In this article I would like to discuss the following, interconnected issues that together create a literary and theological context for the analysis of some of Michael Psellos’ ideas expressed in Theologica 59:

1. The patristic origins of Psellos’ terminology used by him to describe the Incarnation of the Logos and possible patristic roots of Psellos’ concept that the deification of Christ’s humanity is mediated by nous.

2. The broader reception of Gregory the Theologian’s terminology used by Psellos in the contemporaneous Orthodox tradition, including liturgical texts.

3. Different opinions, which existed in patristic and Byzantine literature concerning the moment of complete and perfect deification of Christ’s humanity. This issue is directly related to Psellos’ ideas about the mediation of nous in the process of deification and is reflected, among other places, in a well-known liturgical text attributed to Symeon Metaphrastes. Symeon lived slightly earlier than Psellos and was considered authoritative by the latter.

4. The way in which the theme of the mediation of the nous was reflected in the works of Nicodemus Hagiorites in the eighteenth century. Nicodemus was not just an expert in patristic theology but also its perceptive interpreter. His remarks regarding the passage from Gregory the Theologian may indicate a particular tradition of Orthodox interpretation of this type of ambivalent statement. The interpretation, I must add, falls within the tradition of Maximus Confessor’s theology, whose authority for Nicodemus was absolute.

In Theol. 59 Michael Psellos observes that the nous "mediates” between the human body and God during the deification of Christ’s humanity:

\[\varepsilon\pi\varepsilon\iota\delta\iota\ \o\ \iota\mu\acute{e}\acute{t}e\rho\acute{o}\varsigma\ \nu\upsilon\varsigma\ \mu\acute{e}\varsigma\varsigma\ \acute{e}\sigma\tau\iota\ \sigma\acute{w}\acute{m}\acute{a}\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \kappa\iota\ \theta\nu\omicron\upsilon,\ \tau\omicron\ \mu\acute{e}\ \lambda\epsilon\pi\tau\omicron\tau\omicron\acute{e}\rho\omicron\varsigma,\ \acute{e}\kappa\epsilon\iota\omicron\upsilon\ \delta\acute{e}\ \pi\acute{a}\varsigma\ \acute{a}n\ \pi\acute{a}\chi\upiota\acute{t}e\rho\omicron\varsigma\ \epsilon\iota\pi\omicron\omicron\omicron\ \sigma\acute{u}gkoi\rnu\iota\kappa\iota\varsigma,\]

(1) I would like to thank Prof. Alexei Sivertsev of DePaul University for his help in writing this article and translating it into English.
I shall now consider the traditionalism of such an understanding of deification for patristic writings. It is worth pointing out that when patristic and Byzantine authors discuss union between saints and God they often talk about the mediating role of *nous*. One immediately thinks of a well-known passage from St. Gregory Palamas’ letter to Xene:

> Ἀλλ’ ὁ κατηξιωμένος τοῦ φωτός ἐκείνου νοῦς καὶ πρὸς τὸ συνημμένον σῶμα πολλὰ διαπορθεμένει τοῦ θείου κάλλους τεκμήρια, χάριτι τε θεία καὶ σαρκός παχύτητι μεσιτεύουν καὶ δύναμιν τῶν ἀδύνατων ἐντιθείς.3

Here Palamas observes that the *nous*, having received the vision of divine light, passes on the acquired grace to the body connected with the *nous*. In the process the *nous* serves as a mediator between divine grace and the “coarse body.” The same idea can be found in Palamas’ *Triads*.4

Unlike Palamas Psellos talks about humanity deified by the Incarnate Logos, and yet the vocabulary he uses is almost exactly the same. It seems that in both cases the terminology can be traced back to St. Gregory the Theologian. In *Theol* 59 (p. 232–233) Psellos provides the following interpretation of Gregory the Theologian:

> Διὰ τούτο περιφρονεῖς θεότητα, ὅτι τὴν σῆν παχύτητα κατεδέχατο, διὰ μέσου νοῦς ὀμιλήσας σαρκί, καὶ γενόμενος ἄνθρωπος ὁ κάτω θεός, ἐπειδὴ συνενεκράθη θεό, καὶ γέγονεν εἰς, τοῦ κρείττονος ἐκκιάζαντος, ἕνα γένομαι τοσοῦτον θεός ὅσον ἐκείνος ἄνθρωπος.5

In his other writings Gregory the Theologian makes the same observation at least two more times:


(3) Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαιάμα Συγγράμματα, t. 5 (Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992) 225–226 (= Φιλοκαλία, τ. Δ’ (Αθήναι, 1991) 112).


All three of these quotes can be seen as sources of Psellos’ interpretation referred to in the beginning of the article. Moreover, this terminology was included into the Eastern Orthodox rite, particularly into the Stauroanastasimos Kanon of the first tone:

Νοῦς ὁ ἀπαθής καὶ ἀύλος, μιγνυται Χριστός ὁ Θεός τῷ ἀνθρωπίνῳ νοῇ, μεσίτευοντα θεία φύσει σαρκὸς τῇ παχύτητι, καὶ ὁ λόγος μοι ἀπέττω ὁλὸς ἤνωται, ἵνα σωτηρίαν ὅλῳ μοι τῷ πεσόντι ὀρέξῃ σταυρούμενος.8

The use of Gregory the Theologian’s terminology by the Stauroanastasimos Kanon of the first tone reflects, first and foremost, the acceptance of Gregory’s terminology for the description of the deification of God the Word by later tradition. The exact dating of Stauroanastasimoi Kanones of the Oktoechos is uncertain. Yet, there is a good chance that these canons can be dated before the tenth century, even though they are not as old as the Sunday canons reliably attributed to John of Damascus.

While quoting the Acts of the Iconoclast Council in Hiereia, John Meyendorff mentions: « le rôle joué par l’âme du Christ dans la christologie du concile de 754 est exactement celui que lui attribuait Origène... ».9

The Greek of the passage referred to by Meyendorff reads as follows:

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(6) PG 36, 325C = Cl. Moreschini (éd.), Grégoire de Nazianze, Discours 38–41 (Paris, 1990) (Sources Chrétiennes 358) 134. See also ibid., introduction, 53–54, for the interpretation of this idea. According to it, Gregory the Theologian emphasized the existence of nous and noetic soul in the humanity of the Logos against Apollinarius. But I do not find this interpretation sufficient.

(7) P. Gallay (éd.), Grégoire de Nazianze, Lettres Théologiques (Paris, 1998) (Sources Chrétiennes 208) 56. See also 57, n. 5.

(8) Παρακλητική (Ῥώμη 1885) 16: Κανών σταυροαναστάσιμος, ἡχός α’, ώδη στ’, το. 1.

This passage seems to contain an allusion to (if not a direct quote from) Gregory the Theologian. Apparently in his discussion Psellos engages a particular tradition which could potentially be open to a non-Orthodox interpretation.

It is possible that another example of the same tradition can be found in the writings of Symeon Metaphrastes, and specifically, in his prayer before Holy Communion (the eighth by the Greek count, the third — by the Russian). Unlike other prayers from the same akolouthia, this text is probably not a pseudepigraphon. Both older (Leo Allatius) and more recent researchers of Symeon Metaphrastes’ literary heritage did not doubt its authenticity. As far as I know, the manuscript tradition (either Greek or translated, including Church Slavonic) contains no alternative attributions, as opposed, for example, to another prayer from the same akolouthia which is also ascribed to Symeon Metaphrastes in modern liturgical books. In any case, this text could not have been written after the eleventh century. The excerpt that concerns us here runs as follows:

Ο τῇ ἐνδόξῳ σου ἀναλήψει τῆς σαρκὸς θεώσας τὸ πρόσλημα καὶ τούτῳ τῇ δεξίᾳ καθέδρα τιμήσας τοῦ Πατρὸς...


(11) Leo Allatii De Symeonis Metaphrastae scriptis diatriba, PG 114, 19–158.

Thou Who by Thy glorious Ascension didst deify our nature which Thou hadst assumed and didst honor it by Thy session at the right hand of the Father...

The apparent meaning of this phrase is that the ultimate deification of Christ’s body takes place only after his Ascension. This contradicts the Orthodox tradition which is most explicitly stated in John of Damascus’ *De Fide Orthodoxa*, namely that Christ’s humanity was deified from the moment of the Annunciation onward. On the other hand this statement comes very close to some of Psellos’ ideas.13

Its *literal* meaning implies the notion of incomplete deification of Christ’s body during Christ’s earthly life. This notion in turn becomes possible when one assumes the mediating role of the *nous* in the deification of the body. In this case the “perfect” or “final” deification of Christ’s body takes place only after the Resurrection or perhaps even after the Ascension, as may be implied by Symeon Metaphrastes’ statement. As a result the issue of the mediating role of the *nous* and the issue of the “final” deification of Christ’s humanity become closely related.

In other words Symeon’s prayer may be interpreted within the philosophical tradition that embraces the concept of the mediating role of the *nous* in the deification of Christ’s humanity. Psellos’ writings quoted throughout this article reflect this tradition most explicitly. Unfortunately, given the current state of our knowledge it is almost impossible to fully understand the theology of Symeon Metaphrastes. Many of his writings remain unpublished, preventing the accurate reconstruction of Symeon’s teachings.14 In this situation it would be a mistake to overinterpret one sentence from the prayer attributed to Symeon. Still it is possible that the theological tradition reflected in the writings of Michael Psellos found another expression in the fragment from Symeon quoted above.

At the same time generations of Orthodox Christians have given these words of Symeon Metaphrastes traditional Orthodox meaning. Symeon was venerated as a saint by Psellos, who composed a service for him, as well as by St. Mark of Ephesus, whose service for Symeon

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has also come down to us. The relics of St. Symeon were venerated in the monastery of Hodegon during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Unlike Psellus, Symeon Metaphrastes had the reputation of an authoritative and pious Orthodox author. This should encourage us to look for alternative interpretations for his more ambivalent ideas, expressed among other things in the prayer before the Holy Communion.

The analysis of Orthodox interpretations of the passages from Gregory the Theologian used by Psellus in his writings could provide one possible starting point for such an interpretation of Symeon Metaphrastes. As follows from the excerpts quoted above, Gregory the Theologian himself did not assume that deification was exclusively mediated by nous, and that the divinity as a result was no longer present in Christ’s body after his death on the cross. The excerpt from the Iconoclast Council in Hiereia also refers to the divine presence in the body of Christ.

In other words it seems likely that Gregory the Theologian attempts to construct “the mechanics of deification,” suggesting that the nous served as a tool that allowed to achieve union between the humanity and divinity of Christ. Later, however, both the nous and the body equally shared in Christ’s divinity, since both of them belonged to the Incarnate Logos. As a result neither could be alienated from the Logos’ divinity.

Remarkably, several centuries later, in the early 1800s, St. Nicodemus Hagiorites interpreted Gregory the Theologian in a similar way. According to him the deification of the nous and the body took place simultaneously κατὰ χρόνον but not κατὰ τάξιν. In order of priorities (but not in chronological order) God first united with the “noetic soul” and then through the noetic soul with the body. Nicodemus concludes with the following observation:

Οὔδείς δὲ δύναται νοῆσαι ἢ εἰπεῖν τὴν τάξιν τῶν ἀνωτέρω
μόνος γὰρ ὁ τὸ Μυστήριον τοῦτο ἐνεργήσας, μᾶλλον δὲ αὐτοψηφήσας, αὐτὸς οἶδε καὶ τὴν τάξιν, καθ’ ἢν τοῦτο ἐνήργησε καὶ αὐτοψηφήσεν.

(15) Published in: Εβελίνα Μινεβά, Τὸ νημογραφικὸ ἐργὸ τοῦ Μάρκου Εὐγενίκου (Αθήνα, 2004) 390–409; see also ιβιδ, 407–409 for the synaxarion of Symeon Metaphrastes, also composed by Mark of Ephesus.

(16) See Εὐρτοδρόμιον (Αθήναι, 1836) 220–221, σημ. 1.
No one is able to grasp or express the order of the highest. Only the One who has acted this mystery, or better to say, self-acted it, knows the order in accordance with which He has acted and self-acted it.

Nicodemus does not follow Psellos’ assertion that the deification of the *nous* takes place chronologically prior to the deification of the body. Nicodemus also does not share the belief in the “partial deification” of Christ’s body prior to the resurrection. On the contrary throughout his writings Nicodemus emphasizes the complete deification of Christ’s humanity since the moment of the Annunciation and stresses that Christ’s body after the burial was inseparable from the divinity thus remaining the continuous source of life. Nicodemus refers to Christ’s body laying in the tomb as “*theohypostatos*” and to the burial itself as “*theosomos*.” In light of this it is even more remarkable that he uses the passage from Gregory the Theologian that I have mentioned above.

**SUMMARY**

Psellos’ ideas about the mediation of *nous* in the process of deification are examined in their possible historical context, including Gregory of Nazianze (quoted by Psellos explicitly) and Symeon Metaphrastes.