

ON NOT SHIRKING DEIFICATION

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The title of my essay turns on a little wordplay, exploiting the two meanings of shirk. The most common meaning of shirk is to evade an obligation, especially in a devious manner.¹ I will argue that Christian theology has an obligation to affirm a high soteriology, a doctrine of salvation that describes not just a repair project or a rearrangement of created elements, but one that rather envisions an exaltation to transformational fellowship with God. “Not shirking deification” in this sense means rising to the demands of a soteriology developed in a fully theological perspective. But the word shirk also happens to have come into English independently, by way of Arabic. In Islamic thought, shirk is the sin of associating something creaturely with the majesty of the one God. Shirk avoidance guards a principle of jealous monotheism. These two meanings of shirk are conveniently suggestive for situating the task of Christian soteriology, which takes place according to a definite index of obligations. Soteriology is obligated to reach high enough, but not too high. It must track the relocation of believers to the divine neighborhood, without trespassing onto the private property of God. Deification can neither be shirked nor commit shirk.

Say it in the Vernacular(s)

The *Oxford Handbook of Deification* sets out to be a significant landmark in the field of “deification studies,” a term introduced by the editors in their opening theses (1-4). The *Handbook* succeeds decisively in every way. The contributors are authoritative, their chapters are carefully focused, and the range of topics is encyclopedic. The entire project is intelligently designed, cohering persuasively under the editing of Paul Gavriluk, Andrew Hofer, and Matthew Levering. It is framed by biblical sections (Chapters 1 to 5) and systematic considerations (Chapters 33 to 44) which carry the main burden of defining and theorizing deification. But filling out the volume’s center, at nearly two thirds of the page count, is a generous portion of historical chapters. The range of coverage makes the *Handbook* a wonderfully informative reference work for grasping in detail what deification has meant across a diverse array of cultures, traditions, and theological sensibilities. Especially after

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¹ Even the best etymological dictionaries are inconclusive about shirk’s derivation, but it seems to be a borrowing from German after 1500.

the patristic and medieval material, the volume opens out onto a surprisingly vast panorama of sources: Palamites, Lutherans, Reformed scholastics, Anglicans, Pietists, and Wesleyans; Byzantine and Russian figures; Barth and neo-Thomists and contemporary Greek Orthodox thinkers. It is within this range of soteriologies that we can actually pursue the question of how well deification has done as an instrument for meeting the obligations of soteriology. If we trace it out through all the varied idioms of vernacular theologies, how has it served?

This helpful category of vernacular theologies surfaces in the eighteenth chapter, "Western Vernacular Mystics." This one chapter is itself a mini-survey, co-authored by a team of theologians (John Arblaster, Rob Faesen, S.J., and Louise Nelstrop) with expertise in Middle Dutch, Picard/Old French, and Middle English writings. The major figures covered include Hadewijch, Ruusbroec, Marguerite Porete, Richard Rolle, and Julian of Norwich. "Vernacular mystics" is a term widely used in recent historical writing on spirituality, having been coined by Bernard McGinn (quoted on 283) to help pick out and highlight a distinct category of medieval theology operating alongside scholastic and monastic theologies. This stream of spiritual writing is vernacular in the direct sense of being produced in regional or national languages rather than in Latin, but also in the extended sense that its authorship is more diverse, its readership broader, and its alignment with authoritative patterns of speech looser.

The relative freedom of speech among vernacular mystics means that they often write about the matter of deification without using the word. Indeed, there is a wondrous resourcefulness in their vocabularies: Believers are said "to grow to be God with God" (284), to "live without solace" (285), to "become with Him all that He himself is" (285), "to be one spirit with God in love" (288), to die three deaths (291), to experience "annihilating union" (291), to achieve the generosity of "pure charity" (292), and to reach perfection in the higher part of the soul (297). We catch Julian of Norwich in the act of forging new ways of talking as she tries to articulate the reality of her experience: "I saw no difference between God and our substance, but as it were, all God, and yet my understanding took it that our substance is in God: that is to say that God is God, and our substance is a creation within God" (297). Examples could be multiplied.

Indeed, examples are multiplied copiously not just in this chapter but across the entire *Handbook*, which not only theorizes deification but serves up a generous helping of how many ways there are to speak of it. The reader comes away from the survey not only impressed with the variety and diversity displayed, but with a strong sense that even what is gathered here must only be a partial report. Having opened the door to such a manifold witness to deification, this project seems to have representatively opened the door to the entire Christian tradition and all its sub-traditions. It seems that all along nearly everybody has been talking about deification without talking about deification, that is, by speaking in diverse tongues and finding their own words to signify the thing.

Jingle or Jangle?

But this expansion of forms of speech brings to a crisis the question whether everybody is in fact talking about the same thing. Of course it will not do to insist that deification is only being spoken of when the word itself is being used. That would be a crass collapse of word and concept. Still, as the *Handbook* documents a simultaneous

proliferation of both, it is worth considering whether word and concept may sometimes interfere with each other. Consider the temptations of jingle and jangle. Educational psychologists concerned with assessment have identified these two fallacies² that bedevil attempts to measure learning. Jingle is a mere verbal resemblance that is taken to be a real similarity. Two distinct things acquire the same name, a name which “sounds the same, and thus we come to treat it as a single concept.” They have the same jingle. Jangle, on the other hand, is “the use of two separate words or expressions covering in fact the same basic situation, but sounding different, as though they were in truth different.”³ In the context of education, theorists may talk about “achievement” and “intelligence” as if they are different things, only to realize that every method of measurement they devise is always testing for the same thing under different names. “They have different ‘jangles,’ and thus we treat them as if they were different in truth.”⁴ But as a result, errors of analysis creep in, not just in tagging and counting, but in theorizing: researchers are fooled by their ears into pondering imponderables like how to relate achievement and intelligence. The jingle and jangle fallacies are evidently special forms of the intellectual errors that Francis Bacon called “idols of the marketplace” (*idola fori*). Bacon called these “the most troublesome of all—idols which have crept into the understanding through the alliances of words and names. For men believe that their reason governs words; but it is also true that words react on the understanding.”⁵

In deification studies, it is difficult to know whether theologians are most at risk of the fallacy of the same jingle or the fallacy of the different jangle. The case for same jingle is that two or more different vernaculars of high soteriology might be coded as both referring to deification. But perhaps all these different ways of describing salvation should not be grouped together at all, being in reality more different than they are alike. In that case, the same jingle fallacy could be misleading deification studies into treating as identical what are in fact fundamentally diverse phenomena. This is especially problematic since the decision to classify them all under the title deification is markedly recent. The hypothesis of same jingle would account for the sudden rise and growth of deification studies, which might be diagnosed as inflation. The hypothesis that a same jingle fallacy is at work would also account for the difficulty of talking about deification in a wide variety of different settings. Theologians often start out thinking they agree with each other about deification because they agree to use the same word, and only later discover that they disagree so fundamentally about its character that they have in fact been talking past each other. They need to come to terms.

On the other hand, the case for different jangle is that when we consider all these different vernacular expressions of high soteriology, we are at risk of considering them disjunctive from each other simply because they sound different. On this view, a vast number of Christian sub-traditions have already been talking past each other for a long time, misled by different jangles. Deification studies, historically considered, would then constitute a programmatic correction by reclassification. Where theorists might have been misled into pondering the complex ways that Lutheran pietism, Wesleyan perfectionism, and Orthodox hesychasm were related to each other, they can now

² The classic source is Truman Lee Kelley, *Interpretation of Educational Measurements* (World Book Company, 1927), 62-65. But Kelley is already engaging earlier uses of the term; he names a Thorndike and an Aikins.

³ Kelley, *Interpretation*, 64.

⁴ Kelley, *Interpretation*, 64.

⁵ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, edited by Joseph Devey (P.F. Collier, 1902), Aphorism LIX, 31.

recognize that they are in fact not so much related as identical—though expressed in different vernaculars.

What the range of *The Oxford Handbook of Deification* makes clear is that disputes about the word deification are not merely a distraction or a preliminary issue, but are in fact baked into the discussion. The editors acknowledge this programmatically in the Introduction: “Term/concept distinction plays an important hermeneutical role in deification studies” (3). But it is in the long series of historical chapters that we see just how deeply ingrained terminological variation is, and how deep it cuts. This definitive handbook does not resolve the issue, because the issue is not one to be resolved and moved on from; it is a permanent fixture of business as usual for deification studies.

High Soteriology

Deification serves as a historical and terminological tool for elevating soteriology to a greater height. To speak of a high soteriology is to establish a contrast with a low soteriology, which can be described as one that presents salvation as nothing more than a kind of reconfiguration of the elements of creaturely life. On this view, God intervenes to reorder habits and actions, recalibrating them to each other in a way that reorients the fallen creature toward its natural goals. Virtues and vices are rearranged; loves are placed in their right hierarchy of order. Such a soteriology may include much wisdom and be of great value for the lives of individuals and societies, and it even includes a reference to divine power as the agent of change. Because a rearrangement soteriology involves a certain kind of transformation, it ranks higher than an abstractly forensic soteriology that simply exhausts salvation in considering it as a changed legal status. And even a sheerly forensic soteriology, since it considers that change as being a change with reference to God, ranks higher than the kind of popular-level soteriology that leaves the present life entirely unchanged but posits a new afterlife destination: heaven or hell. Salvation reduced to nothing but a change of future destination is in grave danger of being stated in a disconnected way that is indistinguishable from mere mythologizing. There are other varieties of low soteriology at large, in many vernaculars. William Sherlock (1639–1707) reacted against Puritan piety by reducing soteriology to a kind of political submission to the precepts given by Jesus: “Let us all fetch our Religion from the plain Doctrines and Precepts of the Gospel of Christ, not from any pretended Personal Acquaintance with him.”⁶

What all of these low soteriologies omit, however, is a transformation that goes deeper than the rearrangement of human capacities. They omit, in fact, God from a central place in their descriptions of salvation. That is, they omit God as the telos, object, and personal horizon of salvation. By contrast, high soteriologies make the character and presence of God central to their view of salvation, calibrating human change to the divine reality. High soteriologies almost invariably are carried out by way of retrieval, that mode of theologizing that regathers classic intellectual and spiritual resources after a period of neglect or culpable suppression. And their formal disposition almost always takes on a trinitarian

⁶ William Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning the Knowledge of Jesus Christ, and Our Union and Communion with Him* (Walter Kettlby, 1674), 94. For a good sketch of the context in which Sherlock made this argument, see J.V. Fesko, “The Communion Controversy: Owen and Sherlock on ‘Union with Christ,’” in *In Christ Alone: Perspectives on Union with Christ*, edited by Stephen Clark and Matthew Evans (Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 118–50.

shape, gathering the Spirit and Son into the divine work that brings believers ultimately to the Father. The more exalted and transformative the soteriology, the more God-oriented it will be. And the more God-oriented it is, the more trinitarian, especially when it is elaborated by way of retrieval. This is the high soteriology to which theology is obligated, with a responsibility that it must not shirk.

But the second sense of shirk obligates theology not to pitch its soteriology so high that it transgresses the creator-creature distinction, encroaching on the divine essence. This obligation can be hard to observe, but here again, the *Handbook* supplies methodological accounts in its early chapters and a generous helping of examples in its central chapters. If the rule is “no trespassing,” are there theological traditions which we can definitely charge as guilty of trespass? If trespassers have existed, they have been confined to the margins or localized in the effusions of idiosyncratic enthusiasts. In tradition after tradition, we see high soteriology worked out with a lively sense that the upper boundary is not to be transgressed. The Greek tradition provides the all-important exchange formula “God became man so man could become God” (a leitmotif cited repeatedly in its multiple forms throughout the *Handbook*), but the careful incarnationism of the first half always acts as a restraint on the second half. The implicit control built into the formula is that God became human without ceasing to be divine, requiring us to take the verb “became” in a technical sense, as a term of art carefully delineated along Chalcedonian lines. Consequently, the deification in the second half of the formula operates according to a limited sense of what becoming can mean. Further, when the divine-human exchange formula reaches its full elaboration in the synthesizing formulations of John of Damascus, it is accompanied and safeguarded by the limiting formula “according to our capacity.”

The proliferation of vernacular deification theologies in the *Handbook* also helps reinscribe some limitations. The extremely wide spread, perhaps paradoxically, resources the project of ensuring that deification talk does not overstep its boundaries. Each distinct sub-tradition that finds its own way to frame a high soteriology must also find its own language for limiting its reach. The fact that a variety of Protestant theologies of deification are represented here is especially beneficial, since so many Protestant expressions of high soteriology share a characteristic instinct for being cautious about over-realized eschatologies, theologies of glory, or mystic excesses. One of the contributions the *Handbook* might make toward further developments in deification studies is the generous way it documents and encourages caution. Though every tradition seems to find its own forms of caution, there is reason to hope that Protestant theologies of deification, as they become more self-aware and intentional, may contribute to a sharper and clearer articulation of the doctrine that would be beneficial for all parties.

For example J.A. Wood, an important theologian from the Wesleyan holiness tradition, does the work of deploying deification-adjacent language this way: “If we are made partakers of the divine nature, and become like God, do we not become gods? No more than one ray of light makes the sun. A ray of light is *like* the sun, and yet it is not the sun. One drop of water is not the ocean, and yet it is *like* the ocean. The *quality* is the same. The Christian may be *like* God, and not God, as a drop is *like* the ocean, and yet not the ocean.”⁷

⁷ J.A. Wood, *Perfect Love: or Plain Things for Those Who Need Them, Concerning the Doctrine, Experience, Profession and Practice of Christian Holiness* (The Christian Witness Co., 1910; original 1880), 306. For its influence, see Priscilla Pope-Levison, “Are Perfect Love and Sanctification Synonymous? Iva Durham Vennard’s Reinterpretation of J.A. Wood’s Perfect Love,” in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Jason E. Vickers, Steven T. Hoskins, and Laura Dahl (Baylor University Press, 2025), 163-78.

Prudential Judgements about Communication

Even when a kind of general consensus is reached about how to pursue a high soteriology without blurring distinctions that ought to remain in sharp focus, the question remains of what to call this high soteriology. Deification? The rise and consolidation of deification studies indicates that this is the label that has emerged as the winner, and that it will continue to establish itself in usage in published literature. *The Oxford Handbook of Deification* marks an advance both in terms of the content of high soteriology and the standardized terms for talking about it. On the content side, we could just barely imagine a competing *Oxford Handbook of Somewhat Lower Soteriology*, which programmatically backed off from the heights envisioned by the current volume. It would be a comparatively bleak and deflationary handbook. But more to the point, it would be a slimmer volume and a minority report, since the present handbook convincingly enshrines high soteriology as the standard Christian view. On the terminology side, we might also imagine a competing handbook that embraced a high soteriology but still refused, on principle, to refer to it by the term now ensconced as standard. It would be a kind of *Oxford Handbook of Something Not Called Deification*. It would not be as depressing as our imaginary volume of actual low soteriology. Still, in the present environment of academic theology, it would be eccentric for avoiding the ordinary terminology; not so much a minority report as an idiolect.

Though it is not the business of this handbook to document it, there has long been resistance to making much use of the language of deification, even in traditions where a high soteriology reigns. Continued resistance to the terminology has several possible motivations. First, deification (and any of its derivatives built on words for god, including theosis, divinization, and so on) continues to sound alien and exotic to a large number of Christians. Though scholars have recently offered persuasive accounts of how the terms became exoticized,⁸ this welcome genealogical work does not so much remove the exoticism as offer a partial explanation of its ongoing reality. Nor does this strand of scholarship, cogent though it is at exposing how a false East-vs-West paradigm was foisted on soteriology, fully account for deification's long dark ages and recent renaissance. Second, the renaissance of deification, while real, is largely an academic phenomenon traceable in scholarly publications and high-level ecumenical discussions. It has not, for the most part, bubbled up into scholarship from below, but has instead flourished in scholastic settings. To teach in a congregational setting about deification is to take up the burden of explaining to outsiders how scholars are speaking these days in seminaries and universities. The five-syllable word deification, not found in Scripture directly, needs to be written on the board and explained. Third, the explanation always involves at least one round of qualifications and concessions to assure listeners of the many things not intended: we do not reach equality with God, displace God, merge into God, or cease to be creatures. The forward surge of asserting deification requires the backpedaling maneuver of denying the implications that tend to present themselves to the untrained ear. Fourth, though there is some biblical warrant for talking about deification (frequently cited are 2 Peter 1:4 and Psalm 82:6 as repeated in John 10:34-5; these appear often in the *Handbook*), it is neither a straight line from these passages to

⁸ Most recently, see Mark McInroy, "How Deification Became Eastern: German Idealism, Liberal Protestantism, and the Modern Misconstruction of the Doctrine," *Modern Theology* 37, no. 4 (October 2021): 934-58. This genealogical literature, pointing out the liberal Protestant campaign against deification, is discussed by several chapters of the *Handbook*.

contemporary formulations, nor does deification belong prominently to Scripture's habitual and settled vocabulary.

The *Handbook* of course has taken the measure of all these objections and more. It has worked them into both its theoretical framing and its extended survey of vernacular varieties. One of the most significant contributions made by the advent of this definitive and methodologically self-aware reference work is that it cements the fact that objections of this nature are not things to be overcome once and for all, but are permanently built into deification discourse.

There may be a fifth motivation at work for those who make the prudential judgment to avoid deification language while pursuing high soteriology, and that has to do with the shocking character of the language. "We become gods" is certainly a striking thing to say, and theologians may want to avoid shock. On the other hand, some theologians may be looking for precisely the right formula to wake up an audience and get their attention. For some the arresting effect of the language may be an objection, but for others a recommendation. This possibility throws the whole biblical lexicon of soteriology into sharp relief. After all, Scripture bristles with terms that would seem obviously grandiose and in need of careful qualification if they were not so familiar to us. We receive revelation, a term that signifies the removal of a veil and the disclosure of divine truth. We are hallowed somehow as saints, and Scripture does not shrink from applying holiness words to us despite our less than exemplary lives. Believers are glorified, signifying that God has in some way shared out his glory with creatures. Are we not being told here that holiness and glory have been made over to us, and that the veil has been removed? For those who have made the prudential judgment that deification language is helpful precisely because of its frisson or shock value, deification serves a kind of pivotal role, drawing the whole biblical vocabulary upward into its highest ranges, where it suggests very great things and requires us to backpedal on unwarranted connotations. It is worth remembering that John of Damascus applied the reassuring restriction "according to our capacity" to the way we receive revelation as well as to our completed salvation altogether. Setting our soteriologies high enough without setting them too high is an obligation imposed on us by Scripture itself, and implicates our hermeneutical judgments about the basic vocabulary of Scripture. Deification language offers a well-worked example and test case for carrying out this obligation.

Trinitarian Norms

Finally, though its historical range makes it possible for the *Oxford Handbook of Deification* to spend plenty of time surveying the variety of cultural and linguistic vernaculars found across Christian history, the entire volume is resolutely theological, and even doctrinal, in its conception. The rewards of this doctrinal embeddedness are manifold. It sets deification in an ecclesiological setting, traces the necessary connections with the other categories of soteriology, and above all indicates the trinitarian form and norm of the doctrine. In his chapter, "Deification and the Trinity," Gilles Emery defines deification as "the progressive perfection of human beings who, by the illuminating and transforming power of divine grace and glory, are led to full communion with the Triune God" (562). This elaborately trinitarian way of describing the breadth of deification is echoed constantly throughout the volume, and in the historical chapters we get a characteristic effusion of vernacular ways

to link deification and Trinity. Maintaining close contact with trinitarian theology does a lot of work for the volume, and for deification studies at large. For one thing, trinitarian theology draws soteriology upward into the heights of contact with God, thereby not shirking the obligations of a high soteriology. But trinitarian doctrine also positions deification to avoid shirk in the other sense, by describing in advance the transcendent aseity of the God into whose fellowship we are invited. Cyril of Alexandria, hardly a minor figure speaking in an obscure idiom, made this point in his *Commentary on John*:

Notice what care the blessed Evangelist took in his discussion. Since he was about to say that believers are born of God, he has to devise a safeguard for us. Otherwise, someone might think that believers spring from the nature of God the Father in truth and reach an unchangeable likeness with the Only Begotten. ... That would drag him down to the nature of created beings since he too is said to be begotten of God. First he says that the natural Son gave them power to become children of God, thereby introducing the idea of adoption and grace. Then he goes on without danger to say, "They were born of God." This is to show the magnitude of his grace toward them since he gathers, as it were, what is alien to God the Father into a natural kinship and raises what is servile to lordly nobility because of his fervent love toward it.⁹

This is exemplary avoidance of shirk on both sides: it exalts "the magnitude of his grace" but "without danger" because we are equipped with a trinitarian "safeguard for us." The Only Begotten stands by himself in the place we can never aspire to, and our character as created, adopted children of God follows from that. Building on the Latin word *filius* or the Greek word *huios*, we might call this the blessing of filiation or huification. But that language, no matter how well it brings trinitarian relation into the heart of soteriology, is more artificial, awkward, and unfamiliar than the term which has now established itself as the lingua franca of high soteriology in academic theology: deification, the study of which is here to stay.

⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, translated with an introduction by David R. Maxwell (InterVarsity Press, 2013), 61.