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Language and Theology in St Gregory of Nyssa

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St John's College
September 2002
M.A. in Theological Research

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27 JAN 2003

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Language and Theology in St Gregory of Nyssa
MA (Research) Thesis, September 2002

Abstract

This MA thesis focuses on the work of one of the most influential and authoritative theologians of the early Church: St Gregory of Nyssa (†396). My topic of research consists in the relationship between language and theology, as it shaped in Gregory's polemical works against the radical Arians, in particular against Eunomius of Cyzicus (†395).

The first chapter tackles the historical side of the controversy and provides the chronology of the dogmatic disputes on the dogma of Trinity following the Council of Nicaea (325). The second chapters illustrate the conflict being at stake between two theological methodologies: Gregory's grammar of thought is scriptural, whereas Eunomius' theology is much more philosophical and inflexible in its terms. Eunomius claimed that one can know God by his essence in the concept of 'ingenerate'. On the contrary, for Gregory of Nyssa, God 'is above all names'. For him, language and sexuality are realities of the post-lapsarian world, which made human mind opaque and the exercise of interpretation indispensable. Gregory included also the episode of Babel in the genealogy of our linguistic finitude.

The third and the fourth chapters focus on the relationship between language and theological knowledge in St Gregory's third book *Contra Eunomium*. All words used in human language – including Eunomius' concept of *agennētos* – have complementary meanings, since no one can describe the essence of an object or of any part of reality. On this basis, Gregory develops his 'theory of relativity' of names, which can never befit God's majesty and glory.

In the last chapter, under the heading 'Pragmatics of Language', I investigate the immediate consequences of Gregory's 'theory of relativity'. Speech is treated as a sphere, which resembles the creative power of the hypostatic Word. Therefore, rhetoric becomes the perfect tool for his pastoral concern in doing theology. By choosing rhetoric, Gregory is free to start his theological argument from anywhere, since theology is a discourse about God's redemptive economy.

In conclusion, I try to emphasise the actuality of Gregory's theory of names and its importance for the contemporary debates in the Church on thorny issues as Trinitarian theology or gender. I also evaluate Gregory of Nyssa's self-consistency in positive terms.

Acknowledgements

In its genuine sense, theology is dialogic and eucharistic. Therefore, I would like to thank here some of the Church people whose support was invaluable during my MA research. My thanks go to Metropolitan Joseph (Paris), Archbishop Bartolomeu (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), Bishop Vasile Someșanul (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), Archimandrite Symeon (Maldon, Essex), Archimandrite Ephrem Lash (Manchester), Hieromonk Gabriel Bunge OSB (Roveredo, Switzerland), Hieromonk Agapie Corbu (Almaș-Romania), Fr John Behr (Crestwood, NY), Fr Radu Mărășescu (Bussy, France), Fr Andrey Kordochkin, the community of the Stavropegic Monastery St John the Baptist (Maldon-Essex), and the orthodox parish of St Bede and Cuthbert (Durham). From them all, I learned the importance of remaining a *dilettante* in the exploration of theology.

In the past twelve months, at different stages, many friends helped me to refresh my approach towards various aspects of my research. I am especially indebted to Alan Brown (Cambridge), Dr Augustine Cassiday (Cambridge, UK), Eugen Ciurtin (Bucharest), Dr Adam Cooper (Adelaide, Australia), Dr Daniel Hanc (Arad), Professor Ioan I. Ică Jr. (Sibiu, Romania), Mihaela Timuș (Bucharest), and Mika Törönen (Durham). I am particularly grateful to Magnus Wheeler and to Maria Lastochkina who read earlier drafts of this paper and improved it considerably. All the mistakes left, in style and substance, are mine.

My postgraduate studies at Durham University were made possible through the generosity of *Society of Sacred Mission* (at St Antony's Priory), which offered me the ideal condition for studying during the whole year. I should also mention *The Rațiu Family Foundation* (London), Dr Ștefan Bălan (New York) and Mrs. Mihaela Scherer, who helped me to benefit from the exceptional libraries of her adoptive city (Munich). The confidence of my parents was also substantial and helped me to overcome many impasses.

Finally, I would like to thank Professor Andrew Louth, for his great support and sympathy, and for giving me the enormous and rare privilege of learning from him so much.

MIHAIL NEAMȚU
Durham, September 2002

Abbreviation

a) Works of St Gregory of Nyssa

<i>Ad Abl.</i> : <i>Ad Ablabium, quod non sunt trei dei</i>	GNO III, 1
<i>Adv. Apol.</i> : <i>Adversus Apolinarium</i>	GNO III, 1
<i>Ad. Eust.</i> : <i>Ad Eusthatium, de Sancta Trinitate</i>	GNO III, 1
<i>Ad. Graec.</i> : <i>Ad Graecos, ex communibus notionibus</i>	GNO III, 1
<i>CE</i> : <i>Contra Eunomium I, II, III</i>	GNO I-II
<i>De an. et. res.</i> : <i>De anima et resurrectione</i>	PG 44
<i>De beat.</i> : <i>De beatitudinibus</i>	GNO VII, 2
<i>De deit. Fil.</i> : <i>De deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti</i>	GNO X, 3
<i>De diff.</i> : <i>De differentia ousiae et hypostaseos</i>	BASIL, <i>Letter 38</i>
<i>De hom. op.</i> : <i>De hominis opificio</i>	PG 44
<i>De inf.</i> : <i>De infantibus praemature abreptis</i>	GNO III, 2
<i>De or. dom.</i> : <i>De oratione dominica</i>	GNO VII, 2
<i>De perf.</i> : <i>De perfectione</i>	GNO VIII, 1
<i>De inst. chr.</i> : <i>De instituto christiana</i>	GNO VIII, 1
<i>De prof. chr.</i> : <i>De professione christiana</i>	GNO VIII, 1
<i>De virg.</i> : <i>De virginitate</i>	GNO VIII, 1
<i>In Basil.</i> : <i>In Basilium fratrem</i>	GNO X, 1
<i>In Cant.</i> : <i>In Canticum Canticorum</i>	GNO VI
<i>In Eccl.</i> : <i>In Ecclesiastem</i>	GNO V
<i>Epist.</i> : <i>Letters</i>	GNO VIII, 2
<i>Inscr.</i> : <i>In Inscriptiones Psalmorum</i>	GNO V
<i>DC = Or. cat.</i> : <i>Oratio catehetica</i>	GNO III, 4
<i>Ref. Eun.</i> : <i>Refutation confessionis Eunomii</i>	GNO II
<i>Vit. Moys.</i> : <i>De vita Moysis</i>	PG 44

The works of Gregory of Nyssa are included in the volumes 44-46 of the collection *Patrologia Graeca* (ed. J.-P. Migne).

b) Journals, Books and Collections

A	Apologia (Eunomii)
AA	Apologia Apologiae (Eunomii)
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
<i>Arch. de Phil.</i>	<i>Archives de Philosophie</i>
CH	<i>Church History</i>
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
DS	Dictionnaire de spiritualité
ECR	<i>Eastern Churches Review</i>
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte
GNO	Gregorii Nysseni Opera
GOTR	<i>Greek Orthodox Theological Review</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
J ECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>

<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>Modern Theology</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
<i>OCA</i>	<i>Orientalia Christiana Analecta</i>
<i>OCP</i>	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
<i>OECT</i>	Oxford Early Christian Texts
<i>PG</i>	Patrologia Graeca
<i>PL</i>	Patrologia Latina
<i>PO</i>	Patrologia Orientalis
<i>PTS</i>	Patristische Texte und Studien
<i>REA</i>	<i>Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes</i>
<i>REG</i>	<i>Revue des Etudes Grecques</i>
<i>HR</i>	<i>History of Religions</i>
<i>RHE</i>	<i>Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique</i>
<i>RScPhTh</i>	<i>Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques</i>
<i>RSR</i>	<i>Recherches de Science Religieuse</i>
<i>SC</i>	Sources Chrétiennes
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
<i>SVTQ</i>	<i>Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>TU</i>	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>ZKG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>
<i>HeyJ</i>	<i>Heythrop Journal</i>
<i>JLT</i>	<i>Journal of Literature and Theology</i>
<i>ZAC</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum: Journal of Ancient Christianity</i>
<i>ZKG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>

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Introduction. Why Language Matters

It happens so that a certain usage of language always gives the interpretation of the 'divine', and *viceversa*. Language matters: it substantiates the faith. This was true in the past and became even more eloquently so nowadays. Especially within the Western Churches, a revisionist trend has already undermined the traditional framework of thinking for both the academic and pastoral theology. During the last two decades, many alterations occurred in the liturgical prayers and in the interpretation of the Scriptures, when they were considered 'offensive', 'unjust' or 'sexist'. The traditional name of the Holy Trinity was put under question by many liberal theologians, ready to 'demythologise' not only Scripture, but also the crucial tenets of the Christian dogma and liturgy. No secular challenge should be too hard to be taken up by such a discipline as theology. But very often challenges in theology are nourished by a depressing oblivion of what the early Christian tradition really said. One desolately finds how widespread is the misrepresentation of the linguistic criteria for the orthodoxy. It is nothing new, for example, in the attempt to 'emancipate' the scriptural formula of the Holy Trinity ('Father, Son and Holy Spirit'), substituting the 'anthropomorphic' names with more impersonal ones (*eg*: 'Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier'). One only needs to remember the doctrine of Sabellius or the ideas that Eunomius of Cyzicus tried to establish in the second half of the fourth century, in order to understand the banality of such reformatory projects. Behind their Trinitarian doctrine, there was obviously a certain understanding of the identity of Christ, harshly refuted by the Church Fathers. Theology and language is, therefore, a perennial issue and to sort out contemporary problems one needs to reflect upon the heritage of the past. If a better knowledge of the Greek philosophy could help the modern scholarship to diminish its redundant 'footnotes to Plato' (A. N. Whitehead), the knowledge of the Patristic age could discourage false polemics in theology, or wrong pastoral verdicts.

I decided to illustrate this point by undertaking a research of one of the most prominent Christian thinkers of the Church, ever. Hans Urs von Balthasar penned the personality of St Gregory of Nyssa in just a few but unmistakable words: 'moins brillant et fécond que son grand maître Origène, moins cultivé que son ami Grégoire de Nazianze, moins pratique que son frère Basile, il les dépasse néanmoins tous par la profondeur de sa pensée, qui mieux qu'aucune autre a su transposer intérieurement

sur le mode chrétien l'héritage spirituel de l'ancienne Grèce.'¹ My interest in Gregory of Nyssa was first motivated by his immense prestige within the Byzantine tradition of the Church to which I belong. Part of the celebrated triad of the Cappadocian Fathers, St Gregory remains an indispensable source of reference for anybody interested in the major topics of Christian theology. Secondly, Gregory's extensive work against Eunomius, written in the wake of Basil's first polemical treatise, contains the first systematic account of the limits and the competence of language.

Yet, long time before I could know anything about the revolutionary agenda of the feminist theology in the West, or even about the heretical theology of Eunomius of Cyzicus, I pondered upon matters of more general concern. As a teenager, I was continuously amazed and thrilled by the importance given to the power of the name of God in the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church. More than once I was perplexed by the subtle combination of ritual gestures during the notoriously long services of my Church. In particular, I was struck by the fact that every believer is expected to venerate the Gospel as much as the icon of Christ. During all the services, the Vespers, the Matins or the Midnight Office, the Gospel and the icon of Christ stand together on a wooden stave in the middle of the church's nave, being venerated with a holy kiss and prostrations by all the believers. Day and night, the Gospel and the icon of Christ support and refresh the loving gaze of those who enter the church 'with faith, reverence and fear of God (*meta pisteōs, eulabeias kai phobou Theou*)'. Being taken from the stave in a solemn procession at the end of the Matins service, before the Liturgy starts, the Gospel is laid on the altar, next to the Eucharistic chalice.

It took me a while to notice that the Divine Liturgy is the only service of the Orthodox Church, which starts with the invocation of the Trinitarian name of God². Every Sunday morning, when I was not too late for the service, I could hear and see the orthodox priest lifting up the book of the Gospel and making the sign of the Cross over the Antimension, saying 'with clear voice'³: 'Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'. This is the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, regarded by the orthodox tradition as the perfect theological drama, actualising in mysterious words and deeds the economy of our salvation in Jesus

¹ HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Présence et pensée* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1942), XIV-XV

² The Vespers start with the blessing: 'Blessed is our God, always now and forever, and to the ages of ages', as well as the Matins.

³ *The Divine Liturgy of our Father among the Saints John Chrysostom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4-5 (in Greek the indication is: *lampra tē phonē*).

Christ. I am only one among many Christians from the Eastern Europe who were baptised without ever being, not for a second, catechumens of the Orthodox Church. Yet, this paradox did not prevent me from realising how much of the first part of the Liturgy is concentrated on the veneration of Christ as the Word of God. When the moment of reading the Scriptures approaches, the deacon exclaims with loud voice ‘Dynamis’ (I Corinthians 1: 24), and he asks for the blessing. The priest answers with the words of the Prophet David, saying: ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ (Psalm 118, 16; John 12: 13). After the first reading *from* the New Testament, usually taken from one of St Paul’s epistles, the deacon again proclaims Christ in just one word, saying: ‘Wisdom’ (I Corinthians 1: 24). Not before another prayer for the illumination of those who listen the Word of God, it follows the reading from the Gospel, when the believers stand up (or kneel) in sign of veneration. This impressive ceremony speaks for itself and shows the living theology to which any person, either baptised or only catechumen, can have access. But the emphasis on the sacredness of God’s name is even more compelling in the Liturgy of the Faithful, which completes the Liturgy of the Catechumens. Unfolding a Trinitarian structure and being entirely wrapped in the body of the Scriptures, this Liturgy has a special litany for the Lord’s Prayer (before the Communion of the Holy Mysteries). The priest says: ‘grant us worthy, Master, with boldness and without condemnation (*meta parrhēσίας, akatakritōs*), to dare to call upon you.’ At the end of the Liturgy, the symmetry becomes perfect when the people replicate the inaugural blessing of the priest, saying: ‘Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit’.

The very fact that those who are not baptised can listen to the Word of God and are allowed to gaze the beauty of the icon of Christ, but are not allowed to take part in the Holy Mysteries, since they are not full members of the Church, already speaks of the orthodox understanding of the relationship between language and theology. It shows how, in the Orthodox Church and her Catholic tradition, the ‘divine names’ and the icon of Christ receive full veneration, but not yet comparable with the adoration due to the Holy Mysteries. The names of God are sacred, but are they a sacrament? This was the main question, which determined me to tackle St Gregory of Nyssa’s work in search for further answers.

The first chapter of this thesis provides the methodological framework in which I read St Gregory’s writings. It is an attempt to justify why one cannot separate Gregory’s theological rationales from the more neutral statements he makes with

respect to the structure of language, its usage and interpretation. By a short presentation of the struggle for orthodoxy during the fourth century, I try to place Gregory's polemics with the radical Arians into a historical context. Subsequently, I pay attention to Aetius' legacy and Eunomius' biography, which could at least partly explain some of the latter's theological options. I envisage Eunomius' theology in her breaking points with the former tradition, while in contrast, pointing out the importance of Basil and Gregory's doctrinal and spiritual commitments, which I regard in continuity with the apostolic confession of Christ as 'Lord and God' (John 20: 24). I suggest that the Trinitarian controversy, which also sets the issue of the 'divine names', can be ultimately traced back to the most important question for the early Christian Church: the confession of Christ's divinity and lordship. I also show that this confession is intimately related to the hermeneutical task of reading the Scriptures, which very easily becomes an object of controversy when the 'hypothesis' of Christ's natural sonship is lost on the way. Without this 'hypothesis', the texts of the Old and the New Testament were open to endless and conflicting interpretations.

The second chapter reveals the importance of Scripture as a source of authority for theology in the fourth century. I try to prove that Gregory's theology follows entirely a scriptural grammar, which uses only provisionally foreign concepts, inherited from the Greek classical tradition. By doing so, Gregory remained faithful to the Nicene Creed and to its methodology, which allowed the usage of concepts such as 'homoousios' in order to express (and interpret) some ambiguous scriptural formulae. On the contrary, I suggest, that Eunomius's theological thought has an eclectic philosophical grammar, which makes use of scriptural references in order to support his subordinationist account of the Trinity. Eunomius' decision to change the baptismal formula and to substitute the name of 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' with the more 'neutral' expression 'First Being, the Second Being, and the Third Being' has no precedent in the Fathers' tradition and diverges very seriously from Gregory's main source inspiration. There was a conflict between two methodologies at stake, which tackled the problem of knowledge and language on very different theological basis.

These differences become more obvious in the third chapter, where I compare Eunomius' epistemological tenets with Gregory's more fluid assumptions. I also show how their understanding of language depends very much on how they read the book of Genesis, and especially the narrative of Adam's creation and his endowment with

the power of naming. In comparison with the Alexandrian tradition (Philo and Origen), Gregory is surprisingly radical, claiming that language is a human invention. On the contrary, Eunomius defends the opposite idea, considering the scriptural and non-scriptural 'names' as literally 'inspired' and 'divine'. I also give heed to St Gregory's most interesting insights from *De hominis opificio*, where he speaks about the correlation between *homo faber* and *homo sapiens*. Having free hands, man is able to think and to articulate meaningful sounds, which make him a social being. I suggest the possibility of drawing some consistent parallels between St Gregory of Nyssa and St Augustine of Hippo, starting with their dialogical interpretation of language. Yet, at least for Gregory, language is closely related to Adam's fall. Language and sexuality are realities of the post-lapsarian world, which made human mind opaque and the exercise of interpretation indispensable. Gregory included also Babel in the genealogy of our linguistic finitude. Babel was temporarily restored at Jerusalem, on the day of the Pentecost. St Gregory interprets this 'great feast of languages' (Shakespeare) as another compelling proof for his eschatological vision, which presents the human beings, like the angels, sharing love and joy without any need for semiotics. This teleological orientation of Gregory's thought explains, at least partly, his basic epistemological pessimism. Gregory emphasises over and over again that the human mind cannot know the ultimate structure of reality, and even less its Creator. Both in theology and epistemology, St Gregory leaves open the possibility to progress, although the relationship between these two realms of knowledge is rather asymmetrical. The progressive knowledge of God – which first requires purity of heart – enfeebles gradually the intellectual commitment to positive knowledge. While contemplating God, one takes distance from reality and perceives nature as an epiphany. This very doxological attitude makes human being similar to the angels, who incessantly adore God in wonder and praise.

The fourth chapter of my thesis focuses more systematically on what Gregory says about the connection between language and thinking. Gregory integrates the basic Stoic distinction between *logos endiathetos* and *logos prophorikos* into a theological framework which, in *Oratio Catechetica*, helps him to present the dogma of Trinity. As with man the multiple intellectual faculties do not affect the unity of mind, God can be three in persons and one in nature. (As usually, Gregory limits the value of this analogy by making an apophatic correction, saying that Christians worship the divine Trinity that is not numeral, but essentially beyond comprehension.)

Furthermore, I present St Gregory's philosophical and theological premises of his defence of language as human invention. Basically, language is defective and, therefore, it cannot be ascribed to God. What we were given, repeats Gregory in *CE* III, is just the power to articulate thoughts in meaningful words and phrases. *Epinoia* is the intellectual faculty in charge of the production of language; it performs the analytic examination of what the empirical intuition brought as 'nourishment' to the mind. *Epinoia* is an act of thinking in the second instance and the source of intellectual and practical creativity. I presume that Gregory's presentation of *epinoia* as the intellectual faculty for the production of language as well as for the natural sciences (mathematics or physics), would be of interest for the continental debates in the contemporary hermeneutics (I think, in particular, of P. Ricoeur's work). I also suggest that Gregory perceived scientific knowledge as a kind of narrative discourse, and that reasoning is similar, in some ways, to the act of translating words from one language into another. (The latter points recalls H.-G. Gadamer's dialogic hermeneutics.) All words used in the human language – including Eunomius' concept of *agennētos* – have complementary meanings, since no one can describe the essence of an object or of any part of reality. On this basis, Gregory develops his 'theory of relativity' of names, which can never befit God's majesty and glory. All words are tentative and, their meaning contextualised. In Wittgenstein's terms, St Gregory of Nyssa treats language as a 'form of life' and 'game', having its specific grammar and rules of play, which have to be learned properly in order to acquire the right understanding. The importance of this theological 'grammar' becomes obvious in the hermeneutics of the Scriptures, which can be extremely misleading if it is undertaken in the absence of such commanding rules. Yet, since it is all about 'forms of life' and 'language games', one cannot prescribe a definite rule of reading the Scriptures: allegory is just one possibility among many others, and Christian pupils can learn how to use it properly *ex silentio*, from a living tradition. It is the effective silence of tradition under the guidance of the Spirit. With respect to *what* God is *in se*, silence is even more important, and the only honourable *dictum*. Since Eunomius' harshly disagreed with this statement, in the last part of this chapter, I situated him on the long historical line of what M. Heidegger described as 'die onto-theologische Metaphysik'. There are two reasons for reading Eunomius in this grid: first, his foundational approach in theology, which marries dialectics in order to establish an extremely 'ontologised' idea about God. Secondly, I counted his rationalistic thrust, which

allows him to make very radical epistemological claims, refreshed only in the early modern age, as with Spinoza and Hegel.

In contrast, Gregory is less happy to employ dialectics and more comfortable to do so with rhetoric, in a *sui-generis* manner. I analyse the rationales of his decision to do so in the last chapter of my thesis. Under the heading 'Pragmatics of Language', I investigate the immediate consequences of Gregory's 'theory of relativity'. Speech is treated as a sphere, which resembles the creative power of the hypostatic Word. Therefore, rhetoric becomes the perfect tool for his pastoral concern in doing theology. By choosing rhetoric, Gregory is free to start his theological argument from anywhere, since theology is a discourse about God's redemptive economy. Nevertheless, the model for his spiritual rhetoric is not Libanius, whom he sincerely admired, but Basil of Caesarea and, even more so, St Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. Gregory is in search for words of life, and for a knowledge affected and perfected by love. Therefore, his main source of inspiration remained the Scriptures and the monastic spirituality. At their best, they teach us how to pray and to praise. This is the final word of Gregory about the usage of language. Doxology transforms words into noetic icons of the invisible God, while our mind becomes a musical instrument designed to sing the 'Song of the Songs'. God's unfathomable infinity is the supreme pledge for this poetic usage of innumerable 'divine names'. Yet, they can never go beyond the 'cloud of darkness' and the 'margins of silence', in which God abides forever.

Let the argument begin.

I. PRE-TEXTS

Nicene Aftermath

The fourth century is widely regarded as the inaugural period of Christianity. For any modern reader, the vast complexity and the apparent violence of the theological confrontations during the fourth century is, at the first sight, stunning. It is probably the most researched period in the history of the early Church, and attempts to understand what happened between Nicaea 325 and Constantinople 381 have increased the amount exegetical literature to an unexpected degree of minutiae and precision. The reasons for this almost unique concentration of scholarly efforts do not even need to be mentioned: the perennial discussion about, respectively, the Hellenistic and the Jewish heritage of Christianity, the definitive setting of the scriptural canon of the early Church, the irrepressible rise of monasticism and other ascetic forms of life, the beginning of the end of paganism in the Roman Empire, the elevation of Christianity as religion of state under Constantine the Great, the first schisms in the Church, the missionary developments, the establishment of the Christian forms of art and, above all, the theological foundation of orthodoxy. All are interconnected issues, which deserve particular attention.

One has to meet these expectations also when the focus of research is restricted to a much narrower topic like 'Theology and Language in St Gregory of Nyssa'. It would be simply wrong to think that 'language' was for any of the Christian theologians of the fourth century a separate issue from their constant effort to understand the heritage of the already established doctrine, spirituality and liturgy of the Church. Therefore, one has to bear in mind that, Gregory's discussion of the competence of language is tacitly determined by his particular understanding of Scripture, tradition, sacraments, and anthropology. Gregory's approach towards theology was holistic and needs to be read as such. Consequently, I have tried to place his analytic debate of the structure and function of language (*CE III*) on a larger map, which includes references to the historical events of the fourth century¹, and a quite

¹ For a detailed picture, see B. STUDER, 'Der Geschichtliche Hintergrund des Ersten Buches *Contra Eunomium* Gregors von Nyssa' in L. F. MATEO-SECO & J. L. BASTERO (Eds.), *El » Contra Eunomium I « en la producción literaria de Grigorio de Nisa* (Pamplona, 1988), 139-172

detailed account of the theological presuppositions and claims of Gregory's foes: Aëtius and Eunomius of Cyzicus.

One of the most distinctive features of the fourth century is probably the dramatic search for truth by the theologians, contrasting with the interest in political unity, of the emperors². Although both the theologians and the emperors claimed to be Christians, this was not a sufficient incentive to assure simultaneously freedom, unity and tolerance within a deeply religious society. Nicaea I (325) did not exhaust all the problems raised by Arius and his followers, at the beginning of the same century³. The condemnation of Arius' teaching, solemnly pronounced by the Emperor Constantine, was accepted by most of the bishops, who rejected in fact a theology with no great antecedents in the acknowledged doctrines of the Church. Many bishops did regard Nicaea as an authoritative ecumenical council⁴, preferring to draw other lines of continuity with the past. It is noteworthy that 'tradition' (*paradosis*) was not an authoritative concept only for the 'orthodox', and the mere recourse to an ambiguous past functioned as a foundational argument for both the Nicene and anti-Nicene parties⁵. It is very clear that the establishment of the *Creed* did not sort out all the problems, which needed additional interpretation. On the side of the orthodox, Athanasius had to justify formulae like '*homoousios*' and '*ek tes ousias tou patros*'. Arius' theology of the transcendent God (who remained unknowable even to his Son) still fascinated many theologians who regarded the Nicene 'metaphysical' expressions as problematic. But the options left by Arius' theology were twofold: some could accept the similarity of essence between the Father and the Son (the 'Homoians'), while others could exacerbate the ontological gulf between the Father and the Son, and make them 'dissimilar' (the 'Anomeans').

Arius' supporters were located outside his homeland (Libya, Palestine, Asia Minor), while Athanasius' enjoyed great sympathy among the simple Christians of Alexandria. Neither the condemnation, nor the deportation of Arius meant the final

² T. D. BARNES, 'Emperor and Bishops, AD 324-344: Some Problems', *American Journal of Ancient History* 3 (1978) 53-75; H. CHADWICK, 'The Role of the Christian Bishop in Ancient Society', in *Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* (Hampshire: Variorum, 1991), ch. III.

³ ROBERT M. GRANT, 'Religion and Politics at the Council of Nicaea', *Journal of Religion* 55 (1975) 1-12

⁴ H. CHADWICK, 'The Origin of the Title "Oecumenical Council"', *JTS* 23 (1972), 132-135; For the contemporary understanding of the Orthodox theologians of the authority of the ecumenical synods, see BISHOP BASIL (KRIVOCHINE), 'Authority and Infallibility of the Ecumenical Councils', *ECR* 7 (1975) 1, 2-8

defeat of his heresy. Arius' revival was easily accomplished after a member of the orthodox group, Eustathius of Antioch, committed the sin of *lèse-majesté* against the Emperor. Already received by Constantine the Great at his court, in 327 Arius was vindicated by a local synod of Bithynia at 328, when Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria. Arius gained support in Libya, while in November 335 the emperor himself sent Athanasius 'for disciplinary reasons' into his first exile (out of five) in Gaul, where he wrote *Contra Gentes* and, probably, *De Incarnatione*. Eventually, sensing the perils of a new schism in the Church (wounded already by the Donatist split in North Africa⁶), Constantine compelled Arius to declare his agreement with the Nicene Creed. Surprisingly, as both Socrates and Sozomen say, Arius did not refuse; but Athanasius reports he privately maintained his earlier convictions. As R. Williams concluded, 'Arius may have been a genuine repentant; but it sounds as though he was, rather, struggling to find a peaceful compromise'⁷. Yet, Arius died without being in communion with the Church, and this very fact determined for a long time the perception of his doctrine as the 'archetypal heresy' during the whole fourth century. Constantine's attitude towards Arius remained fairly ambiguous, being himself baptised by an Arian bishop (Eusebius of Nicomedia) at the hour of his death, on 22 May 337. It would be reductive to claim that the 'Catholic model' sprang univocally from the political agenda of the Emperor, who obviously wanted a unifying religion for his people. However, Nicaea was far from bringing a monochrome religious identity and in fact Athanasius' victory over Arius was to be short-lived. Yet, it is significant that Arius never won great audience in the monastic circles of Egypt, while Origen remained, until the end of the fourth century, highly esteemed among both cultivated and uncultivated monks. And since monasticism was not yet subjected, in the middle of the fourth century, to any great episcopal or imperial pressure, one should probably understand the final eviction of Arius' doctrine as something deeper than a result of Constantine's merely arbitrary political decision. Arius' doctrine remained, at first, an internal matter of the Church, the theological autonomy of which was only *protected*, but not necessarily *decided*, by the secular institutions of the Roman Empire. In 335, Athanasius was deposed at the council of Tyra, while in 336, a congregation of pro-Arian bishops gathered at Constantinople and led by Eusebius

⁵ See W. A. LÖHR, 'A Sense of Tradition: The Homoiousian Church Party', in M. R. BARNES and D. H. WILLIAMS (eds.), *Arianism after Arius*, (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1993), 81-100

⁶ T. D. BARNES, 'The Beginnings of Donatism', *JTS* 26 (1975), 13-22

of Caesarea (the author of *Contra Marcellum*) condemned his friend, Marcellus of Ancyra on the basis of his alleged monarchian doctrine. Marcellus' authority over his see in Cappadocia was replaced by Basil of Ancyra, the future leader of the 'homoiousians' in the late '350s. Constantine II re-established Athanasius in his rights in November 337 at Alexandria. Next summer (338), the patriarch of the Egyptian desert visited Athanasius at Alexandria and assured him of the support of the monks (including the Pachomian monasteries). Meanwhile, the East still resisted the orthodox doctrine and in January 339, an Antiochene synod deposed Athanasius. Anti-Nicene uprisings determined Athanasius and Marcellus to flee to Rome, where they found support in the person of Julius I, the pope who later invoked the authority of Peter in his defence of the Nicene Creed⁸.

Forty Years of Uncertainty (341-381)

In 341 at Antioch, a council presided over by Constantius II replied to Julius' vindication of Marcellus with two credal documents, extremely scriptural in content, explicitly refuting Arius so that the Nicene theologian Hilary of Poitiers (who was considered sometimes 'the Athanasius of the West') could call Antioch 341 a '*sanctorum synodus*' and used it in the Latin West as an orthodox manifesto. The prospects for ecclesiastical unity between the East and the West were encouraging, but the personal animosities were probably prevailing against the dogmatic differences. The bishops convened at Sardica (Sofia) in 343 did not accept Athanasius especially because of his alliance with Marcellus, and their strong attachment to the concept of *homoousios*⁹. In Sardica, the Westerners bishops (led by the orthodox Ossius of Cordoba) showed in their doctrinal statement that their understanding of *ousia* and *hypostasis* was far from being clarified. 'We have received and been taught, and we hold the catholic and apostolic tradition and faith and confession which teach, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have one *hypostasis*, which is termed "essence" (*ousia*) by the heretics. If we were asked, "What is the *hypostasis* of the Son?" we confess that it is the same as the sole hypostasis of the Father; the Father has never

⁷ R. WILLIAMS, *Arius. Heresy and Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001²), 80

⁸ Cf J. STEVENSON (ed.), *Creeeds, Councils and Controversies. Documents illustrative of the history of the Church A. D. 337-461* (London: SPCK, 1966), 8-9

been without the Son, nor the Son without the Father, nor is it possible that what is Word is Spirit.’¹⁰ The Arian position was identified with the proclamation of three hypostases in God, which is exactly what the orthodox Council of Constantinople I (381 AD) did. Obviously, the Latin orthodox theologians could not make a difference between ‘ousia’ and ‘hypostasis’, which could be both rendered happily through *substantia*¹¹. In 345, the Easterners composed the so-called *Ekthesis Macrostichos*, which was meant to explain in depth to the Western audience the reasons for their resistance against both, respectively, the Arian (*lato sensu*) and the Nicene (*stricto sensu*) theology¹². ‘The Creed of the Long Lines’ explicitly condemned the Arian phrase ‘there was once when he [the Logos] was not’, and the possible implications of the teaching about the Son’s generation ‘from nothing’; it also rejected the heresy of Tritheism and the adoptive Christology of Paul of Samosata; it threw anathemas also against Marcellus’ teaching about the ending reign of Christ, against the Patripassians (who claimed that in Christ’s passion the Father suffered), the Sabellians (the other name for the modalists). While rejecting all the inchoative Arian doctrines and many other heresies faced by the Catholic Church during the third century, the *Ekthesis* avoided carefully to mention anything about *homoousios*, replacing it with another expression: ‘Christ has taken no recent dignity, but – the Eastern bishops said – we have believed him to be perfect from the first, and *like in all things* to the Father.’ (§8) Despite its most reverential manner of speaking about the Son as ‘God before ages’, unseparated from the Father and whose generation cannot be compared to any extrinsic act of creation, and regardless of the open veneration of ‘the all-perfect Triad’, the *Ekthesis* of the Eastern bishops (led probably by Basil of Ancyra) did not touch the ecumenical sense of the Westerners. It was a situation similar to the painful experience of separation between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Church, over to the presence of *filioque* in the Latin Creed. The explicit subordinationism of the *Ekthesis* did not convince Athanasius about the orthodoxy of the Easterners, though it is likely that their sincere search for unity made him cool the relationship with Marcellus. In 346, Athanasius returned to Alexandria while Leontius of Antioch, one of Arius’ pupils, made Aëtius deacon. For his part, Aëtius envisaged the possibility of

⁹ SOCRATES, *HE* II. 20. 7-11

¹⁰ THEODORETUS, *HE* II. 8. 38-41

¹¹ J. T. LIENHARD, ‘*Ousia* and *Hypostasis*: The Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of “One Hypostasis”’, in S. T. DAVIES, D. KENDALL and G. O’COLLINS (eds.), *The Trinity* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 99-121

raising a more radical movement of opposition against Nicaea I, which could take profit from the disagreement between Athanasius of Alexandria and Basil of Ancyra. Consequently, Aëtius entered into conflict with some of the most faithful supporters of Nicaea in Antioch, two ascetics called Flavian and Theodoret, who coined for the first time in the East the doxological formula 'Glory be to the Father, *and* to the Son, *and* to the Holy Spirit' (instead of '*through* the Son, *in* the Holy Spirit').¹³ In spite of his Arian convictions, Leontius of Antioch tried to calm the imminent theological controversy, the dogmatic side of which was initially marked, *nota bene*, by a discussion over the liturgical forms of Trinitarian worship.

In the late 340's, Aëtius very probably met Eunomius in Alexandria, where he stayed until 351¹⁴. By the same time, Aëtius and Eunomius distinguished themselves from the moderate Arians, among whom the most important figures were Basil of Ancyra and the great ascetic Eusthatus of Sebaste. Gallus Caesar knew Aëtius very well and even appointed him to convert the future emperor Julian from paganism to Christianity. In 353, the Bishop Serapion of Thmuis visited the Emperor Constantius and expressed again the support of the Egyptian monks for Athanasius and the Nicene doctrine. They were probably the best entitled to confirm that *theosis* was the immediate and most important of the orthodox doctrines of incarnation. By the late 340s, Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, started to defend the Nicene Creed in his famous *Catechetical Lectures*, while in North Africa the Church was torn apart by the Donatist controversy. The exuberant poet and ascetic theologian Ephraim¹⁵ (†373) was conspicuously active on behalf of Nicaea in Syria, glorifying in innumerable hymns Christ's majestic glory. Though very seldom taken into account by scholars who specialise in the Arian controversies¹⁶, Ephraim's theology is probably the perfect antithesis of the kind of theology promoted by Aëtius and Eunomius, which was

¹² SOCRATES, *HE* II. 19. 7-28

¹³ I follow here T. KOPECEK, *History of Neo-Arianism* vol I (Cambridge Mass., 1979), 100; for a brief account, see DAVID RANKIN, 'Arianism', in PHILIP E. ESLER (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, vol II (Routledge: London and New York, 2000), 975-1004

¹⁴ KOPECEK, *History of Neo-Arianism* I, 111

¹⁵ S. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992)

¹⁶ In a volume of more than eight hundred pages (*The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, Edinburgh, 1988), R. P. C. Hanson never mentions his name or his contribution to the victory of the Nicene Creed. Important reparations were made by P. BRUNS, 'Arius Hellenizans? Ephraem der Syrer und die neoarianischen Kontroversen seiner Zeit', *ZKG* 101 (1990/91), 21-57; also PAUL S. RUSSELL, *St Ephraem the Syrian and St Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians* (Kottayam: St Ephraem Ecumenical Research Center, 1994).

paralleled only by Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies to the Song of the Songs* and by Gregory of Nazianzus' *Theological Orations*.

Between 350-361, Constantius was the sole emperor and searched to find the middle ground between the Nicene position and the radicalism of the Anomeans. In 356, Constantius sacked Alexandria in search for Athanasius, who found his refuge within the monastic caves of Upper Egypt. In the wake of the decisions taken at Sardica in 343, Ursacius of Singidunum and Valens of Mursa (both from Illyria), 'and the rest of their comrades in crime (a splendid lot of Christian bishops!)', as Jerome described the friends of Constantius the Emperor¹⁷, composed in 357 at Sirmium a Creed that starkly refuted any ontological language about God (both *homoousion* and *homoiousion*), claiming that 'it is not contained in the divine Scriptures and it is above man's understanding.'¹⁸ In 358, at Ancyra, another non-Nicene body of bishops put under question the contentions of Aëtius, who 'was extremely addicted to contention, very bold in his assertions on theological subjects, and prone to have recourse to a very subtle mode of argumentation.'¹⁹ They persuaded Constantius about the radical intention of Eudoxius, Aëtius and Eunomius, and the immediate result was the condemnation of their 'innovations' on the 22nd of May, 359 at Sirmium. There, the Synod presided over by 'the most religious and gloriously victorious Emperor Constantius Augustus', decided that the term 'essence' (*ousia*) 'gives offence as being unknown to the people', and suggests its removal, despite the Nicene formula. The Creed of Sirmium 359 concluded that 'the Son is like the Father in all things' (recalling the *Ekthesis Macrostichos*).²⁰ But another council held at Ariminum, gathering more than 400 bishops, invalidated the decisions taken at Sirmium, supporting Nicaea. Meanwhile, during the winter of 359 at Seleucia²¹, the Emperor along with 180 moderate Arian bishops imposed again the doctrine of similarity between the Father and the Son.

This is precisely the moment when the radical Arians became more visible in their theological activity. There are important historical clues²², which suggest that Eunomius could have published his *First Apology* (an attack on the Homoians) in late

¹⁷ JEROME, *Dial. Contra Lucif.*, 19 (PL 23, 181b)

¹⁸ HILARY, *De Synodis*, II; ATHANASIUS, *De Synodis*, 28; SOCRATES, *HE* II. 30-31-41

¹⁹ SOZOMEN, *HE* IV. 12. 1-2.

²⁰ ATHANASIUS, *De Synodis* 8; SOCRATES, *HE* II. 37. 18-24

²¹ SOZOMEN, *HE* IV. 22.6-10

²² L. R. WICKHAM, 'The Date of Eunomius' *Apology* of Eunomius: a reconsideration', *JTS* 20 (1969) 231-240; KOPECEK, *History* vol II, 299-306.

359, almost simultaneously with Aëtius' *Syntagmation*, while some indications favour another chronology, which dates it two years later²³. What is sure is that, in January 360, the second session of a council started at Seleucia in late 359 took place at Constantinople. It is very likely, though not for sure, that Eunomius and Basil (both deacons at that time) met there *tête-à-tête* for the first time. The radical neo-Arians were not entirely successful, and the minority faithful to Athanasius desperately needed to join forces with the moderate wing of the Arians. The latter shored up the idea of similarity of essence between the Father and the Son, and were led by Basil of Ancyra and Eustathius of Sebasta (friend, for a while, of Basil of Caesarea²⁴). In 361, Julian the Apostate took power and censored any public debate on theological matters, setting up in fact some favourable circumstances for the adversaries of Nicaea. From that year, Aëtius (former instructor in religion of Gallus, half-brother of Julian the Emperor²⁵) was no longer *persona grata*, and there are hints that he was anointed bishop somewhere in Libya²⁶. Sozomen²⁷ also tells us about a council held around time in Antioch, having an explicit Anomean agenda. After a short pro-Nicene *intermezzo* (under Jovian, 363-364), political support for the Neo-Arians (now with preference for the Homoians) was strongly given by Valens (364-378), the Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire. From Valens' stiff opposition to the Nicene Creed, many orthodox Christians suffered exile, while the activity of the neo-Arians flourished. Between 360-70, Eudoxius, an associate of Aëtius and Eunomius, ruled over the Archbishopric of Constantinople (already the most influential see in the Middle East), eliciting the venom of the Orthodox writers. For them, this was 'a time out of joint', in which – as St Jerome put it – the whole world 'groaned to find itself Arian'²⁸. Though it is true that under Valens' administration, *both* Eunomius and Gregory spent a long time in exile, and were therefore unable to engage one another in theological polemic.

²³ VAGGIONE, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 302: '[the first *Apology*] was probably worked up into publishable form during the summer of 361'

²⁴ At least one side of the history of their relationship is documented in Basil's letters (*Ep.* 79, 119, 125, 244 and 263); more on this, see M. SIMONETTI, *La crisi ariana*, 411-418

²⁵ PHILOSTORGIUS *HE* VI. 7; SOZOMEN *HE* V. 5. 9

²⁶ HANSON, *Doctrine of God*, 602

²⁷ SOZOMEN, *HE* IV. 29. 1-4

²⁸ JEROME, *Dial. Contra Lucif.*, 19. PL 23, 181b

The Emergence of the Cappadocians

Gregory started his literary career in the early '370s, probably before his wife was dead²⁹, and by the same time, he was made bishop. Gregory's favourite topic was ascetic theology, of which a paramount example is his disquisition *On Virginity*. Later on, Gregory composed other homiletic and exegetic works (like *De oratione dominica*, *In inscriptiones Psalmorum*, *Orationes de beatitudinibus*). He probably began his dogmatic composition *Contra Eunomium* in 381, finishing the last book in 383³⁰. The most famous and long-lasting of all Gregory's books were written after 379, if one counts *Vita Macrinae*, *De Vita Moysis* and also *Orationes in Canticum Canticorum*. Only the ascension of Theodosius (379) as new emperor of the *Oriens* gave the promise of success to the ecclesiastical representatives of the Nicene party, among whom the best theologians were Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. Peter Brown has concisely described these political circumstances in the Eastern Roman Empire: 'From Theodosius I onwards, pagans and heretics were increasingly deprived of civic rights and forced to conform the Catholic Church. The sense of an otherworldly mission affected the Roman state. The Christian emperor, too, would have to answer to Christ for the souls of his subjects'³¹.

In 381, at least theoretically, the heresy of Aëtius and his followers was officially rejected by the majority of the Church bishops gathered at the Emperor's call, and who, in the first synodal canon, repudiated all the heretics by name: 'the Eunomians, the Anomeans, the Arians or the Eudoxians, the Semi-Arians or the Pneumatomachi, the Sabellians, the Marcellians, the Photinians or the Apollinarians'³². Practically, as we are told by the Byzantine historians Sozomen³³ and Socrates³⁴, Eunomius' defence was not complete. Large areas of Asia Minor were still influenced by his teaching. Because of the civil disturbances caused by the longest religious 'war' (Orthodoxy *versus* Arianism) of the fourth century, Theodosius

²⁹ J. DANIELOU, 'Le mariage de Grégoire de Nysse et la chronologie de sa vie', *REA* 2 (1956), 71-78

³⁰ I follow here M. CANEVET's dating from *Grégoire de Nysse et l'herméneutique biblique. Etude des rapports entre le langage et la connaissance de Dieu* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1983), 10

³¹ PETER BROWN, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1971), 108

³² Canon 1 in NORMAN P. TANNER SJ (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Sheed&Ward: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 31

³³ *HE* VI, 29

³⁴ *HE* V, 10

the Great thought of different conciliatory stratagems, finally to establish Orthodoxy by consent and not by means of coercion³⁵. The Emperor received in the late days of 383 a new doctrinal exposition (*ekthesis tes pisteos*) of Eunomius³⁶, a fact that triggered Gregory's prompt reaction. It might well have happened that Gregory attended in person Eunomius' address at the 'conference of the heresiarchs', which Theodosius set up in June 383 at Constantinople. In front of the assembly severely supervised by Nectarios, the Archbishop of Constantinople, Eunomius presented a compendium of his teaching divided into four short parts, and framed by an introduction and a conclusion. As R. P. Vaggione characterised it, Eunomius' work 'is chiefly notable for what it does *not* say'³⁷, suiting at best his missionary activities. But since *omitting* is by far more blameworthy than *committing*, Gregory had every reason to worry about the propagandistic potential of Eunomius' *ekthesis*, and decided to cross swords with him again. Thus, he wrote a short treatise named in W. Jaeger's edition *Refutatio Confessionis Eunomii*, which in the collection of J. P. Migne (*PG* 44) has been published as the second among the twelve books *Contra Eunomium*³⁸. Probably three or four seasons before writing his *Refutatio* (winter 383-384), St Gregory composed his 'Answer to Eunomius' Second Book' (identified as *CE* II in Jaeger's edition). There are clear indications that Gregory composed this theological masterpiece in the wake of the second council of Constantinople, when he was relatively old³⁹, and enjoyed a good reputation at the imperial court⁴⁰. *CE* III, which obviously grapples with Eunomius' *Apologia Apologiae* (written, respectively, in 378/9 and 382/3), represents the major source of documentation for Gregory's doctrine of the 'divine names'. Once again, it is noteworthy that Gregory felt obliged to refute systematically Eunomius' works written immediately after the death of St Basil of Caesarea (†379). It is very important to keep in mind the fact that the first clash between the Nicene orthodoxy and the radical Arian doctrine of God becomes

³⁵ Retaliations against the heretics will be taken late in 390.

³⁶ For a detailed presentation of the historical context of the emergence of Eunomius' last writing, see VAGGIONE (1987), 131 sq

³⁷ VAGGIONE (1987), 133

³⁸ The only existing English translation of *CE* follows this division. Thus, Gregory's *Refutatio*, published under the title 'Book II', can be found in NPNF V, pp. 101-134. Details about the tradition of the manuscripts of *Contra Eunomium* can be found in Jaeger's presentation (finely synthesised by R. Vaggione in his introduction to Eunomius' *Expositio Fidei*, op. cit., 138-140).

³⁹ NPNF V, 311b (GNO I. 403. 6-7).

⁴⁰ G. MAY, 'Die Chronologie des Lebens und der Werke des Gregor von Nyssa', 63; also G. MAY, 'Gregor von Nyssa in der Kirchenpolitik seiner Zeit', *Jahrbuch der österreichischen byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 15 (1966), 105-132

public in St Basil's answer to Eunomius' first *Apologia*. St Basil wrote his rejection of Eunomius' ideas sometime between 363/4, 'during his years of monastic solitude at Annesoi'⁴¹). In his first *Liber Apologeticus* (359), 'the logic-chopper' (*ho technologos*) in the neo-Arian party (*synagogē*), bishop of Cyzicus for approximately two years (360/2-64), had made some extremist theological assertions, to which even Arius probably never hoped to bear witness⁴². Following his mentor Aëtius, Eunomius made the central claim that 'ungeneracy' is the *proper name* of God which gives us full knowledge of God's essence, and that such appellation 'is based neither on invention, nor on privation (*mete kat' epinoian mete kata steressin*)'⁴³. In *CE I*, Gregory of Nyssa works out the presuppositions of his Trinitarian theology with an elaborate epistemology, and a correlative theory of language. Gregory only refreshes the questions already tackled by St Basil in his two-fold treatise *Adversus Eunomium*, bringing forth new arguments and dealing at length, especially in his third book, with the problem of theological language and knowledge. But if the genealogy of Gregory's ideas can be, at least in part, traced back to Basil, the much-loathed Eunomius has to be understood in close connection with his not less notorious teacher from Antioch, Aëtius.

Aëtius' Legacy

Most of the contemporary testimonies, save for Philostorgius' biased ecclesiastical history, portrayed Aëtius as an important but very controversial figure of the Church of Antioch. There is a major consensus among Sozomen and Socrates Scholasticus, confirmed by Gregory of Nyssa and Theodoret of Mopseustia, who used in their depiction of Aëtius a rich palette of colours. Born some time at the beginning of the fourth century, Aëtius came from a plebeian background and had to struggle with the social barriers of his time. Having an unmitigated careerist agenda, Aëtius became very early the protégé of a long row of more or less Arian bishops: Paulinus, Eusebius of Caesarea, Leontius of Antioch, Eustathius of Sebaste and, in the event, Eudoxius of Constantinople. His ambition was paralleled by his intelligence, which

⁴¹ VAGGIONE (1987), 5

⁴² On Arius' posterity among the so-called neo-Arians circles, see M. WILES, 'Attitudes to Arius in the Arian Controversy', in M. R. BARNES and D. H. WILLIAMS (eds.), *Arianism after Arius*, (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1993), 31-44

⁴³ A 8, 14

was naturally inclined towards ‘logical studies (*epi tas logikas mathēseis*).’⁴⁴ By coincidence or not, Aëtius developed the same organic empathy towards Arius’ theological ideas, as for the syllogistic exercises, in which he started training himself as a very young student. Looking ahead for success and reputation, Aëtius found early in his life that theological innovations could bring him an easy notoriety. Therefore, he engaged in public disputations, through which he could impress some landlords in search of cheap pedagogues. In Kopecek’s own words, ‘he tended throughout his life to be both enthusiastically aggressive and outspoken.’⁴⁵ In the early 330s, he learned theology from Leontius of Antioch, a priest who followed very faithfully the canon established by the famous Lucian, the biblical exegete. Afterwards, Aëtius went to Alexandria, where he enriched his knowledge of practical arts by studying medicine, logic, and rhetoric. Having all these credentials, it is no wonder that Aëtius fulfilled Eunomius’ gullible search for mastership over his own ideas. Apart from his secular skills, like Arius himself, Aëtius claimed to have inherited spiritual authority from the sacred tradition of the saints (alluding to the martyric death of Lucian⁴⁶). Yet, as Sozomen assures us, ‘many gave him the name of “atheist.”’⁴⁷

By the early 350s, Aëtius had already made himself acquainted Athanasius’ report in *De Decretis*, which emphasised the immovability of the Nicene formulae. He maintained that neither ‘homoousios’ nor ‘ingenerate’ were scriptural, and that the sonship of Christ (confessed by the Gospel) can only be expressed but in two ways: either natural, or adoptive. Any third option was inconsistent, since ‘similarity’ (preferred by Basil of Ancyra *et alii*) between two terms can be established only within a class of congeneric elements. Only the natural sonship of Christ preserved his scriptural designation as ‘icon of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1: 15), or ‘Word of God’ (John 1: 1). Th. Kopecek considers that there is much evidence which ‘suggests that Aëtius reacted to Athanasius’ championing of *homoousios* ca. AD 350 by putting in response the formula “unlikeness.”’⁴⁸ In short, by the late 350’s, Aëtius started professing his ‘Heterousian gospel’⁴⁹ (*to heterousion kerygma*) on the basis of a monotheist model with clear precedent in the Arian theology. For Aëtius, God could only be one, self-sufficient entity, while within the Deity no process of generation was

⁴⁴ PHILOSTORGIUS, *HE* 3. 15

⁴⁵ KOPECEK, *History of Neo-Arianism*, 67

⁴⁶ also EUNOMIUS, *Apol.* 12. 1-6

⁴⁷ SOZOMEN, *HE* 3. 15

⁴⁸ KOPECEK, *History of Neo-Arianism*, 116

imaginable. He claimed that ‘the ingenerate *is* his own essence (*autoousia*)’⁵⁰. Yet, Aëtius differed from Arius by maintaining between the Father and the Son not only an ontological gulf, but also a gnoseological difference. Following the philosophical principle (which, somehow, recapitulates the structure of the Cartesian ‘ontological argument’), which says that any active cause is greater in being than the passively caused product⁵¹, Aëtius refused to the Son any equality with the Father. To Christ is acknowledged just a moral perfection, since he ‘preserves the pure will of God’⁵². It is interesting to see how, claiming that only the ingenerate is God, Aëtius had to conclude, that the Son of Mary was certainly not dual-willed.⁵³ In the fifth sentence of the *Syntagmation* (which originally included 300 statements, out of which only 47 were preserved), Aëtius explicitly says that ‘his nature must be one (*mia*)’, and so must his human will. Holding to the hard line of Jewish monotheism, Aëtius consequently supported Christological monothelism, which was three centuries later was condemned by the Church at the Council of Constantinople (680).

As a consequence of his ineffective soteriology and adoptive Christology, Aëtius also held particular ideas about the scriptural language about God. The sonship of Christ being adoptive, the relationship Father/Son was understood in terms of a providential act of carefulness, which God shows in the economy of creation. Among Christ’s titles, no one could discern, in Aëtius’ eyes, any relationship of consubstantiality. In a memorandum issued by Basil of Ancyra in order to defend the scriptural language Father/Son (against any substitution with abstract terms), many of the statements made by the radical Arians are recorded *verbatim*. We learn that they were happy with the doctrine of likeness if it was to bear this emendation: ‘not in essence, but in the relation of will (*ou kata tēn ousian, alla kata ton tēs thelēseōs logon*).’⁵⁴ The radical Arians, headed by Aëtius and Eudoxius, were also against the ascription of ‘infinity’ to the Son, and claimed that ‘the name “Father” is not revelatory of essence (*ousia*), but of power (*exousia*), which made the Son to exist as a hypostasis before the ages as God the Word (*hypostasēs ton hyon pro aiōnōn theon logon*).’⁵⁵ The argument was that: ‘If they [*ie* the Orthodox] wish that “Father” be

⁴⁹ EPIPHANIUS, *Panarion* 73. 21. 4 (294)

⁵⁰ *Panarion*, 76. 11. 18 (356)

⁵¹ *Panarion*, 76.11. 8 (353)

⁵² *Panarion*, 73. 21. 3 (293)

⁵³ KOPECEK, *op. cit.*, 130

⁵⁴ *ibidem*, 185

⁵⁵ *idem*

revelatory of essence (*ousias*), but not of power (*exousias*), let them address also the hypostasis of the Uniquely-Generated by the name Father.’⁵⁶ In short, Aëtius refused to understand that the Father and the Son could have the same essence, while they bear different and not interchangeable names. There is an obvious inconsistency in saying that one name (*ie*: ‘ingenerate’) defines essence, while the rest of the others (*ie*: Father, Son) express relations of activity or passivity (to beget, to be begotten). This criticism becomes even more acute when one considers that ‘ingenerate’ (*agennetos*) is not a scriptural name for God, as it is the case with the names of Father and Son. But, as has been already noted⁵⁷, Aëtius, despite his claims⁵⁸, had little concern to ground his theological doctrine on a scriptural basis, while he preferred to set in motion ideas more close to the Aristotelian canon of thinking. Aëtius’ metaphysical model was regarded as mandatory by his direct disciple Eunomius. In order to understand the roots of his conflict with the Cappadocian Fathers, a closer look at Eunomius’ biography and ideas is essential.

Eunomius of Cyzicus

Eunomius is well known as the *bête noire* of the neo-Arian movement, against whom more famous authors – from Basil the Great to Theodore of Mopsuestia – wrote long polemical treatises. R. P. Vaggione is the author of Eunomius’ most detailed picture, which in fact is based on much of the sympathetic account given by Philostorgius’ in *Historia Ecclesiastica*. From Vaggione’s monograph, we learn that he was born ‘toward the middle of the second decade of the fourth century’⁵⁹ in the north-west region of the province of Cappadocia. Born into a family of modest condition (unjustly patronized in the prose of his enemies), Eunomius, who enjoyed a Christian background, served as a pedagogue at a quite young age. By the early ‘340s, it is very likely that Eunomius looked for a better education in the new city of Constantine the Great. There, Eunomius might have got to know about the passionate theological disputes over the nature of Christ, which after the death of the emperor

⁵⁶ *ibidem*, 186

⁵⁷ HANSON, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 610-611

⁵⁸ AËTIUS, *Syntagmation*, *intro*: ‘my little discourse is in accordance with the meaning of the Holy Scriptures (*kat’ ennoian tōn agiōn graphōn*); cf L. R. WICKHAM, ‘The Syntagmation of Aëtius the Anomoean’, *JTS* 19 (1968), 532-68, here 545

had been suddenly refreshed. In the capital of the Empire, the results of Nicaea were largely contested. In terms of private matters, Eunomius' stay on the Bosphoros was not very successful, so that by 346 he was in Antioch. Having a population of almost 200 000, this *polis* of Asia Minor could compete fairly well by that time with the imperial cities of Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople. Antioch could provide the best opportunities for students willing to pursue a course in rhetoric, the prestige of which was still undisputed among philosophers and theologians alike. There, Eunomius found first Aëtius. Eunomius' fate was determined by this decisive encounter with Aëtius, whose disciple he remained up to the end of his life.

By the late 340s, Eunomius encountered the Alexandrine theological milieu, from which both the presbyter Arius and the bishop Athanasius emerged as major opponents, much earlier. Eunomius became a more important figure in the late 350s. In the eyes of Constantius, who died by 361, Eunomius and Aëtius were two undesirable troublemakers who obstructed the emergence of the moderate Arian compromise. On the feast of Epiphany January 6 by 361, Eunomius scandalised his congregation from Cyzicus, when he mentioned that *Theotokos* had borne children to Joseph after Christ's nativity. Since told by Philostorgius⁶⁰ (ally of Eunomius' doctrine), this story satisfies all the criteria of credibility. By maintaining this position, Eunomius confirms that, in general, the understanding of Christ's incarnation dictates the formulation of the dogma of Trinity. Carefully analysing this episode, one can catch a glimpse of Eunomius' concept of holiness, in contrast with the defenders of Nicaea⁶¹ (who ultimately invoked deification as the last consequence of Christ's incarnation⁶²). For Gregory, the narrative of Christ included as a natural stage the moment of virginal birth⁶³, whereas Eunomius was ready to acknowledge it only as a miraculous event⁶⁴, which after Jesus' birth ceased. This story shows Eunomius very prone to doubt, having a sectarian reading of the Scriptures, trying to find rationalistic explanation for crucial elements of the revelation.

The leaders of the Anomeans suffered exile for more than a year, and only the reign of Julian the Apostate brought them back onto the ecclesiastical scene. It took very little for Aëtius and Eunomius to recover from the disgrace suffered under

⁵⁹ VAGGIONE, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 2

⁶⁰ PHILOSTORGIUS, *HE* 6. 2 (GCS 71. 3-9)

⁶¹ GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Ep.* 101 (PG 37, 177 C 4-6).

⁶² ATHANASIUS, *On the Incarnation* 43; GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *Letter* 101. 32

⁶³ *De Virg.* XIII (PG 46, 377D); *Ep.* 3. 24 (PG 46. 1022A).

Constantius: the first one became bishop without see somewhere in Libya, while the latter was appointed bishop of Cyzicus. Vaggione tells us that their teaching did not satisfy the interests of some prestigious Arian leaders in the West (e.g.: Wulfila), who were spreading the Gospel without paying too much attention to Eunomius' celebrated *akribeia*. (Vaggione pointed out that one of the constant leit-motifs in Eunomius' writings is 'precision' (*akribeia*), which means not only doctrinal correctness, but also fidelity towards what, allegedly, the former teachers of the Church believed). After the death of Julian (361-363), Jovian (363-364) took power. A defender of Nicaea, he did not pursue any violent policy *adversus haereses*. His successor Valens railed, for not less than fourteen years (364-378), against Nicaea. But political intrigues and the lack of support of the Homoians (Basil of Ancyra and Eusthatius), brought Eunomius again into trouble. Though exiled in Naxos, he managed to write his second *Apologia*, in a comprehensive refutation of Basil's treatise *contra Eunomium*. The accession of the Spanish officer Theodosius to the imperial throne ensured that Eunomius' days were numbered. Theodosius' reign records a theological offensive against neo-Arianism, conducted in first instance by Gregory of Nyssa (Basil's youngest brother) and Gregory of Nazianzus ('the Theologian'). After the decisions taken at Constantinople in 381 confirming the documents of Nicaea, little hope remained for Eunomius. The seventh canon of this second ecumenical council required a new baptism of every member of the Eunomian community who wanted to be reconciled with the Catholic Church. This was an extremely severe measure which, interestingly enough, did not apply to the genuine Arians (admitted to the Church provided that they had accepted the orthodox Creed).

In June 383, Eunomius was given the last chance to be admitted to 'the great Church'. The Emperor, who used to 'speak loudly and carry a big stick'⁶⁵, wanted a peaceful extinction of all the ecclesiastical and civil clamours around Nicaea's creed. Though dressed in finical biblical language, omitting completely *agenmetos*, Eunomius' *Expositio Fidei* did not convince the Emperor. It seemed that Eunomius' fate was 'neither to die a martyr like Lucian, nor receive burial like Arius'⁶⁶. He could not even die like a Roman poet (*ie*: Ovid) in the remote province of Scythia Minor. Vaggione inspiringly tells us the story: 'during the summer of 389 Eunomius was

⁶⁴ A I, 27. 7

⁶⁵ SOZOMENOS, *HE* 7. 12, 11-12

⁶⁶ VAGGIONE, *Eunomium of Cyzicus*, 351

arrested at Chalcedon and exiled at Halmyris, an appropriately named fortress on the salt-flats of Danube delta. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), before Eunomius could actually arrive the river froze and the barbarians crossed over and captured the fort⁶⁷. In the spring of the next year, Eunomius was sent to Caesarea in Asia Minor, and in the meantime, the implacable process of the extinction of all the non-Nicene ecclesiastical factions started. In 396, consumed with rage over his bitter past, Eunomius died like an old ‘troglydyte’, hoping probably only for heavenly consolations.

Eunomius’ Double *Apologies*

According to Th. Kopecek’s arguments, Eunomius’ *First Apology* was probably delivered in public at Constantinople (359), when the moderate Arians (‘homoians’) met the radical wing of the ‘Anomeans’. The first *Apologia* sets out the whole premise of Eunomius’ thinking, displaying his passionate conviction that by his arguments, he only ‘honours the teaching of our Saviour Jesus Christ’⁶⁸, kept in the ‘governing tradition of the fathers’. In not more than three sentences, Eunomius made known the tenets of his faith, which, though different from what Nicaea had established in 325, looked, at least at the first glance, very biblical and unproblematic. Speaking on behalf of his community, Eunomius said:

We believe in one God, Father almighty, from whom are all things
(*ex ou ta panta*)

And in one only-begotten (*eis hena monogenē*) Son of God, God the Word (*theon logon*), our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things (*di’ ou ta panta*)

And in one Holy Spirit, the Counsellor (*ton paraklēton*), in whom is given to each of the saints an apportionment of every grace according to measure for the common good⁶⁹

Yet, the real meaning of this confession of faith comes in the subsequent lines, where Eunomius explained his understanding of such expressions as ‘all things’, or ‘the Only-begotten’. Apparently, in Eunomius’ phrase, the ‘fatherhood’ ascribed to

⁶⁷ VAGGIONE, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 356

⁶⁸ A I. 2. 6

⁶⁹ A I. 5. 1-7

the one God is the generic attribute of his providence over the creation. Yet, Eunomius disclosed his thinking when he said:

Anything which can be said to come into existence by the action of another (*hyph' heterou*) – granted that this is in fact the case – has itself to be placed among created beings, and must properly be ranked among things which have come into existence by the action of God⁷⁰

For him, the criterion for this analytic judgement is 'the innate knowledge' (*kata te physikēn ennoian*). If the Scriptures speak about Christ being begotten, this process is to be understood, in Eunomius' eyes, just as another way of bringing something (i.e.: the Logos) into being. It is not the only place where Eunomius' makes of 'being' or 'existence' the ultimate category of thought. He could not possibly imagine in God any activity that prevails over the concept existence, as was the case with, respectively, the Only-begotten Son, and the Holy Spirit who proceeded from the Father. On the contrary, for the Nicene theologians, 'to be' was not the last attribute for God. The Son could be born and yet, not *brought* into being *from* (real or notional) non-existence; the Holy Spirit could be proceeded, and yet, not brought into life *from* (real or notional) nothingness. For Eunomius, since the Son is begotten, he must have been non-existent once upon a time⁷¹. God himself can only be 'the unbegotten essence' (*ousia agennētos*), an appellation by which he thinks he acknowledges God as 'the one who is' (*tēn tou einai ho estin homologian*).⁷² Very obviously, Eunomius changes here the tonality and talks about the Trinity not as about the awe-inspiring and great mystery of the Christian faith, but of a sequential Triad, which he described dialectically, rather than prayerfully. Eunomius wants to bring Trinity into the realm of evidence, and his best image of God is that of a supreme Monad. In fact, Eunomius does not speak at all, in any of his writings, about the Holy Trinity, while suggesting that the assessment of consubstantiality cannot avoid the heresy of Sabellius and Marcellus of Ancyra, who 'have been excluded from the priestly assemblies, fellowship of the sacraments (*koinōnias mysteriōn*).'⁷³ (No reader should be misled by this statement, since, by the early 350s, the Anomeans themselves cut off any liturgical relationship with the Nicene communities. Aëtius and

⁷⁰ A I. 7. 7-9

⁷¹ A I. 14. 15-22

⁷² A I. 8. 3

⁷³ A I. 6. 14-15.

Eunomius shared the same situation with the Sabellians and the followers of Marcellus.)

Eunomius' major problem was with the appellation of God as Father, which was justified by Jesus' own teaching about prayer. To accept fatherhood as a natural attribute of God meant for Eunomius that God was somehow involved in 'the passion of a communication of essence (*to tēs metousias pathos epi theou dia tēn tou patros prosēgorian*)'⁷⁴. Therefore, he could explain the generation of the Son only as an act of creation, which from the philosophical viewpoint remained problematic. In his *CE I*, Gregory repeatedly reproached Eunomius for having introduced a double causality in God, as was suggested by loose expressions such as: 'he [the Only-Begotten] alone was begotten and created [*gennētheis kai ktistheis*] by the power of the Unbegotten [*monos gar tē tou agennētou dunamei*].'⁷⁵ Gregory claimed that, instead of simplifying the scheme, Eunomius made it more complicated, introducing between God and the Only-Begotten another mediating structure, namely 'the divine power'; after God begot his Son, Eunomius presumes that the Son is charged with second-hand demiurgic responsibilities, like that of creating the angels⁷⁶. Yet, he remains 'offspring' (*gennēma*) and 'thing made' (*poiēma*), essentially different from God.

As we have seen, Eunomius introduces already in the first *Apologia* some stark statements about the nature of language. In paragraph 18, we learn that 'since the names are different, the essences are different as well [*parēllagmēnōn tōn onomatōn parēllagmenas homologeîn kai tas ousias*]'⁷⁷. In other words, 'the designations in fact indicate the very essences [*einai tōn ousiōn sēmantikas tas prosēgorias*].'⁷⁸ Eunomius had to answer the problem raised by the indiscriminate scriptural usage of words like 'life', 'power', or 'light' about God and the Only-Begotten, respectively. His answer is that there is a specific light to God the Father, distinct from the one the Son reveals. It is obvious that Eunomius thinks the begetting of the Son in analogy with the other demiurgic actions, about which he says that they are 'neither without beginning (*ouk anarchon*), nor without ending (*out' ateleutēton*).'⁷⁹ An 'eternal begetting' of the Son is beyond Eunomius' power of comprehension. He prefers, therefore, to compare the

⁷⁴ A I. 16. 8-9

⁷⁵ A I. 15. 15-16

⁷⁶ A I. 17. 11

⁷⁷ A I. 18. 13-14

⁷⁸ A I. 18. 20

⁷⁹ A I. 23. 6-7

begetting to the process of mirroring⁸⁰. Christ is the ‘image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 15: 15), a definition which, read in Platonic terms, could very easily imply an ontological degradation. In short, for Eunomius, the name Father designates the activity of God, which has a beginning and an end, while ‘agenetos’ designates what God is *in se*.

Eunomius’ first *Apology* was thoroughly refuted by Gregory of Nyssa in his *CE I*. In this book Gregory introduces for the first time his famous argument about the Son’s eternal generation by reference to the divine *infinity*. Gregory had to defend what could be called the asymmetrical relationship between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, respectively. He had to show that this asymmetry of relation does not entail any form of subordinationism or emanationism. In the wake of Basil the Great, Gregory undertook the difficult task of speaking about the fellowship or the community of substance (*to koinon tēs ousias*)⁸¹ within the Holy Trinity and, in the meantime, of dismissing any intellectual enquiry into the nature of God. How this affected the use of the scriptural language became clearer only in *CE III*.

In his second *Apologia*, Eunomius reiterated Aëtius’s general opinions about God, in particular the idea that the divine essence is encapsulated by the concept of ‘ungeneracy’. This statement was the laughing stock of Gregory’s third book *CE III*, and the object of an impressive philosophical deconstruction, framed by stark theological references to the Scriptures and tradition (the latter being for Gregory paradigmatically incarnated in the person of Basil). At the very beginning of *CE III*, Gregory identifies the conundrum: ‘Our opponents [*scil.*: Aëtius and Eunomius], with an eye to the evil object, that of establishing their denial of the Godhead of the Only-begotten, do not say that the essence of the Father is ingenerate, but, conversely, they declare ungeneracy to be his essence, in order that by this distinction in regard to generation, they may establish, by the verbal opposition, a diversity of natures.’⁸² In other words, Eunomius tried to find an attribute of the Father which, *eo ipso*, could not be assigned to the Son. This was, of course, *ungeneracy*, which for Eunomius, as well as for Gregory, meant ‘without origin’. If Gregory – along with the previous Church

⁸⁰ A I. 14 6-14

⁸¹ NPNF V, 79b (GNO I. 165, 10)

⁸² NPNF V, 252a (GNO I. 232. 26-233.1)

Fathers⁸³ – had no problems in admitting it as one of the names ascribable to the Father, he objects to Eunomius’ readiness to transform this qualification into the only legitimate one, on behalf of God. One has to admit that Gregory’s claim was not easily understandable: for him, as for Basil, God could be called ‘agennētos’ but his essence should not be identified with ‘ungeneracy’ since the Son – ‘gennetos’ *per se* – was *homoousios* with the ‘ingenerate Deity’. The only possibility of understanding this dogmatic statement was through what S. Kierkegaard would have called ‘the jump into paradox’. But why, among divine names, should ‘ungeneracy’ have priority over other attributes like ‘simplicity’, ‘infinite’, ‘righteousness’, etc.? On the one hand, Eunomius seems to specify an essential attribute that could unfold all the other attributes of God. What Gregory is concerned about is that Eunomius professes ‘ungeneracy’ as *the* divine attribute, precisely because it cannot be ascribed to the Son. As one can easily see, Eunomius’ trick was not to plainly reject Christ’s divinity on the basis of scriptural evidence – an impossible task since Scriptures are *always* to be interpreted – but to do it from a different angle. Pretending to proceed methodically, starting from a low level of philosophical reflection, in fact Eunomius excluded *ab initio* from his deductive scheme the full participation of the Son in God’s essence.

A Search not for Doctrine, but for Truth

The above-sketched overview shows the quite discouraging complexity of the theological controversies of the fourth century in which Gregory of Nyssa took part. Even the little information provided shows that, *pace* A. von Harnack, it is no more possible to regard the Nicene Creed as an expression of Hellenistic culture triumphing over the Jewish scriptural heritage. This thesis can be easily contradicted if one thinks how deeply Hellenised was the philosophical culture of Aëtius and Eunomius, and how, on the side of the Nicaea, the non-philosophical, poetic theology of Ephrem the Syrian could defend the orthodox Creed. It would probably be insufficient to say, as R. Williams does⁸⁴, that ‘orthodoxy’ was made possible only by the Emperor

⁸³ JUSTIN THE MARTYR, *Dial.* V. 4 (PG 6, 488B); ORIGEN, *De princ.* IV. 1 (PG 11, 357C); *agennetos* (‘unborn’ < *gennaō* = to beget) has been often confused with *agenetos* (‘uncreated’ < *gignomai* = to come into being).

⁸⁴ R. WILLIAMS, *Arius*, 91: ‘The Constantinian synthesis was in the long run destructive of both the “Catholic” and the “Academic” senses of the Church in most of the Christian world.’

Constantine's decision to put the ecclesiastical disputes on his political agenda. One can hardly imagine any circumstance in which Church representatives could avoid dealing with the subjective idiosyncrasies of one or another Caesar, Christian or not. One of the consequences of the Incarnation is that separation from the political realm is not possible for a Christian Church which professes 'orthodoxy' and 'catholicity'. Even less convincing is the argument of F. Young who claims that 'orthodoxy entails violence'⁸⁵. To say that is a way of deploring the idea of truth, which is *by definition* correlated with the notion of error. It is also incorrect, since the history of Christianity provides examples of tolerant and orthodox emperors (like Jovian), as well as non-orthodox (Julian the Apostate). Within the social sphere, the Christian idea of 'orthodoxy' no more entails violence anymore than the political idea of 'monarchy' in the contemporary world.

Before even thinking of establishing a doctrine of God, Gregory and Eunomius were searching for truth. They thought that theological ideas could therefore be either right or wrong. But the postmodernist allergy against concepts as 'truth' and 'error' make us very often unable to understand appropriately the passionate struggle of the ancients to defend their position: though hard enemies, Gregory of Nyssa and Eunomius of Cyzicus shared the same vision about the compulsive need to know the truth. It is hard to understand the patronising attitude of some contemporary scholars who believe that this search for truth entails violence, as if the Church was not born through Christ's crucifixion. It is even less comprehensible how one can envisage the achievement of orthodoxy as the irrational or, at best, the hazardous result of an indefinite number of causalities. Since Nietzsche wrote his (false) genealogy of morals, far too many theologians refuse to acknowledge the existence of *facts*, and not only of *interpretations*. The conviction that we know more than the actors in the events of the fourth century, makes possible the presentation of the 'development of Christian doctrine' in terms of intellectual emancipation. It is quite perplexing to see the confidence of so many contemporary scholars who depict the fourth century controversies as a mere fruit of mutual misunderstanding.

R. P. Vaggione, for example, is sympathetic to Eunomius just because he was the loser, and this very fact prevents him from questioning the value of his theology. Vaggione found the sustained activities of the heretics to be a *felix culpa*, since they

⁸⁵ F. YOUNG, *The Making of the Creeds* (London: SCM, 2002), 15: 'the "idea" of orthodoxy cannot but

stimulated the creativity of the orthodox theologians. This means forcing an answer to the question of theodicy, which goes far beyond the competence of modern Patristic scholarship. To spell out the Arian controversies as a fruit of reciprocal misapprehension is to suggest that historical distance and theological neutrality allows us to understand *better* the true rationales of their disputes. Yet, distance is not only the condition of visibility, but also a test for myopia. Vaggione also tried to explain the success of the Nicene Creed by emphasising two elements. First, was the relative flexibility of language practised by Athanasius and his followers (contrary to Eunomius' obsession with *akribeia*), and second, the capacity of the Nicene theologians to capture the imagination of simple people. Sociologically, both points are valid, but they still need a deeper analysis of the conditions of possibility for the Nicene success. Let us weigh up what stands behind Vaggione's insightful remarks.

The first clue referring to the idiomatic flexibility is best seen in the transformation of the concepts of *ousia* and *hypostasis* from Athanasius' writing into the Cappadocian theology. The instatement of *homoousios* at Nicaea as the watchword of orthodoxy lacked the appropriate hermeneutic package, which could deter any suspicion of modalism in Athanasius' Trinitarian theology. In other words, *the context of the emergence for homoousios was not identical with the context of its final justification*. The long and necessary period between 325-350 AD unfolded and articulated the potential typologies of the non-orthodox Trinitarian theology. In the 350s, the moderate Arians (Homoians) showed interest in the theology of Nicaea and the Emperor blustered against Aëtius and Eunomius, who were even more innovative in their language and conceptions. In between 361-378, 'the Nicenes seized the initiative by distinguishing between *ousia* and *hypostasis*,'⁸⁶ while the Anomeans adopted a more defensive position. When Theodosius the Great (who, unlike Constantine, was baptised by an orthodox bishop, Ascholius) took power, the church of Eunomius could be regarded only as a sectarian movement, which had to be disciplined in the interests of peace within the Empire. Vaggione's second point could make even clearer the already emphasised efficacy of rhetoric (masterly handled by the Cappadocian Fathers) against dialectics (stubbornly wasted in the writings of Aëtius and Eunomius). Still, the methodologies of persuasion used by the fourth century competitors cannot be separated from the substance of their argument and,

breed intolerance'

moreover, from the question of authority. Whence did the Nicene theologians gain the immensely influential power of their discourse? To say 'from the Scriptures' would be simply too easy, though it is obvious that Basil and Gregory were better versed in the Scriptures, and were therefore better placed to talk about their letter and Spirit. In principle, but not always in exegetical practice, Eunomius and the Nicene theologians shared the same belief in the unity of the Scriptures (the Old and the New Testament) so that, in this respect, 'their problem was neither canonical, nor textual'⁸⁷. It is very likely that, at Antioch, Aëtius initiated Eunomius into the study of the Scriptures, though he never showed the same comprehensive knowledge of it as the Cappadocian Fathers. Eunomius genuinely willed to buttress his theological and philosophical statements with biblical references. However, his interpretation of some key passages regarding the divine Logos in relationship to God was substantially different from that of the Nicene theologians. Lack of congruence in biblical hermeneutics reflected (if did not derive from) huge disagreements on other theological or philosophical issues.

Yet, I think it would be wrong to believe that, if Aëtius and Eunomius too had a more elastic language, and used more abundantly scriptural images, the Nicene theologians would have failed. Beyond this narrative embodiment of theology, there was at stake something to do with real life. I would use here Max Weber's terms to describe the 'charismatic' authority that Athanasius and Basil in particular enjoyed within the vast majority of lay and monastic circles. In the person of these leaders, who were both monks and bishops, the potential 'anarchism' of any exclusive 'charismatic' determination of the Church authority was balanced by the doctrinal 'routine', which had to remain always a visible sign of orthodoxy. The solidarity between monasticism and the Nicene theologians lies in something deeper than these sociological categories can express. The reasons for the success of orthodoxy are simply theological. When Athanasius and the Cappadocians defended the orthodox doctrine of incarnation, they appealed to the concept of deification (*theosis*), which was already the supreme goal of the monastic life. The hermits of the desert could recognise the 'orthodox' doctrine about Christ by detecting this crucial concept of deification, which was at work in their daily life. Only transfiguration (*metamorphosis*) in Christ made meaningful the orthodox soteriology, and not the mere talk about participation in God. Vaggione tries to situate Eunomius in the

⁸⁶ VAGGIONE, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 377

context of the urban forms of monasticism, but one thing remains sure: neither Eunomius, nor Aëtius, had such a genuine interest in the contemplative life as St Basil or anybody in his natural and spiritual family. Perhaps Vaggione could have drawn more conclusions from such a comparison: not only the hermeneutics of Scripture and their outlook on philosophy divided the neo-Arians and the Cappadocian Fathers, but also their understanding of prayer, asceticism and mystical theology, which all enjoyed huge respect in the countryside⁸⁸, where the simple Christians lived and worshipped God. If Gregory of Nyssa professed a 'gnoseological pessimism' (Vl. Lossky), it was because, as we shall see, he understood the doctrine of God's infinity as a call for continual spiritual progression (*epektasis*). Nothing about 'union with God through prayer' can be found in any of Eunomius' writings, which, as we shall see, resemble rather strikingly the arrogance of the epistemological *claims* of some modern metaphysicians, like Spinoza or Hegel.

Vaggione is certainly right in saying that Eunomius' fall (along with the oblivion of Aëtius) in the late '370s was the result of his incapacity to address issues of potential popularity. 'Aëtius and Eunomius were looking to shock, and they succeeded'⁸⁹. Not even in front of the Emperor Constantius (who had no sympathy for the Nicene theologians) did Eunomius gain credibility, due to his essentialist jargon (regarded by the conciliators as the seed of discord)⁹⁰. Contrarily, Gregory of Nyssa proved to have an immense knowledge of the Scriptures, which probably represented the nucleus of the religious imagination of the Christian people by the end of the fourth century. Comparatively, Aëtius' or Eunomius' dry and very speculative prose, in which Christ was hardly mentioned, and which resembled Aristotle's style⁹¹, could hardly convince or capture any religious imagination. Yet, one still needs to emphasise that the reasons for their failure were not accidental, rooted in their wrong strategies of persuasion, but substantial, having to do with the gist of their theology. Apart from his artificial manipulation of the Scriptures, there were two other major points in which Eunomius broke with the former tradition. First, it was his very denial of Christ' essential divinity (confessed by the apostolic Church), and second, his

⁸⁷ VAGGIONE, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 79

⁸⁸ W. H. C. FREMD, 'The Winning of the Countryside', *JEH* 18 (1967), 1-14

⁸⁹ VAGGIONE, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 256

⁹⁰ On Eunomius' vocabulary, see F. MANN, 'Das Vokabular des Eunomius im Kontext Gregors', in L. F. MATEO-SECO and J. L. BASTERO (ed.), *El 'Contra Eunomium I' en la produccion literaria de Grigorio de Nisa* (Pamplona, 1988), 173-202

⁹¹ NPNF V, 313b (GNO I. 407. 25-26)

contempt towards the long-lasting apophatic tradition within Christian theology⁹². Since Clement of Alexandria's time, apophatism was an undisputed conviction shared by virtually all the Christian theologians⁹³. No one before Aëtius and Eunomius imagined a way of knowledge of God parallel to worship and prayer. Moreover, the doctrine of Trinity was not a simple matter of 'imagination', be it for 'experts', or 'pastors'. As I have suggested above, Vaggione could have gained more by taking into consideration another crucial element in the social fabric of Late Antiquity, namely, the commanding function of the 'holy man'⁹⁴. Peter Brown's ideas, worked out by D. Brakke in his research on Athanasius⁹⁵, could help us to understand why *Nicaea* was predestined for victory (*nikē*). *Nicaea* received not only the support of the Egyptian desert Fathers, but also the assistance of the Syrian convents led by Ephrem (much esteemed by Basil the Great), and of the monasteries of Asia Minor. The Cappadocian Fathers were representatives of a kind of 'experiential theology' (J. Romanides⁹⁶), to which Eunomius – as defender of dialectics – did not want to have access. In the Latin-speaking world, Hilary of Poitiers resumed this orthodox exigency in his arresting appeal: 'we must believe, must apprehend, must worship; and such acts of devotion must stand *in lieu* of definition (*credendus est; intelligendus est; et his officiis eloquendus*)'.⁹⁷

Summa summarum, it is very likely that the facts of the second half of the fourth century were much simpler: the battle between Neo-Arianism and Nicene Orthodoxy was conducted by two categories of people, holding two different understandings about *how* the revelation of God in Christ can be effective. *Pace* Vaggione, the radical Arians and the orthodox Nicene disagreed both on theological propositions and on the forms of life that could make these propositions *real*. The Nicene theologians, while espousing the 'maximalist' spirituality of the Desert Fathers, found deification to be the last consequence of the Incarnation. For them

⁹² A. LOUTH, 'Apophatic Theology: Before and After The Areopagite', *Bogosloveni Vestnik* 56 (1996) 3, 297-310

⁹³ JUSTIN THE MARTYR, *Apologia* I. 61 (PG 6, 421b); ATHENAGORAS, *Ad Autolykos* I. 3 (PG 6, 1028c); CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stromates* V. 11. 71. 5 (SC 275, 144 sq); ORIGEN, *Peri archon* I. 1. 5 (PG 11, 124 b-c); ATHANASIUS, *Contra gentes* 36 (PG 25, 69).

⁹⁴ See especially, P. BROWN, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80-101

⁹⁵ D. BRAKKE, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

⁹⁶ J. S. ROMANIDIS, 'Critical Examination of the Application of Theology', *Procès Verbaux du deuxième Congrès de Théologie orthodoxe à Athènes* (19-29 Août, 1976), ed. S. C. AGOURIDES (Athens, 1978), 413-441.

⁹⁷ HILARY, *De Trinitate* II. 7 (PL 10. 57a; NPNF IX, 54b)

salvation meant deification in the perspective of eternal progress in God's eternal love. Contrarily, the radical Arians considered any discourse about Incarnation as conflicting, so that their spirituality could find salvation effective on the moral level of agreement between the human will and God's commandments. Those living the monastic life probably knew first that Christ is more than a model of moral perfection. Gregory of Nyssa's insistent description of life in God being infinite is the perfect proof for the 'maximalist' understanding of salvation. In short, the motives of the success of Nicene orthodoxy are first theological and only secondarily political or sociological. And since the reasons for this achievement are theological and not secular, it would be simply wrong to envisage the fourth century as an epoch in which the Church bishops found themselves in search of the *doctrine* of Christian God. (Very probably, this is the pious consequence of the inner conviction of so many Protestant scholars that Jesus Christ was, above all, a *teacher* professing his doctrine in widely-accepted parables.) It would be even worse to consider the achievement of 'orthodoxy' as an experiment of 'trial and error'⁹⁸. Like Christ's apostles and their immediate heirs, martyred within the first three centuries, the Christian theologians were not in search of a doctrine, but in *search of truth*. To spread the Gospel to the Gentiles meant for St Paul to present the image of Christ in different cultural idioms, which despite their peculiarity were meant to preserve the universality of the unique proclamation. This explains why the elements of Christian doctrine of God stemmed from the earliest times of the Church and could acquire new connotations even one thousand years after Nicaea. The *search for truth* is perennial and therefore the Christian doctrine receives new valences in every age of the Church. 'Development of doctrine', within and beyond the fourth century, represents not the evolution from a primitive stage (of the primitive Church) towards more recent and more intelligent levels of understanding, but the spontaneous process of unfolding of what it is already given in the apostolic confession of Christ as 'God and Lord'.

With these methodological presuppositions, I shall embark on my research of St Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine of language, analysed first in the light of the scriptural and ecclesiastical authority (always bearing in mind his debts towards Basil of Caesarea). I hope to substantiate the claims made in advance through a close reading

⁹⁸ R. P. C. HANSON, 'The Achievement of Orthodoxy' in R. WILLIAMS (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy*, 153

of Gregory's most commanding writings, which made him being praised as 'teacher of the world (*ho tēs oikoumēnes didaskalos*)'⁹⁹ and 'Father of the Fathers.'¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ MAXIMUS CONFESSOR, *Op. theol.* (PG 91, 161)

¹⁰⁰ MANSI 13, 293.

II. THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Background

Unlike Denys the Areopagite, who in the fifth-sixth century wrote the short but prominent treatise on the *Divine Names*, or St Augustine, who is the first Christian author who worked out systematically the principles of semiotics inherited from the Stoic philosophy¹, Gregory of Nyssa dealt rather circumstantially with this subject, in an oblique way. Like all his predecessors, Gregory spelt out his ideas about the nature of language in direct relation to the hermeneutics of the Scriptures, which shaped all the theological debates of their age. Since Gregory was not a philosopher, language could not have been a self-standing issue for him. His references to Babel's story (Genesis 11: 1-9), or to Adam's endowment with the power of naming the creatures (Genesis 1: 26-31; 2: 15-25)² emerge in a context primarily loaded by doctrinal, and not strictly exegetical interests. Especially with the Alexandrine thinkers (like Philo of Alexandria³, or Origen⁴), exegesis gave way for deeper theological consideration. Instead, Gregory tackled the problem of language and develops its correlative epistemology in the context of the elaboration of his Trinitarian theology. Nevertheless, his contributions represent a milestone in the history of Christian thinking. As it happens with almost every important theologian of the early Church, Gregory's theological ideas are sown throughout all of his hermeneutical work on the Scriptures. The modern reader is struck by Gregory's immense knowledge of the Scriptures, which shape his theological thought from *alpha* to *omega*. Whether he had to build up the orthodox principles of dogmatic theology – especially in his *CE I* –, or compose ascetic homilies for the Cappadocian (lay or monastic) congregations, Gregory drew heavily on the words of the Scriptures. In this respect, more than Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus – who in 358 edited the famous *Philokalia* – Gregory of Nyssa seems to be the true heir of Origen in Cappadocia. It is significant that he started his career in theology writing commentaries on various texts of the

¹ For a brief and elucidating exposition, see A. LOUTH, 'Augustine on language', *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3 (1989) 2, 151-158

² Useful references (except for Gregory's work) are given in A. LOUTH and M. CONTI (ed.), *Genesis 1-11. Ancient Commentaries of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

³ PHILO, *Quaestiones in Genesim et in Exodum. Fragm. Graeca; De confusione linguarum*, passim

Gospel (*The Beatitudes* came among the first), ending his life by composing the exquisite homilies on the *Song of the Songs* (with explicit reference to Origen). What the Scriptures offered to him was the possibility of contemplating God's glory, brought to fulfilment in Jesus Christ. One can catch the same glimpse by reading even the most speculative books of Gregory, such as the bulky, three-fold treatise *Contra Eunomium*. *CE* has the strongest philosophical input among Gregory's writings, laying down weighty epistemological arguments against the doctrine of the Anomeans. Yet, it would be a mistake to isolate its content and purpose from Gregory's previous works, which prove a decisive interest in ascetic theology and biblical hermeneutics. To speak about Gregory's Trinitarian theology without understanding first the place which confession of Christ took in his life, would be simply wrong. Though born in a pious family – his grandmother Macrina the Elder being a Christian ascetic –, and having a brother like Basil of Caesarea and a sister like Macrina the Younger, Gregory did not embrace Church life from the very beginning⁵. Only after he spent much of his youth in the tiny town of Nyssa⁶ as a lawyer⁷, did Gregory convert to Christ. The date of his baptism is unknown, but we at least can be sure that he was consecrated bishop of Nyssa in the early '370s (by then, Gregory was in his late '30s).

One has to bear in mind that, as with all the apostolic fathers, Christ is at the heart of Gregory's theology, which centrality is beyond any of his more or less systematic philosophical commitments. Christ's divinity is the hypothesis of Gregory's theology, worked out through a myriad of Scriptural references⁸. It might be useful to recall that in the fourth century Scripture received its canonical and definitive form for the Christian Church, remaining unquestioned until the dawn of Reformation in the West. By 'the Scriptures' Gregory understood not only the corpus of the Old Testament, but also, the unmistakable Gospel of Jesus Christ, in whom God has revealed himself to us as Father.

⁴ *Contra Celsum* IV, 33-34; V, 45

⁵ J. DANIELOU, 'Le mariage de Grégoire de Nysse et la chronologie de sa vie', *REA* 2 (1956) 71-78; J. DANIELOU also wrote about Gregory's life in the introduction to H. MUSURILLO (ed.), *From Glory to Glory. Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* ET by H. Musurillo SJ (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 3-10; see T. KOPECEK, 'The Social Class of the Cappadocian Fathers', *Church History* 42 (1973), 453-66

⁶ P. MARAVAL, 'Nysse en Cappadoce', *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 55 (1975) 2, 237-247

⁷ GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Ep.* 11. 4 (ed. Gallay, 1. 17)

⁸ JAMES A. BROOKS, *The New Testament Text of Gregory of Nyssa* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).

The Scriptural Grammar

During the first three centuries, the Scriptures raised many questions, for which the theologians hoped to find answers in the same Scriptures. It was not easy to harmonise many contradictory passages from the Scriptures. Allegorical exegesis was, of course, a general solution to solve textual conflicts, but it remained only a neutral tool ready to serve any theological purpose. Before proceeding to any form of biblical exegesis, one had to answer a single question: was Christ's lordship given in time, by adoption, or by nature, before all ages?

With this question, one touches the heart of the theological discussions surrounding the council of Nicaea and the condemnation of Arius' theology. Ironically, there was no ground for discord between the Nicene and the Arian theologians when they referred to the inspired character of the Scriptures. Being very much against the subversive approach of the Gnostics, both ecclesiastical parties regarded the Scriptures to be right in their form. The unity of the Old and the New Testament was undisputed among them, and, in general, the canon the New Testament was mutually accepted. The Arian crisis stands for the most eloquent evidence of the general agreement existing on the foundational role of Scripture and tradition in the early Church. Arius was described as 'a teacher of ideas and an interpreter of Scripture'⁹ and even, in certain respects (like his apophatic approach in theology and epistemology), as a 'traditionalist' theologian. In 359, Eunomius of Cyzicus could also claim that his teaching was guided by nothing else than the 'pious and governing tradition which has come down from the fathers (*tēn de kratousan anōthen ek tōn paterōn eusebē paradosin*)'¹⁰. Obviously, for the Cappadocian fathers and for the *maître penseur* of the Anomean party, tradition meant something different, but this misrepresentation is not very surprising. The 'right' interpretation of Scripture was at stake in the polemics between the Arians theologians and the defenders of Nicaea. Rowan Williams appreciated that the Arian controversy 'began in the discussion of a disputed passage in the 'divine law''¹¹, which obviously put under question the identity of Jesus Christ. In the long decades of the fourth century, struggle for

⁹ R. WILLIAMS, *Arius*, 89

¹⁰ A 4. 6-7

¹¹ *Ibidem.*, 107; at stake was the reading of the Proverbs 8:22, Psalm 45:7-8, Isaiah 1:2, etc.

dogmatic orthodoxy epitomised deep hermeneutical divergences: the problem was not the divine origin of Scripture, but her single 'mind' that could explain the undivided meaning of the Old and the New Testament. In their reading of the Scriptures, the Nicene theologians seemed more flexible, since they would admit that texts of the Old Testament could be referred (as prophetic) to events recorded only in the Gospels. For the non-Nicene, such freedom of interpretation was unacceptable. The Nicene Creed established two major points: that Christ is the Only Begotten One 'before all ages' and that the Christ preached by the Church is 'according to the Scriptures'.

What could this possibly mean? The Church confronted again the conundrum of her beginnings: who performed all the deeds ascribed to God in the Old Testament? Who was the subject of the ancient epiphanies recorded in the books of the prophets? Could someone speak about a transcendental *continuum* between the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Christ? If so, does this scriptural unity disclose a peculiar doctrine about God? And, once again, was Christ's lordship adoptive, or of the same nature with the Father? To answer these questions became increasingly important since Christ was addressed as God in the liturgical prayers from the earliest times of the Church. It was, therefore, not merely a theoretical question, but first a practical one, touching the daily life of every Christian believer. Christ's divinity and lordship was a puzzling question for also the Pharisees of the Synagogue in Jerusalem in Jesus' time. An excerpt from the Gospel according to Matthew is extremely telling:

Now, while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question saying: 'What do you think of Christ? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.'

He said to them, 'How is it then that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying,

"The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet? [*Ps* 110: 11]"

If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?"

And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did any one dare to ask him any more questions (Matthew 22: 41-46)

Though Nicaea held together two fundamental sentences (that Christ is 'Lord and God', according to the Scriptures), the way it expressed the doctrine about the unity of God was problematic. The terminology used in order to express the mysterious words of the Prologue of John, had a very strong philosophical flavour. One of the constant objections against the Nicene Creed was the usage of the

ontological language having no almost biblical precedent. For both Athanasius and Basil, at least in the 350s, ‘homoousios’ became the crucial and indispensable theological concept, which could define appropriately Christ’s natural sonship. Later on, with the establishment of the Trinitarian formula ‘*mia ousia, treis hypostasis*’, the famous adjective *homoousios* became ‘the watchword of true orthodoxy in the Church’¹². Of course, this notion has a very complex prehistory in the Greek philosophy and theology, stemming from the semantic field of a metaphysically charged word, namely *ousia*¹³. As a theological concept, *homoousios* had an almost modalist connotation for many of the members of the first ecumenical council, who thought it might express a Trinitarian doctrine similarly to Paul of Samosata’s thought, condemned by the Church in 268/9¹⁴ but likewise revived by Marcellus of Ancyra in 340’s. Significantly enough, an early controversy in the second half of the third century shows bishop Dionysius of Alexandria (200-265) – a disciple of Origen¹⁵ – being very reluctant to accept the usage of *homoousios* (with reference to the Father and the Son) ‘perche non scritturistico’¹⁶. Where Origen was concerned, he eschewed any conceptualisation of the unity between the Father and the Son by using *ousia*, whilst being afraid of the materialistic connotation of this word in the Greek language.¹⁷ By coining this word (*homoousios*) in the Nicene Creed, the orthodox were employing a theological semantics only later clarified by subtle dogmatic distinctions as the one between *ousia* and *hypostasis* (treated thoroughly in Gregory’s famous letters to his brother Peter, formerly attributed to Basil). At the beginning, the advocates of Nicæa had the explicit purpose of stressing Christ’s full participation in God’s divinity, in contrast to Arius’ teaching. By doing so, the Orthodox majority also set an important precedent for the history of Christian doctrine. For their foes, the Greek formula ‘*homoousion tō Patri*’ only proved the insufficiency of the

¹² H. LIETZMANN, *A History of the Early Church* (vol. III), ET by B. L. Woolf (Meridian Books: Cleveland & New York, 1964), 99

¹³ F. RICKEN, ‘Nikaia als Krisis des altchristlichen Platonismus’, *Theol. und Phil.* 44 (1969), 321-341; HANSON, *Search for the Christian Doctrine*, 181-207; C. STEAD, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 190-222

¹⁴ M. SIMONETTI, *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo* (Roma: Institutum Patristicum ‘Augustinianum’, 1975), 92

¹⁵ EUSEBIUS, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6. 29. 4; 6. 35

¹⁶ SIMONETTI, 92

¹⁷ In his *Commentary of John* (13. 149), Origen criticises Gnostic ideas (maintained by Heracleon) about the consubstantiality between elected spirits and God, which might imply identical attributes for both subjects. J. REBECCA LYMAN, ‘Substance Language in Origen and Eusebius’ in ROBERT C. GREGG (ed.), *Arianism. Historical and Theological Reassessments. Papers From the Ninth*

hermeneutical principle of interpretation of Scripture by Scripture, and the need for a speculative complement at every stage of theological reflection. Of course, from the orthodox viewpoint, *homoousios* was designed to interpret philosophically and theologically what the metaphorical language of the Scriptures left in obscurity for some Christian believers. No depreciation of the authority of Scripture stands behind Athanasius' usage of *homoousios*, and yet his enemies could read this decision as potentially downgrading the Scriptures¹⁸. As R. P. C. Hanson noted, 'Athanasius in his *De Synodis* had to meet the objection to the use of the word that the fathers of the Council of Antioch which had condemned Paul of Samosata had also condemned *homoousios*.'¹⁹ Still, Athanasius thought that *homoousios*, while following 'the mind (*dianoia*) of the Scriptures'²⁰, could succinctly express the ontological status of the Son, who should never be regarded as a creature. We know that the Cappadocian Fathers – St Basil of Caesarea and St Gregory of Nyssa, especially – were not so much keen on using Athanasius' key concept of divine unity²¹. The reason for that might have been a lack of communication between two distant regions of the Byzantine Empire at that time, but also their awareness of the heretical precedents in using this concept. St Basil, for example, suspected that Sabellius used *homoousios* in a false Trinitarian framework of thought, which explains Dionysius of Alexandria's reluctance to use it²².

While being non-scriptural, *homoousios* was intrinsically controversial, facilitating misunderstanding on both sides of the orthodox mainstream (eg: Marcellus of Ancyra vs. Eunomius of Cyzicus). Some evidence of this is provided by the fact that almost all non-Nicene factions clarified their position almost exclusively in relationship with to this term (the paternity of which remains mysterious up to now). The Homoeans represented the middle-way of the so-called 'neo-Arianism' stream in the fourth century; followers of Acacius of Caesarea – like Eustathius of Sebaste and Basil of Ancyra – coined '*homoiousios*' just to affirm the subordination in full

International Conference on Patristic Studies, September 5-10, 1983, Oxford (The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation Ltd., 1985), 257-266

¹⁸ There is evidence for that in ATHANASIUS *De decretis* 18; BASIL, *On the Holy Spirit*, 10. 25, GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Orat* 31. 18, 21

¹⁹ HANSON, *Doctrine of God*, 193

²⁰ ATHANASIUS, *De Decretis Nicæanae Synodi* 21. 2 (18).

²¹ M. R. BARNES, 'The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon' in L. AYRES and G. JONES, *Christian Origins. Theology, Rhetoric and Community* (London: Routledge, 1998), 47-67; J. T. LIENHARD, '*Ousia* and *Hypostasis*: The Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of "One Hypostasis"', in S. T. DAVIES, D. KENDALL and G. O'COLLINS (eds.), *The Trinity* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 99-121

likeness of the Son to the Father. In their turn, the Anomoeans wanted to take Nicaea's ontological formulae as a precedent that could legitimise their own philosophical jargon, in which 'First Essence, Second Essence, and the Third Essence' substituted the Trinitarian name of the 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. In Gregory's eyes, this was abusive, since the intention of Nicaea was to make clear a scriptural idiom, which without 'homoousios' could have remained open to loose interpretation. Athanasius insisted that the rejection of the Son's consubstantiality with the Father entails no third choice, apart from the radical solution of the Anomeans. 'Homoousios' was meant to defend not only the metaphor of 'sonship', but also the image of Christ as 'the icon of the Father'. For Athanasius and the Cappadocians, the philosophical vocabulary was used to express the scriptural grammar of the Christian theology (which eventually was an appeal to deification), whereas for the radical Arians the Scriptures provided only some elements for philosophical speculation within a strange grammar, not entirely baptised in Christian waters.

Gregory's Panoply

From the first, right up to the last chapter of his treatises, Gregory refutes Eunomius' theology with solid arguments from the Scripture. Indeed, what makes Eunomius vulnerable to the accusation of heresy is, in the first instance, his attempt to challenge the biblical doctrine of the names of God with a private philosophy, which transpires to be not only theologically perilous, but also intrinsically contradictory. In principle, for Gregory (as well as for John the Evangelist) 'he who presumes to pervert the Divine utterance (*tēn theian phonen*) by dishonest quibbling (*diakakourgias sophistikēs paratrepein*), the same is "of his father the devil", who leaves the words of truth and "speaks of his own" [John 8: 44].'²³ Whether in dispute with the Macedonians or with the neo-Arians, Gregory detects one rule: the heretics conceive wrong opinions because they reject the Scriptures. Speaking about the sacred tablets (*hieras plakkas*) received by Moses on the mountain of Sinai, Gregory considers them 'a divine invention and a gift, which did not need any human cooperation (*synergias*) in order to be made'. Furthermore, 'both the matter and the

²² BASIL, *Epist.* 9. 3. 1-18

²³ 'NPNF V, 101b (*Ref. Eun.* in GNO II. 313. 17-21)

characters (*charagmata*) were God's deed'²⁴. On the other hand, this immediacy of God's presence in the text of the Scriptures is not obvious, since divine meanings are hidden under a protecting veil (II Corinthians 3: 15) of a semantic obscurity²⁵. Scriptures still need spiritual illumination in order to be properly read and interpreted, and therefore, to become an invaluable nourishment for the believers of the Church. Such an intrepid position is of no wonder, if we take into consideration the great amount of scriptural exegesis provided by Gregory during his lifetime. The emphasis put on the Scriptures also reveals a very important characteristic of Gregory's theological epistemology. Allegiance to Scripture acknowledges the primacy of God's revelation, and its active role in shaping our understanding of his infinite mystery. This is the *raison d'être* of the experience of faith within tradition²⁶ and Gregory fully supports this position, grounding it in at least two reasons.

The first is his philosophical commitment to what Vladimir Lossky once called the 'pessimistic gnoseology'²⁷, generally ascribed to the Cappadocian fathers. This is due to Gregory's conviction that the entire creation is marked – at least in its post-lapsarian history – by corruption, perfectly seized in the experience of temporality. Our epistemological incapacity²⁸ to enjoy the experience of a full self-understanding and even less the comprehension of any other being mirrors perfectly this ontological gap – called *diastema* – within the creation itself²⁹. Our knowledge is obfuscated not only by the opaque materiality of the biological body metaphorically called 'the garments of skin' (*dermatinoi kitones*)³⁰, but because of the generally finite constitution of human being. Though not naturally corrupted, human being is limited

²⁴ *Vit. Moys* I.57.1-4 (PG 45, 321 A5-9; ed. J. Daniélou, SC1bis, 24)

²⁵ NPNF V, 192a (GNO II. 163, 5-25)

²⁶ A. LOUTH, *Discerning the Mystery. On the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) offers a fruitful description of this process.

²⁷ V. LOSSKY, *The Vision of God* translated into English by A. Moorhouse (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Press, 1983), 77; The point was not missed by A. MEREDITH, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Press, 1995), *passim*

²⁸ A comprehensive debate of this topic is given by T. PAUL VERGHESE, 'Diastema and Diastasis in Gregory of Nyssa. Introduction to a Concept and the Posing of a Problem', in H. DOERRIE, M. ALTENBURGER & U. SCHRAMM (ed.), *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie. Zweites Internationales Kolloquium über Gregor von Nyssa (Münster 18-23 September 1972)* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 243-259.

²⁹ Gregory's doctrine of creation (which has at its core the concept of *diastasis*) was brilliantly echoed in St Maximus the Confessor's theology of Incarnation, depicted in *Ambigua* 41; cf A. LOUTH, *Maximus the Confessor* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 155-162

³⁰ J. DANIELOU, 'Les tuniques de peau chez Grégoire de Nysse', *Glaube, Geist, Geschichte. Fest. E. Benz*, Leiden, 1967, 355-367, reprinted in a modified version in *Temps et être chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 154-185. An important reassessment of Gregory's anthropology was recently made by JOHN BEHR, 'The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis officio*', *J ECS* 17 (1999) 2, 219-247.

per se, and embedded in the experience of temporality, at least in a post-lapsarian history. Under these circumstances, human intellect runs the risk always of building up a simulacrum of knowledge, which consists in making conjectures about the unconceivable. Because of this natural tendency of the human mind, which is bent towards noetic idolatry, God elected Moses and gave him the commandments (i.e.: the core of the Scriptures). Here we meet the second reason for Gregory's assessments of the value of Scripture. God, who does not have the inner experience of *diastasis* though is a Trinity of Persons (but *not* in the numerical sense), gave us the commandments, which lead to real knowledge, surpassing the dramatic consequences of the fall and initiating us into the divine mysteries of the age to come. Commandments are to be taken not merely in a moral sense, as Gregory makes clear in *The Life of Moses*:

[The commandments] were doctrines about virtues, among which the first was the piety (*eusebeia*) and having a true judgement of the divine nature, namely that it transcends (*hyperkreitai*) every cognitive notion (*gnoristikou noematos*) and representation, not being similar to whatever cognoscible. In fact, he [Moses] is asked not to regard any thoughts about God conceived by [human] mind, and not to make similar (*homoion*) the Nature which surpasses all to something conceptually known, but to believe in His existence, without searching for its quality, quantity, mode, and origin, letting it [be] inaccessible.³¹

In other words, Scripture does *not* act as an epistemological supplement to natural reasoning. For Gregory, Scripture rather introduces a fracture, forcing the theologian to abandon idle speculation about God. In discursive or prayerful knowledge, 'any concept made in order to touch or to circumscribe the divine nature does not succeed but to form an idol of God, without making him known'³². Unlike Eunomius, Gregory does not see any complementary rapport between philosophy and theology, not even a dialectical one. Of course, in talking about God from inside, theology surpasses 'the profane education' (*he exothen paideusis*), although she makes use of it. Yet, true theology is for Gregory only a form of conversation: with God and with his people. The former instance takes the form of a dialogue with the

³¹ *Vit. Moys* I. 47. 1-8 (PG 45, 317 B8-16; ed. J. Daniélou, SC1bis, 21)

³² *Vit. Moys*. II. 165 (PG 44, 337B; ed. J. Daniélou, SC 1bis, Paris: Cerf, 1955, 82)

divine Word, which teaches us the virtues of theology, and assesses the transcendental conditions for a true dialogue within a community.³³

Gregory's Scriptural Mind

Theology must find its foundational 'rock' in Christ. In the Scriptures, Gregory finds Christ being Word of God descended from heaven in order to communicate to us his 'divine mysteries by words and names that are intelligible to us'³⁴. This intelligibility becomes effective only when it is rooted in a firm liturgical ethos³⁵. Theology presupposes a vital connection to God through prayer³⁶ and an active engagement in the ascetic life, as taught by the Scriptures. Gregory still belonged to a non-equalitarian spiritual universe, which regarded knowledge as a virtue on a pyramidal scale. Therefore, Scripture was supposed to be read following its goal (*skopos*) and rational sequence (*akolouthia*)³⁷, divinely foreseen by God. Only this goal – which was Christ – could provide the right interpretative framework, which could exempt anybody from confusion about the words of the Scriptures. For Gregory, pursuing the 'mind' of the Scriptures is not privileged job of the intellect. The initiation of the Christian neophyte in the mystery of God's revelation urges the acquirement of the basic rules for moral life (set out in the book *Proverbs*). 'Natural contemplation' follows, and this unfolds a double process. On the one hand, it means recognition of worldly vanities, but on the other hand commands the praising of God's glory on heaven and earth (as the *Ecclesiastes* puts it). After it had passed through the gates of moral and natural knowledge, the Scriptures could only open their divine mysteries to the mind purified in the *Song of the Songs*.³⁸ Gregory compares the gradual revelation of the divine name – which is 'above any name' (Philippians 2: 9) – with the ongoing achievement of the Christian virtues. God's attributes are revealed only proportionally to the accomplishment of Christ's commandments given in

³³ See, for example, St Gregory's reading of the *Beatitudes*, ET by Hilda C. Graef (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, col. "Ancient Christian Writers", 1954), 85-176

³⁴ *Beatitudes* 2 (ET, 98)

³⁵ JOSEF A. JUNGSMANN, *The Early Liturgy. To the Time of Gregory the Great* ET by Francis A. Bunner (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1959), 197

³⁶ For prayer as an eminent way of union with God, see GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Lord's Prayer*, ET by Hilda C. Graef (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, col. "Ancient Christian Writers", 1954), 24 sq

³⁷ J. DANIELOU, '«Akolouthia» chez Grégoire de Nysse', *VC* 7 (1953), 154-170 (reprinted in a modified form in *Temps et être chez Grégoire de Nysse*, 1972, 18-50)

Scripture: otherwise, theology becomes a barren exercise of thought and imagination, if not an open blasphemy. This analogy between practical performance and noetic scrutiny is more profound than one might appreciate at first sight. For Gregory, the Christian virtues are deduced one from another, just as for Immanuel Kant the analytical predicates illuminate a single logical subject; this process is very much similar to the way Scripture can be understood, because the nature of both Christ's virtues and words is iconic³⁹. After all, it was St Paul first who warned that, without having the 'mind of Christ' (I Corinthians 2: 16), an untrained reader can easily blur the meaning of Scriptures. Like almost all the apostolic Church Fathers, Gregory was ready to accept only the 'scriptural Christ' and, conversely, just the 'Christian Scriptures', including 'the Law and the Prophets'. Christ was not an external object to the Scriptures, whom some clever theologians were expected to talk about. On the contrary, Christ's relation to the Scriptures is firstly not accusative, but genitival. Christ is not only 'according to the Scriptures', but also 'abiding in the Scriptures'.

Gregory of Nyssa, like other advocates of Nicaea, was persuaded by the large extent of the Scriptures' polysemy, which required different levels of interpretation. Even a superficial examination of Gregory's writings reveals the impressive complexity of his biblical commentaries. He never denies the difficulty of some scriptural fragments, but rejects Eunomius' unilateral (and even univocal) reading of such passages. In this respect, perhaps one of the most illuminating examples is Gregory's differential treatment of the biblical term of 'Son'. One should first recall the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, recorded in Gospel according to Matthew:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?"

And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven"

(Matthew 16: 13-17).

³⁸ For this typology of the biblical hermeneutics, see *In Cant. 1*, *GNO VI*, 17 (PG 44, 767), ET by Casimir McCambley (Brookline: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 44

³⁹ B. SALMONA, 'Logos come trasparenza in Gregorio di Nissa', in H. R. DROBNER (ed.), *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der christlichen Spätantike* (Leiden: Brill, 1990) 165-171

The fragment has a perplexing structure, since Jesus calls himself 'the Son of man' (Matthew 16: 13) – which, in fact, is a prophetic appellation (Daniel 7) – but also acknowledges himself to be 'the Son of the living God' (Matthew 16: 16), of his Father 'who is in heaven'. For Eunomius⁴⁰, this double appellation – corroborated with references given in the book of Proverbs 8: 22⁴¹, I Corinthians 1: 24⁴² and Colossians 1: 15⁴³ – proves finally that Jesus' sonship in respect of the Unbegotten God is only adoptive. For Gregory it is the other way round:

As he is called called the Son of Man by reason of the kindred of his flesh to her of whom he was born, so also he is conceived, surely, as the Son of God, by reason of the connection of his essence with that from which he has his existence, and this argument is the greatest weapon of the truth. For nothing so clearly points to him who is the "mediator between God and man" (I Tim 2: 5) – as the great apostle called him – as the name of 'Son', equally applicable to either nature, divine or human. For the same person is Son of God, and was made, in the incarnation, Son of Man, that, by His communion with each, he might link together by himself what were divided by nature. Now if, in becoming Son of Man, he were without participation in human nature, it would be logical to say that neither does he share in the divine essence, though he is Son of God. But if the whole compound nature of man was in him – for he was "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4: 15) – it is surely necessary to believe that every property of the transcendent essence is also in him, as the word 'son' claims for him both alike – the human in the man, but divine in the God⁴⁴.

The riddle consists in the power of the analogy. For Gregory, Christ's double sonship is the perfect proof of his double consubstantiality, but Eunomius is stubborn in understanding it differently. For him, human generation coincides with the act of giving birth, bringing to life, or, more philosophically, to existence. The insistence of the Nicene theologians on Son's eternal generation makes no sense for Eunomius⁴⁵ because for him existence has a logic priority against begetting. If he agrees that,

⁴⁰ AA II. 35. 2-5

⁴¹ Proverbs 8: 22-23: 'The Lord created me [the Wisdom] at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old; I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.'

⁴² I Corinthians 1: 24: 'Christ the power and the wisdom of God'

⁴³ Colossians 1: 16-17: 'He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the first-born (*prototokos*) of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'

⁴⁴ NPNF V, 145b (*GNO* II. 35, 16-27)

⁴⁵ A 13

while begetting the Logos, God had no need of supportive material (except his own will), Eunomius cannot accept the idea of 'eternal begetting'. He reads the analogy of sonship only partially. On the one hand, Eunomius agrees that, unlike in human circumstances, for God there is no need to beget the Logos from anything, except his will. On the other hand, Eunomius expects that 'begetting' (or 'creating') univocally means to 'come into being' at a definite time. For Gregory, on the other hand, is clear that, if Jesus was the 'Son of Man' from the Virgin Mary (*i.e.* not begotten), then Christ could be 'Only-Begotten God' from eternity, thus *theologia* perfecting the symmetry with the divine *oikonomia*. Gregory goes on presenting the paradoxes of Christ's appellation:

He is called God and man, Son of God and Son of Man, — for he has the form of God (Philippians 2: 6) and the form of a servant (Philippians 2: 5), being some things according to his supreme nature, becoming other things in his dispensation of love (*kata tēn philanthropon oikonomian*) to man (I John 3: 1) — so too, being the Only-begotten God, he becomes the first-born of all creation (Colossians 1: 15), — the Only-begotten he that is in the bosom of the Father (*en tō patrōō kolpō*), yet, among those who are saved by the new creation (II Corinthians 5: 17), both becoming and being called (*genomenos kai legomenos*) the first-born of the creation (Colossians 1: 16)⁴⁶

Apart from the important theological aspects of his argument, one cannot miss noticing how rich in biblical phrases it is, contrasting starkly with what Eunomius usually makes of the Scriptures. One has to emphasise again Gregory's holistic approach towards the Scriptures⁴⁷, which can only guarantee the understanding of their general meaning. Where Eunomius interpolates scriptural quotations with dialectical deductions, Gregory's usage of the Bible is organic, substantial, and comprehensive.

Conflict Between Methodologies

In Eunomius' first writings, references to Scripture fulfil an almost decorative role, and intentionally so. The heresiarch posits his starting point in theology at the level of natural, inductive and almost Cartesian reasoning:

⁴⁶ *NPNF* V, 158b (GNO II. 70. 22-71. 2)

⁴⁷ *NPNF* V, 293b (GNO I. 352. 9-10): 'the Word, teaching the whole from the part (*apo merous to pan ekdidaskōn ho logos*)'

Thus, to begin with, it seems to us that those who presume to compare the essence which is unmastered, superior to all cause, and unbound by any law to that which is begotten and serves the law of the Father, have neither really examined the nature of the universe, nor made judgements about these things with clear minds. There are two roads marked out to us for the discovery of what we seek: one is that by which we examine the actual essences, and with clear and unadulterated reasoning about them make a judgement on each, the other is an enquiry by means of the actions, whereby we distinguish the essence on the basis of its products and completed works – and neither of the ways mentioned is able to bring out any apparent similarity of essence.⁴⁸

Taking off from this platform of thought – which in modern context could be labelled as *natural theology*⁴⁹ – it is no wonder that Eunomius' ignorance of the Scriptures becomes a leitmotif in Gregory's writings, very often exerting a remarkable rhetorical force. Apparently, for Eunomius Scripture does not count as an eminent source for the knowledge of the divine mysteries. Although he does not explicitly touch upon this subject, Eunomius seems to place Scripture in a line of contiguity with the data offered by the positive inquiry in the structure of reality. With his unmistakable expressionist touch, Pavel Florensky described Eunomius' theological methodology as 'a cry of the flesh, a cry of rationality, a rationality that wanders about the elements of the world and egotistically trembles in fear for its integrity, a rationality that is self-satisfied despite its total inner disintegration, a rationality that dares, in its infinite fear of the smallest pain, to adapt very Truth to itself, to its blind and meaningless norms'⁵⁰. Surely, Gregory of Nyssa and Eunomius of Cyzicus were looking for two different types of theological rationality, but their starting point was different. For Eunomius, the inquiry in the structure of reality was the premise for the conceptual determination of God as the 'ungenerate essence', while for Gregory the contemplation of God through Scripture was the premise of any theological deliberation. It is very telling that, one thousand years later, Eunomius reappeared in the memory of the orthodox Byzantium as the prototype of the intellectual arrogance,

⁴⁸ A I, 20. 1-12

⁴⁹ D. STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God* ET by I. Ioniță and R. Barringer (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), 1: 'The Orthodox Church makes no separation between natural and supernatural revelation.'

⁵⁰ P. FLORENSKY, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, ET by B. Jakim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 46

denounced by St Gregory Palamas⁵¹. These two different methodologies made strongly incompatible the understanding of the Scriptures, and consequently, their Christological and Trinitarian assumptions.

It is surprising to notice the general scarcity of scriptural commentaries on the side of the neo-Arians. Except for his *Commentary on Romans*, which was lost, Eunomius did not show, apparently, any serious interest in the exegetical and pastoral theology. Right from the beginning of his ecclesiastic career, Eunomius had a very controversial image, so that the first book he wrote had to be *pro domo sua*. His theology is neither homiletic, nor scriptural, but only justificative. Eunomius is deemed a 'sophist' or a 'technologist' because of his weird method of argumentation, but also an 'innovator', an epithet, which at that time could hardly flatter any theologian. In Eunomius Gregory could not see even the farthest shadow of Basil's incarnation of theology. Not only Gregory had reasons to employ such qualifications. Socrates Scholasticus tells us that Eunomius 'had a very slender knowledge of the letter of Scripture: he was wholly unable to enter into the spirit of it. Yet, he abounded in words, and was accustomed to repeat the same thoughts in different terms without ever arriving at a clear explanation of what he had proposed to himself'⁵².

Yet, one cannot say that Eunomius is unaware of the importance of Scripture for building up a theological *system*. The quotations he selected from the Scriptures, though redundant, proved to be very challenging. His skilful manipulation of biblical verses may have an explanation in his tactics. One knows that in 383, when his case was virtually lost, Eunomius delivered at the request of the Emperor Theodosius the Great an *Expositio Fidei*, which, while packed with scriptural quotations, failed to improve the image of his well-known theology. 'We find no mention of *gennema* or *anomoios* at all, and even *agennetos* is played down in favour of the less suspect *hopantokrator*.'⁵³ In the first glosses of his *Apologia Apologiae* (2. 5), Aëtius' disciple piously invoked Jesus Christ as 'our Saviour', which still does not clarify his understanding of Christ's nature. Apparently, Eunomius stuck to the golden rule of the early Church, who considered Christ 'Lord and Saviour', and the Scriptures to be God-inspired. Yet, Christ's divinity and lordship were, in Eunomius' viewpoint, of an

⁵¹ GREGORY PALAMAS, *Topics of Natural and Theological Science* 82, in *The Philokalia* ET by G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 384-85

⁵² SOCRATES, *HE* IV. 7

⁵³ R. VAGGIONE, 'Introduction' to 'The Confession of Eunomius' in EUNOMIUS, *The Extant Works*, Text and translation by Richard Paul Vaggione (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1987), 133

adoptive kind, given presumably because of the merits of Jesus' deeds during his life. What makes Eunomius suspect in his enemies' eyes is, therefore, not a different understanding of the formal importance of Scripture in building theological arguments, but the way he reads the mystery of Christ and how he relates the scriptural revelation to other sources of authority for knowledge (*ie*: philosophy). Eunomius reads the Scriptures through some kaleidoscopic philosophical lens, which he wears with much less freedom (and, therefore, intelligence) than Gregory. Eunomius does not discover Christ's eternal glory while for Gregory and the whole tradition of Nicaea, the Scriptures have in their centre the image of the redeeming King. *The whole difference between these two assessments consists in their sources of authority.* That Christ cannot be the eternal God, Eunomius is convinced through dialectical reasoning. Somehow, he was right to say that for the natural thinking, Christ's eternal divinity and pre-existence is simply inconceivable. St Paul said even more, knowing that the preaching of the crucified and resurrected Christ – our 'God and Lord' – was 'a stumbling rock to Jews and folly to Gentiles' (I Corinthians 1: 22). Gregory of Nyssa would not have denied that what the Greek philosophers taught about the principles of knowledge was turned up side down by the proclamation of Christ. Yet, for Gregory, the Greek *logos* was not normative, and the Scriptures always enjoyed more appraisal and affection than any source of authority.

Eunomius is only able to accommodate his dogmatic statements to some of the biblical verses referring to Christ's apparent inferiority by following the canon bequeathed by Arius.⁵⁴ Unsurprisingly, Eunomius' quotations from the Scriptures used to portray Jesus Christ are selected in such a way that 'the passages describing his glory were played down at the expense of those describing his humiliation.'⁵⁵ As usual, the problem was the right understanding of Jesus Christ's identity. For the Arians of all sorts, it was impossible to conceive *one* subject sharing simultaneously a divine and human nature, something that could only make him two subjects (*i.e.* two Christs). The non-Nicene model of incarnation followed a very simple anthropological model of birth: divine Logos took flesh (John 1: 14) exactly as the soul is incorporated or, to put it differently, as the body is ensouled. This is a non-sophisticated anthropological model of segregation between body and soul, adopted by Lucian of

⁵⁴ M. VAN PARYS, 'Exégèse et théologie dans les livres contre Eunome de Saint Grégoire de Nysse', in M. HARL (ed.), *Ecriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 170

Antioch who, together with the partisans of Arius, refused to ascribe Christ any human soul, its place being taken by the Logos⁵⁶. Subsequently, Eunomius found support for this anthropology in a literal reading of the text of Genesis, where Adam's creation presupposes first the shaping of body from dust and secondly God's pouring divine breathe into his flesh (*i.e.* ensouling). From this mixture of philosophical speculation and exegetical manoeuvring, Eunomius had to hand a depreciative image of Jesus Christ, which resisted all the theological paradoxes of which the Nicene partisans were so fond. If God did not take flesh because he is *per definitione* impassible, then the narrative of incarnation had to be changed. Its subject, in order to keep his integrity, had to be a creature (Proverbs 8: 22; Col 1: 15), like the flesh (*sarx*) that he took. For Eunomius, there is no difference between the non-incarnated and the incarnated Son of God, and if Christ is the one who speaks in both the Old and the New Testaments, he does so only as a messenger of the only true God, the Unbegotten essence. Being a skilful rhetorician, Eunomius wraps his theology in sonorous quotation from Scripture, but the way he does it is patently different from Gregory. Their starting points are poles apart, if one considers Eunomius' reliance on deductive, *a priori* reasoning, the outcome of which he looked to validate by the Scriptures only retrospectively.

Gregory's approach to the Scriptures was, both chronologically and methodologically, a way of prospecting the grounds of the Christian theology. Scripture was the only framework in which theological arguments could stand without great risks. Gregory started as a theologian by writing commentaries on the Scriptures, while Eunomius emerged in debates by defending Aëtius' speculations about the Nicene Creed. In dealing with the Scriptures, Gregory is genuinely prospective, while Eunomius seems to provide only a retrospective usage of it. Eunomius does not strive for mystical, and prayerful *inspiration* from the Scriptures, but only for a formal *confirmation* of his former ideas. Hence, Eunomius' lack of flexibility in theologising became notorious. As Michel von Parys has pointed out, Eunomius' reading of the Gospel did not progress beyond that of Arius, which demonstrates that he elaborated his theological scheme independently of a true, dynamic and fruitful engagement with the Scriptures. One might present Eunomius' strategic approach to Scripture in the

⁵⁵ VAGGIONE, *Eunomius*, 107

⁵⁶ VAGGIONE, *Eunomius*, 114; HANSON, *Doctrine of God*, 604: '[It is] the universal Arian supposition that the *Logos* took the place of the *psyche* in Jesus Christ'.

following way: first, the heresiarch employed a highly selective hermeneutics⁵⁷, then he chose a suitable anthropological model which, consequently, prescribed a diminished Christology. Ultimately, this option outlined the whole scheme of his Trinitarian theology, which appeared to be, in the eyes of the Cappadocian fathers, merely a product of a bookish *technologia*.⁵⁸ Gregory accused Eunomius of having abused the constitutive ambivalence of the Scriptural texts, which read without the ‘mind of Christ’, could serve any corrupted intention⁵⁹.

Obviously, Gregory looked for a model of theological rationality which did not match at all Eunomius’ own criteria. I would say that Gregory’s reading of the Scriptures is teleological, not only in that he reads the Old Testament as prophecy of the New Testament, but in the very fact of presenting eschatology or the kingdom of the Spirit (*basileus*) as the measure of all understanding. The Scriptures are for Gregory the unsealed revelation of the bountiful in mercy God, who calls people through his divine Word to share *ad infinitum* the eternal life. We are called to read the Scriptures in the same way we step on a ladder, never looking backwards but gazing at the supreme goal. *Akolouthia* deciphered in the Scriptures and in the structure of reality has, in a fact, a futurist design. God is Providence (*pronoia*) and, therefore, what makes the Scriptures so authoritative is not their blind letter, but the unction of their words by the Holy Spirit. Gregory’s model of rationality is pneumatic and teleological: always the future is the key for what happened in the past. In this respect, allegory is not an arbitrary and optional method of reading the Scriptures, but a disposition of mind begged by the Spirit and freely adopted by those who bear the name of Christ. One cannot acquire a right understanding of the Scriptures while still misrepresenting the Holy Trinity, for the following reason. As in God the Word is not separated from the Spirit, one cannot make the right interpretation of any scriptural paragraph without having purchased, before anything else, this right balance between

⁵⁷ VAGGIONE (*op. cit.*, 383-395) lists the following passages of Scripture used by non-Nicene: Genesis 1: 26; 18: 1-33; 19: 24; 32: 23-31; Exodus 3: 1-15; Psalm 44 (45): 7-8; Psalm 109 (110): 1, 3, 4; Proverbs 8: 22-5; Job 38: 17; Joel 2: 25; Isaiah 1: 2; Matthew 4: 2 = Luke 4: 2; Matthew 20: 23 (cf. Mark 10: 40); Matthew 22: 43-45; Mark 12: 35-7; Luke 20: 41-4; Matthew 24: 36 (cf. Mark 13: 32); Matthew 36: 37 (cf. Mark 14: 33); Matthew 26: 38 (cf. Mark 14: 34); Matthew 26: 39; Matthew 27: 46 (cf. Mark 15: 34); Matthew 28: 19; Mark 10: 18 (cf. Luke 18: 19); Luke 6: 12; Luke 22: 44; Luke 23: 46; John 4: 6; John 4: 22-24; John 5: 19; John 14: 14-17; John 14: 28; John 20: 17; Acts 2: 36; Romans 8: 29; Romans 16: 27; I Corinthians 1: 24; I Corinthians 11: 12; I Corinthians 15: 24-8; Philippians 2: 6-11; Colossians 1: 15; I Timothy 1: 17.

⁵⁸ JOSEPH DE GHELLINCK, ‘Quelques appréciations de la dialectique et d’Aristote durant les conflits trinitaires du IV^e siècle’, *RHE* 26 (1930), 5-42; E. VANDENUSSHE, ‘La part de la dialectique dans la théologie d’Eunomius le technologue’, *RHE* 40 (1944/1945), 47-72

Word and Spirit, which is required by the orthodox teaching of God. Having the Spirit, one cannot miss the distinction between contradiction and paradoxes⁶⁰, for example, which sometimes appears to be crucial. Unlike Eunomius' dialectic foundational approach, Gregory accepts circularity as an image of the divine nature, which in hermeneutical terms, make you refer the parts to the whole, and *viceversa*. This hermeneutical effort to accommodate the words with the Spirit has virtually no end, being just one way of contemplating God in his infinity.

What Makes the Difference?

It is exceptionally important to highlight the presence of the scriptural elements in the theological disputations between Gregory of Nyssa and Eunomius, and, more generally, among all the participants in the second generation of the Arian controversy. If contemporary scholars are aware of this important source of divergences, they nevertheless regard it with an irresistible feeling of superiority. R. P. C. Hanson put it in this way:

It was much more the presuppositions with which they approached the Biblical text that clouded their perceptions, the tendency to treat the Bible in an "atomic" way as if each verse or set of verses was capable of giving direct information about Christian doctrine apart from its context, the "oracular" concept of the nature of the Bible, the incapacity with a few exceptions to take serious account of the background and circumstances and period of the writers. The very reverence with which they honoured the Bible as a sacred book stood in the way of their understanding it⁶¹.

In his turn, R. Vaggione assumes that only the lack of a historical and critical approach of the Scriptures left both Nicene and non-Nicene parties unable to achieve mutual understanding of any dogmatic topic⁶². In a gloss on the Arian controversy, Frances M. Young also finds a source of conflict in the fact that 'texts from what had become the Old Testament continued to be *anachronistically* read as referring to Christ'⁶³ (my emphasis). But this very modern way of reading the controversy is anachronistic itself, because it contemptuously regards the actors of those theological

⁵⁹ *In Cant.*, 'Prologue', GNO VI, 12 (PG 44, 764)

⁶⁰ *De homin. Opif.* prologue (PG 44, 128)

⁶¹ HANSON, *Doctrine of God*, 848-49

⁶² VAGGIONE, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 138

debates as being misled by 'naïve assumptions' about the nature of Scripture, which nowadays seem to be for so many of us completely untenable. But this is to forget several important hermeneutical rules. First, if the modern reader has the right to be suspicious about the authority of the biblical writings, he will never be able to discern the *true* story standing behind any text, not to mention the Scriptures, contextualised by style, composition, historical background, etc. As Hans-Georg Gadamer⁶⁴ has definitively demonstrated from a phenomenological standpoint, one cannot possibly operate sound distinctions like those between, respectively: *intentio auctoris*, *intentio operis*, and *intentio lectoris*. Because of our continual immersion in the world of language, mediated by tradition and lived from inside historical consciousness, one cannot claim to have a better insight over the meaning of a work of art than the author himself. On the contrary, due to the constant process of subjective temporalisation (which Gregory calls *diastasis*), the full auctorial intention remains hidden to the author himself. *Pace* Schleiermacher, modern consciousness simply cannot break with the continual historical determination of subjectivity and therefore, is not allowed to judge (*i.e.* guess) what, for example, Scripture could *really* mean in its own time. One important conclusion of Gadamer's brilliant demonstration reinforces the patristic understanding of Scriptures as a *Lebenswelt*, with its own rules of constitution. It was from the very beginning a nonnegotiable article of faith for the entire Christian community to consider Scripture an undivided corpus of more or less patent meanings. Therefore, it would be simply wrong to maintain that participants in dogmatic controversies in the fourth century were not aware – on both sides, *pro* and *contra* Nicaea – of the possibility of reading the Scripture in absence of their own *hypothesis* (*i.e.*: Jesus Christ as the Word of God): the Jews or the Gnostics publicly criticised their assessments. As we have seen, figures like Arius and Athanasius, Eunomius and Gregory, whether good or bad theologians, were all ready to quarrel over the meaning of one or another biblical verse, with a lack of irony which no modern historian or even theologian would be ready to praise. Yet, they were not as blind as we sometimes think. Like his brother Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa shows that he was acutely aware about the multi-dimensional structure of the Scriptures, whose

⁶³ YOUNG, *Biblical Exegesis*, 34-35

⁶⁴ H.-G. GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), ET by G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).

understanding he never considered an easy task⁶⁵. In one of his last homilies on the Song of the Songs, Gregory lays down this hermeneutic principle of extrinsic inspiration: 'Because the Song's divine words contain some difficult, veiled ideas concealed in obscurity, we need to apply greater attention to the text; rather, we need greater help through prayer and guidance from the Holy Spirit'. In contrast to the opinions of some modern authors (and, partly, to some of his contemporaries, like Aëtius and Eunomius), Gregory was sure that no discursive intellect is capable of resolving the difficulties found in the Scriptures. For him, it was a matter of respect and self-consistency to read the Scriptures within a subjective context closest as possible to the original situation in which the 'divine authors' wrote them, namely under the inspiration of the Spirit. There was no objective method available to St Gregory, that could lead to the truth of the Scriptures⁶⁶. Christ is simultaneously the way leading towards, and the truth emerging from, the Scriptures (John 14: 6; Luke 24). The enigmatic scriptural statements are not to be avoided, but appropriately approached from their genetic and teleological perspective, which was, is and will be that of edifying the body of Christ.

At this point, the Nicene and Arians largely diverged in their opinions. If indeed, it is hard to imagine Gregory and Eunomius talking over the theological authority of the biblical narrative, one finds, as we have seen, a significant gap between their scriptural hermeneutics⁶⁷, which only enhanced the conflict between two theological methodologies. Albeit remaining guilty of not being modern in their 'non-suspicious' way of reading the Scriptures, Eunomius and Gregory undertook the Gospel from two radically different standpoints. Gregory's success against Eunomius resides in his generous, largely imaginative and powerfully spiritual consideration of Scripture. Gregory's usage of the Scriptures is far more profound and subtle than any of the Anomean theologians, which, on the whole, can explain the popularity of Nicene theologians. This has little to do, I suspect, with the Antiochian background of Eunomius and the Alexandrine theological formation of St Gregory of Nyssa. The battle is between two theological grammars, having not so much to do with the usage of allegorical or literal exegesis. Gregory's appeal to the Scriptures is both traditional and creative, imposing new standards for the orthodox biblical hermeneutics over the

⁶⁵ *In Cant. Cantic.* X (ET 187; *GNO* VI. 294.25-295.1-2)

⁶⁶ It is important to notice that for Gadamer himself, comprehension of truth has a definite liturgical character (*Truth and Method*, op. cit., 108-114)

centuries. With more relevance to the debate over orthodoxy, nobody should miss one of the most important images that emerge from St Gregory's writings: that of a teacher unconditionally obedient to the divine Word. This attitude enforced new criteria of rationality within the orthodox theology, and severe limitation for any possible prospect of natural theology. Syllogistic demonstration (on which Eunomius could bet without hesitation) was left far behind the project of spiritual persuasion. Thinking of Max Weber's concept of 'charismatic leader', one could easily imagine the immense popularity of bishop Basil of Caesarea, whose icons the two Gregorys depicted and their best. Having a sober and scriptural theology, the Cappadocians could impose themselves in front of their communities as charismatic leaders of the Catholic Church, found under threat.

By reading and proclaiming the Scriptures under genuine spiritual inspiration, Gregory and his fellows succeeded in capturing the imagination of the Christian people much better than Eunomius. The 'ontologist' jargon of the latter could never fulfil the simplest task of the Christian theologian: the need to be being simple and yet, not simplistic, and popular but not populist. The Scriptures did not lose their intrinsic complexity in the hands of Gregory. He called for reading divided in multiple degrees of comprehension, taking into consideration also the vast diversity of biblical genres, their linguistic peculiarities, and even historical settings. Gregory knew that read without any spiritual preparation, scriptural excerpts could be misleading, triggering vicious consequences. On a hermeneutical level, the literary war between Gregory of Nyssa and Eunomius of Cyzicus had a common ground in the authority of the inspired Scriptures, equally respected on both sides of the battlefield. It is an irony, and quite bitter, that this engagement with the Church's most sacred texts only amplified the hostility among the ecclesiastical parties of the fourth century. Yet, this is not surprising: the Scriptures were firstly very urgent and authoritative (while being of sacred inspiration) and, secondly, they were polyphonic, like any other collection of texts. The whole problem was to make of this polyphony an organic and cohesive body of meanings; in short, to perform a symphony. The Nicene and non-Nicene representatives could agree that, in principle, the only conductor able to produce the necessary harmony was Jesus Christ. Perhaps it is right to say that not only for the orthodox authors, 'it is Christ who is being explained through the medium of

⁶⁷ VAGGIONE, *Eunomius*, 129-147

Scripture, not Scripture itself that is being exegeted.⁶⁸ Yet, instead of bringing a solution, this reference to Christ made all the difference. The way the fourth century theologians regarded Jesus Christ was fundamentally different: for the Nicene Fathers, he was ‘truly God from truly God’, while for Aëtius and Eunomius, he was lacking even in similarity with God the Father. Neither Scripture, nor philosophy, but Christ was first – for Eunomius and his forebears – ‘the stumbling block’ in the long disputes with St Basil of Caesarea and St Gregory of Nyssa. This crucial difference in understanding the person of Jesus Christ elucidates their relationship towards Scripture and the other divergences between Eunomius and Gregory, such as for example, their usage of philosophy. With Christ as creature, one could only pluck – as Eunomius of Cyzicus did – the fruits of the wisdom from outside, which ‘are aborted before reaching the light of the knowledge of God’⁶⁹. Without a truly divine Christ, Eunomius could not share neither Gregory’s scepticism towards the autonomous intelligence of human being, nor his enduring trust in God’s power to ‘make foolish the wisdom of this world’ (I Corinthians 1: 20).

⁶⁸ JOHN BEHR, ‘The Paschal Foundation of Christian Theology’, *STVQ* 45 (2001) 2, 115-36, here 123

⁶⁹ *Vit. Moys.* II. 165 (PG 44, 337 B 14-16; ed. J. Daniélou, SC 1bis, 34)

III. PROTOLOGY OF LANGUAGE

The Ministry of Hands

Gregory's anthropological considerations are determinative for what nowadays one might call a 'theological theory of language'. Obviously, man's power of reasoning governs his linguistic performance. Nothing speaks so clearly about this human vocation (to think, to speak, and to write) than the physical attributes of man, which make him *not* a 'microcosmos' (an appellation against which Gregory protests explicitly), but a sure candidate for divinisation. The bodily constitution of man has two distinctive traits, which even the most developed animals cannot share: standing vertically and having free hands. The eighth chapter of his famous treatise 'On the Making of Man' (written, like his *CE*, in Basil's memory) bears witness to Gregory's outstanding insight. To begin with, Gregory plays upon a false etymology, assuming that *anthropos* is a composite noun, merging the preposition *ana-* ('upward') with the verb *tropein* ('to orient, to direct'). Then, he stresses the connection between the vertical physical constitution (which already speaks of man's creation 'in the image and the likeness of God') and our intellectual abilities, namely the capacity to think, to speak, and to write.

Especially do these ministering hand adapt themselves to the requirements of the reason: indeed, if one were to say that the ministration of hands is a special property of the rational nature, he would not be entirely wrong; and that not only because his thought turns to the common and obvious fact that we signify our reasoning by means of natural employment of our hands in written characters. It is true that this fact, that we speak by writing, and, in a certain way, converse by the aid of our hands, preserving sounds by the forms of the alphabet, is not unconnected with the endowment of reason; but I am referring to something else when I say that the hand co-operate with the bidding of reason¹.

One cannot miss the allusion made by Gregory to the ministry of priesthood in which hands and mind go and work together. Man is called to be not only minister at the altar of God, but also priest and deacon of all creation. But Gregory also points the importance of the order in creation, which somehow is repeated in human's own constitution. Stars are created first, as protectors of life on the earth; grassland comes

after, as *Heimat* for the wild beasts; eventually, man is made out of earth (which inherits the mineral, the vegetal and the animal life) and spirit, poured in the sleeping body of Adam. If man is expected to reign over the creatures (tamed only by the human reason), it is because spirit should rule man's senses. There is a certain progress and teleology in God's creation, and as in Aristotle's cosmology, *causa efficiens* determines *causa finalis*. One could even speak about a doctrine of continual creation, since Gregory explicitly declares that 'no single thing existing, whether an object of sense or of thought, is formed spontaneously or fortuitously, but that everything discoverable in the world is linked to the Being Who transcends all existences (*tēs pantōn tōn ontōn hyperkeimenēs physeōs*), and possesses there the source of its continuance (*tēn aitian tēs hyperxeōs echei*).'² The progress is given from above and affects the material structure of the universe, as it happened in the first days of the creation. 'We may suppose that nature makes an ascent as it were by steps (*per gradum*) – I mean the various properties of life – from the lower to the perfect form'³. This order is respected at all the levels of creation, and echoed also in the Scriptures, which have their narrative bodies (the historical one being the 'garment of skin') and yet, just a single spiritual *skopos*⁴.

This sequential order reflected in God's creation, and above all in man's dual constitution, has a musical beauty⁵. The balance between intellectual proclivities and physical aptitudes is shown at best in man's capacity of correlating his mind's decisional acts with the extraordinary mobility of his hands. The instruments used by musicians are designed not only for the sounds that man likes hearing, but, says Gregory, they benefit first our manual intelligence. Gregory of Nyssa is aware that musical instruments – like the technological products⁶ – are only the projection (by prolongation) of our organs. Not before noting *en passant* that, in the 20th century, this

¹ 'On the Making of Man' (VIII. 2), NPNF V, 393a (PG 44, 144 B12-C9)

² NPNF V, 309a (GNO I. 396. 19-20)

³ 'On the Making of Man' (VIII. 7), NPNF V, 394b (PG 44, 148 B10-C1)

⁴ J. DANIELOU, '«Akolouthia» chez Grégoire de Nysse', *VC* 7 (1953), 154-170 (reprinted in a modified version in *Temps et être chez Grégoire de Nysse*, 18-50)

⁵ H. I. MARROU, 'Une théologie de la musique chez Grégoire de Nysse', in J. FONTAINE & CH. KANNENGIESER (ed.), *Epektasis. Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal J. Daniélou*, Paris, 1972, 500-509; Marrou's references are restricted mainly to St Gregory's commentaries *In Ps.*

⁶ 'On the Making of Man' (VIII. 8), NPNF V, 394b (PG 148 C-D): 'As you may see musicians producing their music according to the form of their instruments, and not piping with harps nor harping upon flutes, so it must needs be that the organisation of these instruments of ours should be adapted for reason, that when struck by vocal instruments it might be able to sound properly for the use of words'.

case was made convincingly by the prominent Russian theologian Pavel Florensky⁷, let us read again Gregory's extensive description, in the most vivid images, of man's gifts:

For this reason the hands were attached to the body: for though we can count up very many uses in daily life for which these skilfully contrived and helpful instruments, our hands, that easily follow every art and every operation, alike in war and peace, are serviceable, yet nature added them to our reason body pre-eminently for the sake of reason. For if man were destitute of hands, the various parts of his face would certainly have been arranged like those of the quadrupeds, to suit the purpose of his feeding: so that its form would have been lengthened out and pointed towards the nostrils, and his lips would have projected from his mouth, lumpy, and stiff, and thick, fitted for taking up the grass, and his tongue would either have lain between his teeth, of a kind to match his lips, fleshly, and hard, and rough, assisting his teeth to deal with what came under his grinder, or it would have been moist and hanging out at the side like that of dogs and other carnivorous beasts, projecting through the gaps in his jagged row of teeth. If, then, our body had no hand, how could articulate sound have been implanted in it, seeing that the form of the parts of the mouth would not have had the configuration proper for the use of speech, so that man must of necessity have either bleated, or "baaed", or barked, or neighed, or bellowed like oxen, or asses, or uttered some bestial sounds (*ē thēriōdē mukēthmon aphienai*)?⁸

In other words, *homo faber* is the proof for *homo sapiens*, and some contemporary evolutionist thinkers did not miss Gregory's contribution to the history of scientific ideas⁹. Gregory's perceptive description of the complementary role played by hands in their dialogue with the mind must have been entirely novel to his contemporaries. However, it is very important to understand that Gregory's praise of man is not justified only by the latter's intellectual capacity. *It is not the size of the*

⁷ I was able to read Florensky's essay only in Romanian translation, cf P. FLORENSKY, *Perspectiva inversă și alte scrieri*, trad. Tatiana Nicolescu, Alexandra Nicolescu și Ana Maria Brezuleanu (București: Humanitas, 1997) 140 et sq.

⁸ *De hom. op.* VIII (PG 44, 148 D3-149A9)

⁹ The above fragment from *De Hominis Opificio* is included as motto of the famous book of the French ethnologist A. LEROI-GOURHAN, *Le Geste et la parole* vol I&II (Paris: Albin Michel, 1964-1965); in the orthodox area, see ALEXANDER KALOMIROS, 'God's Breath in Ape's Body', *Epiphany* 10 (Fall 1989-Wint 1990), 10-23; 'The Eternal Will: Some Thoughts Concerning the Scriptural and Patristic Understanding of the Creation of Man and the World', *Christian Activist* 11 (1997). Dr. Kalomiros defended the theory of evolution with reference to Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, but he was harshly refuted by Hieromonk SERAPHIM ROSE and DAMASCENE CHRISTENSEN, *Genesis, Creation and Early Man* (Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2000), 514-515, 522-27, 540-544; Indications against an evolutionist interpretation of Gregory are given in NPNF V, 305b (GNO I. 387. 13-16): 'our humanity is preserved continually, from first to last, within the same circle of qualities, losing none which it had at the beginning, any more than it acquires any which it had not then.'

brain that makes man superior to other creatures, but his linguistic capacities, and the iconic structure of his being. The linguistic abilities were, strictly, inconceivable in the absence of some exceptional physiological aptitudes. Verticality gives man not only a deeper horizon and more profound visual perception, but also manual freedom and the capacity of articulating a very complex bodily and vocal language. Gregory is aware that hands are not only for writing, but can articulate a bodily language, to which he clearly alludes when saying: ‘we speak by writing, and, in a certain way, converse by the aid of our hands’¹⁰. There is a mutual correlation between the intellectual capacity of the human brain and the manual skills, and yet, Gregory avoids a materialist account of man’s creation. What makes man remarkable is his capacity to illustrate all the gifts of the wild nature, imitating and surpassing them. Man is the crown of God’s creation not only because he performs unrivalled intellectual exercises (in mathematics or other theoretical arts), but also due to his capacity to shape forms of beauty¹¹. The human mind is for Gregory ‘a skilled musician (*hōsper tis mousikēs empeiros ōn*)’¹² able to conduct the ‘animated instruments’ of his body. Human language does not signify a brute state of affairs, in the way that animals react by various screams while they sense fear, hunger or sexual desire. Man contemplates perfection, since God ‘did not give, but imparted him (*ouk dedōken all’oti metedōken*)’¹³ mind and reason. Since tonality, syntax and harmony are crucial in the performance of human language, Gregory carries out his musical metaphor in imagining the human body as the scene of an invisible concert performed by innumerable *organs*. He compares ‘breath’ with a ‘flute’ and the ‘mouth’ with a ‘lyre’, which strings are invisibly played and attuned at the request of the mind.

Being given in the Garden of Eden, the gift of language is expected to perform a musical symphony. Yet, because the biblical idea of paradise does not cover only the rustic Eden, and is paralleled also by the heavenly Jerusalem, Gregory compares the map of our mind with the complexity of a *polis*, in which different buildings and avenues satisfy the need for beauty and diversity¹⁴. On ‘the spacious territory of our

¹⁰ *De hom. opif.* VIII. 2 (PG 44, 144B12-C9)

¹¹ A. MEREDITH, ‘The good and the beautiful in Gregory of Nyssa’, in *ERMENEUMATA* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1990), 133-145

¹² ‘On the Making of Man’ (IX. 2), NPNF V, 395a (PG 44, 149 C1-2)

¹³ ‘On the Making of Man’ (IX. 1), NPNF V, 395a (PG 44, 149 B4-5)

¹⁴ ‘On the Making of Man’ (X. 4), NPNF V, 396a (PG 44, 152 C12-D6). For an excellent research in Gregory of Nyssa’s psychology, see M. R. BARNES, ‘The Polemical Context and Content of Gregory of Nyssa’s Psychology’, *Journal of Medieval Theology and Philosophy* 4 (1994), 1-24

mind', knowledge gathers impressions coming through various sensible canals, and yet, what makes a unity of this diversity, is beyond the bodily senses. There is no physiological organ – not even the brain – which in Gregory's anthropology could be identified with the residence of human thought, which is linguistically determined. The miracle of thought is not more arresting than the miracle of musical performance, since at stake, in both cases, is the power of unifying the multiplicity and the ability of discerning one *telos* (and, therefore, the *akolouthia*) amidst the profligate diversity of sensation or emotions. Both thought and musical performances resemble the mystery of God's simplicity, which does not exclude difference. Our triune God cannot be grasped in the logic of binary propositions, but only through the submission to darkness of all the senses. To express the ultimate mystery of the triune God requires a *sacrificium intellectus*, since it integrates multiplicity into unity¹⁵. Stressing the parallel existing between God and man made in the divine image, Gregory celebrates incomprehensibility as the reverse of our call for the infinite resemblance to God.

For Gregory of Nyssa, symphony is not only the archetype of scriptural hermeneutics, but also that of the linguistic performances. This is not only because language, like music, is learned and practised as a skill. There is not only a structural connivance, but also a shared finality in musical and linguistic performances. Thinking, speaking or writing should convey harmony and beauty, if they are to be regarded as revelation of one truth. Contemplating truth means for Gregory to grasp the beauty of the creation (Wisdom 13: 5), which is better expressed by the non-verbal art of music. Grasping the truth is not a matter of objective validation of one statement against one fact, but the poetic intuition of the dynamic process of the self-disclosure of truth. Knowing truly the truth implies rigour and charity, which ultimately needs ascetic struggle with the chaotic forces dwelling in our body, mind and imagination. 'Tuning' the wild passions of the body is not a goal *per se*, and is meant to open the horizons of limpid, unified, all-inclusive perceptions. It is no surprise that Gregory can hold a strong admiration, simultaneously, for mathematics and for the musical arts¹⁶, both related to what he calls '*epinoia*' (imaginative faculty). And it so happens that both arts imply a process of abstraction or, in other words, the taming of our arbitrary

¹⁵ 'On the Making of Man' (XI. 2): 'How is there diversity in unity? How is unity maintained in diversity (*pōs en poikilia ton en*)?' (NPNF V, 396b, PG 44, 156 A9-10)

¹⁶ M. POLANYI, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 193: 'like mathematics, music articulates a vast range of rational relationships for the mere pleasure of understanding them'

imagination. Symphony means diversity, but requires rules of constituting the unity, the meaning, and everything beyond ('the sublime').

Ultimately, language's eminent pattern is that of a melody, to which the beauty of all parts of the body and faculties of the mind must contribute. This explains why prayerful doxology best befits the vocation of the human mind. We are at our best when we sing, suggests Gregory, and it becomes apparent why the Old Testament calls its mystical book *par excellence* 'the Song of Songs'. But the song is not of an ordinary kind, comforting the sensual desires of the broken heart, 'for the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked'¹⁷. It is the nuptial song of the purified heart, which longs for God's secret beauty and his infinite love.

Conversion and Conversation

In the light of the scriptural account of creation, Gregory is ready to accept that Adam has been given the right to call the creatures 'upon their names' *after* the fulfilment of all of God's demiurgic acts. If man was made the crown of the whole creation, then the gift of language can be regarded as the last of Adam's endowments (which pre-existed Eve's conception). Without being put in relationship with the living world (and, afterwards, in close relation to his wife), Adam would not have needed language¹⁸, not even to address God¹⁹. Presumably, Adam was addressing God in thoughts that needed no vocal utterance whatsoever. Since Gregory considers the sexual determination of the human being (in contrast with the immaterial reproduction of the angels) as a post-lapsarian reality, one can imagine that Adam had access to a passive knowledge of God, which did not need any discursive articulation.

Confirmation is given in the book of Genesis, which presents language as a thoroughly human instrument. Language seems to fulfil the vital need for interaction

¹⁷ T. S. ELIOT, 'Choruses from "The Rock", V', in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber&Faber, 1963), 173

¹⁸ NPNF V, 266b (GNO I. 273. 5-8)

¹⁹ Though not explicitly expressed by Gregory of Nyssa, the idea occurs in JOHN CHRYSOSTOMOS, *Homilies to Matthew* (prologue), NPNF X. I, 1a (PG 67, 13A 1-8): 'It were indeed meet for us not at all to require the aid of the written Word, but to exhibit a life so pure, that the grace of the Spirit should be instead of books to our souls, and that as these are inscribed with ink, even so should our hearts be with the Spirit. But, since we have utterly put away from us this grace, come, let us at any rate embrace the second best course.'

and dialogue²⁰ that characterised human beings *ab initio*. If God called upon Adam, then Adam had to speak to the creatures. Giving names to the beasts, Adam made the first step to tame them. Yet, the goal of this act does not reside, apparently, in the utilitarian plan of domesticating the animals. Read metaphorically, the biblical scene shows Adam consecrating, almost in an Eucharistic way, the gifts given to him by God. One cannot forget that some of the animals were, later on, components of the sacrifices requested by God (and which, above all, was to test man's gratefulness). Linguistic performance appears to be from the beginning an act of improvisation, and therefore, of improving somehow what has been already given. Usage of words reveals not only authority, but also opens an intermediary territory, where the subtle art of dialogue can be played in sounds and silence (the latter being, again, indispensable in musical performance²¹). To carry on Gregory's thoughts, one could say that language is ambivalent and manifests not only the potential of dominion, but also the virtue of recognition, valuing silence as the privileged space of hospitality. To call upon somebody requires already the preparation for attentive silence. Any responsible speech promises a time of listening, which again means hope, faith, and love. Adam received the gift of language in order to apprehend better the wonders of God's creation, and yet, was still unable to perceive their essence. This structural incomprehensibility of creation, emphasised on many occasions by Gregory, outlines the need for conversation, and for conversion. Called to dialogue, Adam could grow in his innocent sense of wonder and praise, learning new things and still not being guilty of curiosity. While talking to Adam, Eve could have explored the inexhaustibility of a person made in the 'image of God'. It is the image of God that makes human being a mystery, and, in the modern sense of the word, a person. Hosted before anything else

²⁰ I follow here the interpretation of AUGUSTINE, *De Gen. Ad litt.* IX, v, 9 (PL 34, 396): 'Quanto enim congruentius ad convivendum et colloquendum duo amici pariter quam vir et mulier habitarent?'. Language socialises, opens new worlds, and becomes a measure of the human generosity. On this, many modern thinkers, both Jewish and Christians, point in their commentaries that Adam's gift of language encapsulate the premises of a dialogical philosophy. H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, ET by Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975). E. LEVINAS, *Totalité et infini* (Paris, 1963), J. DERRIDA, *De l'hospitalité* (Paris: Calman Lévy, 1997), J.-L. CHRÉTIEN, *L'arche de la parole* (Paris: PUF, 1999), and also RUBEM ALVES, *The Warrior, the Prophet and the Poet* (London: SCM Press, 2002).

²¹ The adoption of an impoverished style in painting (Malevich, Rothko), sculpture (Giacometti, Brâncuși) and music (the minimalists), during the whole 20th century, is very telling. In music, this kenotic usage of silence is most striking in Arvo Pärt's work. Cf. PAUL HILLIARD, *Arvo Pärt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1

by the language²², which emulated the Edenic gardens, Adam and Eve's conversations must have been unparalleled, and they remain so. The words of their language conveyed their thoughts in transparency, and only freedom of choice shifted their minds from the marvellous experience of incomprehensibility (which was poetic, resembling God) to the dramatic, pitiable and corrupted experience of misunderstanding. Ambiguity became real only when Adam's freedom chose autonomy (which is, actually, self-love and lack of faith)²³. Then, the darkening of thought collapsed the previous luminosity of human language, and hermeneutics was instituted as, at least, an 'art of divination'²⁴. Since Adam's fall, life itself became a foreign language to be endlessly learnt. If before his alienation from Eden, Adam enjoyed the spiritual pleasure of peaceful conversation, afterwards he had to undergo conversion. Mind lost its limpidity and words need to be restored to their former iconic purports. In the post-lapsarian condition of humankind, uttering word runs always a risk, that of openness and generosity, which can succumb to garrulity. Too easily and too often words become like 'waterless clouds, carried along by winds, and fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted' (Jude 1: 13). This uprooted character of words Martin Heidegger alludes to, in his famous critique of daily gossip (*das Gerede*),²⁵ by which one talks about everything and nothing, falsely pledging our needs to live in the present, and to have everything at hand. Talking, 'we are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea'²⁶. Words are exposed to misapprehension because our language is ambiguous and our identity unstable. With the same tongue, 'we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come blessing and cursing' (James 3: 9-10). When the heart lacks love, the word can become like a sword, and language the most powerful tool for destructive purposes. Confronted with this double-sided

²² MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, GA 12 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), 255.

²³ TH. KOBUSCH, 'Name un Sein. Zu den sprachphilosophischen Grundlagen in der Schrift *Contra Eunomium* des Gregor von Nyssa', in L. F. MATEO-SECO & J. L. BASTERO (Eds.), *El » Contra Eunomium I « en la producción literaria de Grigorio de Nisa* (Pamplona, 1988), 247-269, here 256: 'Die Lehre [Gregors] von der Sprache ist in einer Philosophie der Freiheit begründet, nach der Gott den Menschen als freies Wesen, mithin auch den freien Gebrauch der Vernunft und der Sprache will.'

²⁴ The expression belongs to Fr. Schleiermacher and does not do full justice either to hermeneutics, or to divination.

²⁵ M. HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, GA 2 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), §35, 244

²⁶ OTTO NEURATH, 'Protocol Sentences', in A. J. AYER (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (London, 1959), 201

constitution of our speech²⁷, those who look for perfection decide that silence is very often the best solution. Since Jesus himself, facing Pontius Pilate, remained quiet (Matthew 27: 14; John 19: 9), silence was regarded very often the golden virtue of Christian monasticism²⁸, though its valuation can be traced back to the age of the early Greek thinkers²⁹.

As we have already seen, Gregory of Nyssa³⁰ is not at all foreign to this apophatic tradition, which still does not regard language as pure negativity. As the light spot on a prism displays beauty in colours, silence makes possible the articulation of language. In Gregory we see at best how ordinary language is, in fact 'fossil poetry' (R. W. Emerson), since the most ordinary words can be the sparkle of the most meaningful images in the laudatory performance, which again, cannot avoid silent awe in God's presence. 'Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him' (Psalm 37: 7), says David, while the Prophet Isaiah is told: 'Listen to me in silence' (Isaiah 41: 1). Being 'the contemplation of the invisible things', prayer is the greatest virtue³¹ that outlines the 'margins of silence' (Vl. Lossky)³² which speak of God more distinctly than 'thousands words in a tongue' (I Corinthians 14: 18).

Angelic Silence and Human Speech

Unlike Augustine³³ (and even less than any of the Jewish medieval Kabbalists), Gregory does not like speculating on the possible nature of the Adamic language. Yet, he allusively refers to the immediate character of the angelic speech:

²⁷ M. HEIDEGGER, *op. cit.*, 232: '[Die Zweideutigkeit] spielt die Neugier immer das zu, was sie sucht, und gibt dem Gerede den Schein, als würde in ihm alles entschieden'.

²⁸ Valuable references are to be found in P. MIQUEL, 'Silence', *DS* t. XIV (Paris: Beauchesne, 1990), 830-42; IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Magn.* 8, 2 (SC 10bis, Paris: Cerf, 1969⁴, 86); GREGORY OF NYSSA, *In Eccl.* VII (SC 416, 375-387; GNO V. 410-416); DENYS THE AREOPAGITE, *Theologia mystica* 1 speaks of 'silence initiatory into the mysteries' (PG 3, 997A-B); JOHN CLIMACOS, *The Ladder* XI; ISAAC THE SYRIAN (*De perfectione* 66) calls silence 'the mystery of the age to come'. For Ephrem the Syrian, see PAUL S. RUSSELL, 'Ephraem the Syrian on the Utility of Language and the Place of Silence', *JECS* 8 (2000) 1, 21-37

²⁹ Cf. M. DUPUY, 'Silence', *DS* t. XIV (Paris: Beauchesne, 1990), 843-859. References are given for PLATO, *Parm.* 142a; PLOTINUS, *Enn.* V, 8, 5; III. 8, 9; PROCLUS, *Theol. Plat.* IV, 9.

³⁰ NPNF V, 260a (GNO I. 254, 27)

³¹ *De or. dom.* I. 1 (PG 1124C): 'mēden tēs proseuchēs einai tōn kata tēn zoēn timiōn anōteron'

³² V. LOSSKY, *In the Image and the Likeness of God* (London: 1975), 151. An inspiring application of Lossky's expression is to be found in A. LOUTH, *Discerning the Mystery. Essay on the Nature of Theology*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1999²) 91-95.

³³ On this, J. K. SMITH, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). Smith draws heavily on Augustine's theory of language in his research on the paradisiacal language.

For, in case of immaterial intellectual nature (*noeras physeōs*), the mental energy is speech (*he kata ton noun energeia logos estin*), which has no need of material instruments of communication (*hypēresia*)³⁴.

If the concept of speech is still appropriate for defining the communication among the angels, in respect to God such description is obviously absurd, since ‘the True Life is an actuality actuating itself (*energeia tis estin he ontōs zoē eautēn energousa*)’³⁵. In Thomas Aquinas’ terminology, God is *actus purus* and, therefore, he does not need to make himself known. Like sexuality, divisive language appears to be the consequence of Adam’s fall. Gregory is confident that ‘we should have no need of using words and names if we could otherwise inform each other of our pure mental feelings (*gymna [...] ta tēs dianoias kinēmata*)’³⁶. Purity of mind³⁷, therefore, diminishes proportionally the use of verbose communication, and those who become similar to the angels (or, in human words, to children), can understand better the mystery of silence (*infans*). For immediate communication, which is realisable without words between minds of the same, one needs only purity of thoughts. When this level is achieved, either through words, or in silence, human mind can make a miraculous connection with the realm of the invisible. This explains how words invested with personal energy in which dwells the Holy Spirit can perform miracles, as one finds in the narratives of the Gospels³⁸. It is very telling, from this viewpoint, that the biblical Greek language uses the word ‘*semeia*’ for ‘miracle’.

To reach the status of a holy receptacle, language – like body and sexuality – needs language needs discipline. Gregory of Nyssa is fully aware that we are only in the possession of a broken instrument, which constantly needs correction, like our thoughts. He does not have the naivety of some of those theologians and humanists who believed that the roots of the primordial language are somehow traceable. Gregory thought that, apart from Adam’s fall, another event marked the condition of human language: the Babelian confusion of tongues, which, in the variant of the

³⁴ NPNF V, 289b (GNO I. 340. 19-21)

³⁵ NPNF V, 287a (GNO I. 333. 26-27)

³⁶ NPNF V, 289b (GNO I. 340. 21-24)

³⁷ The concept of pure mind occurs also in Eunomius’ *First Apology* (A I, 20. 3-4), but has a merely philosophical sense: it is required by the examination of the nature of the universe.

³⁸ D. MAGUERAT, ‘Magie, guérison et parole dans *Les Actes des Apôtres*’, *Etudes théologiques et religieuses* 72 (1997) 2, 197-208

biblical myth, tore apart also the ethnic unity of humankind³⁹. Gregory makes clear that language is necessary and performed only in a disrupted world, characterised by *diastasis*⁴⁰. Since we are made *ex nihilo*, our knowledge is never substantial⁴¹, and, therefore, human language remains imperfect. Gregory does not seem to hope that a 'return to the things themselves' (Husserl's dictum: '*Zurück zu den Sachen selbst!*') could be, in any sense, possible. 'Things in themselves' are to be known only by God, while man can only grasp their contextual meaning. Man can acquire incomplete knowledge only since his very nature is ambivalent (spiritual and material). Aristotle has clearly established that one knowing subject and one known object cannot come together if their characters do not possess homogeneity⁴² (in hermeneutics, this sentence can be translated as such: every disagreement includes an agreement). Gregory leaves substantial knowledge to God, who is the infinite Creator of all things. But to man was allowed a deflected knowledge of the finite creatures (with whom we share materiality), and 'an affective knowledge'⁴³ of God, in whose image man has been made. On both sides (horizontal and vertical), our thought and knowledge encounters limitations, and together with that, a call for infinite surpassing (*epektasis*). All 'divine names' derive from 'human names', and express tangentially God's immanence in the economy of creation⁴⁴.

From Babel to Pentecost

³⁹ NPNF V, 275b-276a (GNO I. 300-301.7)

⁴⁰ T. PAUL VERGHESE, '*Diastema and Diastasis in Gregory of Nyssa. Introduction to a Concept and the Posing of a Problem*', in H. DOERRIE, M. ALTENBURGER & U. SCHRAMM (ed.), *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie. Zweites Internationales Kolloquium über Gregor von Nyssa (Münster 18-23 September 1972)* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 243-259.

⁴¹ More on this point, see the remarkable monograph of ALCUIN A. WEISWURM, *The Nature of Human Knowledge According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America, 1952), 119-146; apart from his accuracy, Weiswurm is especially good in drawing comparisons between Gregory's and Aristotle's epistemology (read through the lens of Thomas Aquinas).

⁴² ARISTOTLE, *De anima* (I. 2), 204b8; Aristotle follows the famous principle of the ancient Greek philosophers, which defined knowledge as a homeopathic process (*tois homoios ta homoia gignosketai*).

⁴³ A. A. WEISWURM, *The Nature of Human Knowledge according to St Gregory of Nyssa*, Washington, 1952, 194

⁴⁴ A word should be said about the divine creation, which in Gregory's eyes, is not 'out of necessity, but in the superabundance of love (*ouk anankē tini pros tēn tou anthrōpinēs physeōs, all' agapēs periousia*)' (*Or. Cat. V*, NPNF V, 478b; ed. R. Winling, SC 453, 162. 32-33; ed. Mühlenberg, GNO III, 4. 17. 3-4).

If one does not know the structure of Adam's idiom before the fall, it is even more senseless to attribute to God a language of designation, as Eunomius did. One cannot imagine in God a linguistic performance, 'who is at once (*all' holon di' holou*) sight, and hearing, and knowledge'⁴⁵. One can speak, of course, about the Word of God (*logos tou theou*), but this tackles already the central problem of the Trinitarian theology, debated at length in *CE I* and *CE II*. With reference to the mystery of the Trinity, the divine and hypostatic Logos can be called also 'Son', 'Icon', or 'Wisdom and Power' of God (I Corinthians 1: 24)⁴⁶. The creative Word of God by whom 'the heavens were established' (Psalm 33: 4) is the One announced in the Prologue of St John and incarnated as Jesus Christ. He is the only 'language' of God that one could ever imagine, and the only ones who speak this language are the saints. There is, of course, a helpful analogy in the scriptural description of the Son as Word of God, which allows Gregory to pinpoint their indestructible unity. 'The Father of the Word needs to be thought of with the Word, for it would not be word were it not a word of some one'⁴⁷. Language and thought are intimately connected as the Father (compared with the human mind) with the Son (called the Word). Words are intrinsically relational, and so are the divine Persons of the Trinity, says Gregory, without developing this analogy into an imagery that could be misleading or idolatrous.

Stressing the natural connection between the vocal utterance of the words and the act of breathing, which are both invisible, Gregory suggests in an analogy of Stoic origin how the Holy Spirit is contiguous to the Word of the Father. The unity of Godhead is always expressed in the Scriptures, though the subject of theophany is not always explicit. Any scriptural reference to articulate speech by God has to be taken metaphorically, and yet, with the appropriate respect due to its inspired character. The Scriptures are part of the divine economy, but they do not express exhaustively the works of God in creation. The Gospels themselves do not record 'many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (John 21: 25). Obviously, Gregory does not deny the possibility of divine inspiration, but he stresses that the destination and the modality of expressing is 'proportional (*tō metrō tēs physeōs ton logon ēmin*) to the capacity of our nature, so that we might be able thereby to signify the thoughts of our

⁴⁵ NPNF V, 271b (GNO I. 287. 3-4)

⁴⁶ M. HARL, 'A propos d'une passage du *Contre Eunome* de Grégoire de Nysse: *aporroia* et les titres du Christ dans en théologie trinitaire', *RSR* 55 (1967), 217-226

minds'⁴⁸. For Gregory, the Scriptures are the testimony of the divine philanthropy⁴⁹ and, therefore, they should be understood as a kenotic manifestation of God. Although he does say *expressis verbis* that Scriptures are the first incarnation of God, one finds in Gregory's biblical theology some similarities to Origen's views. Our perception is gross, needing a steady point of reference, and continual pilgrimage in the land of 'divine letters', since one can easily represent the Scriptures as an epistolary. Gregory puts it eloquently: 'in as much as human nature is in a sense (*tropōn tina*) deaf and insensible to higher truths, we maintain that the grace of God at "sundry times" and in divers manners (*polymerōs kai polytropos*) spoke by the Prophets.'⁵⁰ Though deaf, when inspired by the Holy Spirit, the prophets and the apostle of God can look like 'drunkards'. Gregory compares the process of inspiration of the Scriptures with the miracle, which happened in the day of Pentecost, this 'great feast of languages'⁵¹. Then, at Jerusalem, 'each man received the teaching of the disciples in his own language (*en tē idia dialektō*) wherein he was born, understanding the meaning of the words by the language they knew (*dia tōn gnōrimōn autō hrēmatōn*).'⁵²

Since the plurality of dialects is preserved in the reception of the divine teaching (the process of understanding being shaped by the idiomatic profile of each one), Pentecost – the feast that harvests the catholic meaning of the Church – does not contradict, but fulfils Babel. Languages are landmarks on the fissiparous body of humankind, divided into cultures, habits, ethnic groups, etc. Of all these, Gregory of Nyssa seems entirely conscious, reading the myth of Babel as a description of a historical event. Stretched between the hypothesis (1) 'language of human origin', and the hypothesis (2) 'language of divine origin', the narrative of Babel could be interpreted either way. While Philo the Jew⁵³ chose the second option, Gregory chose for the first one. Breaking the idiomatic unity of humankind was, certainly, God's will to punish the pride of the people. But he just gave an impetus to an innate possibility of human language, that of being divided and reproduced: 'God, willing that men

⁴⁷ *Or. Cat.* I. 2 (NPNF V, 476b; éd. R. Winling, *SC* 453, 151; GNO III, 11)

⁴⁸ NPNF V, 274a (GNO I. 294. 22-23)

⁴⁹ NPNF V, 290a (GNO I. 341. 14-21); NPNF V, 292a/b (GNO I. 348. 27): *dia touto en tais poikilais pros tous anthrōpous theophaneiais kai kata anthrōpon schēmatizetai kai anthropikōs phtheggetai kai orgēn kai eleon kai ta toiauta hypoduetai pathē*

⁵⁰ NPNF V, 275a (GNO I. 297. 6-9)

⁵¹ W. SHAKESPEARE, *Love's Labour's Lost* (1595) act 5, sc. 1. 1

⁵² NPNF V, 274b (GNO I. 296. 6-8)

⁵³ PHILO, *Leg. All.* II. 14-15. And the commentary of J. DILLON, *The Middle Platonists* 80B.C. to A.D. 200 (London: Duckworth, 1996²), 181

should speak different languages (*allais glōssais*), gave human nature full liberty to formulate arbitrary sounds, so as to render their meaning more intelligible'⁵⁴. Even the Hebrew language, in which the author of the book of Genesis writes (for Gregory, he is unmistakably Moses), is posterior to this event, though the historical circumstances in which it emerged as the idiom of the 'elected people', remain veiled in secrecy. Assuming that the birth of a nation coincides with the birth of its idiom, Gregory searched for an answer to the Jewish dilemma: how the people led by Moses from Egypt to Canaan could acquire Hebrew language in such a short time? To respond, Gregory takes refuge in the concept of miraculous intervention, which sounds more plausible and humanly speaking is much more acceptable than the imaginary thesis held by Josephus Flavius or even Origen, about the antiquity of the Jewish language. 'To suppose that God used the Hebrew tongue, when there was no one to hear and understand such language, methinks no reasonable being will consent'⁵⁵.

The implications of this theological position are strong; there is no sacred language as such. The process of translation is not criminal since it follows the pattern of understanding by the human mind of divine commandments. At a closer glance, the Scriptures themselves – at least those used by the Christian Church – are a corpus of texts translated into an idiom almost foreign to the language of their subjects and, in part, of their authors. Yet, the Scriptures were sacred and enjoyed a broad veneration among Christians. Gregory's viewpoint, therefore, confirms the early Church's understanding of the importance and the necessity of translating the Scriptures into the idioms spoken by the gentiles.

Acknowledging Cultural Diversity

Going deeper into the substance of his argument, Gregory parries the blows of his adversary by referring to the evidence of cultural and linguistic diversity⁵⁶. To claim that just *one* concept expresses the essence of God would lead to the conclusion that, since it supports no comparison, any attempt to translate it is doomed to failure. I think that the point made by Gregory is particularly strong. If *agennetos* indeed

⁵⁴ NPNF V, 276a (GNO I. 300. 23-26)

⁵⁵ NPNF V, 276b (GNO I. 301. 24-26)

⁵⁶ G. BARDY, *La question des langues dans l'Eglise ancienne* (Paris : Beauchesne, 1948)

captures God's essence, then the necessary conclusion is that *agennetos* can be regarded in itself as a separated ('idiomatic') essence, which accepts no synonym. The conclusion is peremptorily absurd and chauvinistic: only people speaking Greek would be able, in Eunomius' view, to know God's essence.

Since Gregory did not allow Hebrew to represent God's thoughts, he had all the more reason to refuse Greek language any sacred authority over the other 'barbarian' idioms. 'Things are named by the indication of the voice (*dia tinos sēmantikēs phōnes*) in conformity with the nature and the qualities (*kata tēn engkeimenēn hekastō physin kai dynamin*) inherent in each, the names being adapted to the things according to the vernacular language of each several race (*en hekastō tō ethnei*).'⁵⁷ As Samuel Johnson one thousand years later, Gregory regarded languages to be 'the pedigree of nations', which cannot and do not need to be dissolved. What makes languages and ethnic origin irrelevant is only a life dwelling in the Spirit. As St Paul put it, 'there is neither Jew, nor Greek, there is neither slave, nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3: 28).

For Gregory, the 'divine names' complement one another like the words of a dictionary, but no one expresses the 'essence' of God. Gregory's vision about knowledge is close to the phenomenological hermeneutics of the 20th century, which describes any process of understanding as an act of translation, which, therefore, is perfectly perfectible⁵⁸. 'Since the nature of most things that are seen in creation is not simple', words are necessarily multiple, and cover only patches of meaning, which themselves endlessly change. What words express are the qualities or, in other terminology, the energies of the objects described. An increase in qualities of an object determines the growth in quantity of appellations, which precision is proportional to their narrowness. Even if the defined objects are not composite, like God who is simple by essence, the two-fold character of human knowledge (rooted in the senses and processed by immaterial intelligence) makes inevitable the lapse into semantic multiplicity. Words can point out the meanings of the objects, but their functionality never describes their 'inner' rationality.

In this respect, the most eloquent example is that of the Scriptures, which were written by different authors, and express in a variety of authorial styles the revelation

⁵⁷ NPNF V, 278a (GNO I. 305. 23-26)

⁵⁸ H.-G. GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), ET by G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 345-449

of one God. Despite God's simplicity, the Scriptures are intrinsically multifarious, and this fact receives from Gregory an interesting explanation. Referring to the Psalms, Gregory imagines their author (i.e.: David) being in the Spirit (*en pneumati*) and interpreting 'by voice and word (*dia phōnon kai hrēmatōn*) his own knowledge of the mysteries given him by God.'⁵⁹ Therefore, if the writing of the Scriptures can be imaged as a process of translation, following divine inspiration, one should admit the presence of a significant human contribution to the 'fabrication' of the material corpus of the Bible.

It is also significant that not even the divine Scriptures escaped the process of idiomatic translation (the Septuagint, if not also some of the Gospels, like Matthew's, probably). The multiplicity of ethnic idioms reflects, on a larger scale, the organic plurality of appellations for a single object within a living language. If no particular language is 'better' than another, there is no right to say that a word is more privileged to utter meanings than another. Words, like languages, are not better, just different. 'The Hebrew calls Heaven by one name, the Canaanite by another one, but both of them understand it alike (*noei de hōsautōs hekateros*), being in no way led into error by the difference of the sounds that convey the idea (*tēn katanoēsīn*) of the object'⁶⁰. The motives of this diverted state of affairs are obscure, and, apparently at least, there is no more logic in somebody's endowment with a language than in the arbitrary usage (*kata to areskon*) of a word⁶¹. It is true that Gregory emphasizes the human decision in giving words by calling the circumstances in which Moses ('from the water', in the language of the Egyptian) and Jacob ('the supplanter') received their name, which etymology provide 'the memorial of the occurrence'. But not all words follow this pattern, and even when onomatopoeic words are translated into other language, their original meaning becomes obscure (like from Egyptian to Hebrew, or from Hebrew to Jewish). Onomatopoeia is an exceptional phenomenon, and usually designates interjections in the vocative case. It might well be the case that Hebrew words tend to 'photograph' the realities they express (and the perfect example is *dabar*, which means both 'word' and 'thing'). Biased by this occasional behavior of the Hebrew language (exploited in full by the later Kabbhalist), Gregory is tempted to play upon, sometimes, specious etymologies, just for the sake of spiritual

⁵⁹ NPNF V, 290a (GNO I. 340. 19-21)

⁶⁰ NPNF V, 279a (GNO I. 310. 2-5)

⁶¹ NPNF V, 279a (GNO I. 309. 29)

interpretation (e.g. *theos* derived from *theaomai*, 'to see')⁶². Yet, in Gregory's writings, this is *not* the rule, but the exception. It is very significant that the etymologies played upon by Gregory expose attributes revealed by God in his economy. The relative mobility of the etymologies given to a single word like *theos* shows that Gregory's interest was not philological, and that even the name of God remained relative⁶³. Certainly, like Hermogenes in *Cratylus*, Gregory does not accept etymological investigations as an appropriate tool to understand the meaning of words. One passing note betrays Gregory's distrust of the pictorial language of the Egyptians, namely hieroglyphs. In John Milbank's words, 'what Gregory identifies as the "daemonic" in the hieroglyphic enigmas is their mixture of the half-human and the half-animal: this, he suggests, is effectively how Eunomius conceives of the divine *logos* – as an "intermediate" being who is constantly being "dragged down into a condition subject to passion"'.⁶⁴

The Virtues of the Intellectual Pessimism

Having clarified a philosophical point, Gregory recalls the purpose of his writings, which is to refute a bad understanding of the Christian religion (*eusebeia*). Suspending for a while his analytic response to Eunomius' ideas, Gregory reminds his reader that his points are not just mapping an intellectual controversy over some tedious questions, like the nature of language and the limits of human knowledge. There is much more, Gregory goes on, and it is all about salvation⁶⁵. A subordinationist version of Trinitarian theology has not only problematic consequences from the cosmological viewpoint (placing the Son at the top of the angelic hierarchy), but also very grave soteriological consequences, by lessening

⁶²In *Ad Abl.* (GNO III. 1. 44. 7-45.5), Gregory of Nyssa provides also an alternative etymology, relating *theos* to *theates* ('beholder'). There were also other false etymologies played upon by the Church Fathers, indicating as possible sources the verbs *theein* (to run) and *aithein* (to burn). See GREGORY NAZIANZUS, *Or.* 30. 18 (*SC* 250, 262-264).

⁶³Gregory of Nazianzus explicitly refers to 'God' as 'a relative name' (*ibidem*).

⁶⁴J. MILBANK, 'The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn' in *Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 88

⁶⁵NPNF V, 255a (GNO I. 240. 16-19)

Christ's power to save humankind⁶⁶. Though not strongly visible, there was a hidden connection, at least for Basil and Gregory, between their defence of the *epinoia* argument about language, and the redemptive task of defending Christ's majesty. Having behind them the heresy of Sabellianism and facing ahead a new variant of Trinitarian subordinationism, the Cappadocian theologians had to make sure that Holy Trinity is not notional, but real. In this respect, they pursued a critical interpretation of the limits and the tasks of theological language.

Gregory's theoretical framework is remarkably consistent at all its levels of discourse, and one could say that ontology and cosmology are justly echoed in his theological anthropology. There are different realms of existence, situated somewhere in between the earthly *topos* of human beings and the God of heaven, called here by Gregory 'the majestic existing One' (*to megaleion tou ontōsontos*). One cannot achieve a proper understanding of God since there is a 'wide and insurmountable' gap between the uncreated nature (*hē aktistos physis*), and the created world. 'There is no faculty in human nature adequate to the full comprehension of the divine essence (*ouk estin en anthrōpinē physei dynamis eis akribē katanoēsēsin ousias theou*)'⁶⁷. Cosmological settings, also, reveal Gregory's rationales for epistemological prudence. Gregory returns to his dearest doctrine of God, whose measure is only the infinite (*tēs de metron ē aperia estin*). Conversely, God's creation is 'limited by time and space' (*chronō kai topō perieirgomenē*)⁶⁸, or in J. Daniélou's words, 'un passage du non-être à l'être'⁶⁹. Our empirical knowledge is necessarily confined within these boundaries. Gregory even concedes that 'in this life we can apprehend (*epinoēsai*) the beginning and the end of all things that exist, but the beatitude (*hē makariotēs*) that is above the creature admits neither end, nor beginning (*oute archēn, oute telos*).'⁷⁰ This passage needs a correction, given in Gregory's commentary on the book of the Ecclesiastes, where he openly professes his pessimistic ideas about the competence of human knowledge:

⁶⁶ M. F. WILES' defence of an Eunomius' soteriology is not very convincing, cf. 'Eunomius: hair-splitting dialectician or defender of the accessibility of salvation?' in R. WILLIAMS (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essay in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge, 1989), 157-172

⁶⁷ NPNF V, 257a (GNO I. 245. 19-21)

⁶⁸ NPNF V, 257a (GNO I. 246. 18; 20)

⁶⁹ J. DANIELOU, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 99

⁷⁰ NPNF V, 257a (GNO I. 246. 24)

To my mind, the creation does not know itself yet and it has not understood what is the essence of the soul, what is the nature of the bodies, the origin of the beings (*ta onta*), how they are generated one from another, how what is not receives substance, how what exists is dissolved in non-existence (*to on eis to me on*), and what is the harmony among the contraries in this world. Thus, if creation does not know itself, how may it declare about what is above itself?⁷¹

It is noteworthy that, following the Alexandrine exegetical tradition, Gregory was very keen to give a commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes. Though not completed, Gregory's exegesis was very effective in shaping his mind about what Christian philosophy means.

There are serious reasons to think that Gregory's attraction for this book of the Ecclesiastes is grounded in his biography. As somebody who was for a long time married, a successful advocate in Nyssa who, in his youth, refused to join Basil's passion for ascetic life, Gregory of Nyssa knew quite well what vainglory and worldly gratification could mean. The understanding of the book that reveals 'the vanity of the vanities' is best prepared by reading of Proverbs. The letter configures the moral understanding of the divine commandments, which being insufficient needs a spiritual complement. Grounded in the natural contemplation, the mind finds the world abundant in lessons about death, shame and futility. This worldly spectacle is inspiringly painted by a divine book, which in the Greek language bears the name of the Church (*ekklēsia*). Gregory does not hesitate to see the divine inspiration of Ecclesiastes sealed by the authority of Christ, who like Ecclesiastes (1: 1), was called 'the Son of David' (Matthew 1: 7). In doing so, Gregory opens the doors of the Old Testament with the key of the New Testament, which seems to be the only suitable way of understanding the Law. He carries out a very close reading, line by line, of the first three chapters of the book of the Preacher (*Qohleth*), which consists in a beautiful meditation upon the transient destiny of the man and of the cosmos. Our becoming is paralleled to the play of children who build castles out of sand.⁷² Nurtured by conceit, the appeal for vainglory of every human being brings forth, eventually, only the bitter taste of deceit. Neither physical beauty, nor worldly fame can make us truly happy, since mortality and oblivion rule over all human bodies. Over the vain glorification in

⁷¹ *In Eccl.* VII. 8 (SC 416. 386, GNO V, 415. 17-23)

⁷² The image is perennial and can be traced back in HOMER (*The Iliad* XV, 363).

the eyes of the world (Ephesians 2: 10), the Apostle chose eternal glorification ‘in Christ’ (Romans 15: 17; I Corinthians 1:31; 15: 31).

What is significant for Gregory’s teaching is not just that he, predictably, spurns materialistic pleasures (tackling harshly the voyeuristic culture of his age, which, like ours, is ruled by *concupiscentia oculorum*), but that he finds no real consolation in mere intellectual activity. To know only in part man, history or cosmos hardly comforts anybody’s heart. Discursive knowledge can be helpful, of course, mainly for two reasons. One is positive, when knowledge is directed to assist by technical products people’s basic needs. It can engender charity and self-forgetfulness in working for others. The second reason is negative and not practical, but metaphysical. Since we do not know anything by essence, discursive knowledge can provide clues about another way of understanding reality. If knowledge has no limits, vanity also is boundless. One knows that ‘of making many books there is no end’ (Ecclesiastes 12: 1), and this can only increase knowledge and sorrow (1: 18). Since it comes out of curiosity, knowledge decays very often in the experience of boredom, which is another mark of our mortality. Since Adam’s fall, *knowledge* and *life* are divided, and this very often makes us captives to sorrowfulness. Knowledge is a wound, which only love can heal⁷³. One needs to despair of everything he knows about creatures in order to start searching for the Creator, not by imaginative analogies, but through the uniting force of prayer. Dimmed knowledge about things brings no substantial remedy for death, but still it can teach us through its vanities. As T. S. Eliot put it: ‘after such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now, history has many cunning passages, contrived corridors and issues, deceives with whispering ambitions, guides us by vanities’.⁷⁴

For any solid mind, the uprising of boredom out of knowledge destroys intellectual certitude as an earthquake wipes out a city. Intellectual boredom begs fundamental questions and, although aroused by a particular experience of deceit, it can interrogate a totality of meanings. But the fundamental affection of boredom, perceived by moderns as *Weltschmerz*, reveals the idolatrous potential of knowledge within a life married to death. To feel bored and sick of everything is the first symptom – compared by St Gregory with the desert of Sinai – of soul’s abandonment

⁷³ *In Cantic. Cantic.* 852A-853A

⁷⁴ TS ELIOT, ‘*Gerontion* (1920)’ in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 38

of the realm of the idols. Unhappiness is the beginning of exile. The easy satisfaction with regional and temporary certitudes is upset by the thirst to communicate with the One above ages. After all, the human being is driven by the innate desire to love and to be loved. The contemplation of being for its own sake, says Gregory, makes nobody happy 'without change'. Only the Lord Jesus taught us the divine beatitudes in the key of the paradoxes, an exegesis of which Gregory made in *Orationes de beatitudinibus*. Any sorrowfulness or distress experienced in the naked perception of the world indicates the separation of man from God, who alone is infinitely good. Nonetheless, one does not suffer distress and anxiety without being discreetly witnessed by the cloud of the Holy Spirit⁷⁵, which through shadows guides the pilgrim towards the promised realm of happiness. Tasting the vanities of the world, the soul feels, obliquely, that only the divine goodness could quench her thirst for love, communion, and meaningful knowledge. For Gregory, the true philosophy should mean, at last, to grow in love for Christ, who alone is 'the wisdom and the power of God' (I Corinthians 1: 24). In a way, says Gregory, 'everything apart from God does not exist (*pan de to exo autou theoroumenon anuparxia esti*)'⁷⁶. Only God is adequate in 'calling the non-beings as beings (*kalountos ta mē onta hōs onta*)' (Romans 4: 17). This is not a surprise if one considers the difference between beings and not-beings only as an *ontic* difference, distinct from the *ontological* difference between the Creator and the creature. As with almost all early Christian authors, for St Gregory of Nyssa, *to be or not to be* is hardly an important question. Only love makes sense of being either alive or dead, but effectively sheltered by God. 'Love is the antithesis of evil', which itself 'must be not conceived as something existent, but rather as the absence of good'.⁷⁷

Scientific Disillusionment and Spiritual Progress

It is one thing to apprehend the formal limits of the world - more precisely, to grasp its finitude - and something different to understand the essence of the creature, which possibility Gregory specifically denies in all of his works. In *CE III*, a few lines

⁷⁵ *Vit. Moys.* II. 121 (PG 45, 361 B8-12; ed. J. Daniélou, SC 1bis, 66)

⁷⁶ *In. Eccl.* VII. 7 (SC 416. 370-71; GNO V, 406. 27-28)

⁷⁷ *In Eccl.* VII. 7 (SC 416. 371, GNO V. 407. 1-10)

below his glosses on the ontological difference between the Creator and the creature, Gregory presents the science of astronomy, objects of which, unlike Aristotle, he regards as dynamic. Because of their never-ending motion, the objects of natural sciences provide no condition for a compact and definitive knowledge. Even less, Gregory concludes, can we know about the Creator of the world: ‘we know that He exists (*oti mēn estin oidamen*), but of His essential nature we cannot deny that we are ignorant (*ton de tēs ousias logon agnoein ouk arnoumetha*).’⁷⁸ Though probably, would disappoint Stephen Hawking’s dream of catching God’s ultimate idea about the universe⁷⁹, Gregory’s epistemological position is of a modesty which, in our times, Sir Karl Popper would have probably been happy to applaud⁸⁰. He defends the fundamental idea of falsification in the positive sciences, even leaving room for scepticism towards ill-tempered attempts of unification in physical theory. ‘What is there to unite things so contrary by nature? And how can the harmony of the universe consist of elements so incongruous (*dia tōn heterophyōn*)?’⁸¹ Still Gregory responds: ‘If any one should interrogate us on these and such-like points, will any of us be found so presumptuous to promise an explanation of them? No! The only reply that can be given by men of sense is this: - that He Who made all things in wisdom does alone know the reason/meaning of His creation (*monos oide ton logon tēs ktiseōs*).’⁸²

Gregory does not only base his case on cosmological references. Anthropology too – with its thorny questions about the union between soul and body – serves Gregory’s conviction that ‘whosoever searches through the whole divine revelation (*dia touto pasan tis theopneuston phōnen*), will find therein no doctrine of the divine nature (*tēs theias physeōs tēn didaskalian*), nor indeed anything else that has a substantial existence (*tōn kat’ousian hyphestēkotōn*)’. The conclusion drawn almost emulates the philosophical scepticism of late Antiquity: ‘we pass our lives in ignorance (*en agnoia*) of much, being ignorant first of all of ourselves, as human beings (*hoi anthropoi*), and then of all things besides (*epeita de kai ta alla panta*).’⁸³ If Scripture is silent in respect of what the faculties of the soul are, or the way body and soul are one, this means that such enquiries – which are obligatory in a philosopher’s

⁷⁸ NPNF V, 257b (GNO I. 248. 2-3)

⁷⁹ S. HAWKING, *The Universe in a Nutshell* (London et alii: Bantam Press, 2001), 160: ‘There may be an ultimate theory that we will discover in the not-too-distant future’.

⁸⁰ K. POPPER, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959)

⁸¹ NPNF V, 258a (GNO I. 249. 11-14)

⁸² NPNF V, 258a/b (GNO I. 249. 26-30-250. 1)

⁸³ NPNF V, 261a (GNO I. 257. 26-258. 1)

repertoire – are legitimate and acceptable, if made under title of hypothesis and with methodological caution. If the realm of the visible puts problems for comprehension, Gregory warns his challenger that the invisible is much less accessible to any human mind, limited in time and space:

All that comes within our comprehension (*hypo katalēpsin hēmeteran*) is such that it must be of one of these four kinds: either contemplated as existing in an extension of distance (*en diastēmatikē tini paratasei theōresisthai ta onta*), or suggesting the idea of a capacity in space within which its details are detected (*topikou chorēmatos parēchein tēn ennoian*), or it comes within our field of vision by being circumscribed by a beginning or an end (*kata tēn archēn kai to telos perigraphē entos*) where the non-existent bounds it in each direction (for everything that has a beginning and an end of its existence, begins from the non-existent), or, lastly, we grasp the phenomenon by means of association of qualities (*dia tēs sōmatikēs tōn poiōtētōn sunthēkēs katalambanomen to phainomenon*) wherein dying, and sufferance, and change, and alteration, and such-like are combined.⁸⁴

Gregory's division is not very systematic: the first two kinds of comprehension are related to the category of space, the third to the category of time, while the last one implies both of them. Interestingly enough, Gregory does not directly connect our limits of knowledge to our bodily constitution, but to our condition of created beings.

In *CE* I, Gregory unleashed his most inclement attack on Eunomius' philosophical eclecticism⁸⁵. Without calling himself a philosopher, Gregory recognises in the argument of Eunomius the main source of confusion. 'Acting like those who get their bread by begging'⁸⁶, says Gregory, the bishop of Cyzicus provides a completely indiscriminate way of dealing with the ideas of the Greek philosophers. First, he implies that Eunomius has read uncritically Plato's *Cratylus*, on the meaning of names. 'Being struck by the beauty of the Platonic style (*tē kalliphōnia tēs Platōnikēs lexeōs*), he thinks not unseemly to make Plato's theory a doctrine of the Church (*dogma tēs ekklēsias*).'⁸⁷ Gregory criticises Eunomius more than Plato. Gregory is aware that a theory of language which claims that names mirror existing objects in reality, backs up etymological procedures as methods to unfold the original meaning. Gregory reasoned very simply: if there is one signified thing, while the

⁸⁴ NPNF V, 308a/308b (GNO I. 395. 3-14)

⁸⁵ Gregory goes so far that considers Eunomius' writing to be 'unphilosophical' (GNO I. 81. 16-18)

⁸⁶ NPNF V, 291a (GNO I. 344. 17): *homoion ti poiōn tois tēn trophēn ek prosaitēseōs eautois sunageirousin*

signifiers are many, it would be illusory to think that etymology can explain the genesis of language. There are here two at least two problems: first, the genesis of the individual practice of language, in which multiplicity dwells unrestricted. Secondly, there is the problem of genesis of the national idioms, which although they contaminate one another, are never entirely translatable. Gregory suggests that to imagine that language is reducible to a nomenclature of objective names would be very naïve. Different actions cannot be expressed in static enunciation: language is not only about facts, but also about intentions, or values, or invisible passions. Obviously, the latter set does not consist in simple objects, and the way they are expressed is always linked not only to vocal articulation, but first, to bodily language (of which Gregory is very much aware). There are experiences irreducible to sharp linguistic qualifications, such as taste or smell (which are invoked heavily by St Gregory in his homilies on the Song of the Songs). A perfume can never be adequately described. To say that language mirrors reality is inconsistent, if reality includes the realm of the invisible. In order to express the ineffable, language makes use of metaphors, as the Scriptures bear testimony. Gregory's epistemological ambitions remain modest, since he does not say *how* man has acquired, individually and collectively, the languages in which one can express his discursive intelligence. Gregory seems to reason that the positive sciences should be characterised by openness towards every novelty brought in time by further research, and that any dogmatism in this field would mean just contempt for human intelligence.

Compared to Gregory's common sense, Eunomius' epistemology is at least bizarre, and completely unacceptable from the contemporary standards, though J. Daniélou called his linguistic theory a theological 'innéisme'⁸⁸. First, Eunomius tackled the realm of divinity with tools appropriate only to natural contemplation (or, in other words, positive sciences). Because of this inadequate methodology, he is drawn to refute the idea of progress in both fields of knowledge (divine and human). Eunomius' pretended understanding of the divine is frozen in the possession of a single word, and consequently, reduced to an empty meaning. Stuck in his obsessive reference to the concept of *agennētos*, Eunomius could stand up for the structuralist slogan, which accomplishes the reduction of life to narrative knowledge, and the

⁸⁷ NPNF V, 291a (GNO I. 344. 23-24)

⁸⁸ J. DANIELOU, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 5

diminution of understanding to mere possession of meanings⁸⁹. In short, stagnation is what characterises Eunomius' epistemology in both territories of knowledge, vertical (theological) and horizontal (pragmatic). While claiming that human language, closely related to the process of thinking, has been revealed by God and does not suffer change in time, Eunomius blocks the way for any dynamic approach towards reality, which requires adaptability and the invalidation of previous schemes of understanding (in Popper's words: falsification). Therefore, he is completely unable to admit any possible 'logic of discovery', and even less a pragmatic of knowledge. Theologically, Eunomius' theory is bankrupt as soon as it reaches the idea of 'ungeneracy', which leaves little room for the knowledge by prayer and, therefore, can hardly justify the need of worship⁹⁰. Where inquiry is needed, Eunomius gullibly pretends that everything is obvious; where discreet silence is needed, the heresiarch conjures reason to speak. Almost everything in Eunomius' theology went against Gregory's understanding of reality, which was secured by his doctrine of divine infinity; the latter fosters the mystical theology (*mystikē theōria*), in which an endless number of 'divine names' absorb the unfathomable mystery of God.

⁸⁹ Yet, since it is made of joys and sufferings, life remains beyond text, while narrative knowledge does not exhaust the possibilities of paradoxical understanding

⁹⁰ 'And prayer is more than an order of words, the conscious occupation of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying' – T. S. ELIOT, 'Little Gidding' in *Collected Poems (1909-1962)* (London: Faber&Faber, 1963), 215

IV. THINKING THE LANGUAGE

Thought and Language

In *CE I*, Gregory develops chiefly a logical and theological rejection of the concept of *agennētos* coined by Eunomius in his first *Apologia*. The third book against the heresiarch examines more interesting philosophical questions. Gregory's focal interest is entirely in the service of Basil's conception about language as human artefact. Yet, Gregory enriches Basil's position with various nuances that prove him to be a skilful thinker. One of the first things he has to plead for, is the effectiveness of linguistic conceptions, which though being invisible, are not equivalent to the production of some *flatus vocis*. Gregory has to establish a solid relationship between thought, language, and the objects of perception, and above all the reality of all these instances. Words don't simply dissipate at the moment of their moment of vocal utterance, since their meaning (i.e.: the content) can be stocked for good in the memory (hard-drive) of the intellect, exactly as the script retains the letters of a hand-writer.

For whatever comes into our mind, whether intellectually existing (*kata ten synesin*), or otherwise, it is possible for us at our discretion to store away in writing. And the voice (*phthoggos*) and the letters (*grammati*) are of equal value for the expression of thought (*eis phanerōsin dianoiās*)¹.

Eunomius did his best to compromise any attempt to understand language in human terms. Conception is ephemeral, Eunomius wanted to say. Therefore, God's best name – *agennētos* – should not have been classified among the perishable thoughts of the human mind. While holding *agennētos* as a divinely inspired concept, he looked for a transcendental justification of the whole of language. He could probably say, together with the first Wittgenstein: 'die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt'². If of human origin, words were for Eunomius mere vocal, fleeting concepts; if divinely authorised, words could, in principle, receive even a magic veneration (e.g. 'agennētos'). In his turn, Gregory rejects any magic reverence towards either written

¹ NPNF V, 254b (GNO I. 239. 21-26)

² L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Prototractatus. An Early Version of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5. 5335 (London and New York: Routledge, 1971), 184-185

or spoken words, which can nourish intellectual idolatry. To Eunomius' conviction that the purport of words vanishes instantly at the moment of their vocal utterance, Gregory replies by defending the reality of thinking. What really matters in dealing with words is not their conservation in script ('hardware'), but the processing of their meaning ('software'). The 'memory of the hearer's soul' (*to mnēmonikō tēs tou akouontos psychēs*) is, in principle, the indispensable source of inspiration for any further intellectual operation.

Though 'St Gregory does not *explicitly* distinguish between the inner word [*logos endiathetos*] and the outer, or the spoken word [*logos prophorikos*]',³ he does belong to what J. Derrida called the 'logocentric' tradition of the Western metaphysics⁴: he regards writing as inferior to (audible or silent) speech in the 'inner receptacle' of the mind. In this respect, like many other Church Fathers (Origen, Basil, John Chrysostom or Augustine), Gregory is a good Platonist, who perceives the materiality of language as inappropriate for expressing the highest thoughts of the human mind about God⁵. Complaining about the non-symmetrical relationship between the intelligible and the material endowments of the human being becomes almost a *leit-motif* in Gregory's writings, and affects his discussion of language. Since the only language we can practise bears the traces of a double 'ontological' fall (in Eden and at Babel, respectively), Gregory cannot regard happily the human mind's need to use words in order to express thoughts. The corporeality of language is obvious and unavoidable in speech, which needs to articulate sounds ('words') in order to convey meanings. But also the refined acts of thinking require the usage of more or less abstracted images (numbers are deducted images). St Gregory of Nyssa does not pay much attention to the morphological constitution of language: the power of mind is not exhausted in discursive thinking, and language is not consumed in semantic indication.

Though he declares the arbitrary character of the words, Gregory does not provide further explanation, with the expected reference to the 'consensual argument'. *Pace* Mosshammer⁶, one could say that Gregory avoids enslaving meanings to any textual web, and even less, he refuses to imagine 'the true power, and authority, and

³ A. A. WEISWURM, *op. cit.*, 128, n. 21

⁴ J. DERRIDA, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967); *La dissémination* (Paris : Seuil, 1972);

⁵ *In Eccl.* I. 12 (SC 416, 138-141; GNO V, 293. 5-294.20)

⁶ A. A. MOSSHAMMER, 'Disclosing but not disclosed. Gregory of Nyssa as Deconstructionist', in H. R. DROBNER (ed.), *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der christlichen Spätantike* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 99-123

dominion, and sovereignty of God consisting in syllables'⁷. In this respect, Gregory follows St Paul, who said that his apostolate resides 'not in words of wisdom, but in the demonstration of Spirit and power' (I Corinthians 2: 4), and that Christ is the 'the wisdom and the power of God' (I Corinthians 1: 24). What makes appropriate and pious the usage of some words with respect to God is, first, the meaning that the author bears in mind, and the context of their application. To call God the 'first being', as Eunomius did, would not have appeared in Gregory's eyes as necessarily heretical. What makes *any name* susceptible of heresy is only the intention to give it an absolute character. When used in a narrow framework, an apparently refined concept like 'being' could have blasphemous connotation in comparison with 'lion' or 'leopard', which can be used freely in the liturgical song of praise for God. In fact, concrete terms can be used better for metaphorical constructions, being not only more vivid, but also stronger in connotation. Poetry cannot be done with general concepts, and the Scriptures confirm at best this law of existence for the metaphors. Gregory showed a special interest for the non-conceptual literary forms, which prevail in rhetoric and poetry. Free images are richer in content than any analytic qualification, which fade God's beauty and imperious presence.

Abstraction

In the famous philosophical dispute whose best description was given by Plato in *Cratylus*, the only two apparent solutions were either (i) to say that language reflects the nature of things (*kata physin*), and, therefore, to assume that etymology provides original knowledge, or (ii) to say that words are completely arbitrary (*kata thesin*), regardless of the nature or function of things, being subjected to change for no sensible reason. In the wake of Plato's exposition, the Stoics defended the essentialist account, whereas Aristotle and the atomists (Democritus, chiefly) held the conventionalist line. M. Canévet, who made a careful and reputable study of Gregory's biblical hermeneutics, situated Gregory in the proximity of Democritus' philosophy of language⁸, while Th. Kobusch placed him close to the Stoics⁹. There are a few exceptions from Gregory's general commitment to the conventionalist

⁷ NPNF V, 280a (GNO I. 312. 9-11)

⁸ M. CANEVET, *op. cit.*, 31

⁹ T. KOBUSCH, *art. cit.*, 256

viewpoint. Sometimes, Gregory likes playing upon false etymologies, for which he does not pretend any scientific accuracy¹⁰. His constant purpose is to draw in all circumstances as many spiritual conclusions as possible, being ready to focus his allegorical reading not only on some scriptural fragments, but also on independent words (like *theos* or *anthrōpos*). Uncharacteristically, as the French scholar remarks in a note¹¹, Gregory's terminology makes a distinction in the way of signifying (*sēmainei*). With respect to different objects, one can use either a proper name (*kyrion onoma*) which records the manifestation of things¹² (*kata to phanēn*) – the example given is 'the sun' –, or just words, which have simply an indicative function.

There is no strong confirmation in Gregory's extensive writings of any distinction between *proper* and *improper names*. Yet, he is able to distinguish between words of primary or secondary meaning, which demand certain abilities of reading and understanding. There are words which designate the individuality of the object (*i.e.*: 'sun', 'earth'), called nouns; there are words which express the qualities of an object (*i.e.*: 'hot', 'cold'), called adjectives; verbs express the transformation to which an object can be subjected, while adverbs qualify these transformations. But all words express the multiple relationships of an object in a system of reference. For the astronomers, 'sun' designates 'the central body of the solar system', while for the readers of the Christian Scriptures, it tells of God's majesty. The Scriptures use innumerable images conveying the attributes of God, but the only appropriate reading of these words (metaphors) refers to their secondary meaning. Usually, the secondary meaning expresses nuances and retains, in a parabolic context, the *idea* conveyed by the first meaning. No matter how vivid some biblical images are, it is obvious that the task of hermeneutics is to extract their global meaning. Since spiritual discernment can be compared to oenological art, this hermeneutical process could be compared to alcoholic distillation, consisting in the separation of persistent qualities from a perishable substratum. Projected into a spiritual horizon, these images become symbols of God's epiphanies. Read so, the images of the Scripture earn an iconic function.

This process of abstraction is required not only in the anagogic reading of the Scriptures: the simplest logical procedures (induction, deduction) or mathematical

¹⁰ NPNF V, 309a (GNO I. 397. 5-9)

¹¹ M. CANEVET, *op. cit.*, 39, n. 11

¹² NPNF V, 264b/265a (GNO I. 268. 19-20)

investigations require a similar method of abstraction of images into concepts: 'each kind of quality is separated from the substratum'. Gregory illustrates this with a common example: 'If, for instance, some animal or tree is presented to our notice, or any other of the things that have material existence, we perceive in our mental discussion of it many things concerning the substratum, the idea of each of which is clearly distinguished from the object we contemplate: for the idea of colour is one, of weight is another; so again that of quantity and of such and such a peculiar quality of touch.'¹³ Only by the constant movement of thought towards the immaterial realm of meanings (and beyond), images are transformed into poetic symbols or scientific categories, turning their status of 'words about things' into 'words about words', and, thus, becoming concepts. Medieval theorists like Ockham spoke about words of first intention and concepts of second intention, the second category being always considered conventional (*ad placitum*). Gregory somehow anticipated this distinction. 'We translate, as it were, into the form of a name the thought (*noēma*) about a subject that arises in us, and announce what we apprehended (*to noēthen*) by words, sometimes with one, sometimes with another. However, we do not make the thing, but only signify it by what we call it. For the things remain what they naturally are. But the mind, laying hold of existing things, reveals its thought by such words as it is capable of.'¹⁴ The words chosen to signify one reality change because reality itself is subject to temporal modification, and what language can grasp is always limited to one perspective. It is again noteworthy that Gregory thinks of the process of naming as an act of translation, and the fact that one usually needs more than one word to describe a single event shows that language is an improvable and alterable cultural construct, items of which can swap endlessly, since they have no substantial determination. It is the reason why one can learn the Greek language and still not become a Greek (if ethnicity is to be taken as an essential determination), and *vice versa*: one can be Greek and not be able to speak the language of one's ancestors.

Reality and Imperfection of Knowledge

¹³ 'On the Making of Man' (24. 1), NPNF V, 414b

¹⁴ PG 44, 760B-C

If one only had to name an object in order to know it, any discipline or science would become extremely easy. Gregory prefers to imagine the relationship between ‘language’ and ‘thought’ not in terms of priority, since they cannot be separated. Language is not defined, primarily, in terms of instrumental knowledge: as T. Carlyle put it, it is not the garment of *thinking*, but its body¹⁵. Of course, like Plotinus, Gregory did not think that mind (*nous*) is exhausted in the exercise of discursive knowledge¹⁶. Meanwhile, he calls knowledge an activity (*energeia*) of the intellect (*dianoia*),¹⁷ which can have language as one of its products (*erga*). Either vocal or written, language uses different appellations that are ‘the shadows of the things (*skiai tōn pragmatōn*)’¹⁸, recording their constant movement¹⁹. Language is dynamic, and every word is therefore inappropriate to define the erratic movements of the things. God himself is infinite, and again, words can only hope to name his glory.

Are we not clearly taught that the words (*hai semantikai*) which represent things are of later origin (*epiginontai*) than the things themselves, and that the words (*hai phōnai*) which are framed to express the movements of things (*tas kinēseis tōn hyphestōton*) are reflections (*hōsper skiai*) of the things (*tōn pragmatōn*) themselves?²⁰

In order to be well understood, this statement needs a close examination. Gregory’s rejection of Eunomius’ essentialist account of language does not make him declare a stark autonomy of language against reality. On the contrary, Gregory plays upon the dynamic character of both language and reality, which explains why our knowledge always can be perfected. Words are meant to reflect reality, but this does not imply an oppositive and static relationship. Words are ‘shadows’ (*skiai*) which have to grasp things in movement. Language is a happening, rather than a description. Both God and creation are known in their energetic dimension, since their essence (*ousia*) or substratum (*hypokeimenon*) remains hidden. Yet, Gregory adheres to the tradition of philosophical realism, and claims that ‘no matter the way in which objects are signified by the words imposed to them, the knowledge we have [of them] remains

¹⁵ T. CARLYLE, *Sartor Resartus* I. 11 (London: 1834), 57

¹⁶ A. MEREDITH, ‘The Concept of Mind in Gregory of Nyssa and the Neoplatonists’, *SP* 22 (1989), 35-51; see also V. HARRISON, ‘Receptacle Imagery in St. Gregory of Nyssa’s Anthropology’, *SP* 22 (1989), 23-28

¹⁷ *De inf.* (PG 46, 176B; GNO III, II. 80. 16-20): ‘*ei oun hē gnōsis ousia ouk estin, alla peri ti tēs dianoias energeia, polu mallon ē agnoia porrō tou kat’ousian einai homologetai.*’

¹⁸ NPNF V, 265a (GNO I. 269. 13-14)

¹⁹ NPNF V, 307b (GNO I. 393. 14): ‘Every term (*pas logos*) – every term, that is, which is really such – is an utterance expressing some movement of thought (*tōn kat’ ennoian kinēmatōn phōnē*)’

²⁰ NPNF V, 265a (GNO I. 269. 11-15)

unconfused.’²¹ Though imperfect, our knowledge of the world is not illusory. The same rules apply when God becomes the focus of the attention of the intellect, which disposes of innumerable words in order to describe the divine works in the world. Yet, since God is one and the same in his activities, ‘all the names and the concepts worthy of God have the same value because their designation (*semasia*) of the object (*hypokeimenon*) coincide.’²²

Gregory explains the fall into multiplicity of names by appeal to the concept of ‘infinity’ in God. This explains, on the one hand, the unfathomable character of God’s essence, but, also, the inexhaustible resource for God’s activities, which make ‘everything that breathes praise the Lord’ (Psalm 150: 6). Gregory lets us understand that, since it is rooted in historicity, the contemplation of God’s mighty works is open and subjected to change and encounters novelties, though God is one. In Kantian terms, the knowledge of God is *a posteriori*, though it surpasses the objective limits imposed by the general rules of perception (space and time). Consequently, the most befitting names that can portray God’s activity are the negative ones, the use of which Gregory considers a ‘sacred duty.’²³ He explains why:

In order that the Supreme Being may not appear to have any connection whatever with things below, we use, with regard to His nature, ideas and phrases expressive of separation from all such conditions; we call, for instance, that which is above all times (*to hyperanō tōn aiōnōn*) pre-temporal (*proaiōnion*), that which is above beginning unbeginning (*kai hyper archēn anarchon*), that which is not brought to an end, unending (*to mē teleioutemon ateleutēton*).²⁴

The names used to extol God are not analytical predicates deduced from the concept of divinity. In Gregory’s writings, there is no such a thing as the ‘essential concept’ for God. It is rather Eunomius’ case that the statements of theology take the form of some analytic *a priori* propositions, making all the attributes of God convertible into the essential divine name, which is ‘agennetos’.²⁵ For Eunomius, when one had the concept of ‘ungeneracy’, all the other divine names become irrelevant or superfluous. They are concepts, which add nothing to our knowledge of God, which is not acquired

²¹ *Ad Abl.* (GNO III, I. 43. 7-9)

²² *Ad Eust.* (GNO III, I. 8. 8-10): ‘*panta gar ta theoprepē onomata te kai noēmata homotimōs echei pros allēla to mēden peri tēn tou hypokeimenou diaphōnein sēmasian.*’

²³ NPNF V, 308b (GNO I. 396. 3-4): ‘It is a sacred duty to use of God names privative of the things abhorrent to His nature (*eusebes an eiē pantōs tois choristikois tōn apemphainontōn hrēmasin ep’ autou kechrēsthai*)’

²⁴ NPNF V, 308b (GNO I. 395. 14-20)

by a sort of intellectual intuition. But Gregory objects to this claim, saying: ‘Thus let all God’s attributes be convertible terms (*outō kai ta kath’ hekasta panta pros allēla metachōreitō*), there being no special signification (*idiazousēs emphaseōs*) to distinguish one from another.’²⁶ Gregory falsifies this theory by comparing two divine attributes, which the latter considered to be equivalent. ‘What has no end’ (*to ateleteton*) cannot be reduced to ‘what has no beginning’ (*to agennēton*) because ‘the term “without end” is common to all things whose life we believe capable of extension to infinity (*diarkein tē zoē pros to apeiron*), while the term without beginning belongs to Him alone Who is without originating cause.’²⁷ Gregory is keen on preserving the plurality of divine names, which already call for God’s majesty. The highway to God is paved with surprises, and therefore, one can describe the knowledge of God as synthetic *a posteriori*, although, unlike the knowledge supplied by mathematics, it is not universally acknowledgeable. Living close to God, the soul perceives modulation in his understanding of the divine mysteries. There are times of apparent forsakeness, and times of great intimacy – the mystical poem of the *Song of the Songs* renders manifest this dialectic of presence and absence. The one who loves God feels obliged to use many words in his praise of the divine marvels²⁸. ‘The force (*emphasis*) of each of the terms used in connection with the Divine Being (*toiautē estin ekastou tōn epi tēs theias physeōs legomenōn*) is such that, even though it has a peculiar significance of its own, it implies no opposition to the term associated with it (*mēdemian ischein pros to synonomazomenon enantiōsin*).’²⁹ There is no conflict among the divine names because there is no hierarchy that could make one privileged as against another. Even less can one find in Gregory’s writings a proper name of God, which includes analytically all the others.

Epinoia

²⁵ NPNF V, 297a (GNO I. 364. 5-9)

²⁶ NPNF V, 297b (GNO I. 364. 20-23)

²⁷ NPNF V, 304b (GNO I. 384. 21-24)

²⁸ NPNF V, 309a (GNO I. 396. 19-20)

²⁹ NPNF V, 298a (GNO I. 365. 26-29)

Epinoia ('conception') is the watchword of Gregory's *sui-generis* treatise on language³⁰. It best explains why Basil and Gregory adopted an 'apophatic' approach in setting the principles of knowledge of God and of his creation. While dealing with the question of the origin of language, it was not enough for Gregory to say that language is a human product. Further clarifications were required, in the light of Basil's former attempt to define the two-folded aspect of knowledge, and therefore, of language. As we have seen, the senses take a full part in the constitution of any vision about physical or intelligible world. Since concepts convey ideas by abstracting or sublimating the primary meaning of raw images, one cannot expect to be able to allot any pertinent word in respect to God. Responsible for this process of mental abstraction is the faculty of imagination, defined by Basil and Gregory as *epinoia*.

According to my account of it, says Gregory, conception is the method by which we discover things that are unknown (*esti gar kata ge ton emon logon hē epinoia ephodos euretikē tōn agnooumenōn*), going on to further discoveries by means of what adjoins to and follows from our first perception (*dia tōn prosechōn te kai akolouthōn tē prōtē to spoudazomenon noēsei to ephexēs exeuriskousa*). For when we have formed some idea of what we seek to know, harmonising what follows (*to akolouthon*) to the first result of our discoveries, we gradually conduct our inquiry to the end of our proposed research³¹.

In other words, *epinoia* is the intellectual activity that targets the discovery of new concepts (*noemata*) which grasp the suspended realm of the unknown. As its etymology suggests, *epinoia* is what comes after a primary act of perception (or intuition), called *noesis*. Any intellectual prospect needs a focal point, and *epinoia* represents the way (*hodos*) on which the last synthesis of knowledge is done, delivering one view about the object researched. For Gregory, to give names means to stamp conceptually the reality grasped first by intuition³². The linguistic fabric of human mind is under the administration of the discursive intellect. But apart from the production of language, *epinoia* is involved in a variety of intellectual activities and, though it explores the realm of imagination (rather in abstract than concrete form), it has no pejorative connotation (as in Epicurus' view³³, taken as such by Eunomius).

³⁰ For precious philological comments, see E. C. OWEN, 'Epinoeō, Epinoia and allied words', *JTS* 35 (1934), 368-376

³¹ NPNF V, 263a (GNO I. 277. 20-26)

³² NPNF V, 290b (GNO I. 343. 26)

³³ NPNF V, 291b (GNO I. 345. 25-30)

Not only poetry or mythology are the product of *epinoia*, but also (and more important), the technological achievements of humankind, on the basis of which the pure sciences lay down their premises.

In praising *epinoia* as the source of all the benefits of the history of humankind, Gregory goes so far that he appreciates ‘this faculty [being] more precious than any other with the exercise of which we are gifted in this life by Divine Providence (*para tēs theias promētheias*)’³⁴. As with any other God-given gifts, man has the capacity to use this faculty of discovery either for good or for bad purposes. Gregory is aware that progress in technology is very often linked with the war machine, ruled over by various state men, and yet, he is keen on regarding *epinoia* as a gift from God given purely for good. Gregory mentions medicine as ‘art of healing’, which benefits from the outcomes of virtually all the sciences and the techniques invented by human intelligence (mathematics, geometry, biology, navigation, commerce, etc.). And since medicine, in contrast to war, can absorb all the results of human creativity, technological progress seems to be entirely legitimate in Gregory’s eyes. It is an orthodox position, since by that time, the small advances in medicine³⁵ did not raise ethical questions such as euthanasia, transplants of organs, etc. Medicine enjoyed a great prestige among the Cappadocians, among whom Basil, even in the hostile age of Valens, gained the illustrious reputation of the initiator of the first Christian hospices, in which people sick of leprosy were carefully looked after³⁶. No doubt because of Basil’s work in the field of medicine, Gregory was ready to praise the benefits of intellectual imagination, which is in charge of language as well as of arithmetic.

Gregory’s defence of *epinoia* as the faculty of imagination of human mind leads to some unexpected results. Since, like thought, human language is not only reproductive, but also creative, one has to justify the huge cultural diversity of humankind. Gregory refers not only to the higher branches of learning (*tōn mathēmatōn ta hypselotera*) – as geometry and arithmetic –, but also to ‘the invention of the mechanical arts (*eureseis tōn mathēmatōn*)’, ‘the marvels of measuring time’, ‘the philosophy of being (*hē peri tou ontos philosophia*)’, ‘the contemplation of the intelligible things (*hē tōn noētōn theōria*)’, or less pretentious skills like ‘agriculture

³⁴ NPNF V, 263a (GNO I. 277.32-278.1-4)

³⁵ For a short overview, see R. PORTER, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: a Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present* (London: FontanaPress, 1999).

³⁶ BASIL OF CAESAREA, *Ep.* 94 (ed. R. J. Deferrari, vol. II, 151-152); GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Orat.* 43. 63; SOCRATES, *HE* VI. 34

(*hē georgia*), navigation (*hē nautilia*), and even the art of taming beasts³⁷. When confronted with such an astounding amount of sciences and techniques, one should find the reasonable source of inspiration for human beings. Surprisingly enough, Gregory's answer is very modern, since he does not make recourse to any mythological explanation. There is no invisible 'genius' or 'daimon' in charge of any of these technological innovations. The bishop of Nyssa tackles highly sophisticated questions even in contemporary epistemology, looking for the origin of scientific discoveries or, to put it differently, the relationship between novelty and human intellect. Translated into the contemporary philosophical jargon of the continental tradition, Gregory's understanding of the process of thinking would look extremely appealing even nowadays, as in the early modern times of Richard Simon or J. C. Herder. *A contrario*, Eunomius' undertakings would appear appalling to any reader interested in epistemology or cosmology. Gregory imagines thought as a way of approximation to what naturally discards essentialist description. Temporal differentiation affects all objects of thought, apart from the ideal entities (as the *rational* numbers). But since spatial difference occurs even in the latter situation, Gregory says that human thinking is more a way of approximation, than a pictorial capture of reality. It is hard to believe that Gregory ever imagined thought to be reducible to linguistic structures and the complexity of language to be entirely mirrored by logic. In its biblical application, language reveals itself to be an interplay between images and concepts, which can suffer almost an alchemical transformation in their meaning, during the hermeneutical process.

To claim that one could assert essential predicates about God means to ignore not only the ontological cleavage between the Creator and the creature, but also the by-product of, respectively, Adam's fall and of the catastrophe of Babel³⁸. Having a corrupted noetic and moral identity, human beings cannot say – like God addressing Moses – 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3: 14). We learn about things and about ourselves by *experience*, which literally means overcoming limits or in spiritual terms, temptations³⁹. For Gregory, our supreme limit is God, whose measure is infinite. Though inexhaustible by nature, God is reflected in his works, in the same way in

³⁷ NPNF V, 263a (GNO I. 277. 5-15)

³⁸ About how the plurality of languages shape human perception, see G. STEINER, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976)

³⁹ In Greek, *peirasmos* stems from *peras* while *emperia* (translated in Latin with *experientia*) plays the same etymology. In the Romanian philosophy, an enticing 'peratology' (or ontology of the limit) has been sketched by G. LICEANU, *Despre limită* (București: Humanitas, 1994).

which reality is expressed by language, in words that reflect the internal limitation of the human mind and the external activities of different entities (living beings, or inanimate objects). Therefore, Gregory is aware that the genuine desire for knowledge (which, *pace* Foucault, is not immediately convertible into power) remains, somehow, unquenchable, though the world is limited and aporetic, when not directly mysterious. The possession of intellectual certitudes is endangered by every new sensible acquirement and by the need of better formalisation. Our skills are always perfectible and any scientific knowledge acquired by systematic methods is challenged by temporality. Genuine knowledge must enlarge and surpass its previous horizon of determination, by a sort of readiness for self-annihilation. Living fully the consequences of Adam's fall, human intelligence is fragmented and our knowledge deficient. One cannot approach totality through discursive reasoning, and this failure already represents an invitation for other 'epistemological' lines of attack, which mean paradoxical elevation through faith and love, expressed at their best in prayer. Hans Urs von Balthasar identified in his shrewd reading of Gregory's writing 'une philosophie du devenir et du désir', which is developed in all the important parts of his theological doctrine. Anthropology – with its classical teaching about the soul as the 'icon of God', and cosmology – which holds the divine Logos as the principle of the whole creation, thus make legitimate any cautious analogical deduction. 'Incomprehensibility' is therefore the hallmark of God's infinity in the contemplation of man and of creation.

Criticism of Semantic Univocity

There is a certain epistemological confidence behind Eunomius' claim that 'ungeneracy' is God's essence (and not that God's essence is – *inter alia* – 'ungenerate'),⁴⁰ namely the confidence in the ability of language to express adequately the realm of the divine. To Basil's affirmation⁴¹ of the human character of any linguistic expression, including *agennētos*, Eunomius replied with a series of unparalleled theological statements. In the first book of his second treatise *Apologia Apologiae*, Eunomius speaks of the natural meanings of the words⁴², claiming that

⁴⁰ NPNF V, 252b (GNO I. 233. 11-17a)

⁴¹ *Adv. Eun.* I. 6 (PG 29, 524B)

⁴² NPNF V, 91b (GNO I. 201.3-5)

God himself made use of these words before the creation of man⁴³. In the second one, Eunomius pours scorn on Basil's⁴⁴ 'relativistic' account of language, saying that he rejected the Scriptures for the benefit of pagan wisdom⁴⁵. Gregory's elder brother is labelled at once as a disciple of Aristotle, Epicurus⁴⁶, and Valentinus⁴⁷. In fact, Basil only claimed that the human mind has the freedom to choose the appropriate words which express better the activity of different real or imaginary entities. Contrarily, captive to a literal exegesis of Scripture, Eunomius supposes that, *ab initio*, God invented a catalogue of names befitting the essence of things⁴⁸. He suggests that such ideas are implicit in the first two chapters of Genesis, but also in various other texts, like the Psalms⁴⁹ or the Gospels. Unsurprisingly, Basil's assessment of the relative character of all the predicates uttered on behalf of God, provoked on Eunomius' part the habitual reflex of accusing his adversary of blasphemy. In short, Eunomius introduced the notion of divine invention of names⁵⁰, without specifying if it was only of *agennētos* or, of others names, as well. 'The Creator, says the heresiarch, by means of relationship, activity, and analogy, has appointed names suitable to each things'⁵¹. It is not clear what words like 'relationship, activity, and analogy' do really mean, but this conclusion is for Eunomius the result of two kinds of enquiries: one is scriptural (of which Moses, David and the evangelists bear witness), while the other is the result of logical deduction from 'a law of nature [which] teaches us that the status of names derives from the things named, not from the authority of the one who does the naming'⁵². Yet, Eunomius never managed to provide biblical evidence either for his prioritising of *agennesia*, or for his essentialist Trinitarian formula. At one point, he says that all names are divine products, and therefore no discrimination among them is acceptable. Then, Eunomius can claim that *agennesia* plays a top role, because of theological reasons. One of the notorious motives for this fixation on a single word is, ultimately, God's simplicity, acknowledged as such by Gregory⁵³. Simplicity of God – Eunomius suggests – should accommodate just one designation, namely *agennētos*.

⁴³ NPNF V, 277a (GNO I. 303. 1-6)

⁴⁴ NPNF V, 248b (GNO II. 310. 25): '[Basil] has undertaken to write without any skill in logic'.

⁴⁵ NPNF V, 269b; 291b (GNO I. 281. 1-14; 345-346)

⁴⁶ NPNF V, 291b (GNO I. 345.9-346.11)

⁴⁷ NPNF V, 295a (GNO I. 356. 20-4); NPNF V, 297a (GNO I. 362. 7-11)

⁴⁸ NPNF V, 291a (GNO I. 345. 12-16)

⁴⁹ NPNF V, 298a (GNO I. 350. 6-9)

⁵⁰ NPNF V, 265 (GNO I. 270. 1-4)

⁵¹ NPNF V, 284a (GNO II. 324. 1-4)

⁵² NPNF V, 305a (GNO I. 385. 21-4)

⁵³ NPNF V, 252b-253a (GNO I. 238. 11-42);

Actually, by saying this, Eunomius acknowledges the instant donation of the concept of *ungeneracy*, and the one of *simplicity*, the semantics of which can hardly dovetail.

In making *agennētos* prevail against all other divine names (like infinity, goodness, etc.), Eunomius proved to be, to say the least, inconsistent, since he wanted to demonstrate that, in fact, language is of divine institution. The natural consequence of this statement would be that not only *agennētos*, but also other names would necessarily enjoy the privileged status of concepts which reveal the essence of natures. Claiming that we are using a divine artefact, Eunomius arrived at a peculiar theory of univocal predication. To be sure, he did not say, like Duns Scotus one thousand years later, that 'to be' can be predicated in the same way of God as of any other creature. In this respect, he was too much a Neoplatonic thinker, asserting for 'the first essence' the right 'to be', in the proper sense of the word⁵⁴. Instead, Eunomius spoke of 'words belonging naturally to God'⁵⁵, which nevertheless, come into our intellectual possession. In this respect, it is legitimate to speak about a linguistic (or semantic) univocity, which means that in Eunomius' thought there was no distinction between God's treatment of words and the human usage of them. Eunomius could make even more bizarre statements, for instance that 'things which have one and the same name are themselves one'⁵⁶. Such a proposition is blatantly wrong even for the most profane observer of the living performance of any kind of languages, which include in their texture a considerable amount of homonyms (words which are identical in form but different in meanings).

AGENNETOS: Privation and Correlation

However, Gregory's objection is not just a moral one. He is very keen to show that the characterisation of God primarily as a 'ungenerate entity' is completely mystifies the understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son, which was the object of Athanasius' theology⁵⁷. In his *CE I*, Gregory spent a lot of energy in order to prove that the whole point of the biblical language about the Father and the Son is to stress in a paradoxical language – which, speaking of God, cannot be

⁵⁴ NPNF V, 225a (GNO II. 251. 18-20): 'He who is in the bosom of I AM [Ex 3: 14] does not possess existence simply or in the proper sense'.

⁵⁵ NPNF V, 305b (GNO I. 388. 6)

⁵⁶ NPNF V, 193a (GNO II. 166. 11-16)

⁵⁷ E. P. MEIJERING, 'Athanasius on the Father as the Origin of the Son' in *God. Being. History. Studies in Patristic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1975), 89-102

suspected of literal connotations – the essential identity and the hypostatic difference.⁵⁸ This is what characterises the mysterious, and the unfathomable God worshipped in the ‘true religion’ (*eusebeia*). For Gregory, the whole point was clear: if the Father always existed as a God, but not as a Father, then the Son would have come – the first among all creatures – though *not* ‘ex nihilo’, but out of divine will⁵⁹. In other words, if one had to speak, like Eunomius, of God in terms of ‘ungenerate essence’, any explanation of the idea of ‘fatherhood’ would be done at the cost of introducing temporality into God. If God is described primarily as an ‘ungenerate essence’ one should say that he only *becomes* a Father by ‘begetting’ a Son (since ‘ungeneracy’ does not speak of ‘fatherhood’⁶⁰). Temporalisation of God is just the first step towards the restoration of mythology, which in Gregory’s time had already begun to be justified philosophically by various Neoplatonic thinkers⁶¹ (among whom one should count Iamblicus and, on a lower note, Julian the Apostate). Driven to despair, Gregory denounces Eunomius as a person who ‘advocates the error of Judaism and takes part in the impiety of the Greeks (*tēs Hellenikēs atheias*)’⁶²

Yet, since the heresiarch does not wish to refute the Nicene dogma straightforwardly, pretending to establish his ideas on a logical platform of thought, Gregory brought out a semantic refutation. First, there is the question of synonymy drawn out between *agennētos* and *anarchōs*, already made by St Basil in his *Adversus Eunomium*⁶³. Gregory comes out with a clear differentiation of the various meanings (*polysemos*) of the word ‘origin’ (*archē*), which stands behind the concept of *agennēsia* (‘ungeneracy’)⁶⁴. Greek language uses different verbs in order to express the act of coming into existence: with regard to the animal nature, one thinks of the

⁵⁸ NPNF V, 80a (GNO I. 165, 25-26): (*mia physis omologeitai par'emon en diaphorais tas hypostasesi*). Cf. S. GONZALES, ‘La formula *mia ousia treis hypostaseis* en San Gregorio di Nisa’, *AnGr* 21 (1939) 1-140; more generally, for the Cappadocian Fathers’ Trinitarian theology, see the invaluable contributions of ANDRÉ DE HALLEUX, ‘„Hypostase” et „personne” dans la formation du dogme trinitaire’, and ‘Personnalisme ou essentialisme trinitaire chez les Pères cappadociens’, in ID. *Patrologie et Oecuménisme* (Louvain: Peeters, 1990), 113-214; 215-268; also, L. AYRES, ‘On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology As Seen in *To Ablabius: On not Three Gods*’, *MT* 18 (2002) 4, 445-474

⁵⁹ A I, 15. 8: ‘we do not, however, include the essence of the Only-begotten among things brought into existence out of nothing, for no-thing is no essence (*epeiπεr ouk ousia to mē on*).’

⁶⁰ AA I (VAGIONNE, 103; GNO I. 190. 20-193.1)

⁶¹ Regarding Eunomius’ relationship to Neoplatonism, some hints have been given by J. DANÉLOU, ‘Eunome l’Arien et l’exégèse néoplatonicienne du Cratyle’, *REG* 69 (1956), 412-432; Further research has been carried on by P. M. GREGORIOS, ‘Theurgic neo-Platonism and the Eunomius-Gregory Debate : An Examination of the Background’, in *“Contra Eunomium I” en la producción literaria de Gregorio de Nisa* (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 1988), 217-235.

⁶² NPNF V, 251b (GNO I. 231, 7-8)

⁶³ BASIL, *Adv. Eun.* I. 15 (PG 29, 545B ff)

⁶⁴ NPNF V, 78b (GNO I. 162, 7-8); Eunomius calls God the ‘only font and source of all things [*ten ton panton te aitian kai archen*]’ (A I, 22. 6). If, on the one hand, Eunomius is ready to render as synonyms concepts like ‘origin’ (*archē*) and ‘cause’ (*aitia*), he is inconsistent in claiming ‘agennētos’ as *the* name of God.

specific acts of, respectively, giving birth and begetting (*tiktein* – for female; *gennaō* – for male), then there is the specific act of creating (*poieō*), and of fashioning (*kataskeuwazō*). Gregory does not follow Aristotle’s taxonomy of causation (divided into four general types of *causa*), but makes clear that ‘ungeneracy’ is just one category under the more general idea of ‘unoriginateness’ (*to anarchon*). ‘Ungenerate’ is a manner of being⁶⁵, and since it is a quality (determination), it cannot embrace the divine absolute. It conveys literally the idea of existence without a father, and in this respect, Adam could be called *agennetos*, as well as God the Father. If they can be designated with identical attributes, their meanings remain utterly different. *Agennetos* is also a non-biblical name, which by its own status shows itself to be an invention⁶⁶ or, in Boethius’ later terms, an *impositio*.

Eunomius finds his way towards the divine Monad trying to find a concept absolutely free of relation. He has difficulties in maintaining that, on the one hand, *agennetos* describes the essence of God, while, on the other hand, it conveys no negative meanings. If *agennetos* had been out of privation (prescribed by *alpha privativum*), then God also would have to be discussed as a passive subject. Why? Because Eunomius takes for granted the absolute, immediate connection of language to reality⁶⁷. Yet, he calls God the ‘only fount and source of all things [*tēn tōn pantōn tē aitian kai archēn*]⁶⁸. Accepting as synonyms words like ‘origin’ (*archē*) and ‘cause’ (*aitia*), he is inconsistent in claiming ‘agennētos’ as the name of God *par excellence*. Theologically, one should be ready to withdraw all the sensible connotations of the word *gennaō*, when it is said about God the Father. As Gregory very often repeats in his work, ‘generation’ tells of the mysterious relationship existing between the Father and the Son, which specifies simultaneously the hypostatic difference (*diaphōra* without *diastasis*) and the community of substance in God, who is One. Therefore, one can be confident that ‘while the Father is unoriginate and ungenerate, the Son is ungenerate [in the way we have said], but not unoriginate.’⁶⁹

It is clear that, from the beginning of the quarrel with Eunomius, there was at stake the understanding of ‘generation’, the meaning of which Eunomius regarded as

⁶⁵ NPNF V, 289a (GNO I. 339. 2-7)

⁶⁶ NPNF V, 305b (GNO I. 387. 3-4)

⁶⁷ A I. 12. 7-8: *ouk heteron men tēn ousian noountes, heteron de ti par’ autēn to sēmainomenon*

⁶⁸ A I. 22. 6

⁶⁹ NPNF V, 78b (GNO I. 162. 22-25)

equivalent to 'creation' or 'bringing into existence'. Briefly, it would be right to say that Eunomius understood 'ungeneracy' as the highest degree of existence ever conceivable, making of his God something less comparable to the late medieval *summum ens*. Eunomius' vocalism (or primitive nominalism) must have sounded attractive to at least one category of people, namely those belonging to upper-class society, being familiar with the Neoplatonic Theurgic jargon of that age (Porphyry tells us about Plotinus' success among members of the Alexandrian aristocracy of the 3rd century). Yet, one can suspect that the appeal of abstract discourse remained limited to an elitist category of people, which explains why Eunomius failed to capture with his rebarbative intellectual speech the imagination of his congregation. In order to substantiate this assertion, one could bring forth not only the Cappadocians' frequent charges of atheism against Aëtius and Eunomius, but also some stances from his *Second Apology*. The first one echoes Exodus 3: 14 and John 1: 1, mixed up into a subordinationist vision of God: 'He who is in the bosom of I AM (*ho en kolpois on tou ontos*), and Who is in the beginning and with God (*kai en archē on kai pros ton theon on*), does not possess existence simply and in the proper sense (*ouk on oude kyriōs on*), even if Basil, neglecting the distinction, uses the title of 'existent' (*tēn tou ontos prosēgorian*), contrary to the truth'⁷⁰. This rather cryptic sentence tells us that the Son does not possess existence in the proper sense of the word, which is only ascribable to the Ungenerate. To such a claim, Gregory protested harshly, saying that even for the pagan wisdom (e.g.: Aristotle), God was unimaginable under the category of quantity (more or less being). Refusing to apply any category of quantity or quality to God, Basil of Caesarea warned that the Trinity is not to be understood into a numeral sense: 'We do not count by addition, passing from the one to the many by increase; we do not say: one, two, three, or first, second and third. *For I am God, the first, and I am the last*' [Is. 44, 6]. Now we have never, even to the present time, heard of a second God; but adoring God of God, confessing the individuality of the hypostases, we dwell in the monarchy without dividing the theology into fragments'⁷¹. Eunomius missed this point and, therefore, introduced an ontological differentiation

⁷⁰ NPNF V, 225a (GNO II. 251. 18-23); VAGGIONE (1987) renders the fragment in a shorted version, translating *ho on* with 'I AM' (capitalised).

⁷¹ BASIL, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 45 (PG 32, 149B); Gregory of Nyssa enunciates in *Oratio Catechetica* (ch.III) the same idea: 'the same thing is capable of being numbered and yet rejects numeration' (NPNF V, 477b; PG 45, D2-3: *pōs to auto kai arithmēton esti, kai diapheugei tēn exarithmēsīn*).

among the divine hypostases, being compelled to speak of a 'second' and a 'third' god. Why one should stop at the third 'God' remained obscure.

The second fragment seem to confirm the onto-theological constitution of Eunomius' metaphysics, in other words: 'For he who possesses existence and who lives because of the Father (*ho dia ton patera on kai zon*), does not appropriate to himself the status of the I AM, for the essence which rules even Him draws (*elkousēs*) to itself the meaning of the existent (*tēn tou ontos ennoian*)'.⁷² Pointing out that God is the essence, very nature which is to exist, Eunomius traces, again, a very similar logic of thought to that of Spinoza who imagined God as that essence 'whose nature can be conceived only as existing'.⁷³ Consequently, Eunomius was obliged to treat Christ as a demigod by adoption. This typically Arian assumption triggered among the Nicene theologians a very prompt reaction. If Christ was created in a time before which he was not, the divine logic of Incarnation would collapse lamentably. Following St Athanasius⁷⁴, Gregory of Nazianzus insisted that 'what is not assumed is unhealed, and only that which is united to God is saved.'⁷⁵ Once again, dogmatic theology cannot be separated from the practical adhesion to the proclamation of the Gospel and submission to the mystery of salvation. Eunomius' essentialist jargon left little room for such an understanding of salvation in Christ. It is significant that Eunomius' denial of Christ's divinity, whose participation in the goodness of the 'First Essence' (or 'Supreme Being', *tēs anokatō ousias*) he considered to be not natural, but gnostic⁷⁶, resembles very much the modern shift the Western thought.⁷⁷ By implementing strongly ontologised concepts like 'Being' or 'Monad' in order to express the essence of God, many philosophers and theologians started to regard Christ as a model for moral perfection⁷⁸. This surprising convergence between Eunomius and the rationalistic ideology of the 17th and the 18th century becomes even more serious and arresting when compared in its epistemological application. The famous *Fragment II* included by Vaggione in Eunomius' *Extant Works*, provides a substantial argument in this respect. If one can trust Socrates Scholasticus' report, Eunomius maintained that

⁷² NPNF V, 227a (GNO II. 254. 27-255. 4)

⁷³ SPINOZA, *Ethics* I, First Definition: 'By *causa sui* I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing' (ET: S. Shirley, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992).

⁷⁴ ATHANASIUS, *On the Incarnation* 43

⁷⁵ GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *Letter* 101. 32

⁷⁶ A I. 15. 16: 'he became the perfect minister [*teleiōtatos hypourgos*] of the whole creative activity and purpose of the Father'

⁷⁷ J. PELIKAN, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (Yale, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 182-194

⁷⁸ X. TILLIETTE, *Le Christ de la philosophie* (Paris : Cerf, 1990)

‘God does not know anything more about his own essence than we do, nor is that essence better known to him, and less to us; rather, whatever we ourselves know about it is exactly what he knows, and, conversely, that which he knows is what you will find without change in us’⁷⁹. With its conspicuous subjective touch, this sentence appears to be, again, very modern (*avant la lettre*). One just has to compare Aëtius and Eunomius’ claims not only with Aristotle’s image about God (defined as ‘the thought which thinks upon itself’⁸⁰), but also with Spinoza’s or Hegel’s philosophical statements, regarding the endowment of the intellect and its call for knowing God’s essence⁸¹. One encounters here the typically modern deduction of ontology from epistemology, namely the objective structure of being is isomorphic with the subjective apparatus of knowledge (the latter reduced to common perception and discursive reasoning). In actual fact, many of Hegel’s *Schwerpunkte* – God as absolute, self-conscious subject (*Gott als Selbstbewußtsein*)⁸², or the motto: ‘what is rational is real and what is real is rational’ – could be easily applied to Eunomius’ eclectic metaphysics.

Contradiction and Contrariety

⁷⁹ SOCRATES, *HE* IV. 7 (PG 67. 473B-C), ET in VAGGIONE (1987), 178; compare with THEODORET OF CYRUS’ report: ‘[Eunomius] dared to assert such things as not one of the saints ever perceived, that he knows the essence of God perfectly (*alla kai autēn akribōs epistatai tou theou tēn ousia*), and that he has the same knowledge about God, as God about himself (*hēn autos echei peri eautou ho theos*)’ – cf. THEOD., *Haer.* IV. 3 (PG 83. 421A), ET in VAGGIONE (1987), 169; see also EPIPHANIUS’ account on Aëtius’ doctrine (*Haer.* 76. 4. 2, GCS III. 344. 22-23): ‘[Aëtius] deluded himself to speak thus: “I know God” (*ton theon epistamai*), he says, “with perfect clarity, and I know and understand him to such an extent that I do not understand myself better than I know God (*me eidenai emauton mallon hos theon epistamai*).’

⁸⁰ *Metaphysics*, L, 7 (1072b19-26); for Aristotle, theology represents, in fact, the *philosophia prima*, or the ‘science of the most eminent genus’ (1026a21), which in the scholastic division of sciences will take the name of *metaphysica specialis*. When diagnosing as ‘onto-theological’ the Western metaphysics tradition, Heidegger thought that Aristotelian theology provided the foundational model of rationality, demanding for a relation of ‘mutual conciliation’ (*Austrag*) between the ‘Being as Being’ and the divine (*theion*) or God, thought as the ‘first essence’ or the ‘supreme being’. One finds here a web of circular determination (God conceived as a Being grounding the common being, *to on*). See, M. HEIDEGGER, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (GA 26) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press); and also C. HANLEY, ‘Heidegger on Aristotle’s “Metaphysical” God’, *Continental Philosophy Review* 32 (1999) 19-28; an important theological application of Heidegger’s verdict has been pursued by J.-L. MARION, ‘The Marches of Metaphysics’ in *The Idol and the Distance*, ET (with introduction) by Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 1-26

⁸¹ SPINOZA, *Ethica* II, §47: ‘Mens humana adaequatam habet cognitionem aeternae et infinitae essentiae Dei.’

⁸² G. W. F. HEGEL, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, S. 747 in *Philosophie Schülerbibliothek* (CD-Rom), S. 18515 (cf. *Werke*, vol. 3, p. 504); see for details, SAMUEL M. POWEL, *The Trinity in German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104-141; and especially p. 116: ‘The Trinity is according to Hegel neither a mystery, nor a secret in itself’; ‘these relations of origin [*ie*: begetting of the Son and proceeding of the Holy Spirit] are pictorial ways of expressing the logical dialectics of differentiation and reconciliation’; p. 121: ‘Trinity therefore is the religious version of what philosophers know as the logical form of spirit’.



There is no doubt that both Gregory and Eunomius used freely a philosophical concept like 'ousia', though by this word they referred to distinct realities. In the wake of the Nicene Trinitarian theology, Gregory tends to identify *ousia* (or *physis*) with the undivided Deity (*theotēs*), the common nature shared by the Father and the Son, while *hypostasis* designates the individuality of the divine persons⁸³. In his turn, Eunomius speaks of three substances (*ousiai*): His definition of the 'Holy Trinity' brings forth the following image: 'the highest and principal essence (*tēs anotatō kai kyriotatēs ousias*), the essence which exists through it but before all others, and in the essence which is third in terms of origin, and the activity which produced it'⁸⁴. However, terminological differences had in the past important antecedents, among which were the controversy between Dionysios of Rome and Dionysios of Alexandria at the end of the third century⁸⁵, but which were not a sufficient condition for delimiting the borderline between orthodoxy and heresy. In the 360s, as Stuart G. Hall put it, 'the threat of persecution made some doctrinal arguments seem suddenly less important'⁸⁶. The Homoians accepted the use of the ontological language of Nicaea (which did not make of the status of the Holy Spirit an issue), while Athanasius 'era limitato a riconoscere, nel *Tomus ad Antiochenos*, che si poteva parlare in senso accettabile, sia di una, sia di tre ipostasi della divinità'⁸⁷.

But Eunomius remained, symptomatically, the enemy of both the 'homoousians' and the 'homoiousians'. He articulated a theology of a hierarchic Triad of divine essences, considering the mode of origination as criterion for ontological dignity. Eunomius was right to see in the concept of *agennēsia* a trait missing among the Son's attributes, but he was wrong to read it as a proof of ontological degradation. Basil put it accordingly: 'The difference between the "generated" (*to gennēton*) and the "ungenerate" (*agennētō*) is not of more or less (*kata to mallon kai hetton*), as between of a more or lesser light, but the distance of one towards the other is so great, like that between two [attributes] incapable of coexistence (*asynhyparkton*)'⁸⁸. Eunomius' mistake stemmed from the kind of logic he used: as Basil put it clearly in *Adversus Eunomium*, there is no necessary contrariety (*enantiōtetos*) between two

⁸³ D. F. STRAMARA, 'Gregory of Nyssa's Terminology for Trinitarian Perichoresis', *VC* 52 (1998) 3, 257-263; see also C. STEAD, 'Why not Three Gods? The Logic of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Doctrine', in H. R. DROBNER & C. KLOCK (ed.), *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der christlichen Spätantike* (Leiden: E J Brill, 1990), 149-163

⁸⁴ AA I (Vagione, 102) (GNO I. 71. 28-73. 15)

⁸⁵ For a short and clear account, see H. LIETZMANN, *A History of the Early Church* vol. III, 95-98

⁸⁶ STUART G. HALL, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (London: SPCK, 1991), 148

⁸⁷ M. SIMONETTI, *op. cit.*, 511

⁸⁸ *Adv. Eun.* II. 28, 1-4 (PG 29, 636 c-d)

terms standing in opposition (*antithesis*)⁸⁹. Between *agennētos/gennētos* there is contradiction, but not contrariety, and this point was emphasised by St Gregory of Nyssa in *CE I*, while working on the concept of ‘beginning’ and of the ‘end’. He states that ‘beginning’ is contradictory to ‘ending’, but just contrary to ‘beginningless’. ‘That which is without beginning, being contrary to that which is to be seen by a beginning, will be a very different thing from that which is endless, or the negation of end’⁹⁰. In other words, the ‘ungenerate’ is contrary to the ‘generated’, but not contradictory. In order to understand what ‘ungenerate’ means, one has to say what ‘generated’ conveys. With respect to the Son, Gregory does not say that we know what the Father’s act of begetting (*gennaō*) means, and what we are left with is just a negative understanding of it. More precisely, since only one actor (excluding thus any mythological scenario) performs it, on a divine level, the act of begetting the Son entails nothing of what we know from the sensible experience of the world. Consequently, Eunomius’ mistake of logic becomes a theological error, since he imagines the Son’s generation as God’s first act of creation⁹¹.

Though opposing, and yet not contradicting one another, *agennētos/gennētos* stand in a mutual relationship. In Eunomius’ logic of argumentation, if one was to define God by his relationship to the ‘third essence’ (the Holy Spirit), then God should have been called the ‘un-proceeded’. In principle, there is nothing wrong with this attribute, which is perfectly admissible. The problem is that Eunomius wanted to pinpoint ‘the first essence’ in relationship only to ‘the second’, while the third essence could have provided a negative concept, as well (*i.e.* ‘the un-proceeded’). Being relative only to the Son’s status, and not to the Holy Spirit, *agennētos* simply cannot be taken as an absolute name for God. Semantically, again, it also strange that one can claim to have an *absolute* name, which retains a privative meaning. Gregory counted in the large (and, potentially, infinite) class of ‘divine names’ both negative and positive terms, but none was ranked at the level that Eunomius’ targeted for *agennēsia*.

⁸⁹ *ibidem*

⁹⁰ NPNF V, 99a (GNO I. 221. 11-14)

⁹¹ In Gregory’s writings, the metaphysics of participation can be supportive of a cosmological doctrine of continual creation. ‘By participation in the transcendent [the intelligible nature] continually remains stable in the good; in a certain sense, it is always being created while ever changing for the better in its growth in perfection’ (*In Cant. Cantic.* GNO VI. 174, ET 127).

V. PRAGMATICS OF LANGUAGE

Gregory's Pastoral Theology

One of the most compelling reasons which determined Gregory to mount up his attack upon Eunomius' teaching lies not only in his great appeal for thoroughness (*ie:* he refuted *all* the books of Eunomius: *Liber Apologeticus*, *Apologia Apologiae* and *Expositio Fidei*), but especially in his understanding of his pastoral duties. This source of inspiration is clearly conveyed by the strong homiletic tone of his writings. Breaking for a while from his methodical questioning of Eunomius' heresy, Gregory explodes before his congregation:

With what eyes will you now dare to gaze upon your guide? I speak to you, o flock of perishing souls! How can you still turn to listen to this man who has reared such a monument as this of his shamelessness argument? Are you not ashamed now, at least, if not before, to take the hand of a man like this to lead you to the truth? Do you not regard it as a sign of his madness as to doctrine, that he thus shamelessly stands out against the truth contained in Scripture?¹

The *way* Gregory speaks – presumably in front of an ex-Eunomian parish in Constantinople – gives us a clue not only about the *content* of his argument, but also about its *raison d'être*. The medium of Gregory's theology (the Church) is more than the message (the Gospel); it is also its firm justification. For the modern reader it is very important to reflect upon the enormous pastoral consequences involved in all theological disputations of the fourth century. It was a time when Christian believers regarded with much more concern the theological tenets of their leaders, than happens nowadays. Gregory of Nyssa spoke with the authority of a bishop (elected in 372), yet without showing off his ecclesiastical dignity. Gregory wants to fortify the Church against the strong waves of heresy. At least for those who accepted the resolutions of the Council of Nicaea, the concept of 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy' was clearly defined. Gregory feared, and probably with good reason, that the Church was under threat of losing her cornerstone, which is Christ. In the prologue of *CE I*, Gregory imagines taking Eunomius' manifesto and dashing it 'on the rock, as if it was one of the

children of Babylon: and the rock is Christ (*ē petra de ēn ho Christos*).² Willing to do so, Gregory feels, 'by the written and the natural law,'³ in communion not only with Basil the Great, but also with St Paul, whose prayers he invokes before setting off his theological arguments. Repeatedly, Gregory mentions that he does not speak for himself, but in the name of 'the Church of God' (*ekklēsia tou kyriou*), whose bishop he was at Nyssa for almost ten years (by the early 380s). Obviously, what drives Gregory is his profound conviction that Christian orthodoxy makes the basic claim to be the true faith⁴. Once again, it should be noticed that, for Gregory or Eunomius, religion was not a matter of 'private consummation'. Once again, for Gregory and for his ancestors, theology was a matter of death (to the 'old man') and life (in Christ), having thus an importance irreducible to what one would understand today by 'ideology'. Gregory lived in a time which hardly knew distinctions between 'religious' and 'secular', when theology was more than an exercise of 'imagination', sacramental life never reconciled with a symbolical conventionalism, Divine Liturgy more than a public spectacle, 'orthodoxy' less than an ideological construct. A battle for truth implied recourse to all literary resources, which, had to overwhelm Eunomius' hidden usage of syllogism in theology. Like Basil, Gregory needed to refute Eunomius' within his own settings of thought, but on the scriptural level and with recourse to the authority of the tradition. Gregory wanted to defend a general truth: not only consistent in its own terms, but also persuasive, beautiful, and credible. Having set this purpose, Gregory could make use of rhetoric and dialectic in the framework provided by the Scriptures. Gregory's plan was not only to refute point-by-point Eunomius' ideas, but to prove what Christian theology genuinely means. In short, Gregory assured himself with the authority of the Church tradition (confirmed by the prestige of Basil's holiness), wrapping his argument in the body of the Scriptures.

On the side of the orthodox, the pastoral implications were quite serious. Gregory mentions more than once that the Eunomians threatened the unity of the Church at the level of practice of the Christian virtues, affecting the orthodox understanding of prayer, Scripture and holy sacraments. One knows that, soon after Eunomius' consecration as bishop at Cyzicus, there were reports about his decision to

¹ NPNF V, 312b-313a (GNO I. 406. 5-13)

² NPNF V, 36a (GNO I. 24. 14-16)

³ NPNF V, 36a (GNO I. 25. 6-7)

change the baptismal formula⁵, shifting from the triple immersion into water (fitting the expression ‘in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’) to just one immersion (symbolising Christ’s death). Christ’s commandment recorded by Matthew (28: 19) – ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ – speaks clearly of *one* name (*eis to onoma*) of the triune God in which the believers should be baptised. Since baptism was the act of initiation into the mysteries of the Christian life, the corruption of the formula of consecration (which means more than a conventional sign or a symbol) proved to be a very culpable arbitrariness on Eunomius’ part. One knows that many credal documents in use before and after Nicaea I were the expression of the liturgical consciousness of the Christian Church, rather than an introduction to some specific issues of dogmatic theology⁶. Catechetical instruction and baptismal initiation, and not an extravagant interest in the theological speculation, set the framework for the composition of the credal confessions. When Eunomius’ party rejected the content of the Nicene Creed, they were obliged, consequently, to alter the baptismal formula. Because of that, the second council of Constantinople was particularly severe with all the Eunomians willing to be received again in the Orthodox Church. If the Arians were expected only to anathematise their former creed before being ‘sealed and anointed with holy chrism’, the Eunomians (together with the Montanists and the Sabellians) were received ‘like the Greeks’ (*ie*: the gentiles). The seventh Canon of this Council states the following: ‘On the first day we make Christians of them; on the second, catechumens; on the third we exorcise them by breathing three times into their faces and their ears; and thus we catechise them and make them spend time in the church and listen to the Scriptures; and then we baptise them.’⁷

⁴ NPNF V, 37a (GNO I. 28. 11-13)

⁵ In his last book of *Apologia Apologiae*, Eunomius explicitly says: ‘we affirm that the mystery of godliness is not established by the sacredness of the Names, or the distinctiveness of customs, but by the accuracy of doctrine’ (NPNF V, 239a; GNO II. 284. 20-5). As Vaggione rightly points out, ‘sacredness of Names’ alludes to the baptismal formula.

⁶ F. YOUNG, *The Making of the Creeds* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 1-15

⁷ Cf. NORMAN P. TANNER SJ (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Sheed&Ward: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 35 (ET)

Meaning of Rhetoric

The structure of Gregory's major work against Eunomius is similar to some other of his polemical writings, and still the most distinctive one⁸. Gregory first quotes faithfully Eunomius' own words, and then counterattacks in full force, topping up his reasoning with unsurpassed literary effects, going from mild ironies to insidious rhetorical questions, then to conscious derision, very often culminating in fierce sarcasm⁹. Here, one should pay heed not only to the historical context of the emergence for Gregory's writings, but moreover, to his crafty and polyvalent usage of language¹⁰. On the one hand, Gregory is committed to spin up the gaudy arguments of his adversary, bringing into play his dearest method of *reductio ad absurdum*. With respect to Eunomius, he can easily maintain that 'strength of vituperation is infirmity in reasoning'¹¹. Yet, Gregory bets on the *power* of words to make the truth triumphant. He is ready to elaborate an almost juridical phraseology, just to fulfil his strategy of persuading the Christian congregation. It is remarkable how, for example, each of St Gregory's homilies on the Song of the Songs, includes at the beginning and at the end a liturgical exhortation to virtues for his readers, and a short prayer to God. Like his 'master', Basil of Caesarea, the bishop of Nyssa is unscrupulous about using all possible literary effects, including *le superflu* (once called by Voltaire '*une chose très nécessaire*'). Indeed, repetition is for Gregory not only the proof of self-consistency, but also a weighty tool of persuasion. As in music and in prayer, the reiteration of words, every time slightly differently tuned, plays down emphatic effects of seduction. The circular movements in thought trace, ideally, the perfect and most enigmatic geometrical figure of the Greeks, which was the circle. Consciously or not, Gregory – who obviously trained himself in the art of oratory – used this procedure of repetition in all his writings against Eunomius. Instilled with refreshing humour, he could approach topics of immense importance for the Church of Cappadocia, which by St Basil's death lost one of her most solid 'pillars of truth'.

⁸ E. C. E OWEN, 'St Gregory of Nyssa: Grammar, Vocabulary, Style', *JTS* 26 (1925), 64-71

⁹ Gregory tells us that Eunomius' father was 'an excellent man, except that he had such a son', NPNF V, 40a (GNO I. 39. 4-5)

¹⁰ G. KENNEDY, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (London, 1980); B. VICKERS, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

¹¹ NPNF V, 313a (GNO I. 406. 21-23)

Gregory accepted with no reluctance the literary canon of the Second Sophistic School¹² from Athens and, even as an old man, he could enjoy correspondence with representatives of the pagan rhetorical schools from Asia Minor¹³. By doing so, St Gregory wanted to make himself ‘all things to all *men*’ (I Corinthians 9: 22), being ‘debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise’ (Romans 1: 14), so that he might ‘by all means save some’. In just one shot, he can prove innumerable virtues: psychological acumen and beguiling rhetoric are cleverly assorted as to oppose any resistance. Besides inheriting from his brother the very deep pathos of a true pastor, Gregory displayed the sparkling dexterity of a lawyer and the accuracy of a philosopher. Therefore, his language takes explosive shapes and, when necessary, gives up any formal rule of consistency. Before finding out *what* Gregory says about the objective status of words in Scripture, the reader cannot help noticing *how* he profits from the pragmatic functions of language.

Pondering upon the endemic harshness of Gregory’s literary style, one could wonder what is the real motif of such an apparently wanton, polemical determination? To this question, many answers are ready. Among Gregory’s personal reasons, one has to count, first, his passionate commitment to the memory of Basil the Great, whose personality deeply marked his biography. Basil was for both Gregory (of Nyssa and of Nazianzus) the very incarnation of the idea of holiness, ‘an orator among orators, even before the chair of the rhetoricians; a philosopher among philosophers, even before the doctrines of the philosophers; highest of all, a priest among Christians, even before the priesthood’¹⁴. Few could have challenged Basil’s credentials, and probably least of all Eunomius¹⁵. The latter hardly distinguished himself among monastic circles as a pastor, and the reputation of his master, Aëtius, was even worse. Attacks *ad personam* were not excluded from Gregory’s armoury, since he regarded theology as a ‘science’ that had to be incarnated and needed a living testimony. The theologian had to distinguish himself first as a holy man, and only secondly as a rhetorician or dialectical thinker. For Gregory, Basil personified all the virtues of the

¹² The standard monograph on this subject remains L. MÉRIDIÉ, *L’influence de la seconde sophistique sur l’oeuvre de Grégoire de Nysse* (Rennes: 1906)

¹³ See letters to Libanius (*Ep.* 13; 14), and presumably to some of his disciples (*Ep.* 15), to a Sophist (*Ep.* 9, 27), to be consulted in the excellent critical edition *SC* (N° 363), with the translation and introduction of P. MARAVAL. cf GREGOIRE DE NYSEE, *Lettres* (Paris: Cerf, 1990)

¹⁴ Gregory Nazianzus, *Or.* 43. 13 (PG 36: 512)

¹⁵ Gregory charges Eunomius of ‘not knowing himself, and how great the distance is between the soaring Basil (*tou hypsipetous Basileiou*) and a grovelling reptile (*kai tou chersaiou theriou*). NPNF V, 314a (GNO I. 409. 3-4)

Church tradition. Though he died prematurely (at the age of 49), Basil enjoyed an enormous reputation as teacher, pastor, ascetic, and bishop of the Church of Cappadocia. The fact that Eunomius attacked Basil shortly after his repose in God, Gregory's response was outrage. In a letter received from Gregory of Nyssa, Peter of Sebasta could read this locution:

When our saintly Basil fell asleep, and I received *the legacy* of Eunomius's controversy, when my heart was hot within me with bereavement, and, besides this deep sorrow for the common loss of the church, Eunomius had not confined himself to the various topics which might pass as a defence of his views, but had spent the chief part of his energy in laboriously written abuse of our father in God – I was exasperated with this, and there were passages where the flame of my heart-felt indignation burst out against this writer¹⁶.

This was the beginning of Eunomius' end. He succeeded to put on fire Gregory, who added moral distrust to his former intellectual disdain against Basil's enemy¹⁷. Secondly, Gregory sensed his obligation to carry on the mandate of Nicaea, dogmatic resolution of which he regarded as the most conclusive one for all previous contentions over Christ's divinity. As he put it, 'the main point of Christian religion (*eusebias*) is to believe that the Only-begotten God, Who is the truth and the true light, and the power of God and the life, is truly all that He is said to be, both in other respects and especially in this, that He is God and the truth, that is to say, God in truth, ever being what He is called, Who never at any time was not, nor ever will cease to be, Whose being, such as it is essentially, is beyond the reach of the curiosity that would try to comprehend it.'¹⁸ The 'truceless and implacable warfare (*ton aspondon touton kai akērukton polemon*)'¹⁹ against Eunomius defended the ideas that all the most important Nicene theologians hold with respect to Scripture and its right hermeneutics of Christ, who since the apostles was acknowledged as 'Lord and God' (John 20: 24).

¹⁶ NPNF V, 33b (printed as *Ep. 29* in SC 363. 311-315, ed. P. Maraval)

¹⁷ It is noteworthy that, if Gregory calls Eunomius 'the Antichrist' (NPNF V, 239; GNO II. 288. 17), Eunomius compares Basil to Gnostic authors like Valentinus, Cerinthus, Basilides and denies him the name of 'Christian' (GNO II, 284. 12-19; NPNF V, 238a)

¹⁸ NPNF V, 251b (GNO I. 230.18-26)

¹⁹ NPNF V, 250b (GNO I. 228. 7-8)

Gregory's appeal to rhetoric should *not* be understood as a proof for his inability to think systematically, as some contemporaries tended to argue²⁰. At stake was rather Gregory's conviction that there is not just one starting point in the process of theological thinking, which is ultimately resolved into the prayerful and doxological contemplation of Christ. Outside the Church and her authoritative tradition, the Scriptures cannot become what they actually are (the Word of God and not a collection of pious texts). In Gregory's case, rhetoric did not mean the usage of flashy style with a very shallow purpose to impress an audience. One has to remember that, by highlighting Basil's charismatic gifts, Gregory pointed to Christ's own enticing power to convert and to resurrect all those who gaze and encounter him through faith. This was done by 'words of life' and not by human wisdom (I Corinthians 2: 5). Gregory's rhetoric opposes the fluid conversation about the totality of God's revelation to the constipated theology of Eunomius, who encapsulated this majestic totality into one single word, 'borrowed from the Greeks' (*ie*: 'agennētos'). For Gregory, theological knowledge is built on the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. Discursive reason is only the secondary effect of our primary call to resemble God in holiness and love. The fruits of faith and the outcome of reasoning do not overlap, though they are not necessarily at odds. Trusting rhetoric more than dialectics, Gregory acts first as a vigilant minister of his Church, and only secondly as an 'academic' theologian. One believes with the heart, which cannot be touched by compelling syllogisms of discursive reason. The faith is not certitude and is not the fruit of analytical deduction, as Eunomius' methodology suggests. If rhetoric grounds anything, then it is this faith, which makes hope and love intelligent and effective. Since it is woven into the most complex web of life-circumstances, faith can start and collapse from every point. Gregory was aware that this 'hermeneutical circle' is the basic specification of our daily perceptions, skills, acts, or reflective attitudes. Trying to avoid the seduction of dialectical precision, Gregory becomes the champion of the Christian rhetoric of truth. He is the advocate of the narrative theology that addresses questions both for 'specialists' and the 'simple minded'. In fact, this is the natural genius of the poetry, closely followed by rhetoric. As the parables of the Gospel

²⁰ C. STEAD, 'Ontology and Terminology in Gregory of Nyssa', in H. DOERRIE, M. ALTENBURGER, U. SCHRAMM (ed.), *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie. Zweites Internationales Kolloquium über Gregor von Nyssa, Münster 18-23 September 1972* (Leiden: Brill, 1976) 107-119; ΓΙΑΝΝΗΣ ΔΗΜΗΤΡΑΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, *ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΠΙΣΤΗ. Η ΛΟΓΙΚΗ ΑΠΟΔΕΙΧΙΜΟΤΗΤΑ ΤΟΝ*

always emphasise, the most important things are known by heart, which needs incessant repentance (*metanoia*). For Gregory, theology starts from anywhere and solicits every single act constituting our being. Theology includes worship, contemplation of the Scriptures, selfless gestures of philanthropy, and reasoning about the structure of the universe. If only one of these pieces is taken away, the cohesion of theological knowledge would fall apart. Gregory's theology unfolds the striking multitude of the literary genres of the Scriptural books, including the cosmic narrative, prophetic lamentations, paraenetical discourses, words of wisdom, mystagogic catechesis, and pastoral letters. This diversity of linguistic performances shows *in action* Gregory's philosophy of names.

Economical and Hypostatic Names

What are the other implications of Gregory's doctrine of language for the Christians' daily life? How should we pray? What words can be used legitimately and why so? Gregory's doctrine allows us to draw important conclusions for questions of significant interest, both in the remote past and nowadays.

First, one has to remember that meanings, like names, never come alone. In order to be understood, the names ascribed to Christ by the Scriptures need a careful contextualisation and, more than that, an orthodox framework of thought. Otherwise, the meaning of many scriptural words looks strange, if not sacrilegious. The Lord is called by St Paul 'curse and sin' (Galatians 3: 13), while the Prophet Hosea uses images that are more picturesque, by calling Christ 'a Bear' or 'a Leopard' (Hosea 13: 7)²¹. What kind of names are these? Do they apply only to Jesus Christ – the incarnate One – or can they be also ascribed to God the Father? To illustrate God's works, the Scriptures employ a plurality of names, and it would be absurd to say that any of these can describe God's nature, which is one and undivided. An essential predicate would make derivative, and in the event useless, all the other appellations. Though Gregory does not stress enough the distinction between what one could call the 'hypostatic names' (Trinity *ad intra*) and 'economic names' (God *ad extra*), it is nonetheless clear

ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΟΝ ΔΟΓΜΑΤΟΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΟΝ ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΟ ΝΥΣΣΗΣ Η 'FIDE DEPRECANS INTELLECTUM' ('Αθηνᾶς Παρουσία, 1996), The English Summary, 167-180

²¹ NPNF V, 280b (GNO I. 314. 23-24)

that two categories cannot be confused. God is one in essence and in his energies and therefore, the names that call his activity in the world *are* interchangeable. God the Father has all the economic attributes of the Son, and all the similar names assigned to the Holy Spirit. Coming back to the words of the Prophet, God can be metaphorically understood as ‘a bear’ or ‘a leopard’ in his salvific economy. Even more, the name of ‘Christ’ (‘the anointed one’) shows the economy of the Holy Trinity. ‘The confession of this name [*scil*: Christos], says Gregory, contains the teaching of the Holy Trinity, because in this name each of the Persons in whom we believe is respectively expressed’²². More precisely, Gregory continues, ‘in this name we recognize the Anointing One [*scil*: the Father], the Anointed One [*scil*: Christ], and the One through Whom He is anointed [*scil*: Holy Spirit].’²³ Identity of nature is reflected by the unity of economical operations, and St Gregory sometimes compares this Trinitarian model with the plurality of activities of one human mind. Due to this essential unity of the Godhead (*theotēs*), economical names as ‘King’ or ‘Lord’ can be shared among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as one reads in Gregory’s epistle to Eusthatus *On the Holy Trinity*²⁴. This mutual transference of dignities shows at best how in St Gregory’s theology no hierarchical division among the divine names can be accepted.

Although Gregory does not carry out all the possible conclusions of his thought, other Byzantine theologians did so, with remarkable courage²⁵. Mention should be made especially of St Gregory Palamas²⁶, who transferred the dignity of fatherhood upon Christ. The scriptural support for this outstanding distinction between the hypostatic fatherhood, which is unique and ascribable only to the Ungenerate God, and the economical fatherhood, which can be ascribed to Christ (and, therefore, also to the Holy Spirit), is given by the prophesy of Isaiah who calls Messiah as ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’ (9: 6). The divine Logos also declares to Moses: ‘Israel is my firstborn son’ (Exodus 4: 23). On these grounds,

²² *Adv. Apol.* (GNO III, 1. 220. 13-14): ‘*tēs gar agias Triados didaskalian periechei ē tou onomatos toutou homologia, ekastou tōn pepisteumenōn prosōpōn emphainomēnou tē prosēgoria tautē kata to prosphoron.*’

²³ *Adv. Apol.* (GNO III, 1. 221. 3-5): ‘*toinun ho chrīōn estin o patēr, to de christma to agion pneuma esti.*’

²⁴ *Ad. Eust.* (GNO III, 1. 15-16.21) NPNF V, 329b-330

²⁵ For the further indications, I am indebted to Sister Anastasia from the *Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist* (Essex, UK), who kindly offered me to read in manuscript the results of her research on this topic.

²⁶ See NICHOLAS CABASILAS, *The Life in Christ*, book IV. 40-48 (SC 355, 300-309), and P. NELLAS, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person* with a foreword by Kallistos Ware (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Press, 1987), 116 sq

St Gregory Palamas could speak in his first homily to the Thessalonians, in the following terms: 'Not only is He our God but He was well-pleased to be our brother, our Father, and our Head, bringing us all together into his Body and making us members of Himself.'²⁷ By sacramental initiation and new birth, the Christian becomes a brother, a sister, a friend, and a son of Christ, as the Gospel does not hesitate to present him (Mark 2: 5: 'My son', Jesus says to the paralytic, 'your sins are forgiven'). This profound meaning of Christ's fatherhood is obviously denuded by any psychological connotation, having to do only with the spiritual initiation in the mysteries of God. 'Christ is also our Father', says Gregory Palamas, 'because He gave us new birth through Holy Baptism and His divine grace. He calls His disciples His children and when He comes to His saving Passion He promises not to leave them orphans'²⁸. Though St Gregory of Nyssa does not refer in the most paradoxical terms to the economical fatherhood of the Son, it is certain that by his theological doctrine of the essential and energetic unity of God²⁹, he made viable the distinction between 'economical' and 'hypostatic' (or Trinitarian) fatherhood. It is an important aspect which, on the one hand, again emphasises Christ's redemptive power, and, on the other hand, explains the liturgical addressing of Christ in prayers, which acknowledges him as 'God', 'Lord' and 'Father of the age to come'.

Gender Issues

The same distinction between 'hypostatic' and 'economic' fatherhood could help us to understand better the disputed issue of 'gender language' within the Patristic theology³⁰. Gregory, being a perfect son of his age, was probably not aware of any possible feminist attack upon the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. But does his theology contain elements that can help us discharge any of these accusations as pernicious and meaningless? Gregory's insistence on the non-representable character of God makes clear that the Son's generation is not passible of any sexual

²⁷ GREGORY PALAMAS, 'Homily I. 1', *The Homilies* vol 1, ET by Ch. Veniamin (St Tikhon Seminary Press: 2002), 1

²⁸ GREGORY PALAMAS, 'Homily I. 2', *op. cit.*, 1

²⁹ E. D. MOUTSOULAS, '«Essence» et «energie» de Dieu selon St. Grégoire de Nysse', *J ECS* 8 (2000) 4, 517-525

³⁰ L. BOUYER, *Le Père invisible : approches du mystère de la divinité* (Paris: Cerf, 1976); P. WIDDICOMBE, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994)

connotation, being just beyond comprehension as Jesus' virginal birth. Unlike in the Greek mythology, the divine Father needs neither a receptacle to plant his 'seed', nor a temporal interval to see his Son born. Christ is not only the Son, but also the Icon or the Word of God (Colossians 1: 15; John 1:1), beyond any sexual implications. In his essence, God is neither father, nor son. The Scriptures use these names to describe the ineffable relation (*schesis*) between the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity. Describing a relation, these names are *relative*, as the Scriptures clearly show: the eternal Christ can be called Son, or Icon of God, and the same consubstantiality is designed by these words. The Holy Spirit is called also 'Comforter', which shows that, with respect to one Person, even the hypostatic names can be plural. Yet, *this relativity is limited* to the usage of the Scriptures. One should refrain from inventing new words in order to express the mystery of the Trinity, the knowledge of which is beyond comprehension. On the Trinitarian level, analogies are far less acceptable than on the economical one. God is the Father of his eternal Son, and this 'fatherhood' cannot be referred to the Holy Spirit. But on the economical level of discourse, the 'fatherhood' of God can be easily paralleled by his divine 'motherhood', if these terms are exempted from too narrow psychological connotations, which ultimately could turn out to be idolatrous. 'As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem' (Isaiah 66: 13). To his people, God can be like a 'mother' or like a 'father', but these appellations are only metaphors of his providence, and, in principle, they are interchangeable.

But why the Trinitarian names were fixed in the sequence 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'? First of all, Jesus addressed God as his 'Father', and Gregory says that this 'indicates the cause of what exists through him [*scil.*: Christ]'³¹. God is father of the whole creation, but in a very specific sense Father of Christ. In the latter case, the name 'Father' indicates the ineffable relationship between the ingenerate God and his Son, and we can recognise God as Father only in Jesus Christ, who through his passion restored our divine kinship. Because of all that, the hypostatic name 'Father' is irremovable. Gregory says over and again that the scriptural ground is crucial for the Christian theology, and that one has to treat this formula as a given fact of God's self-revelation. If one feels free to substitute the God's Trinitarian name, why should he accept the dogma of Trinity at all, when the scriptural testimony is not regarded

³¹ 'Our Lord's Prayer', ET 39.

compulsory? Gregory refused to substitute the Trinitarian names with, apparently, Eunomius' more neutral ontological concepts, which introduced in God hierarchy and division. Nowadays, as in the past, it would be against the authority of the Scripture to change these hypostatic names by inverting their (textual) gender. On the other hand, it would be heretical to claim that the eternal Son, as a divine hypostasis, has a masculine gender, though he was historically incarnate in Jesus Christ. Being the Word of the ingenerate God and the Creator of all worlds, the Son retains only a *nominal*, and not a *real* masculine gender. Human language, and therefore worship and prayer, at least in the Indo-European idiomatic family, is sexually specified, and any option would be discriminative against one or another gender. This becomes even clearer if one contemplates Gregory's doctrine of creation, which is divided, and his theory of sexuality. Within God, although there is real and not nominal difference (*diaphora*), still there is no division (*diastasis*), to which pointed the mythological speculations of the Gnostics. *Pace Burrus*³², to imagine the divine Persons possessing a gender qualification would mean to impose not only difference, but also division within the one God who is beyond all names (Philippians 2: 9). To described God's essence in sexual terms would mean to represent him into a finite and disruptive language, which cannot be but blasphemous³³. 'Any concept made in order to touch or to circumscribe the divine nature does not succeed but to form an idol of God, without making him known (*pantos noēmatos, tou kata tina perilēptikēn phantasian en perinoia tini kai stochasmō tēs theias pyseōs ginomenou, eidōlon Theou ginōskein*).'³⁴ Divine darkness, contemplated by Moses on the Mountain of Sinai, is a call not only to intellectual modesty, but to 'iconoclastic approach' of God in imageless prayer. Probably St Gregory's teaching about prayer³⁵ was at best taken over and developed by Evagrius of Pontus³⁶, the great patriarchs of the Egyptian desert. Close disciple of Gregory Nazianzus, Evagrius was very probably known to Gregory of Nyssa's

³² V. BURRUS, "Begotten Not Made". *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 108: 'he [Gregory] could well be charged with "monoanthropism".'

³³ More on this, see V. HARRISON, 'Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology', *JTS* 41 (1990), 441-471; 'Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa', *Semeia* 57 (1992), 113-130; 'Gender, Generation, and Virginity in Cappadocian Theology', *JTS* 47 (1996) 38-68.

³⁴ *Vit. Moys.* II. 165 (PG 44, 337 B 14-16; ed. J. Daniélou, SC 1bis, 34)

³⁵ W. VÖLKER, *Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1955), 264-265. Völker traces Gregory's teaching about prayer back to Origen, who obviously played a major role in forming the spirituality of the Cappadocians.

³⁶ On Evagrius' spirituality, see G. BUNGE, 'On the Trinitarian Mysticism of Evagrius of Pontus', *Studia Monastica* 17 (1986), 191-208

ecclesiastical circle of friends, and had learned a lot from the Trinitarian theology of the Cappadocians, which became the real basis of his monastic spiritual teaching³⁷.

Desire of Infinity and Infinity of Desire

The unfathomable character of God and the innumerable divine names hold together and can be explained only by reference to St Gregory's doctrine of infinity. It is an important aspect of St Gregory's dogmatic and spiritual theology, which alone can frame the doxological usage of language that surpasses both dialectics and rhetoric since, as we shall see, it requires to 'honour God in silence'.

Much has been written³⁸ on St Gregory's defence of the idea of divine infinity, which, in its compelling presentation, certainly was a novelty among the Christian theologians. Within the Greek tradition, with the unique exception of Anaximander and Plotinus³⁹, the idea of infinity had a bad reputation⁴⁰. The Platonic doctrine about 'uncreated matter' shaped the horizontal and negative meaning of infinity as something 'indefinite' and 'chaotic'. For Aristotle, the couple 'form'- 'matter' played a crucial role in giving an explanation to the unity of our experience of the physical world⁴¹. Knowledge was often considered only an intellectual sublimation of the visual perception⁴², which could never become active in the absence of a horizontal delineation. To draw this horizon in the study of nature (*physica*) meant for Aristotle to avoid the pernicious *regressum ad infinitum* and to postulate an entity with the mechanic function of causation (*prōton kinoun*). In short, for Plato and Aristotle, fixing borders within any physical or metaphysical research singled out the very

³⁷ The name of Evagrius occurs in *Ep.* 28 (ed. P. MARAVAL, *SC* 363, 308-309) in the expression '*koinos adelphos ēmōn Euagrios*'. In a footnote (*op. cit.*, 308, fn. 2), P. MARAVAL says: 'on ne peut identifier cet Evagre, bien que plusieurs personages de ce nom apparaissent dans la correspondance des Cappadociens'. It is not impossible that, as a former deacon in Constantinople, Evagrius was known to Gregory, Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus altogether.

³⁸ J. E. HENNESSY, *The Background, Sources and Meaning of Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Fordham: Dissert. microfilm, 1963); E. MÜHLENBERG, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa. Gregors Kritik am Gottesbegriff der klassischen Metaphysik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965)

³⁹ PLOTINUS, *Enneads* IV. 3. 8

⁴⁰ E. LEVINAS, 'L'infini' in *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (Paris, 1995). Levinas's historical treatment simply fails to mention Gregory of Nyssa. For the most comprehensive dossier of this subject, see L. SWEENEY, *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992)

⁴¹ ARISTOTLE, *Physics* III. 207a14

criteria of rationality⁴³. Behind this logical refutation of the idea of infinity stood also the classical principles of the Greek civic morality, for which the absence of limit represented the origin of *hybris*. Starting with Socrates who, if one is to believe Nietzsche, killed the Dionysian spirit of the poets⁴⁴, the ethical principles of the Greeks (at least in Pericles' era) were generally defined by proportion and measure (*kata metron*)⁴⁵.

In the Christian tradition, there are some precedents for Gregory's doctrine of the divine infinity. Yet, the references existing in Clement of Alexandria's and Hilary of Poitiers' writings are rather 'occasional'⁴⁶. In Origen's treatise *Contra Celsum*⁴⁷, one can find a surprising limitation of God following the Platonic principles of rationality. St Athanasius postulated the incomprehensibility of God because of his transcendence⁴⁸, while Basil of Caesarea often referred to God's infinite power.⁴⁹ Yet, as E. Mühlberg has demonstrated at length⁵⁰, Gregory's whole theology relies heavily on the doctrine of divine infinity, which plays a decisive role in all of his writings. As with all the previous Christian theologians, Gregory takes his legitimacy in theologising about God's infinity from the Word of the Scriptures. 'Great is our Lord', says the Psalter, 'his understanding is beyond measure' (Psalm 147: 5). This has important consequences for the understanding of the inner life of the Holy Trinity, which was still described by Eunomius using a subordinationist grid. While writing his first treatise of dogmatic theology (*CE I*), Gregory found a powerful argument against the neo-Arians by appealing to the idea of infinity.

When he [*scil.*: Eunomius] pronounces that the life of the Father is prior to that of the Son, he places a certain interval between the two; now, he must mean, either that this interval is infinite (*apeiron*), or that it is included within fixed limits. But the principle of an intervening mean will not

⁴² PLATO, *Alcibiades*, 132d-133a; ARISTOTLE, *Met.* A, 980 a 21-26; PLOTINUS, *Enneades* III. 8. 15.

⁴³ ARISTOTLE, *Met.* A, 994b 22; PLATO, *Philebos*, 17 e.

⁴⁴ F. NIETZSCHE, *Birth of the Tragedy. The Genealogy of Morals* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956)

⁴⁵ J. P. VERNANT, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983)

⁴⁶ HENNESY, *op. cit.*, 178

⁴⁷ ORIGEN, *De princ.* IX.1: 'we must maintain that even the power of God is finite, and we must not, under pretext of praising him, lose sight of his limitations; for if the divine power were infinite, of necessity could not even understand itself, since the infinite is by nature incomprehensible' (ET by G. W. Butterworth, ed. Koetschau, London: 1936, 128)

⁴⁸ ATHANASIUS, *Contra gentes* II. 35

⁴⁹ BASIL, *De Spiritu Sancto* IX. 22; 23. 54

⁵⁰ There has been also a justified criticism against Mühlberg's thesis. Cf. KANNENGIESSER, 'L'infinité divine chez Grégoire de Nysse [Review article of E. Mühlberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes*]', *RSR* 55 (1967) 1, 55-65; R. S. BRIGHTMAN, 'Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St Gregory of Nyssa', *GOTR* 18 (1973) 1-2, 97-114

allow him to call it infinite; he would annul thereby the very conception of Father and Son and the thought of anything connecting them, as long as this infinite were limited on neither side, with no idea of a Father cutting it short above, nor that of a Son checking it below. The very nature of the infinite is, to be extended in either direction, and to have no bounds of any kind. Therefore if the conception of Father and Son is to remain firm and immoveable, he will find no ground for thinking this interval is infinite: his school must place a definite interval of time between the Only-begotten and the Father.⁵¹

Gregory's appeal to infinity is sound and unrecorded in Athanasius' defence of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father. One cannot imagine, says Gregory, any spatial or temporal mark within God, which would imply ontological difference. The principle of individuation of the divine Persons cannot be material (subject to change), and only the internal act of causation from God the Father provides the eminent distinction of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In one of the few passages where Gregory defines the life of the triune God, he seems to give an interpretation of the famous definition of God as love (I John 1: 14). He says: 'The divine nature exceeds each good, and the good is wholly beloved by the good, and thus it follows that when it looks upon itself it desires what it possesses (*ho echei, thelei*) and possesses what it desires (*kai ho thelei, echei*), and receives nothing from outside itself.' One finds here, though in a subdued version, the theology of *actus purus*: God's inner acts are unfolded by his perfect and, therefore, generous self-sufficiency. 'The life of that transcendent nature', Gregory continues, 'is love, seeing that the Beautiful is necessarily loveable to those who know it (and God does know it), and so this knowledge becomes love (*ē de gnōsis agapē ginetai*)⁵², because the object of his knowledge is essentially beautiful.'⁵³ God is life eternal and goodness by excess, and this overflow of life and goodness cannot be expressed, save in negative terms. 'It is a sacred duty to use of God names privative of the things foreign to His nature (*eusebes an eiē pantōs tois choristikois tōn apemphainontōn hrēmasin ep'autou kechrēsthai*).'⁵⁴ Infinity (*to aoriston*) is one of the most probative among the privative names of God,

⁵¹ NPNF V, 67b (GNO I. 129.1-17);

⁵² It is the motto of P. FLORENSKY, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, ET by B. Jakim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997)

⁵³ *De an. et. res.* NPNF V, 450b (PG 44, 153-156)

⁵⁴ NPNF V, 308b (GNO I. 396. 3-4)

which befits his inner life of overwhelming love, which does not know ‘the insolence of satiety’⁵⁵.

Following this Trinitarian argument, the cosmological argument suggests that since the experience of division, fragmentation and corruption is specific to the material realm of creation, it would be absurd to ascribe boundaries to the Creator.⁵⁶ ‘But if the Divine and unalterable nature is incapable of degeneracy, as even our foes allow, we must regard it as absolutely unlimited in its goodness: and the unlimited is the same as the infinite (*to de aoriston tō apeirō tauton estin*).’⁵⁷ Furthermore, in *CE I* Gregory uses an ethical argument to endorse the idea of infinity, claiming that ‘Good, as long as it is incapable of its opposite, has no bounds to its goodness.’⁵⁸ Within the spiritual realm of goodness, increase or contradiction is impossible⁵⁹, and therefore, one has to understand it as being infinite. Thirdly, Gregory cannot imagine the process of spiritual growth being limited by anything⁶⁰, confirming again the voice of the Apostle who said that ‘love never ends’ (I Corinthians 13: 8). God is the zenith of our incessant search for knowledge, unity and love, and his nature being infinite, ‘it follows of necessity that the participation in the enjoyment of it [the First Good] will be infinite also, for more will be always being grasped, and yet something beyond that which has been grasped will always be discovered, and this search will never overtake its Object, because its fund is as inexhaustible as the growth of that which participates in it is ceaseless.’⁶¹ These theological principles, already set up in *CE I*, were confirmed by Gregory’s spiritual treatises on the ‘Life of Moses’ and on the ‘Song of the Songs’, which depict with brilliant minutiae the nature of this journey towards God. In the introductory passage to his sixth homily on the Song of the Songs, St Gregory ascribes infinity not only to God as such, but to the whole intelligible world, ‘and consequently also to angels and human souls’.⁶² Being made in the image of God (Genesis 1: 27; Colossians 1: 16) – man is the iconic reflection of the uncreated

⁵⁵ NPNF V, 450b (PG 44, 153-154)

⁵⁶ NPNF V, 60b (GNO I. 106. 12-15)

⁵⁷ NPNF V, 51b (GNO I. 77. 18-20)

⁵⁸ NPNF V, 51b (GNO I. 77. 8)

⁵⁹ NPNF V, 51b (GNO I. 77. 20-23): ‘But to suppose excess and defect (*pleonasmon kai elattōsin*) in the infinite and unlimited is to the last degree unreasonable: for how can the idea of infinitude remain, if we posited increase and loss in it?’

⁶⁰ *De an. et res.* NPNF V, 450a: ‘For this teaching we have the authority of God’s own Apostle, who announces a subduing and a ceasing of all other activities, ever for the good, which are within us, and finds no limit for love alone.’

⁶¹ NPNF V, 62b (GNO I. 112. 16-20)

infinity, apt to participate without satiation in the goodness of God. We see here that the second way of sharing God's infinity is not passive but active, and means for the human mind growing up into the life of virtues, which brings us close to the source of all Goodness. Only God is good by nature, all other being are good only by participation. Yet, it is important to observe also that 'the transcendent source of perfection is not diminished by being participated, and is in a true sense totally present in all participants. Yet each of these partakes of the perfection "more or less" according to its free dispositions'⁶³.

Doxological Icons

The consequences of the doctrine of divine infinity for Gregory's theology of language are vast. First, one can understand better St Gregory's apophatic teaching with respect to the 'names of God'. Being infinite, one cannot adequately predicate about God, and this is a statement reappraised in the recent French philosophy by religious authors as E. Levinas or J.-L. Marion⁶⁴. 'La relation à l'Infini', says Levinas, 'n'est pas un savoir, mais un Désir et du besoin par le fait que le Désir ne peut être satisfait : que le Désir, en quelque manière, se nourrit de ses propres faims et s'augmente de sa satisfaction ; que le Désir est comme une pensée qui pense plus qu'elle ne pense, ou plus que ce qu'elle pense.'⁶⁵ Although God is infinite, infinity is just one among many names. *Pace* E. Mühlenberg⁶⁶ – the concept of 'infinite' should be included among the 'negative' attributes of God. Doctrine of infinity also grounds the discourse about incomprehensibility, which characterises both God and his spiritual creation. But most importantly, the doctrine of infinity lays out the premises for the liturgical application of Gregory's theory of names.

Since God is infinite, the names ascribed to him should be innumerable, and have an iconic function. Thus, *words can resemble the revelatory function of Christ,*

⁶² D. BALAS, *METOYΣIA ΘEOY. Man's Participation in God's Perfection According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Rome: Herder, 1996), 135

⁶³ D. BALÁS, *op. cit.*, 134

⁶⁴ J.-L. MARION, *God Without Being. Hors-Texte* translated by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 23

⁶⁵ E. LEVINAS, *Ethique et Infini* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 86-87; see also 'Philosophy and the idea of infinity' in E. LEVINAS, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993)

⁶⁶ E. MÜHLENBERG, *op. cit.*, 28: „Der Begriff des Unendlichen muß die negative Theologie überbieten können; sonst, beruht es ja auf einem reinen Zufall, daß er in die Reih der negativen Gottesprädikate vor Gregor nicht aufgenommen wurde.“

who as the Word of God is also called 'the icon of the Father'. At their best, 'divine names' are icons of the invisible, opening our mind to an infinite realm of knowledge. The infinite distance between man and God needs to be adequately traversed. The means of transportation consist in love, which is the driving force, and in the very 'divine names', which are the noetic vehicles of the prayerful desire. Words are engulfed in this infinite openness and bridge the invisible realm of glory in which God dwells and contemplates us⁶⁷. If God was a fixed object laid at an accessible distance, one could have found an appropriate concept to grasp his essence. But concepts are helpless when they have to envisage God: trying to grasp (*capio, capere*) the infinity of God, they can only fail. Even when Gregory speaks about God as '*ho ontos on*', he does not identify, as Philo, the famous '*egō eimi ho on*' (Exodus 3: 14) with the revelation of the true name of God⁶⁸. If Eunomius confines the absolute sense of Being to the Father, the only true God for him, Gregory refers it to Christ as well as to the Holy Spirit. (Exodus 3: 14 can be also read as a tautology that expresses the refusal of God to decline his name). For Gregory, the attribute of existence does not prevail over the attribute of goodness. In his Trinitarian theology the predicate of 'existence' never competes with the notion of 'generation' or 'procession'. One cannot imagine the Son in other way than 'being generated', the meaning of which, as the Father's way of existence (*tropos hyparxeos*), remains unknown to any human mind (no matter how clever, or even holy, could it be).

E. Mühlenberg was right to claim that 'das Gedanke des endlosen Fortschrites wird sich als die wichtigste Folgerung aus der Unendlichkeit Gottes.'⁶⁹ Speaking of 'die Zahllosigkeit der Namen Gottes als Voraussetzung der unendlich fortschreitenden Erkenntnis', the German scholar rightly emphasized the importance of 'wonder' (*to thauma*) in Gregory's theology. Yet, in this sentence one reads more Luther's thoughts than, as it were, Gregory's mystical theology: 'Worin drückt sich dieses Erstaunen aus? Es muß nicht mit dem Schweigen enden, sondern die Spannung des Glaubens, die zwischen dem denkbaren Begriff und der Größe Gottes besteht, kann sich

⁶⁷ On this, see the excellent books of J.-L. MARION, *God Without Being. Hors-Texte* translated by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7-24; *La croisée du visible* (Paris: PUF, 1996³); *De surcroît* (Paris: PUF, 2001).

⁶⁸ On this topic, see the excellent surveys of E. STAROBINSKI-SAFRAN, 'Exode 3, 14 dans l'oeuvre de Philon d'Alexandrie' in *Dieu et l'Etre* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1978), 47-55; M. HARL, 'Citations et commentaries d'Exode 3, 14 chez les Pères grecs des quatre premiers siècles', *op. cit.*, 87-108

⁶⁹ MÜHLENBERG, *op. cit.*, 23

mitteilen⁷⁰. Trying to sack Gregory's 'sogenannte Mystik'⁷¹, Mühlenberg refuses to accept that there is enough room in Gregory's writings both for 'the tension of faith' (which is an incomplete translation of Gregory's *epektasis*) and the call for 'union with God' through prayer⁷² and charity⁷³. Though never abandoned, faith is absorbed into paradoxical (mystical) knowledge: surrounded by the divine clouds, one knows God without necessarily understanding him.

It is remarkable, indeed, how the continuous spiritual progression 'from glory to glory' (*epektasis*), being pledged by God's infinity, is described mainly through non-visual metaphors. The very doxological language used by Gregory in his stunning interpretation of the Song of the Songs unfolds its rules like a subtle game. The most important thing about it is to be played: only being in movement, words can accomplish their function. The existence of grammar does not limit, but rather makes creativity possible; there are always exceptions from the general rule of interpretation. The major feature of his hermeneutical application is the usage of the paradox, which to those who lack love, appears as a nonsensical discourse. Yet, the difference between contradiction and paradox is beyond question. The meanings of words depend very much on their narrative context, and on the intention, that brings them forth: love can turn out words of shame into words of glory, while lack of love can transform beautiful icons into harmful idols. Christ the Word can be perceived like a 'sword'⁷⁴, which wounds the soul with divine love, or like 'wine'⁷⁵, which provokes the blessed and 'sober drunkenness' of the mind. Indeed, Gregory twists what J. Derrida called – following the late Heidegger⁷⁶ – the 'metaphysics of presence'⁷⁷ dominating the Western tradition of thought. The objectifying tendency of human mind, determined by the optic representation of the world, is fully undermined by Gregory of Nyssa throughout his exuberant homilies, which were paralleled, during the fourth century, only by the theological poetics of St Ephrem the Syrian and St

⁷⁰ MÜHLENBERG, *op. cit.*, 185

⁷¹ Mühlenberg debates explicitly with J. Danielou and V. Völker, who maintained that Gregory is the initiator of the mystical theology in the Church tradition. This claim was tempered by H. CROUZEL, 'Grégoire de Nysse est-il le fondateur de la théologie mystique?', *RAM* 33 (1957), 191-202

⁷² GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Lord's Prayer*, ET by Hilda C. Graef (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, col. "Ancient Christian Writers", 1954), 24 sq

⁷³ 'If love is taken from us, how shall we be united with God?' in *De an. et. res* (NPNF V, 443a)

⁷⁴ *In Cant.* V (GNO VI. 193. 2; ET, 135)

⁷⁵ *In Cant.* XIV (GNO VI. 403. 6, ET 246)

⁷⁶ M. HEIDEGGER, *Zeit und Sein* (1962) ET by J. Stambaugh, *On Time and Being* (NY: Harper and Row, 1972).

⁷⁷ J. DERRIDA, *La Voix et le phénomène* (Paris: PUF, 1967), 9

Gregory of Nazianzus. The ordinary function of the senses collapses for their integration into a superior realm of perception⁷⁸. The Homilies to the Song of the Songs retain the central image of *De Vita Moysis*, which is the paradoxical darkness of God. Once again, as Andrew Louth perceptively pointed out, ‘for Gregory, intellectual seeing – *theoria* – is no longer possible in the darkness, *gnophos*, where God is encountered, and so, with every encouragement from the *Song of the Songs*, he turns to the other senses, smell, taste, touch (not hearing, especially) to characterize the experience that takes place in the darkness. It is an experience of immediacy and presence, which is undeniable but very difficult to objectify’⁷⁹. This is the way of the mystical theology (*mystike theoria*), which is open only to those purified in their hearts from all wicked desire and vainglory, through prayerful repentance and ascetic struggle. Those who undertake this task and acquire God’s holiness can perceive him as ‘perfume’, ‘fragrance’ and ‘taste’, not by means of poetic imagination, but within the inner cavity of their hearts, and through the sacramental food. Therefore, the call to ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’ does not illustrate with a metaphor a remote and inaccessible transcendence, but describes an experience that, in many Christians’ heart, is real and enduring.

Only the ‘hymnic psalmody (*en hymnois psalmos*)’ (Psalm 6:1), which sets in motion words of praise, breaks down the propensity of the intellect to objectify God in passive concepts. Only being in movement the words of praise can acquire transformative power: whether positive or negative, ‘divine names’ can exist only as icons in a symphonic discourse of praise.⁸⁰ All the images used in the ‘hymnic psalmody’ are transitory, although repetitive. In fact, as in music and rhetoric, the non-identical repetition of words is indispensable in prayer, because at every time they reveal different aspects of God’s mystery. Repetition in doxology ingests moments of silence. As we have seen, there is the perennial silence, which can be also called ‘agnostic’ and should be always kept in respect to *what* and *how* God is⁸¹. The ‘perennial silence’ is the continuum of every doxological act. Its sublime pendant is to

⁷⁸ K. RAHNER, ‘Le début d’une doctrine des cinq sens spirituels chez Origène’, *RAM* 13 (1932), 113-145. As Gregory himself acknowledges, his commentary on the Song of the Songs is largely indebted to Origen, though in many respects anew.

⁷⁹ A. LOUTH, ‘Eros and Mysticism. Early Christian Interpretation of the Song of the Songs’, in J. RYCE-MENUHIN (ed.), *Jung and the Monotheisms. Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 252

⁸⁰ *Inscr.* VI, 37. 15 (éd. J. Reynard, SC 466. 306)

⁸¹ *In Eccl.* VII. 8 (SC 416, 375-387; GNO V. 410-416)

be found in the 'wonderful silence', overloaded with awe, marvel and love for God's glory. This second moment of silence can last just for a second, igniting the heart with new prayerful thoughts of love. One stops only in order to start again with reinvigorated forces. Silence of wonder is spontaneous and occurs when the soul reaches the climax of praise. As Gregory tells us in his fifteenth homily on the Song of the Songs, 'the bride's praise is not made known by words', since 'anything belonging to silence is beautiful; it is ineffable and more wonderful than words.'⁸²

⁸² *In Cant. Cantic. XV*, ET 270-271 (GNO VI. 456. 4; 456. 12-15)

Conclusions

The quarrel between Gregory and Eunomius was, therefore, more than a 'godless chat'. Their issue was not philological, but doctrinal. The polemic between Eunomius and Gregory epitomises the established deaf relationship between two different ecclesiastical parties who had different understanding of Christ. This divergence shaped their subsequent comprehension of the Scriptures, and the framework of its exegesis. For Gregory, *theology* preserved her radical and somehow primordial meaning, which is – in the words of the apologist Athenagoras (second century AD) – to speak in words *from* God (*para Theou*), and not just *about* God (*peri Theon*).¹ Like St Paul, Gregory regarded the Word of God incarnated in Jesus Christ as the first theologian, whilst he first made the exegesis of the Father (John 1: 18).

One should not lose sight of the pragmatic implications of St Gregory's polemic with Eunomius. His Trinitarian approach, the recourse to Scripture and tradition and his very solid spirituality, teach us about a way of doing theology. Gregory's appeal for rhetoric is very significant in contrast with Eunomius' fascination by the dialectical method. It is noteworthy that Gregory's massive dogmatic text takes the form of a letter, whose beginning is a panegyric to his brother Basil. Therefore, at stake is neither a domestic sense of solidarity, nor a parochial ideology, but rather Gregory's intention to preserve and to carry on the mandatory tradition of the Church, which revolves around what he often calls the 'mystery of faith'. Given the lavish style and the reverential manner of address, one is struck by its affinity with the biblical deposit of spiritual epistolary, hidden especially in Paul's letters. For Gregory, theological ideas must enact a soteriological drama and, in this respect, prayer and worship are the unmistakable signs of his championship of orthodoxy.

Apart from this important matter of style, there is much to be drawn from the substance of Gregory's argument. One should ponder seriously upon Gregory's implicit distinction between the 'Trinitarian' and the 'economical' names of God. Many feminist theologians confuse, nowadays, this crucial difference among the 'divine names', falling consequently into the heresy of modalism. Gregory's emphasis

on God's ineffable nature can help us to avoid any form of idolatry, which occurs when our mind projects in God thoughts emerging sometimes from our inner psychological conflicts. Gregory's orthodoxy of teaching was perfectly confirmed by the monastic spirituality of the desert, especially in the person of Evagrius of Pontus, who stressed the importance of imageless prayer. 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' is referred to the mystery of the Holy Trinity (which, being non-numeral, is beyond imagination), and should be understood as *one* name for the triune God. It expresses the ineffable relationship (*schesis*) between the Persons of the Trinity, who being eternal, cannot be ascribed any real gender. In this respect, Gregory holds the hard-line of those theologians who found the Scriptures as a very compelling argument against innovations. On this basis did he reject Eunomius' theories, since they had dramatic consequences for the understanding of the tenets of the Christian faith, especially for prayer and the sacramental life:

If the confession of the revered and precious Names of the Holy Trinity (*hē tōn semnōn te kai timiōn tes agias triados onomatōn homologia*) is useless, and the customs of the Church unprofitable (*ta ethē tēs ekklēsias*), and if among these customs is the sign of the cross (*hē sphragis*), prayer (*he proseuchē*), baptism (*to baptisma*), confession of sins (*hē tōn hamartiōn exagoreusis*), right ordering of character, sobriety of life (*to kata sophrosunēn bioun*), regard to justice, the effort not to be excited by passion, or enslaved by pleasure, or to fall short in moral excellence, - if he says that none of such habits is cultivated to any good purpose, and that the sacramental tokens (*ta mystika symbola*) do not, as we have believed, secure spiritual blessings, and avert from believers the assaults directed against them by the wiles of the evil one, what else does he do but openly proclaim aloud to men that he deems the mystery which Christians cherish a fable, laughs at the majesty of Divine Names (*katagelan tēs semnotētos tōn theiōn onomatōn*), considers the customs of the Church a jest, and all sacramental operations idle prattle and folly?²

Gregory is one of the best examples for theologians who kept the balance between conservatism and creativity. His theory of language broke seriously with the Alexandrian tradition (Philo, Origen) and opened an important chapter in the history of the Christian thinking upon language³. For Gregory, names could never acquire a

¹ *apud.* J.-L. MARION, « Théologiques », in A. JACOB, (ed.), *L'Univers Philosophique* (Paris: PUF, 1990), 17-25

² NPNF V. 238b (GNO II. 285. 25-286.13)

³ On the history of St Gregory's reception in the late medieval and early modern thought, see T. KOBUSCH, 'Name un Sein. Zu den sprachphilosophischen Grundlagen in der Schrift *Contra Eunomium*

magic, or not even a protreptic power⁴: what makes words effective is not an intrinsic attribute of language, but the mental energy that supports them in prayer. Gregory would have never said, as Origen⁵, that the translation of one idiom into another would diminish the magic power of the words. There is no sacramental automatism within the articulation of language, and, from a theological viewpoint, Gregory dismisses the idea that Hebrew or Greek could be regarded as 'sacred languages'. For us, this is a sensible point, but it became an evidence only recently in the history of humankind. At the beginning of the 18th century, there were still some respectable Hebraist scholars who believed sincerely in the possibility of tracing back the roots of Adam's language. Living by the end of the fourth century, St Gregory was highly revolutionary, and Th. Kobusch did not hesitate to call him 'ein Aufklärer'. The early Christian Church adopted Gregory's very pragmatic viewpoints on language and spread the Gospel to the Gentiles in as many idioms as possible. Unlike for many romantics of the 19th century, for Gregory there was no language that could provide a 'more original' access to reality. For Gregory, *language is a broken mirror of a broken creation*. A double-fall affects its usage: Adam's lapse into self-misunderstanding and the disaster of Babel, which was only prophetically repaired at Jerusalem, on the day of the Pentecost. The restoration of language has to start with the unification of the divided human nature in each person. Only then, the usage of language can acquire the virtues of a spiritual exercise.

Gregory can be compared with Augustine and, as the bishop of Hippo, he could refresh many contemporary debates about semiotics or hermeneutics. Drawing on the relationship between language and manual skills, Gregory advanced a theory nowadays confirmed in by many scholars of anthropology or psychology. On the other hand, although he emphasises the essential contribution of the human being in the creation of language, Gregory does not confine thought to the realm of mere discourse. Language can nourish badly many forms of conceptual idolatry, and only the purification of heart and the spiritual love for the infinite God can transform the 'divine names' into icons of his invisible. St Gregory, as Alexander Golitzin has

des Gregor von Nyssa', in L. F. MATEO-SECO & J. L. BASTERO (Eds.), *El » Contra Eunomium I « en la producción literaria de Grigorio de Nisa* (Pamplona, 1988), 247-267

⁴ JOHN G. COOK, 'The Protreptic Power of Early Christian Language: From John to Augustine', *VC* 48 (1994), 105-134. Unsurprisingly, Gregory of Nyssa does not occur in Cook's lists of authors.

⁵ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum* V. 45-46 (ET by H. Chadwick, 299-301)

already shown⁶, anticipates theological themes worked out later by Denys the Areopagite. Gregory was an apophatic thinker, although not so systematic as the Areopagite (who was more seriously affected by the Neoplatonic theology). Yet, he belongs to the celebrated generation of the Church Fathers who, from Justin the Martyr up to Gregory Palamas, taught that, above all, language is limited in comparison with the task of theology. Having an eschatological orientation, theology is obliged to grasp the ineffable, and the best way to do it is by 'sacrifice of praise'. The persistent temptation of conceptual idolatry, which made of Eunomius a prophet of the modern age, can be dissuaded only by setting words into motion: in prayer, hymns and psalmody *ad infinitum*.

Driven by the infinite desire to draw nearer to God, the soul cannot help becoming a 'musical instrument' and actor into a 'cosmic symphony', completing thus the liturgy of the angels. While praising God, human being returns the gift received from above in Christ's incarnation as Word of God. In Gregory's viewpoint, only by adopting the divine *kenosis*, our language, as well as our body, can be sanctified and redeemed.

⁶ A. GOLITZIN, *Et introibo ad altare Dei: the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with special reference to its predecessors in the Eastern Christian tradition* (Thessalonike: 1994), *passim*

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