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## Gregory of Nazianzus' Concept of "Knowable" Transcendence

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#### ABSTRACT:

This paper outlines Gregory of Nazianzus' thought on the knowability of transcendence and according to the Cappadocian Father, what knowing God entails. Beginning with a critical appraisal of what William Placher means by the domestication of Transcendence and his expressed dismay over "trivial images of God" in contemporary theology arising from overconfidence in the human capacity to understand God's nature and the human ability to talk clearly and precisely about God after the seventeenth century. Arguing that Gregory articulated this problem long before Placher, this paper is an appraisal of Gregory's response to an issue previously well-articulated by Placher.

# Gregory of Nazianzus' Concept of "Knowable" Transcendence

by Fr. William Orbih

In his book, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, William Placher expresses dismay over what he calls "trivial images of God" in contemporary theology. These emerge from concerted attempts by contemporary theologians to respond to the distant "lordly deity" of the Christian tradition, "incapable of being affected by the things of this world, standing at the summit of Metaphysical hierarchies, and reinforcing their oppressive structures."<sup>1</sup> He argues that while the overall intention is valid, this overconfidence in the human capacity to understand God's nature and in the human ability to talk clearly and precisely about God has led theology astray.<sup>2</sup> Precisely, it has led to what he coins the "domestication of transcendence." That is, in calling God transcendent, contemporary theologians refer to God as unknowable, while at the same time fundamentally speaking of transcendence as though it were one among the definable properties of God—an utterly comprehensible attribute at that!

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- 1 William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 1.
  - 2 *Ibid.*, 3.



## SIREN'S CALL

by Katryna Bertucci

However, while Placher traces the history of this problem to the seventeenth century, this paper argues that earlier Gregory of Nazianzus had articulated this problem and even responded to it in what it describes as his concept of “knowable” transcendence. It argues that for Gregory, unlike for Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin—whose theologies Placher appraises to accentuate his point—God is not unknowable. God is knowable. Knowing God, however, is not synonymous to “containing” God. It is ascending and being contained by God. Theology, according to Gregory, is an ascent comparable to Moses ascending the mount of God (Ex 24: 18). The goal of this paper, therefore, is to outline Gregory’s theology of the knowability of transcendence, that is, what, according to the Cappadocian Father, knowing God means and what it implies for human nature and salvation. It will begin with an appraisal of what Placher means by the domestication of transcendence, paying attention to his evaluation of the theologies of Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards, it will outline how Gregory’s five theological orations can serve as a response to this problem. That is, it will demonstrate how, against the overconfidence of the Arians and Eunomians in their pretention to be able to assert something accurately about divine essence, Gregory insists that God is knowable yet transcendent. Most importantly, it will point to what Gregory thinks is at the heart of the perennial problem: theology misconstrued as anything other than an ascent of the theologian towards transcendence or knowing God ill-conceived as “containing” transcendence within our finite essence, language, and systems.<sup>4</sup>

## THE DOMESTICATION OF TRANSCENDENCE

Arguably, no other divine attribute has received the kind of attention among contemporary theologians that divine transcendence has. Divine Transcendence, as Mayra Rivera succinctly defines it, “is a theological idiom

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3 This work does not intend to be a review of Placher’s book, nor should it preclude an actual reading of Placher’s work. Of interest is the introduction where Placher articulates what he means by the domestication of transcendence, as well as the first part of the book where he uses the theologies of Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin to accentuate his point about how theology flourished before the seventeenth century.

4 I got the concept of “containing” God from a class lecture by Prof. Anatonios Khaled, Oct 18, 2019. Similarly, most of the arguments, especially towards the end of this paper, have been much shaped by Prof. Khaled’s class lectures.

referring to God's otherness."<sup>5</sup> It is also a controversial concept, she explains, a concept which progressive contemporary theologians are right to be suspicious about, given that it is often associated with hierarchical distance and separation of God from creation.<sup>6</sup> However, before this very recent era of suspicion and caution, there is a long history of adventure with the idea of the "otherness" of God who is radically separate from the created order. For many theologians throughout the long history of Christianity, transcendence is the first and perhaps the only accurate and "positive" thing to be said about God. As such, it is the vital prelude upon which every other thing that can be said about God rests. For these theologians, therefore, divine transcendence is the prelude to the whole province of negative theology. This is because transcendence does not only express the total incomprehensibility of God but ultimately implies the inadequacy and inappropriateness of human categories as applied to God.<sup>7</sup> Augustine of Hippo is an apt representative of this school. According to him, the total transcendence of the godhead quite surpasses the capacity of ordinary speech. Therefore, "when we think about God the trinity, we must never forget that our thoughts are quite inadequate, our intellect and language totally incapable of grasping the being of God."<sup>8</sup> In other words, transcendence is what one gets when God's infiniteness meets human limitedness.

However, there have been other theologians in the history of theology for whom divine transcendence is simply one other thing that can be said about God. Karl Rahner accuses these theologians of treating the incomprehensibility of God in isolation of other Christian doctrines. According to him, rather than recognizing it as the proper starting point of theology, they relegate it to an afterthought. Rather than seeing it as the attribute of attributes, they see it as just one other divine attribute. As a result, the incomprehensibility of God is not brought out clearly and firmly in, for instance, the traditional treatment of the question of the meaning of human

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5 Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), ix.

6 Ibid.

7 Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 6.

8 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2015), 74.7.

existence.<sup>9</sup> In the opinion of Placher, this trend became particularly noticeable among theologians from around the seventeenth century, which for him coincides with the beginning of the modern era. Beginning from that time, thinkers in theology, as well as other fields, grew increasingly confident about human capacities. This confidence was precisely in “their ability to understand God and God’s role in the world and to contribute to human salvation—and narrowed their understanding of what counted as reasonable articulation of and argument for faith.”<sup>10</sup> Just like every other development in theology, this was motivated by sociohistorical factors. These include the thirty years war (1618-1648), motivated in substantial part by religious difference; civil wars in European city-states, e.g., England; severe depression; and plagues.<sup>11</sup> In a world full of these many uncertainties as the seventeenth century was, Placher argues that it is only natural that individuals would want to present their beliefs compellingly. It is thus not the case that theologians from the seventeenth century onward rejected the notion of God’s transcendence, but that they increasingly thought they could, should, and must talk clearly about God. Thus, “rather than explaining how all categories break down when applied to God” as virtually all theologians before the modern era have been wont to do, they set the stage for talking about transcendence as one of the definable properties God possesses.<sup>12</sup> As a result, “transcendence got domesticated, and theology suffered.”<sup>13</sup>

Placher’s central thesis in *The Domestication of Transcendence* can be delineated into three interrelated premises. First is the misunderstanding of divine transcendence among contemporary theologians. This misunderstanding is not that contemporary theologians misunderstand the meaning of transcendence. Instead, it is precisely the fact that they conceive of God as transcendent, that is, unknowable, but then proceed to make clear and concise and definite categorizations about God. Second, this misunderstanding has led to a domestication of the notion of divine transcendence. By the very nature of the concept, transcendence defies

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9 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Volume XVIII: God and Revelation*, trans. Edward Quinn. (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1984), 89.

10 Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 3.

11 Ibid, 5.

12 Ibid, 7.

13 Ibid.

domestication. Domestication can, nevertheless, occur in two basic senses. It is either that theologians ignore the implication of divine transcendence and pretend to be able to talk clearly and definitively about God, or that in appreciation of the strict implication of transcendence, they become left with nothing to say about God. The result in either of these instances forms Placher's third and last premise: whenever transcendence is domesticated, theology suffers. By theology suffering, Placher means that the domestication of transcendence has led to many theological bottlenecks. It has led to a form of idolatry, where theologians create a God of their liking or fit and force God into systems of their own making. It has led to theologians thinking that human categories are transferable to God.

Apart from process theology, which is his prime example of the tendency to subject the divine to the structures of human reason, Placher also sees this tendency to fit God into our human systems in the various forms of theological functionalism. These include but are not limited to certain contemporary theological strands of feminism and liberation theology. In addition to forcing God to fit into our human system, in theological functionalism, one also sees the propensity to want to design God to serve our human purpose. Both process theology and theological functionalism can likewise be contrasted with theologies such as that of Mark C Taylor, who, in seeking to "honor the radical otherness of the divine," is left with "nothing to say about God at all."<sup>14</sup> Beyond presenting examples from postmodern theology, Placher is convinced that in order to appreciate just how much theology has suffered consequent of the domestication of divine transcendence, one only needs to look at premodern theology. Without over-romanticizing the premodern era or the wholistic theological legacy from that era, he is confident the premodern era has a lot to teach the postmodern era about how to do theology. He appraises the doctrine of God in the works of three eminent theologians: Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, to accentuate this point.

All three theologians prove the vitality of theology before the domestication of transcendence in that divine transcendence served for them neither just one other thing to be said about God nor the first and only thing to be said about God. For these theologians, transcendence is not even just an idea to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 14.

be kept in the background. It is one kept as a constant and ultimate focus of their entire theological systems. As a result, they neither kept quiet as though God were a mysterious unknowability nor did they, in presuming to talk about God, turn God into an idol of some sort forced to fit into their intellectual system or serve their purpose. Aquinas does this in his concept of the unknowable God.

According to Thomas Aquinas, “We cannot know what God is, but only what He is not; we must, therefore, consider the ways in which God does not exist rather than ways he does.”<sup>15</sup> According to Placher, this premise, which pertains to divine simplicity, does not imply radical unknowability. On the contrary, it shapes every other thing that Aquinas says about God in the *Summa Theologiae*, for throughout, Aquinas is both conscious of the fact that God transcends whatsoever we can conceive of him as well as confident of the fact that “we cannot know of the existence of something without also knowing its essence in some way”<sup>16</sup> Thus, while Aquinas never imagines himself to be speaking clearly, precisely, or definitively about God, he speaks confidently nonetheless. Aquinas can speak confidently because he is forearmed with his theory of analogy.<sup>17</sup> With his understanding of analogy, he was able to apply human language and our way of speaking to God while remaining conscious that “our language never quite works when applied to God.”<sup>18</sup> In the end, Aquinas did not present us with “a *metaphysical system* that would place God within our understanding of the world and specify the meaning of our language about God, but *metalinguistic rules* that remind us of the limitations of our language about God and thereby make it clear that we *cannot* place God within the world we can understand.”<sup>19</sup> Most importantly, this becomes the prelude to Aquinas’ treatment of faith and divine revelation. Through the self-revelation of Christ, we come to know God. This knowledge is the knowledge of faith; it is never about empirical certainty or conclusiveness.

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15 Ibid, 21: quoting Aquinas, ST 1a.3.

16 Ibid., 23: quoting Aquinas, *Commentary on Boethius; Augustine, De Trinitate*, 6.3

17 Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 27. Placher clarifies that while Aquinas has become identified with the theory of analogy, he never propounded a systematic theory of analogy. Cf. Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 72.

18 Ibid, 31.

19 Ibid: italicization Placher’s.





## GIVE ME A SIGN

by Katryna Bertucci

What Aquinas does with his concept of the unknowable God, Luther does in his theology of the cross. Like Aquinas, Luther speaks rather confidently about God in his theological system while at the same time resisting every tendency to put God into any human system. Placher argues that Luther was able to achieve this chiefly in the theology of the cross, which he first expounds at the Heidelberg disputation. With his theology of the cross, Luther was able to remove human salvation entirely from the province of human effort and, by extension, human system, and place it in the province of God's grace. Human salvation is, thus, what God does in the cross of Christ and not what humans do. As Placher puts it, "the human path to salvation lies not in climbing virtuously upward, but through suffering the suffering of despair and the knowledge of one's sins. No self-congratulatory sense of our own accomplishment can survive in the presence of the cross."<sup>20</sup> Luther's theology of the cross is thus the key for understanding the rest of his theological system, for it is the mystery of God's grace, which, as Luther insists, can never be part of any human system of moral virtues.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, it transcends all human systems, ethical or otherwise, for it is simultaneously revealed and hidden. It is revealed in the mystery of the cross of Christ, just as it is, at the same time, hidden in the suffering of God on the cross.<sup>22</sup> With the dialectics of revealed and hidden God, Luther is, thus, able to put the reality of divine transcendence within the context of divine self-revelation in Christ. Like Aquinas, Luther would, therefore, insist that while through the self-revelation of Christ, we truly come to know God, God does not thus become comprehensible. In Christ, God becomes a revealed God, while nevertheless remaining the same (hidden) God.<sup>23</sup> The mystery of God's revelation and hiddenness is, therefore and above all, an invitation to faith.

Just as Aquinas and Luther cannot be said to share similar theological conclusions, neither can Calvin be said to share similar theological conclusions with either of them. However, while the three of them differ in particular doctrines, all three of them, according to Placher, resisted the urge to force God into human systems either of their own makings or constructed by

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20 Ibid, 45

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid, 46-47.

23 Ibid, 50.

others—including the institutional religion/church. Placher expresses it thus: “Like Aquinas on the nature of our language about God, or Luther on the mysteries of the hidden God, Calvin counselled against claiming to know too much, or claiming to say what we know more clearly than we can.”<sup>24</sup> This is one window into Calvin’s vast theological system. It explains his willingness to leave questions unanswered, “necessary consequences” underived, and apparent inconsistencies suspended in tension.<sup>25</sup> It explains why in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he advises us to “use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends. For how the human mind can measure off the measureless essence of God.”<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, it also explains the practical orientation of Calvin’s entire theological system. For instance, even if scripture does not satisfy all our curiosity, it remains useful for Calvin, “To instruct us in good doctrine, to console us and to exhort us to render ourselves perfect in all good works.”<sup>27</sup> Above all, it is consistent with Calvin’s view of God accommodating himself to our standard in order that we might be able to comprehend him. Calvin’s confidence in speaking about God is, therefore, not based on the effort of human intellect but instead on God accommodating himself to human capacity. Therefore, just as for Aquinas we speak with confidence a language about God we do not understand and for Luther we are to turn aside from any effort to penetrate the mystery of the hidden God, so for Calvin, the words we speak of God can help us to a confident trust in God even as we recognize the inadequacies both of the words themselves and of our understandings of them.<sup>28</sup>

For Placher, therefore, the common denominator discernible in the theological systems of Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, is their ability to write extensively about God without falling into the temptation of “domesticating” transcendence. They succeeded in this because they never claimed to be able to talk conclusively about God. They understood that transcendence does not mean not talking about God at all, but instead, proceeding with care and

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24 Ibid, 54

25 Ibid, 53

26 Ibid: quoting Calvin, *Institutes* 1.13.21.

27 Ibid, 54

28 Ibid, 60

humility. They understood that we can talk about God as Trinity because of revelation. They never presumed to be able to talk about God *a priori* or outside of divine self-revelation. However, pressured they were to present the Christian faith in articulate systems, they resisted the urge to confine God within these human systems. Above all, they succeed precisely because they never failed to keep in focus the ultimate unknowability and hiddenness of God. They were conscious that, as Rivera puts it, “God is ultimately irreducible to our images of God.”<sup>29</sup> However, while they were quite successful in not making an idol of God, their respective dominant images of God are each not without their inherent difficulties. For instance, Aquinas’ concept of an unknowable God is logically problematic. The problem divine unknowability poses can be stated thus: is it the case that God is unintelligible, or is it rather the case that human beings cannot grasp God? When divine unknowability is the basis of transcendence, theology might be preserved from idolatry; it nevertheless risks leading to theology as mere speculation on what is after all unintelligible. Besides, the conceptualization seems to be misleading. At least it contradicts Aquinas’ axiom: “we cannot know of the existence of something without also knowing its essence in some way.”<sup>30</sup>

Luther, on the other hand, as Placher himself acknowledges, can only “inconsistently” maintain his concept of the hidden God if he must at the same time acknowledge the clear and vivid self-revelation of God in Christ through the scripture. He struggled to assert his certainty of God’s love for humankind in the face of human suffering.<sup>31</sup> The same to a large extent, applies to Calvin. He must fit his theory of predestination within his overall theological picture, however inconsistent with the universality of God’s mercy and Christ’s perfection.<sup>32</sup> He must assert it with certainty even if, by so doing, he goes against his counsel to us against “claiming to know too much or claiming to say what we know more clearly than we can.”<sup>33</sup> Luther and Calvin are perfect examples of how not to “domesticate transcendence” only if we were to imply that inconsistencies in their theological systems (at least as presented by Placher), is somewhat a vindication of transcendence.

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29 Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*, 4.

30 See footnote #16.

31 Cf. Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 51.

32 Cf. *Ibid.*, 61.

33 *Ibid.*, 54.

What is clear is that however well “inconsistency” serves the notion of transcendence (i.e., protects it from being domesticated), it does not serve the overall theological enterprise. Or perhaps, is it the case that all three of these theologians ventured to do theology without first articulating the goal of theology? These inherent difficulties in the notion of divine transcendence seem to have been well articulated and addressed in Gregory’s orations. In these orations, Gregory devotes considerable attention to articulating the goal of theology and the identity and proper disposition of the theologian.

## GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS AND ‘KNOWABLE’ TRANSCENDENCE

Plato had said in the *Timaeus* that “to know God is hard, to describe him impossible.” Gregory, nicknamed the theologian on account of his profound elucidation of the doctrine of God, had in his mind this quote from Plato as he began his second theological oration. He does not, however, corroborate it. “To tell of God is not possible,” says Gregory, adding that “to know him is even less possible.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, Gregory insists that all that can be known about God is that God exists, that Divine existence is the only positive knowledge we can have with regards to God, since it is evidently to be seen in the reality, beauty, and order of creation with God regarded as the transcendent cause of creation whose “incomprehensible and boundless nature pass [human] understanding.”<sup>35</sup> The implication, therefore, is that apart from divine existence, nothing else can be known about the divine essence. We do not go beyond knowledge of God’s existence to any knowledge of God’s nature.

In other words, the incomprehensibility of the divine nature is the fundamental premise of Gregory’s Theological Orations. In fact, for F. Norris, the assertion that the divine nature is incomprehensible is the most often repeated one in Gregory’s Theological Orations.<sup>36</sup> Gregory would often emphasize just how incomprehensible the invisible divine nature is by pointing to just how we are unable to fully comprehend the things that are perceptible to our senses. “If you do not fully grasp these things, of which your own sense

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34 Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 28: 4 in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002).

35 Oration 28: 5.

36 Tomasz Stepien and Karolina Kochanczyk-Boninska, *Unknown God, Known in His Activities: Incomprehensibility of God during the Trinitarian Controversy of the 4th Century*. Berlin (Peter Lang, 2018).

faculties are witnesses, how do you suppose you can know with accuracy what and how great God is? This is really a lot of foolishness!"<sup>37</sup> Thus, according to Gregory, it is not just the fact that God's essence is unknowable; it is foolishness and smacks of impiety to imagine oneself as able to comprehend the essence of God. His discussion on the incomprehensibility of the divine nature in the Theological Oration, therefore, oscillates between the reality of God's greatness and human nothingness on the one hand, and on the other hand, God's unapproachableness in holiness and human unworthiness. God is not just supremely greater than or superior to the rest of creation; God is the "other;" God's existence is radically different from that of the created order.<sup>38</sup>

However, while this position of Gregory with regards to the unknowability of God is clear enough, the difficulty is the fact that Gregory, the champion of "divine unknowability" himself, gifts us five beautiful Theological Orations, which even at face value, and prior to any probe into their contents would imply the fact that God is not "unknowable" after all. What sounds like seeming contradiction is only resolvable when one understands that what Gregory had as his aim in the Theological Orations is neither to merely restate the doctrine of the Trinity nor to clarify it conclusively. Rather, it is a critical investigation of the language used in talking about God as well as the right theological posture one must take before venturing to think of, not to talk of or speak, about God. Explaining how Gregory's interest in the language of speaking about the Trinity as well as in the disposition of the theologian trumps his interest in the doctrinal formulation, Christopher Beeley writes:

*Gregory of Nazianzus is best known in Christian tradition for his definitive teaching on the Holy Trinity. Yet in a way that does not fit neatly into the divisions of modern systematic theology, his Trinitarian doctrine consists less in devising technically accurate statements about how God is both one and three or even in the doctrine of God per se, than it does in a whole nexus of concerns that bear as much on Christian anthropology, language theory, and sacramental theology as they do on the loftier spheres of modern Christian dogma. One of the most characteristic aspects of Gregory's*

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37 Oration 20: 11: quoted in Stepien and Kochanczyk-Boninska, *Unknown God*, 211.

38 Stepien and Kochanczyk-Boninska, *Unknown God*, 213.

*oeuvre and a cardinal principle of his theological system is his repeated insistence that the knowledge of God is inseparably related to the condition of the human knower—that theology both demands and causes a change in the state of the theologian, and that it involves a wide range of practical and theoretical concerns that are integral to its meaning.*<sup>39</sup>

With this few sentences above Beeley brilliantly captures Gregory's theological interest and the expanse of the work of one who is famously referred to as the theologian. However, while in the *Theological Orations*, we see a masterful interaction of these diverse interests, what seems to be most important to Gregory in these orations is an interest in the language used in talking about God as well as the appropriate disposition of the theologian.

The reason Gregory was more focused on investigating the language used in talking about God would have been due at least to the fact that, by the time of his writings, the council of Nicaea had already taken place. He was born five years after the commencement of this first ecumenical council.<sup>40</sup> The full divinity of Christ had been affirmed. Likewise, the full divinity of the Holy Spirit was at least on the way to being fully affirmed in the second council in which Gregory was to preside—even if briefly.<sup>41</sup> Terms such as Consubstantiality and *homoousious* had been introduced into the Christian creed, and their specific meaning and usage was largely clarified with reference to and in rejection of the alternative usage in which unorthodoxy employed them. The winners and losers of the agelong Christological and Trinitarian debates had been declared, and the precise boundary of the Trinitarian

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39 Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

40 Gregory of Nazianzus was born about the year 330 AD, which is some years after the Nicaean council. He thus lived his life practically throughout the already described “second period” of the Arian controversy, and he was eventually to confront and refute the Arian position as none less than the bishop of Constantinople. At first, invited to take charge of the proprietary chapel in an otherwise pro-Arian Constantinople, he was eventually given full episcopal control over the city through the support of Emperor Theodosius. It was from this chapel, and eventually as bishop of Constantinople, as well as briefly as president of the Council of Constantinople, that he delivered a good number of his much-revered theological orations. For the biographical detail of Gregory's life, see Brian Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006).

41 The Council of Constantinople AD. 381 confirmed the creed of Nicaea and expanded articles pertaining to the Holy Spirit.

doctrine set. There is, however, another often ignored reason Gregory was keenly interested in critically investigating the language used in talking about God. This was to safeguard divine transcendence from “domestication” by the Arians and Eunomians in their presumption to be able to say something clearly, precisely, and definitively about the nature of God and fit God into their system.

Despite the remarkable development in Christian theology at this time, the language used in referring to God remained largely ambiguous. Words such as “Unbegotten” as used for the Father, “Begotten” as applied to the Son, and “Procession” used in reference to the Holy Spirit in relationship to the Father and Son remained unclear and subject to diverse interpretative conclusions. The Arians and Eunomians, refusing to accept “defeat,” continue to advance their ideologies. They were interested in making their case and making it as clearly and precisely as possible. The different terms applied to the distinct persons of the Trinity—Unbegotten and Begotten—were of particular interest to them in this endeavor. If the Son is “by nature” begotten, he cannot be of one substance with the Father who is Unbegotten by nature, they argued, since “being unbegotten” is different from “being begotten.”<sup>42</sup> This was for them an irrefutable and conclusive argument. After all, the concept “begotten” is scriptural, and their employment of the term was consistent with logic and the common usage of grammar. Gregory vehemently rejected this argument, and he does this across five theological orations.

Gregory's *Theological Orations* deal with the doctrine of the Trinity: three persons, one God. However, they were written post-Nicaea and during the Trinitarian controversy that both led to the council and continued long after it. In other words, they were essentially written as responses to the unorthodox position of the Arians and the Eunomians who denied the consubstantiality and coequality of the Son with the Father. While, for them, names like begotten and unbegotten pertain to the essence of the persons of the Trinity, Gregory disagrees. On the contrary, he argues that these are relationship words that pertain to the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. In other words, while the word begotten is indeed scriptural, what the Arians did with it is not a legitimate interpretation of scripture. Instead,

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42 Oration 29: 10, 12.



it amounts to both a misinterpretation of scripture as well as a misuse of language. Hence, in the *Theological Orations*, among other things, Gregory gives due attention to the language used in talking about God. As a matter of fact, Gregory is mostly renowned, as Brian Daley notes, for his pioneering work in “articulating a theological terminology—indeed a theological grammar—for speaking about God in a way consistent with Scripture and the Church’s tradition of faith.”<sup>43</sup> Gregory argued that the language used to talk about the being of God is never a positive assertion, but a negation. As such that the term unbegotten does not state the nature of the Father, but simply the fact that he was not begotten, just as begotten does not state the nature of the Son, but the fact that he was begotten.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Gregory concludes that because all three divine persons share in the substance of divinity, they are co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial.

Similarly, Gregory notes that the term Father designates neither the substance nor activity, but the relationship, the manner of being, which holds good between the Father and the Son.<sup>45</sup> Hence, the word Father is not to be predicated on God in the exact same way it is predicated on human beings. Accordingly, the relationship between the Father and the Son is the relationship between the Father who begets and the Son, who is begotten by the Father. This heavenly begetting is radically different and more incomprehensible than the human idea of begetting, which is itself beyond our complete comprehension.<sup>46</sup> First, the Son is begotten in a non-temporal way. Next, the Son as begotten by the Father means that he is from the Father; it does not mean the Son is after him, and it definitely does not imply that the Son is not eternal.<sup>47</sup>

For Gregory, the problem with the heretics goes beyond a misunderstanding or misuse of words. Thus, while he challenges the Arians and Eunomians to recheck their language, he does not stop there. He goes on to demonstrate just how divine transcendence logically necessitates that apophatic language

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43 Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 41.

44 Oration 29: 11

45 Oration 29: 16

46 Oration 29: 8.

47 This is equally true of the Holy Spirit. That the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father does not mean the He is after the Father. Cf. Oration 29, 3.

must have primacy over cataphatic theology in theological discourse. The sheer necessity of saying something might necessitate the use of cataphatic language, but whatever one says of the divine nature is ultimately comparable to the averted image as in a mirror.<sup>48</sup> This is because human finitude cannot grasp the infinity of God. Human language is not only inadequate; it is even inappropriate. Furthermore, beyond language-checking them, Gregory queries their overall theological posture and disposition. He queries their claims to know something for certain about the nature of God.<sup>49</sup> He queries what he describes as their “complete obsession with setting and solving conundrums,” worrying that if this attitude is unchecked, the “great mystery” of the faith is in danger of becoming a mere social accomplishment.<sup>50</sup> He describes as a lack of piety imagining oneself being able to contain with intellectual finality and to grasp the mystery of God rather than submitting in prayerful disposition to God in faith and charity.

Whether this accurately represents the theological enterprise of the Arians and Eunomians is disputable. To be fair to them (to the Arians for instance), behind their vigorous denial of (full) divinity of Jesus was a desire to defend what they thought to be the integrity of the divine nature. The integrity of the divine, for them, totally excludes any admixture of that which is not divine. What is clear, however, is the fact that in doing this, they imagined themselves as being able to say something *via positiva* and entirely accurate about God’s very nature. This is what they did when they described words such as begotten and unbegotten as substance words, i.e., telling us something about the nature of the Father and the Son.

Using Placher’s framework, therefore, one can easily see the many ways in which Gregory would have appraised the theological systems of the Arians and Eunomians as tantamount to an attempt to domesticate transcendence. For Gregory, this would have consisted in their presumption to make positive affirmations about the divine as well as speak with confident conclusiveness about the nature of the deity. However, in Gregory’s articulation of divine transcendence, there is a significant departure from Placher as well as from the theological systems of Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, which Placher uses to

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48 Oration 28: 3

49 Cf. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 91-2

50 Oration 27: 2.

elaborate his point. This is first and foremost in the fact that the divine for Gregory is not unknowable/unintelligible. Divine Transcendence is knowable, first, because of the reality of divine self-revelation/incarnation.

Also, divine transcendence is knowable through the clear and vivid manifestations of God in the created order. Through the reality and grandeur of creation, we come to a conviction of God's existence.<sup>51</sup> This is because God's manifestation is never outside God's essence. The knowledge of God's nature is, however, never the conclusion of a deductive argument. It is not the fact that we can move from the created order to an accurate and precise knowledge of who God is in his essence. On the contrary, Gregory's central thesis in the theological oration is the incomprehensibility of God. According to Beeley, by incomprehensibility, Gregory means the "creaturely inability to know the full magnitude or the entirety of God."<sup>52</sup> There is nevertheless an important distinction to be made between God being incomprehensible in his essence and God being ungraspable by the limitedness of the human essence.<sup>53</sup>

There is also an important distinction between human beings created to know God and human beings unable by their own effort to know God. For Gregory, therefore, it is not ultimately the question of whether we can know God or not, but the question of whether we can contain the divine essence within our limited essence. For this to take place, God must illuminate human nature. Tomasz Stepien and Karolina Kochanczyk-Boninska rightly note in their appraisal of Gregory's Oration 25, 17 that "Gregory's primary concept for God's nature is light and he frequently refers to the knowledge of God as illumination or coming to share in the divine light. The ultimate aim of human existence is participation in God. Those who are purified, Gregory says, will come to know that the Trinity as well as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are known to one another."<sup>54</sup> Beeley totally agrees with this. In fact, for Beeley, this two-poled dialectic of purification and illumination, constitutes the spiritual framework in which the knowledge of God takes place and theology has its

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51 Oration 28: 5.

52 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 96.

53 Oration 28: 11.

54 Stepien and Kochanczyk-Boninska, *Unknown God*, 216.

meaning.<sup>55</sup> By purification, Gregory “means first of all a radical change in one’s character and way of life.”<sup>56</sup> Gregory specifically sees the role of theology as consisting in purifying the theologian. This is both in the moral as well as in the intellectual sense.<sup>57</sup>

However, this is only the one step in the two-step process, and it refers to what is required of the theologian.<sup>58</sup> The second step is not what the theologian has to do, but what God does: illumination. It is God’s gift and God’s grace. Even though illumination is God’s prerogative, it in some way requires the theologian to acquire the proper disposition. Gregory also insists that the end of this process of purification, illumination of the process of “knowing” God, does not consist of a direct vision of God. Gregory had compared doing theology to ascending the mount. Who may ascend? He answers: The one who is fit to. Otherwise, let him not come near for it is dangerous. Nevertheless, even for the one who is pure and who ascends the mount and penetrates the cloud, nothing other than the averted figure of God will he or she be able to see.<sup>59</sup> Besides, because it is the nature of God as “superabundant being” to supersede human perfection, the purification necessary must be ongoing and precisely one that looks to the life to come. What is required is both a radical change in one’s character as well as a radical change in one’s life.<sup>60</sup>

The most crucial feature of Gregory’s departure from Placher (and the trio of Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin) is in his overall vision of the goal of theology. For him, the goal of theology aligns with the goal of human existence. It is not to come to intellectual truths about God but to ascend to God. It is not just to seek out ways of speaking about God as faithfully and truthfully as we can.<sup>61</sup> Rather, it is ascent and union with God through the process of transformation and divinization of the theologian. For this ascent, constant purification is required. Purification is not only from sin and impiety but from all our so-called “positive” images and perceptions of God. It is also the purification of

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55 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 64.

56 *Ibid.*, 69.

57 Cf. Oration 28.1.

58 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 71.

59 Oration 28: 2-3.

60 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 69

61 Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 2.

our human language. As Brian Matz notes, the concept of purification occurs severally in Gregory's teaching. Among other things, "it is the prerequisite to the knowledge of God. In fact, it leads to the comprehension of the essence of God."<sup>62</sup> It is, however, the task of theology to cleanse the theologian and thereby aid the theologian to acquire the right disposition for this ascent.<sup>63</sup> This is because if the "knowledge of God" is never the conclusion of a deductive argument, then it obviously requires more than a logical technique on the part of the knower..



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62 Brian Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 45-46.

63 Oration 28: 1.