (focusing specifically on the

²⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 30.3. Greek text is from Paul Gallay and Maurice Jourjon (eds.), *Grégoire de Nazianze: Discours 27–31 (Discours Théologiques)*, SC 250 (Paris: Cerf, 1978), p. 230. Translation is my own.

predication of the name ‘god’ of creatures, and how different authors explain this predication). This approach goes beyond a narrow focus on deification terminology, since an author may predicate the name ‘god’ of creatures without ever using terms such as *θεωσις* or *θεοποίησις*. Nonetheless, it is a primarily lexical approach rather than a typological approach. While I do not wish to suggest it is the only methodological approach, it is, in my view, the most secure and would complement (and, in my view, enhance) the methodological proposal made by the editors of the *OHD*.

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Conflict of interest statement

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.