



Gregory of Nazianzus: On being a theologian

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The Divine Nature, then, is boundless and hard to understand; and all that we can comprehend of Him is His boundlessness

Oration 38, 7

Gregory of Nazianzus is one of the most significant fathers and saints in Orthodox Christianity, not simply because of the quality of his theological thought but also because of the unique beauty and brilliance of his writings. Along with St John the Evangelist and St Symeon the New Theologian, St Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390) is one of the few saints in the Eastern Christian tradition to bear the honorific title ‘Theologian’. In his work he lays out how one can speak about God (*theologisei*) and connect with the Triune God, asserting that only by meeting specific criteria can one become a partaker of the attributes of the Holy Trinity and obtain partial but certain knowledge about God. Partial, also, is the knowledge that man as a creature can acquire of God, since man can know only God’s attributes but never His actions. Gregory explains that while we may be able to point out the characteristics of God, we do not, thereby, define such understanding of God. Such a definition is, in essence, impossible, since in any definition there is an indication of limits, and, therefore, boundaries, and incompleteness. There are, however, no boundaries to God and therefore there cannot be a definition of our comprehension of God: ‘The Divine Nature [...] is boundless and hard to understand; and all that we can comprehend of Him is His boundlessness’.¹

This paper deals mainly with the teaching of St Gregory of Nazianzus found in his work *On Theology, and the Appointment of Bishops*.² Theology, that is, the knowledge of God, is given to humans through theophanies or *theopties* (the appearance of God) and

theological research. At the same time Gregory's teaching concerning the Triune God is related to a period in which many heresies, such as Arianism, the teachings of Eunomius and Marcellus of Ancyra, had recently made their appearance. These heresies stood in opposition to traditional Trinitarian, Christological and pneumatological doctrine.



The historical environment of the Twentieth Oration

We turn, briefly, to examine, the historical context of Gregory's work. In 359, needing reinforcements against Persia, Constantius, son of Constantinus the Great, ordered his cousin Julian's legions to the east. Instead of obeying orders, the troops stationed round Paris mutinied and proclaimed Julian emperor. Julian then advanced slowly eastwards with his troops to what would have been a decisive confrontation. In 361, however, Constantius died in Asia Minor while moving westwards to meet Julian. Julian the Apostate (361–363) was now the new emperor. As imperial ruler, Julian had two primary goals: the complete abolition of the Christian religion, and the restoration of paganism, which had fallen on hard times in recent decades.

Julian, as a military man, was very likely familiar with the maxim 'divide and rule'. Accordingly, he encouraged strife among those who professed allegiance to Christ. He restored certain bishops who had been in exile to their offices, in the hope that they would foment dissension. By recalling these exiled bishops, Julian encouraged dissension among the Christians, who were already fighting the Arian heresy.³

The result was that new heresies quickly arose. The leader and the founder of one of these heresies was Eunomius (333–393), Bishop of Cyzicus. According to Eunomius, God was ungenerated Being: the single, supreme, ultimate, and simple Substance. Eunomius held that the 'Son of God' was actually created by the Father and, though possessing creative power, was not of His essence; further, the 'Holy Spirit' was created by the Son in order to be the Sanctifier of souls. Christ was born: His existence, therefore, had a cause, according to Eunomius. Christ, furthermore, according to His essence, could not be called God, whose essence is creative. Similarly, Christ's essence

is expressed with the notion ‘offspring’ (*gennéma*), while God’s essence is denoted as ‘unbegotten’ (*agénnitos*). To sum up, following Eunomius’ argumentation, the persons of God had different names and because of this they had different essences.⁴

In 364 Valens (328–378) came to the imperial throne. His reign followed after Jovian’s short reign (363–364). The Emperor Valens lent powerful support to the Eunomians, even to the extent of persecuting the orthodox. As a follower of the Arian branch of Christianity he actively persecuted the Catholic church. During his reign many of the orthodox were exiled. In 378, however, Valens was killed at the Battle of Adrianople and his nephew Gratian became the new emperor. Gratian favoured Christianity and recalled all the orthodox bishops from exile. The reign of Gratian forms an important epoch in ecclesiastical history, since during his reign orthodox Christianity became dominant throughout the Empire for the first time. Gratian also published an edict requiring all imperial subjects to profess the faith of the bishops of Rome and Alexandria (i.e., the Nicene faith). This move was aimed mainly at the various sects that had arisen out of Arianism, but smaller dissident groups, such as the Macedonians, were also suppressed.

In 379 Gratian chose Theodosius as co-Augustus for the East. Theodosius favoured the Nicean Christian creed (325).⁵ In 381, Theodosius summoned a new ecumenical council at Constantinople to repair the division between East and West on the basis of Nicean orthodoxy. Generally, Theodosius proved to be a champion of the orthodox faith, and his purpose in calling this council was to eradicate Arianism, and condemn Macedonius and Apollinarianism by establishing orthodox teaching on the unity of the Holy Trinity and the complete manhood of Christ. In the end, the Council of 381 defined orthodoxy, clarified the jurisdiction of the state church of the Roman Empire, and ruled that Constantinople was to be second in precedence to Rome.⁶

The general situation of this era is reflected in the Twentieth Oration of St Gregory of Nazianzus. From the opening clauses of the oration, the Holy Father alerted his readers to the context of his writing. He made clear his response to those men who claimed to be ‘theologians’:

When I see the endless talkativeness that haunts us today, the instant sages and designated theologians, for whom simply willing to be wise is enough to make them so, I long for the philosophy that comes from above; I yearn for that “final lodging,”⁷ to use Jeremiah’s phrase, and I want only to be off by myself.⁸

For Gregory, the real theologian searches for God, is illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and can talk about the infinite God:

For nothing seems so important to me as for a person to shut off his senses, to take his place outside the flesh and the world – [and] not to fasten on human realities unless it is completely necessary, and so, in conversation with himself and with God, to live above the level of the visible, and always to bear the images of divine things within himself in their pure state, free from the stamp of what is inferior and changeable. In this way, one is – and one is always becoming – a spotless mirror of God and divine things, assimilating light to light, and adding clarity to indistinct beginnings, until we come to the source of the light that radiates in this world and lay hold of our blessed end, where mirrors are dissolved in true reality.⁹



The Twentieth Oration and the definition of the term ‘theologos’, theologian

The Twentieth Oration of Gregory of Nazianzus, *On Theology, and the Appointment of Bishops*, is one of his dogmatic orations. This work was, perhaps, written in the summer or autumn of 380, after the writing of the other five theological orations. This is considered by many to be a summary of the first theological treatise, *Against the Eunomians*. This, however, seems less likely. Some scholars place it earlier, in the spring of 380, and John McGuckin suggests it may be a reworking of Gregory’s *First Lecture* in the capital, given as early as September or October 379.¹⁰

The reason for the writing of this treatise relates to the environment that then prevailed in the church. Gregory’s aim was to characterise as

‘pseudo-theologians’ those who ‘try to mold other people into holiness overnight, appoint them theologians, and as it were, breathe learning into them, and thus produce ready-made any number of Councils of ignorant intellectuals’.¹¹ In response, Gregory laid out the criteria by which to identify those who were called to be theologians.¹²

The Holy Father accused the bishops and many of the priests of his time of incompetence in their priesthood. He expressed anger at those who did not have the right qualifications to be a theologian. Most of them, he declared, are theologians only by name but not by essence. The real theologian must have illumination by God, should be able to speak about God, should be purified, and know the Scriptures adequately.¹³ Gregory insists that a theologian must be purified before he purifies others. He was to be a defender of the truth, and only then would he stand together with the angels.

Continuing his oration, Gregory pointed to the Scriptures, mainly the Old Testament, to indicate that those who disobeyed God were the cause of Israel’s punishment. He wanted to emphasize that those who were disrespectful to God, those who did not correct or punish ungodly people, were unworthy to be serving God.¹⁴ Whoever is cognizant of his own unworthiness but tries to purify himself, on the other hand, is illuminated and given grace by God to theologize.¹⁵

While this oration, of course, is a dogmatic text, it is at the same time an exquisite literary creation, demonstrating that this Cappadocian Father was very knowledgeable in the art of rhetoric and the correct use of the Greek language.



The conditions for someone to be called a theologian

While the content of the oration is mainly a dense statement of Gregory’s synthetic view of the orthodox doctrine of the One God as a Trinity of Persons, here, as elsewhere, Gregory insists that the ability to apprehend this central understanding of faith in a right spirit depends, first of all, on moral character.¹⁶

In Gregory’s view, Christian theology involves a dynamic, lived relation between God and the theologian. The oration does not begin, therefore, with abstract information about God. Instead, once again, Gregory makes it clear that, for every theologian, purification is the

necessary condition for knowing God. The theologian must grow in holiness in order to know God more fully.¹⁷

Gregory explains that, basically, a theologian could be considered to be a man who speaks or writes treatises for God. Regarding Christianity, the theologian is the God-seer. He is the one who succeeds in realising the *most* divine truth in relation to God's truth, which neither decreases nor increases. This apprehension of the divine truth is achieved through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, '[...] completing in detail that which was incompletely said by them concerning the Holy Ghost; for that question had not then been mooted, namely, that we are to believe that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are of one Godhead, thus confessing the Spirit also to be God.'¹⁸

The Holy Spirit enables the theologian to rise above the human level of life. The Spirit gives light to understand truths and to reach decisions not by reasoning things out, but by a kind of intuition. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is above reason. The theologian 'communicates' with the Holy Spirit and the latter reveals to him further elements of the divine truth through His illumination. In a discussion of the work of Athanasius, Gregory writes:

[...] he inquired into the truth of our faith which had been torn asunder, confused, and parceled out into various opinions and portions by many; with the intention, if it were possible, of reducing the whole world to harmony and union by the co-operation of the Spirit: and, should he fail in this, of attaching himself to the best party, so as to aid and be aided by it, thus giving token of the exceeding loftiness and magnificence of his ideas on questions of the greatest moment. Here too was shown in a very high degree the simple-mindedness of Athanasius, and the steadfastness of his faith in Christ. For, when all the rest who sympathized with us were divided into three parties, and many were faltering in their conception of the Son, and still more in that of the Holy Ghost (a point on which to be only slightly in error was to be orthodox), and few indeed were sound upon both points, he was the first and only one, or with the concurrence of but a few, to venture to confess in writing, with entire clearness and distinctness, the Unity of Godhead and

Essence of the Three Persons, and thus to attain in later days, under the influence of inspiration, to the same faith in regard to the Holy Ghost, as had been bestowed at an earlier time on most of the Fathers in regard to the Son. This confession, a truly royal and magnificent gift, he presented to the Emperor, opposing to the unwritten innovation, a written account of the orthodox faith, so that an emperor might be overcome by an emperor, reason by reason, treatise by treatise.¹⁹

The gift of the grace of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity is given when the passions are suppressed and, through prayer, fasting and participation in the sacraments of the Church, inner purity and purification of the soul are finally achieved.²⁰ Careful study of the sacred texts of the Bible and the works of earlier Church Fathers have an important role in coming to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. What matters most is true faith in God, and trying to harmonize our life with the will and commandments of the Triune God.

Although many Fathers used the specific term ‘saint’, the Orthodox Church was very careful in attributing this characterization to the Fathers and teachers. Over the two thousand years of the earthly existence of the Church only three saints have been found worthy to be called theologians. One was the beloved disciple of Christ, the son of thunder, John the Evangelist. The other was Gregory of Nazianzus and the third was Symeon the New Theologian. They alone managed to obtain access to deeper and broader truths than those earlier theologians who came before them.²¹

In this particular oration, Gregory insists that a theologian is not one who has been ordained as a priest and is wise according to human standards, but one who has been filled by the grace of the Holy Spirit.²² This holy grace makes him long for union with the Divinity. The true theologian has innermost peace and mental quiet. At the same time, he tries to be constant and vigilant in the renewal of his internal world, always having, as a basis, true faith in Christ Jesus.²³ Only then, may a man work as an ‘unblemished reflector of God’ and theologize correctly.²⁴

In another part of this speech, Gregory notes that someone who speaks for God must be worthy, because God, the ultimate pure

Being, can be approached only by an entirely purified man. They can theologize, or speak for God, only if they

[...] have been examined, and are passed masters in meditation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified. For the impure to touch the pure is, we may safely say, not safe, just as it is unsafe to fix weak eyes upon the sun's rays. And what is the permitted occasion? It is when we are free from all external defilement or disturbance, and when that which rules within us is not confused with vexatious or erring images [...].²⁵

Such confusion will be like mixing up good writing with bad, or the sweet odour of ointments with filth. It is necessary to be truly at leisure to know God; and so, when we can find a convenient season, to discern the straight road of things divine.²⁶ Only through purification in Christ can the potential theologian rid himself of passion, and accept the fact of salvation with his whole being.²⁷ There is support for this view in the work of the Cappadocian Father, Gregory of Nyssa. He also insists that one can talk about theology only if one is purified by the virtue and grace of the Holy Spirit.²⁸

Theology, therefore, is an awesome task²⁹ according to Gregory the Theologian. Man fails to capture the eternal, *anarcho archi* God. In normal circumstances man cannot speak for Him or about Him, but must be removed from anything related to the observable universe in order to obtain the required inner peace. This was precisely what was sought by Gregory throughout his entire life. This was what involved him in a constant tension between monastic and wider social life. He followed a middle way, since he considered that anyone who lives in the world may be useful to others, but useless in himself, since he is surrounded by passions that agitate him. Instead, anyone who lives outside the world will find stability, and in looking to God he will be useful in himself, though 'narrow' and restricted in love for his fellow man. The fundamental goal of theology for Gregory is the vision of God. Only thus can a greater degree of experience of divine truth be achieved – one that is entirely consistent with the theological teachings of Sacred Tradition and the Church.

Theology, then, is impossible, unthinkable even, without the vision of God. And, in turn, the vision of God, personal experience of truth, is a function of purification:

Love what already abides within you, and let the rest await you in the treasury above. Approach it by the way you live: what is pure can only be acquired through purification. Do you want to become a theologian someday, to be worthy of the divinity? Keep the commandments, make your way forward through observing the precepts: for the practical life is the launching-pad for contemplation. Start with the body, but find joy in working for your soul.³⁰

Only in this way will the theologian gain experience of the knowledge of God, the knowledge of the uncreated attributes of the Holy Trinity (though not the knowledge of the divine nature, because His essence or '*ousia*' is incomprehensible to everyone except the hypostases of the Triune God).

The 'word for God' of theology is greater than any philosophy. The latter deals with mundane things, with concepts that mutate in meaning and whose philosophical content is, therefore, emptied. To rise in understanding of theology resembles climbing an 'inaccessible mountain'. Man cannot achieve this by his own power, by the exercise of his body and mind, because theology is the fruit of the action of the Holy Spirit and the whole of the Holy Trinity (since all divine energies except the hypostatic idioms are common to all persons of the Triune God). The theology of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity arises from man's deepest experiences with God. This is a theology which flows from the genuine living knowledge of those who have come to know God in faith.

In conclusion, in his writing Gregory the Theologian sets out the required conditions for the true theologian and indicates the fundamental conditions of Orthodox theologising. If these conditions are altered, then man is driven into deviation from the truth and is, therefore, liable to falsehood or heresy. Gregory makes clear, then, the importance for theology in connecting closely with the vision of God. Reliance on the lavish grace of God is essential for anyone who

attempts to speak for God. In sum, the necessary conditions of correct theology are: sacred silence, the way of God, the purification of the heart from passion and the divine illumination of the human mind.

Notes

- ¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 38, 7: On the Theophany, or Birthday of Christ. Patrologia Graeca* (hereafter PG) 36, 317CD.
- ² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 20: On Theology, and the Appointment of Bishops. Sources Chrétiennes* (hereafter SC) 270 (=PG 35, 1065A–1081A).
- ³ Vlasios Feidas, *Ecclesiastical History I*, Athens 1992, 507.
- ⁴ Stylianos Papadopoulos, *Patrologia I* (Athens, 1992), 365. See Eirini Artemi, “The Religious Policy of Byzantine Emperors from First to the Fourth Ecumenical Councils”, *Ecclesiastic Faros* 76 (2005): 121–63.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Stephen Williams and Gerard Friell, *Theodosius: The Empire at Bay* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 27.
- ⁷ Jer 9:2.
- ⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 20. SC 270*, 1 (=PG 35, 1065AB).
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ John A. McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 243ff, 253ff.
- ¹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 27, 9: The First Theological Oration: An Introductory Sermon Against the Eunomians*, in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* (trans. Frederick Williams; Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press), 32 (=PG 36, 20D).
- ¹² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 20. SC 270*, 1 (=PG 35, 1065B).
- ¹³ Ibid. SC 270, 1–2 (=PG 35, 1065B).
- ¹⁴ Ibid. SC 270, 2 (=PG 35, 1065B).
- ¹⁵ Ibid.

- ¹⁶ Brian E. Daley (trans.), *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 98.
- ¹⁷ Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 88.
- ¹⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle 102, 2¹⁻⁶: Against Apollinarius; The Second Letter to Cledonius*. SC 208, 2 (=PG 37, 180A).
- ¹⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 21, 33: On the Great Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*. PG 35, 1121B–D.
- ²⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 27, 3*. PG 36, 13CD: ‘Not to every one, my friends, does it belong to philosophize about God; not to every one; the Subject is not so cheap and low; and I will add, not before every audience, nor at all times, nor on all points; but on certain occasions, and before certain persons, and within certain limits. Not to all men, because it is permitted only to those who have been examined, and are passed masters in meditation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified.’
- ²¹ Stylianos Papadopoulos, *Patrologia II* (Athens 1990), 499.
- ²² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 20, 1*. SC 270, 1 (=PG 35, 1065A).
- ²³ Konstantinos Skouteris, *The Meaning of the Terms ‘Theology’, ‘Theologize’, ‘Theologian’ in Greek Fathers’ Teaching and in Ecclesiastic Writers to the Cappadocians* (Athens, 1989), 168.
- ²⁴ Cor 13:12: ‘For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known’.
- ²⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 27, 3*. PG 36, 15A.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 20, 1*. SC 270, 4 (=PG 35, 1068D–1069A). See Basil of Caesarea, *On Isaiah*, 14. PG 30, 621A.
- ²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*. PG 44, 577D.
- ²⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 20, 4*. SC 270, 4 (=PG 35, 1069B).
- ³⁰ Ibid. SC 270, 12 (=PG 35, 1080B).

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