

UNIT FIVE: The Pro-Nicene Theology of the Cappadocians

Introductory reading:

Chadwick, chapter 38; Kelly, X 3-4

1. The Fantastic Four

The mantle of Athanasius passes in the fourth century to the 'Cappadocian Fathers' who take up the defense of pro-Nicene orthodoxy. They are Basil, bishop of Caesarea (c. A.D. 330-379), his friend Gregory whose father (and not he himself) had been bishop of Nazianzus (329-89), and Basil's younger brother Gregory who became bishop of the insignificant city of Nyssa (c. 335-395). They came from families of the provincial nobility of Cappadocia, to the east of central Asia Minor, whose Christianity reached back to the age of Origen. Origen's disciple Gregory Thaumaturgos converted Macrina who was the grandmother of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. Ecclesiastical statesman, social reformer and monastic founder, Basil has been characterized as 'the man of action.' His imperious temper is evident in the letters he exchanged with the equally imperious bishop of Rome, Damasus. Emmanuel Amand de Mendieta likens it to a battle between two goats, forehead to forehead and horns to horns. Gregory of Nazianzus was 'the master of oratory.' Two years before the Council of Constantinople opened in 381 he delivered his five *Theological Orations* in the capital. They sum up in clear and elegant fashion the pro-Nicene theology of the Trinity. Although the theology underlying it is, as we have seen, not novel or peculiar to Gregory, it is to his [Epistle 101](#) that we owe the celebrated formula, 'That which he has not assumed, he has not healed.'

Gregory was briefly bishop of Constantinople but after a series of political misjudgments he was forced to withdraw to a life of seclusion and letters in Cappadocia. Gregory of Nyssa was 'the thinker' and played a decisive role at the Council of Constantinople. The thought of the Cappadocians has the coherence of a single doctrinal system, and together they occupy a place in early Byzantine theology that is parallel the place of Augustine in the medieval west. To these three should be added 'the Fourth Cappadocian,' Macrina (the Younger), the oldest sister of Basil and of Gregory of Nyssa, named after their grandmother. In the open phrase of his dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection* Gregory of Nyssa calls her, 'sister and teacher at the same time.' After their parents death she became the educator of the entire family in both Christian and classical culture. In the [Life](#), Gregory describes her prayer just before she died at dusk, at the time of the lighting of the lamps in their home:

[984 D] 'O God eternal, to Whom I have been attached from my mother's womb, Whom my soul has loved with all its strength, to Whom I have dedicated both my flesh and my soul from my youth up until now-do Thou give me an angel of light to conduct me to the place of refreshment, where is the water of rest, in the bosom of the holy Fathers.' As she said

these words she sealed her eyes and mouth and heart with the cross. And gradually her tongue dried up with the fever, she could articulate her words no longer, and her voice died away, and only by the trembling of her lips and the motion of her hands did we recognise that she was praying.

Meanwhile evening had come and a lamp [986 B] was brought in. All at once she opened the orb of her eyes and looked towards the light, clearly wanting to repeat the thanksgiving sung at the Lighting of the Lamps. But her voice failed and she fulfilled her intention in the heart and by moving her hands, while her lips stirred in sympathy with her inward desire. But when she had finished the thanksgiving, and her hand brought to her face to make the sign had signified the end of the prayer, she drew a great deep breath and closed her life and her prayer together.

2. A deep, but dazzling darkness

The youngest of the Cappadocians is simultaneously the most elusive and the most compelling. Gregory of Nyssa is a writer of astonishing spiritual insight, philosophical sharpness, and theological complexity. The writings of all the Cappadocian Fathers bear witness to their engagement with the writings of Origen and of Platonism, as well as those of Athanasius. Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus prepared the collection of extracts from Origen's writings known as the *Philokalia*. Origen teaches them to seek the 'unfathomed Word' in Scripture and Origen and Platonism offer them a conceptual framework which is then modified in their pro-Nicene theology. But it is Gregory of Nyssa who does this most daringly, in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* and his *Life of Moses*, as well as the treatises that he, like his brother, wrote against the Cappadocian heterousian Eunomius, and in his great *Catechetical Orations*. For Gregory of Nyssa, as for Athanasius, the soul, along with all other creatures, is created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). In his account of a hierarchical division in being he uses the Platonic distinction between intelligible and sensible realities. In Platonism this distinction is ultimate. But Gregory brings the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* to bear on this Platonic ontology. For Gregory the realm of the intelligible is divided into the uncreated and creative on the one hand and on the other that which is created. This distinction is now what is ultimate. It cuts across the Platonic distinction between the intelligible and the sensible. There is a metaphysical gulf fixed between the created and the uncreated. Only the Trinity is uncreated. So for Gregory there is no possibility of the soul passing across such a gulf, even though God and the soul are both immaterial and intelligible realities known by the mind and not the senses. There is no ecstasy as in Platonism in which the soul can ascend to touch the divine. The soul cannot leave its created nature behind and ascend to the uncreated.

On the basis of this new map of reality, Gregory transforms the spirituality that he receives from Origen and Platonism. He abandons or modifies the intellectualism of this tradition, replacing it with a voluntarist stress. There is no point of contact between

the deepest self and the divine across the gulf between the created and the uncreated. The soul can only know God insofar as God makes this experience possible. Gregory insists that it is only in virtue of the incarnation, only because God has manifested himself and his love among us, that we can know him at all. So, as Martin Laird argues (2004), faith is central in Gregory's theory of divine union. Gregory values faith for its ability to unite with God, who remains beyond the comprehending grasp of mind. He bestows on faith qualities which the Platonist philosopher Plotinus would have granted only to the 'crest of the wave of intellect.' His account of the ascent to divine union is apophatic – it attempts to describe God using negatives, by saying what God is not. As the soul responds to God's love, as it comes closer to the unknowable God, it enters into deeper and deeper darkness, and knows him in a way that surpasses vision, a way of union through love. At the apex of an apophatic ascent faith unites the believer with God the Word; by virtue of this union the believer takes on the qualities of the Word, who speaks in the deeds and discourse of the believer.

Perhaps Gregory was drawn to a 'mysticism of darkness' by his pro-Nicene response to the heterousian Christology of Eunomius. Origen had taught with most Platonists that God is limited, since to be limited is to be clearly defined and knowable. Eunomius contended that the divine nature could be exhaustively defined in a way that excluded the Son. But Gregory breaks with the teaching of Origen and Platonic tradition to argue against Eunomius that God is infinite and above the reach of the human mind, and human definitions, and created intelligences must walk in darkness, by faith in Christ and not by sight.

This theology takes its point of departure in exegesis of Scripture. In his *Life of Moses* 2.62, Gregory seeks to understand Ex. 20:21, in which passage Israel has come to Sinai: 'And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.' Gregory poses the question what it means for Moses to have entered the darkness and seen God in it.

In Gregory's allegorical reading, the ascent of Mount Sinai towards the darkness of incomprehensibility represents the way of contemplation, superior to Moses' first meeting with God when he appeared to him in the burning bush. Then Moses saw God in light; now he enters the darkness, leaving behind him all that can be seen and known; there remains to him only the invisible and unknowable, but in this darkness is God. For God makes his dwelling there where our understanding and our concepts can gain no admittance. Our spiritual ascent only reveals to us, more and more clearly, the absolute incomprehensibility of the divine nature. Filled with an ever increasing desire the soul grows without ceasing, goes forth from itself, reaches out beyond itself, and in so doing, is filled with still greater longing. Thus the ascent becomes infinite, the desire insatiable. This, for Gregory, is the love of the bride in the Song of Songs: she stretches out her hands towards the lock, she sees him who cannot be grasped, she calls him to whom she cannot attain...she attains to him in the perception that the union is endless, the ascent without limit.

Thus, from the insight that the knowledge of God can never reach a terminus, Gregory develops the idea of an unending self-transcendence of human beings in their relation with God. Jean Daniélou (1944: 305-306) used the term *epektasis*, 'straining forward', for this self-transcendence. It is the noun deriving from a verb used by Paul (Phil. 3:13), which for Daniélou is the key text in Gregory's vision.

Origen also presents an account of Christian life as an *epektasis* (cf. *On Prayer* 25.2) but, as we have seen, for Gregory there is no kinship between the soul and God, as there was for Clement and for Origen. For Origen the Christian 'strains forward' to live a divine godlike life by protecting the culture of the intellect which has this kinship with God from any possible disturbance from or threat from without, especially from or through the body, or from the vulnerability. In Gregory's theology human nature is seen as essentially restless, precarious, mobile and variegated, because of its orientation to a reality now outside of itself. And so the movement of history and biography is made possible and meaningful by its reference to God who meets us in history, yet extends beyond it, who is always, so to speak, ahead of it. Gregory offers the foundations for a Christian account of both history and of human individuality. For Rowan Williams (1979: 58) this is Christianity's major revision of the philosophical assumptions of Greek antiquity. Williams (1979: 55-56) explains how this also revises the notion of participation in God that Gregory and Origen shared as their account of salvation. Gregory's emphasis on the will rather than the intellect directs attention to participation not in what God is, but in what he does.

3. Trinity...whose dim shadows exalt me

3.1 The Trinitarian theology of Basil

Basil is at first associated with the homoiousian party of Eustathius of Sebaste who tried to form a common front to oppose the heterousian theology of Aetius and Eunomius who insisted on the unlikeness of the Son to the Father. Basil moved away from this homoiousian position but sought to reconcile with the Nicene Creed those who had been disturbed by the unitarian interpretation put upon it by Marcellus of Ancyra.

For what did homoousios mean? It was a convenient tool for disposing of Arius, but apart from an affirmation of the equity of nature between Father and Son it was hard to say what more was being stated. Marcellus of Ancyra offered a unitarian interpretation and argued that the Nicene Creed asserted identity of nature and of person. So the interpretation of Nicaea turned on what precise relation was assumed between two terms left undefined in the creed, *ousia* and *hypostasis*. Basil's most important contribution to the debate was an attempt to clarify the relation between these two terms. In *Letter* 210 (written in 375), Basil teaches that we must confess both community of essence (*ousia*) and distinction of person (*hypostasis*). In *Letter* 236,

written in the same year, he explains more precisely using a distinction, which goes back to Aristotle, and likening the relation between *ousia* and *hypostasis* to that between the general and the particular, between *koinon* and *idion*. The three persons of the Trinity all belong to the same general category of Godhead: all are therefore equally spiritual and uncreated, because all share in the same nature. Yet this nature does not have an independent reality apart from the three persons. We are not to think of God as somehow distinct from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To believe in God is to believe in the Trinity. In the Basilian scheme each person of the Trinity can be thought of as a union of the general divine nature and an individual divine characteristic, sometimes referred to as a 'way of existing' (*tropos hyparxeos*). So the Father is as it were a compound of divinity + Fatherhood, and so on for the Son and Spirit.

But it is as a theologian of the Holy Spirit that Basil deserves most attention. In his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* (written in 375), he argues against his former ally Eustathius and makes innovative use of the relation of worship and belief. He claims that everybody admits that the Father is God and the Son is God. But we always unite the Spirit with the other two persons of the Trinity in our prayers and hymns, and above all in our doxologies – liturgical formulas ascribing glory to God. Persons so conjointly honoured must share a common nature. To deny the Spirit's deity is to put a question mark beside that of the Father and the Son. For Basil what makes the Spirit distinct from the Father and Son is his holiness or sanctifying power. He traces a pattern of descent without subordination from the Father as source. The Father is the first cause of everything, the Son the creator, the Spirit the perfecter.

3.2 The Trinitarian theology of Gregory of Nazianzus

In his five *Theological Orations* Gregory of Nazianzus, apart from a more pronounced insistence on the deity of the Holy Spirit, owes much to and shares much with Basil. He inherits from Basil the two models of sharing a common nature and descent from a single source, and repeatedly insists that the source of the divine unity is the monarchy of the Father. To Gregory of Nazianzus however we owe one idea that seems to be quite new. In his endeavour to evade the anti-Nicene charge that ideas of Fatherhood must be descriptions either of the divine essence (which would exclude the Son), or of the divine attributes (which would import accidents into the simple essence of God), Gregory introduces the idea of relationship (*schesis*) in his *Third Theological Oration* ([Oration 29.16](#)). He writes:

I should have been frightened by your distinction, if it had been necessary to accept on or other of the alternatives, and not rather put both aside, and state a third and truer one, namely that 'the Father' is not the name of either of an essence or of an action, but is the name of the relation, in which the Father stands to the Son and the Son to the Father

He makes the point that the nature of the Trinity is not simply constituted by the age-old characteristics of deity like omnipotence, goodness and eternity, but also and perhaps more importantly by the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity both to each other (the immanent Trinity) and to the world (the economic Trinity). The being of God is relational being, 'being as communion,' not impersonal substance, an idea taken up in the original and profound theology of John Zizioulas (1997). Zizioulas proposes that the idea of person, humanity's 'most dear and precious good' (1997: 65), appears for the first time through the patristic vision of the being of God.

3.3 The Trinitarian theology of Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa's discussion of the Trinity occurs in several contexts and he was especially concerned with defending the truth of the co-equality of the three persons against the anti-Nicene account Trinity of Eunomius. In doing so he used language which was accused of tritheism. He made it sound as if he was speaking of three Gods. In his [*Against Eunomius* 1.19](#), he had argued that the three persons of the Trinity share the same divine nature, even as Peter, James and John share in the same human nature. They are the same as each other in their common human nature, different in their individuality. He responded to accusations of tritheism in his dense *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods* by arguing that 'God' is neither a common noun nor a particular one but transcends both. In the same treatise he argues that if it can be shown that one action proceeds from the three persons of the Trinity, then the Trinity is the single source of that action. Where there is only one action, there is only one agent. A third attempt to counter the accusation of tritheism takes the form of an attempt to relate the three persons of the Trinity together by means of their internal relationships, an argument that may owe something to Gregory of Nazianzus, and which prefigures the Trinitarian theology of Augustine and the later filioque clause in the Western form of the creed. For Gregory of Nyssa the Spirit comes from the Son, as in the filioque clause, at least coming through him.

4. The Hellenism of the Cappadocians

The marriage of the Greek philosophical culture and the Gospel was regarded by the Cappadocians as a necessary and desirable fact. But this marriage was suddenly threatened with a divorce imposed by the anti-Christian emperor Julian. In a law of 362 he forbade Christians to teach in schools and attempted to create a form of sectarian education. The *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, Plato and Euripides were to be the sacred texts of a view of the world in which Christians could no longer share. He proposed to make culture and religion an organic whole, which would exclude Christians and leave them to their ignorance and bigotry. In responding to this exclusion Gregory of Nazianzus also had to reply to the enemies of Hellenic culture within the Church. He argues in his *Fourth Oration* that Greek culture and pagan Greek religion are separable. Basil applied

this principle to Homer and Gregory of Nyssa to Plato. With discrimination they evaluate the contribution of pagan philosophy, accepting some elements and abandoning or modifying others. The Cappadocians move in a platonic universe. For them, as for Origen, there is an intellectual world of supreme beauty and goodness, which can be apprehended only by the mind and not the senses, for which the human spirit exists. But they were willing to make changes. Scripture was the fundamental resource for their imaginations. God is reconceived as personal, and as Trinity. Platonism taught an impersonal absolute unity and simplicity. For Plato there are 'forms', static patterns of changeless perfection. For the Cappadocians they become living beings, angels. They have a scripturally obedient concern with close union of body and soul, and with the resurrection of the body, which is alien to a popular Platonism where the possession of a body is a punishment for the fallen soul. The question of the end of man and the fate of the devil and the sinful was a major source of disagreement between the Cappadocians. Plato and Origen held to the view that punishment was essentially therapeutic and would not last forever. Gregory of Nyssa shared this view, but Basil almost always holds a sterner view, believing in everlasting punishment. Gregory of Nazianzus is an uncertain candle set between the two brothers.

The Cappadocians acknowledge their deep indebtedness to Hellenistic culture and yet reshape that culture on the basis of ultimate differences. As Jaroslav Pelikan (1993) demonstrates, the Cappadocians show how orthodoxy is made in relation to a contemporary culture. The fixed assumptions of a natural theology shared between Christian and pagan Hellenism are metamorphosed as they are taken up into Cappadocian theology. For example, the natural theology they used in Christian apologetic, such as in polemics against the gods of Olympus, was in the first instance apophatic theology. It was based on a conception of the 'ineffability' of the nature of God in Hellenic thought. This apophatic theology could lead minds from the contemplation of visible realities to the contemplation of the invisible. But the apophatic theology of the Cappadocians gave the incarnation a special dialectical position. They argued that by the incarnation the mind is led back from contemplation of the invisible to the utterly visible, and from an inconceivable, ineffable reality to be 'staggered' by the incarnation and the fullness of Godhead dwelling embodied in Christ. As Pelikan relates, the mind is then disposed to see the very transcendence of god revealed, ineffable as ever, in time and space, and to see that (in Gregory of Nazianzus's phrase: *Oration* 29.21) 'faith gives fullness to reasoning.'

The Texts

Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses* 2.152-169 is one of the key texts for understanding his 'mysticism of darkness.' In the second text, he explains the difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis*, and argues for the 'united separation and separated union' of the persons of the Trinity. The third text is taken from the Basil's treatise *On the Holy Spirit* and shows how he relates worship to belief.

Further Reading

- Ayres, L. *Nicaea and its Legacy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Coakley, S. (ed.) *Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa*, New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Daniélou, J. *Platonisme et theologie mystique*, Paris: Aubier, 1944.
- Laird, J. *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- McGuckin, J. *Gregory of Nazianzus*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001.
- Meredith, A. *The Cappadocians*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985.
- ____. *Gregory of Nyssa*, London: Routledge, 1999.
- Pelikan, J. *Christianity and Classical Culture*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Rousseau, P. *Basil of Caesarea*, Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1994.
- Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, London: DLT, 1979,1990, chapter 3
- Zizioulas, J. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1997.

Questions for consideration

1. Why was Gregory of Nyssa drawn to a 'mysticism of darkness'?
2. What does he mean by *epektasis*?
3. On what grounds does Basil argue for acceptance of the divinity of the Holy Spirit?
4. Why was Gregory of Nyssa accused of tritheism and how does he respond?
5. How would you evaluate the Cappadocians' response to Hellenic thought?