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ABSTRACT:

This article discusses the doctrine of God of the early Church Fathers Origen and Gregory of Nazianzus. According to these two theologians, the tension between God's transcendence and God's immanence conditions the language we use to name and describe God. Such "God-talk" is necessarily limited by the ontological divide between the human and the divine. Using Origen and Gregory as reference points, it examines how the precise and careful use of apophatic, cataphatic, and analogical language is necessary to properly account for both God's eternal nature and God's activity in the material world.

How to Talk about God

Origen and Gregory of Nazianzus on Divine Transcendence and Theological Language

by Coleman S. Kimbrough

**INTRODUCTION:
CONTEXT AND THESIS**

By the time Origen and Gregory of Nazianzus developed their doctrines of God in the third and fourth centuries C.E., Christianity had spread across the Mediterranean world, encountering a variety of cultures, religions, and languages. The philosophy of the Greeks—particularly that of the Stoics and



Plato and his interpreters—dominated the pagan intellectual landscape. This philosophy posits a dualistic worldview wherein ultimate reality is purely intellectual, and the material universe is merely a pale image of that intellectual reality. The material world is real, and therefore good, insofar as it participates in or imitates a form of the intellectual realm.

An inevitable consequence of the encounter between Christianity and this pagan philosophy would be the development of a Greek Christian tradition heavily influenced by the metaphysical and epistemological thought of the Platonists. The chief intellectual center of this growing tradition was the Egyptian city of Alexandria.¹ When Origen penned his influential proto-systematic theological work, *On First Principles*, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo had already attempted to synthesize the teachings of the Hebrew Bible with those of Hellenistic philosophy.² Philo, labeled now as a “Middle Platonist,” taught that God (i.e., pure Intellect) is unknowable in God’s Self and can only be known through God’s interactions with the material world of creation: that is, through divine revelation.³ As exemplified in the thought of Origen and Gregory of Nazianzus (hereafter, “Gregory”), many Church Fathers would find much utility in Philo’s notion of the “unknowable God” to frame their own theological doctrines.⁴

In this paper, I will engage with the thought of Origen and Gregory to reveal a foundational doctrine in early Christian thought, one that shapes the way we still talk about God today: that humans cannot arrive at any reliable knowledge of God’s true nature. I begin with examining how God’s transcendent ontological status places strict limitations on so-called “God-talk.” That is, as God exists outside of the material world, any human conception of God’s nature ultimately falls short of an accurate depiction of God *as God is in God’s Self*. Next, I consider the ways that we may use language to *describe* God. We can only use language gleaned

1 See John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 4.

2 See Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17.

3 Louth, *Origins*, 17–18.

4 See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa in his *Life of Moses* and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in his *Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*.

from Scripture, tradition, and our own reason and experience to arrive at appropriate, though imperfect, descriptions of God. Thus, while falling short of conveying a knowledge of God's nature, "God-talk" is ultimately necessary to connect human beings to the divine; our ability to communicate even a limited understanding of God is a basic human response to God's gift of grace given to us through revelation. Ultimately, my hope is that this discussion reveals a fundamental tension that pervades the entire history of Christian theology: the tension between God's transcendence and immanence, his Being-with-us.

THE UNKNOWN GOD: "GOD-TALK" AND DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE

Origen and Gregory's views of God's transcendence conditions the way they conceive and talk about God; as God occupies a level of reality beyond the material universe, God possesses a distinct state of being from all creatures and created things and is ultimately incomprehensible. There is an ontological difference between humans and God which barricades the human mind from truly knowing God's nature. Reflecting his Greek philosophical influences, Origen imagines God as the "immeasurably superior" intellectual Being.⁵ God does not have a body and therefore cannot be comprehended by our own intellectual capabilities. To better understand this intellectual lacuna, consider how we use our minds to comprehend the material world: humans come to understand the world through their rationality and sense faculties. For example, I may engage my intellect to form a mental image of a tree; however, this image reflects *only* my past experiences with trees. Through my ability to see, touch, and smell trees, I can imagine a so-called "ideal" tree in my mind. However, this ability is limited precisely because the imagined tree is based on my previous interactions with trees in the material world. Therefore, my experience and familiarity with a certain type of tree determines the tree-image I form in my mind. Origen believes that our constant interaction with the material world disrupts or damages our ability to perceive *purely intellectual* things, for

5 Origen, *On First Principles: A Reader's Edition*, trans. John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 16.

[O]ur mind, when shut in by the fetters of flesh and blood and rendered, by its participation in such materials, duller and more obtuse, although it is regarded as far more excellent in comparison with bodily nature, yet when it strives after bodiless things and searches for a glimpse of them, it scarcely has room for some spark or small lamp.⁶

The influence of the Platonist philosophical tradition here is prominent: for Origen, the human mind grows comfortable with the dark, cavernous world of matter and materiality and is inadequate to understand the light of purely intellectual truths. Thus, when we do turn our minds to contemplate God's nature, the light of God blinds our intellectual senses such that we cannot truly know God. We, quite literally, cannot handle the truth.

Like Origen, Gregory's emphasis on God's transcendent nature is prominent, though he stresses God's incomprehensible nature even more explicitly. Nowhere is this more evident than in the blunt dictum in his "Second Theological Oration" that "to tell of God is not possible... but to know him is even less possible."⁷ This inability to comprehend God's nature is a result of our own creaturely nature, our "gross portion of flesh."⁸ Gregory even goes so far as to state that material images for God—such as spirit, mind, fire, light, wisdom, and love—"intrude" themselves into our intellectual engagement with God.⁹ Like Origen, Gregory believes that our experience in the material world dulls our capacity to perceive pure ideas. Even our ability to understand the nature of material objects is limited; while we perceive an object such as a tree through our senses, we still struggle in our efforts to comprehend the nature of the tree itself. For example, I may describe the tree by its functions (e.g., its ability to grow, convert carbon dioxide to oxygen, or provide a habitat for other wildlife, etc.) or composite parts (e.g.,

6 Origen, *On First Principles*, 16.

7 Gregory of Nazianzus, "The Second Theological Oration (Oration 28): On the Doctrine of God," in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham, 37–67, Popular Patristics Series 23 (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 39.

8 Gregory, "Second Theological Oration," 40.

9 Gregory, "Second Theological Oration," 46.

leaves, branches, trunk, and roots). However, such observations do not automatically lead to the identification of the tree's nature, its essence. If comprehending the nature of material objects is difficult, so much more the comprehension of the immaterial First Cause of all material objects.¹⁰ Nonetheless, as Gregory points out, this inability to know God's nature does not prohibit our ability to know that God exists in the first place, for we can deduce God's existence from creation much like how we can reliably deduce the existence of a musician from listening to a song or the existence of an artist from gazing at a painting.¹¹ Such a deduction reveals the value of "analogical" language in "God-talk," to be discussed further below.

DESCRIBING THE DIVINE: WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT GOD?

Having demonstrated the foundational patristic doctrine that humans cannot reliably understand God's nature through language, we can nonetheless describe God insofar as God has revealed God's Self to us; reflecting upon Sacred Scripture, creation, and our own rational abilities, we can identify three ways humans may speak about God: first, we may use apophatic language, declaring what God *is not*; second, we may use cataphatic language, affirming a particular description or characteristic of God; lastly, we may use analogical language by drawing a connection between God and a feature of creation. Each of these types of theological language possesses both upsides and pitfalls.

In utilizing apophatic language in God-talk, we deny names and descriptions of God and arrive at a limited understanding of the divine that acknowledges God's transcendence, God's being-beyond-language. For example, we may arrive at a closer understanding of God by denying that God has a body or is non-composite.¹² Furthermore, we may also refer to God as infinite, immutable, incorporeal, immeasurable, and immortal. Such language, rather than forming an image in our minds of what God may be like, leads us further into an ignorance of God's nature in which the outer limits of human reason come into focus, for, at this stage, "faith rather than reason shall lead us, if that is, you have

10 Gregory, "Second Theological Oration," 40.

11 See Gregory, "Second Theological Oration," 40.

12 See Origen, *On First Principles*, 16–17.

learned the feebleness of reason...and have acquired enough knowledge of reason to recognize things which surpass reason.”¹³ This ignorance is perhaps more foundational than any affirmative understanding of God, as any linguistic affirmation necessarily leads to some mental image of what God must be like, thus placing one’s conception of God within the realm of material reality.¹⁴ Perhaps the greatest value of apophatic language lies in its ability to humble oneself before God: if I recognize that all my thoughts and images of God are insufficient, I come to appreciate my status as a creature completely contingent upon a divine Creator. However, the apophatic method is insufficient on its own, for it must be supplemented with positive affirmations to give some clarity to our use of language when discussing God’s attributes.¹⁵ An over-reliance on apophatic language emphasizes God’s transcendence at the expense of God’s immanence, especially displayed in the Incarnation of Christ.

Cataphatic language fills in the gaps left by the apophatic method of describing God and reflects God’s immanence, God’s gift of God’s Self to creation through revelation. First, the cataphatic method is certainly more practical than the apophatic, for one can spend much effort and time poring over concepts that do not apply to God’s nature (e.g., time, space, and corporeality); however, by combining a negation with a positive attribute or name for God, one is more likely to arrive at a clearer conception of God’s nature, a conception that recognizes both God’s transcendence and immanence.¹⁶ To use an example from Scripture, the *First Letter of John* declares that “God is love” (1 John 4:16). Describing God as Love itself gives us an idea of what God is like through our own experience of love within our lives, such as through a relationship with a parent, close friend, or spouse. Additionally, the *Gospel According to John* refers to God as “spirit” throughout its narrative. For Origen, the use of the word “spirit” by Jesus in the Gospel to describe the Father was meant to distinguish God’s level of reality from that of the material.¹⁷ Most useful for Origen here is the knowledge that God is intellectual.

13 Gregory, “Second Theological Oration,” 60.

14 See McGuckin, *Handbook*, 23.

15 Gregory, “Second Theological Oration,” 43.

16 Gregory, “Second Theological Oration,” 43–44.

17 Origen, *On First Principles*, 14.

Understanding God as a purely intellectual Being, as immaterial spirit, affirms both God's unity and oneness.¹⁸ That is, the capacities of the intellect—such as the understanding, memory, will, and judgment—are combined in a united whole, while the intellect itself cannot be separated into composite parts; it is thus one rather than divisible. In understanding God as indivisible spirit, we confront a reality so alien to our own, especially ours in the twenty-first century: the tendency to view the world scientifically—as an object to be investigated and broken down into its component parts—renders a contemporary human especially inadequate to comprehend a unified, indivisible, and immaterial reality. As with apophatic language, an over-reliance on cataphatic language produces a dangerous side-effect in our God-talk: if I rely too heavily on cataphatic language to describe God, I limit my ability to understand the infinite nature of God's Being, scaling God down to the level of materiality. In this case, our God-talk would reflect an idolized image of God created through our collective interaction with the material world.

Closely related to the cataphatic method is the analogical method, in which we begin with a reality *created by God*, such as light or fire, to comprehend an analogous but transcendent reality *of God*. Creation bears the mark of the Creator; therefore, we may point to aspects of creation that give us an understanding of what God is like. For example, we recognize the beauty in nature and can apply such beauty to God, who is the source of the beautiful, bearing in mind that the analogy is limited: we identify God as beautiful because of the beauty that occurs in creation; however, the beauty of God is transcendent to the material beauty of creation and exists on a scale beyond the comprehension of our intellect. In this way, our use of analogical language reflects the Greek philosophical influence on Christian theology: the beauty of material creation, while good, is an image of transcendent Beauty, of God. In appropriately utilizing analogical language, we appreciate the grandeur of God through our experience in creation “without losing God through the grandeur of what [we see.]”¹⁹

18 Origen, *On First Principles*, 16.

19 Gregory, “Second Theological Oration,” 47.

CONCLUSION

Origen and Gregory of Nazianzus thus both call attention to the limits of human reason in its ability to understand God's nature. Despite our use of apophatic, cataphatic, and analogical language to describe the names and attributes of God, for these two Church Fathers humans remain in complete ignorance of God *as God is in God's Self*. Nevertheless, while we still acknowledge and confess God's transcendence in our contemporary moment, this ignorance does not justify abandoning all attempts to arrive at some type of understanding of God, however limited that understanding may be. Striving toward a limited knowledge is necessary if one is to cultivate a relationship with God. For example, one's understanding of God as Love may reveal God's mercy, forgiveness, and compassion to one desiring to grow in holiness. The ability to describe and partially understand God is only possible through grace: God's revelation of God's Self throughout history, most especially in the Incarnation of Christ and the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit, enables the human creature to experience intimacy with the Creator.



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