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Ben Vanderhyde

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, [vanderhydeb@csl.edu](mailto:vanderhydeb@csl.edu)

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# Impassioned Wonder: Theosis and the Place of Reason in Gregory Nazianzen's Theological Orations

Ben Vanderhyde

## Reason, Revelation and Transcendence



Ben Vanderhyde is an STM student at Concordia Seminary. Ben has a BA in parish music from Concordia Wisconsin and completed the MDiv program in December 2021. He and his wife Grace are blessed with three children, Larson, Hollen and Adelaide.

The theologian is situated between two realities: the revelation of God and the transcendence of God. It would seem that all of theology should be a matter of reckoning with these two extremities. Without transcendence, we have no God. Without revelation we have neither starting point, nor guide, nor aim; theology becomes pointless speculation.

We must know God, and yet, not know him. He must remain far beyond any language to describe or any image to depict, and yet, we must describe him. Theology lives in the middle of these, neither putting God into a box nor holding God above, out of reach. It would seem to be yet another paradox to maintain, another tension to hold in the balances. Say what can be said, so much and no more. And yet, the relationship between what is revealed of God and what is transcendent of God is in no way simple. That is in part because revelation is itself shrouded in mystery. “He came to his own and his own did not receive him” (John 1:14, NKJV). The incarnation, the light shining in the darkness, is itself the greatest mystery of human history, not a simplification of what was once transcendent. Revelation and transcendence remain inextricably bound up together. It is with a view toward this dynamic between revelation and transcendence that Gregory of Nazianzus gave his famous *Five Theological Orations* in the year 379 as part of the orthodox Nicene resistance in Arian-dominated Constantinople. These are some of the most important theological lectures in the history of the church, so important, in fact, that they prompted subsequent generations of the church to canonize Gregory as the “Theologian,” a title only ever given to one other father of the church, Saint John the Evangelist himself.

In the second of these orations, Gregory quotes Plato as having said, “To know God is hard, to describe him impossible.”<sup>1</sup> He sees Plato indicating subtly his own ability to ascend to knowledge of the transcendent, though not without great difficulty. Gregory turns it around and says that, yes, to tell of God is impossible but *knowing* him is *even harder* (28.4).<sup>2</sup> In short, reason will not do as a starting point for the ascent. It was necessary for Gregory to suppress this Platonic overconfidence for comprehending the nature of God through philosophy, because the indiscriminate use of reason in the theological debates of this time had reached a fevered pitch in the Eunomians.

Gregory's primary objective in these orations was to refute this group of extreme

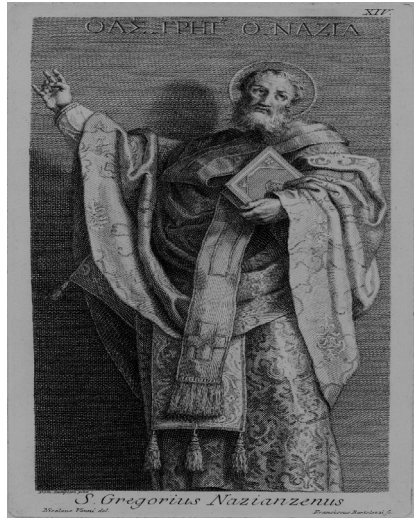
Arians who believed that the Son was unlike the Father and thus could not be consubstantial with him. Gregory pulls no punches in deriding their arguments:

They delight in the “profane and vain babblings and contradictions of the Knowledge falsely so-called,” [1 Tim 6:20] and in “strife of words” [1 Tim 6:4] .... I only wish they would display comparable energy in their actions: then they might be something more than mere verbal tricksters, grotesque and preposterous word-gamesters—their derisory antics invite derisive description. (27.1)

Gregory has little sympathy for those who irreverently submit God to their sophistry. Their attempt to reach God apart from revelation is fated from the beginning.<sup>3</sup> But in the act of dismantling their arguments and exposing the absurdity of their conclusions, Gregory reveals his own earnest desire to know God. Gregory does not merely throw up his hands and despair of reason altogether in his appeal to Scripture and tradition. A properly functioning faculty of reasoning is, for him, intimately connected with his theology of the Trinity and not to be excluded. The Eunomians abuse reason and misuse it to the denigration of the Godhead. But in Gregory’s view, faith, instead of cutting reasoning short, gives fullness to it.

This comes to expression in the doctrine of *theosis*, or deification, which features centrally in these orations. Gregory’s rejection of the extreme Arian position comes to a head in rhetorical questions like, “If the Son is not God then how can he deify me?” *Theosis* indicates man’s salvific participation in the divine nature (cf. 1 Pet 2:4), situating man’s *telos* in God himself. “He became man that we might become God,”<sup>4</sup> as Athanasius put it. This essay seeks to demonstrate that *theosis* is a helpful lens through which to view the way of the theologian between what is known and what cannot be known, the way from revelation towards transcendence. In his *Theological Oration*s, Gregory forges the path of the true philosopher-theologian, whose capacity for reason is grounded in the fact that he is created and restored into the image of the source of all reason.

In Gregory’s trinitarian theology, a picture emerges of the relationship between God’s revelation and transcendence. Gregory does not emphasize the revealed God to the exclusion of the transcendent God, taming him into a palatable God of the gospel. The revealed God and the transcendent God are not polar opposites in his mind.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the transcendent God is the one whom Gregory desires to know. He does not turn his back on the transcendent God in favor of the revealed God. The revealed God is the pinprick of light (28.17) which informs him and transforms him at the inception of his journey into the fulness of God’s light. Like the refrain of the final chapter in C. S. Lewis’ *The Last Battle*, the clarion call of *theosis* is a resounding “Further up and further in!”<sup>6</sup> Gregory can say, in solidarity with Paul,



Saint Gregory of Nazianzus. By Francesco Bartolozzi after Domenico. 19th century. Public domain. Public

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Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:12–14)

Such an attitude, when applied to reason's pursuit of understanding, recognizes that striving will cease when, as Paul puts it, we no longer see in a mirror dimly but face to face and "know fully, even as [we] have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12). Acknowledging that reason has reached its limit, then, becomes acknowledgment of God's transcendence and the reality that we are not yet perfect. From this viewpoint, recognizing the limits of reason must not entail the abandonment of philosophy; rather, "it is the repentance of the human person before the face of the living God."<sup>7</sup>

What follows is not a systematic analysis of the *Theological Orations*. We intend, rather, to trace the outlines of Gregory's place for reason in theology. The first section is an exploration into the nuanced philosophical arguments Gregory had to engage in to defend Nicene theology. Significant for our purposes is the fact that Gregory does not relinquish reason to the heretics but enters into the philosophical, linguistic debates, in large part, to prove reason's inadequacy by itself for reaching knowledge of God by deflating the Eunomians' overconfidence in their sophisticated philosophy. The second section, the heart of this study, discusses the doctrine of *theosis* and shows how Gregory's view of the importance of reason in theology stems from it. *Theosis*, we maintain, is the linchpin in Gregory's understanding of reason, holding together both its limits and its striving for comprehending God. The final section shows Gregory's emphasis on the limits of reason in key rhetorical passages in the orations. It demonstrates how, for Gregory, reason's inability to pierce beyond a certain level is a matter of striving rather than laziness, a matter of piety rather than resignation. Although talk of *theosis* might sound strange or even alarming in our Western ears, we must engage Gregory's theology as it is and resist the urge to "domesticate" it.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that we must adopt *theosis* into our own theological vocabulary, but coming to a better understanding of the way Gregory employs it will help us understand how the Theologian believes theologians should think about reason, revelation and transcendence.

### ***Reason Is Incapable of Comprehending the Incomprehensible***

Frederick Norris's distinction between the approaches of philosophic and rhetoric in the *Theological Orations* is a helpful framework in which to contrast Gregory's approach to reason with that of his opponents.<sup>9</sup> Norris observes that strict (Platonic) philosophy prefers logical syllogisms that proceed from premises to conclusions. The logic of syllogism pulls people along from one truth to the next. It forces them to give their consent to what must necessarily be true. For instance, (a) God is ingenerate (i.e., he has no origin); (b) the Son is generate (he originates from the Father); therefore (c) the Son is not God. Gregory calls this what it is, a word-game, but he also takes it in hand to demonstrate the fallacies of their argument.

In the *Theological Orations*, Gregory prefers not to develop his arguments on the basis of this strict, logical, deductive argumentation. Instead, he favors the less precise Aristotelian "enthymematic," inductive approach which Norris calls rhetorical philosophy.

The arguments from this approach are not necessarily able to be formally demonstrated through a logical chain of premises and conclusions. Rather, they appeal to the sensibilities of the audience. For instance, in his argument for the divinity of the Holy Spirit, Gregory asks: “Were the Spirit not to be worshipped, how could he deify me through baptism?” (31.28) He leaves it to his audience to confirm for themselves whether the Holy Spirit’s deification is indeed an essential doctrine. Had Gregory, instead of asking a rhetorical question, stated this in the form of a logical syllogism, it might have followed something like this: (a) the Holy Spirit deifies me through baptism; (b) to deify me, he must be divine; therefore, (c) the Holy Spirit must be divine (and so he is to be worshipped). But this kind of cumbersome argumentation is exactly the kind of thing Gregory seeks to avoid throughout these orations, not least of all because these are orations and not treatises. Rhetoric, with its allowance for imprecision, is a much more suitable tool for asserting divine truth, shrouded, as it is, in mystery.

Despite this preference (which will come sharply into focus in the final section of our investigation), Gregory does not hesitate to enter into the philosophical debates spurred on by his opponents. He engages their syllogistic reasoning either in a negative way, to show the futility of reason for arriving at an understanding of God, or, in a positive way, to show the fallacies in his opponents’ logic which lead them to their incorrect conclusions. For instance, in the second theological oration, he engages in this philosophical banter and proves, logically, that God is incorporeal, after which discussion he apologizes:

Why have I made this digression, too labored, I dare say, for the general ear but in tune with the prevalent fashion in discussions, a fashion which despises noble simplicity and substitutes tortuous conundrums? I did it to make the tree known by its fruit. ... I wanted to make plain the point my sermon began with, which was this: the incomprehensibility of deity to the human mind and its totally unimaginable grandeur. (28.11)

The third oration is the densest of the theological orations, since Gregory challenges head-on many of the Eunomians’ most tightly knit arguments. For example, as Gregory relates, they ask whether the Father begat voluntarily or involuntarily (29.6). They think this is an airtight dilemma for the Nicene theologian since he cannot both be God *and* do something involuntarily (be forced into it). On the other hand, if he begets voluntarily, then the Son, they say, is the son of his Father’s *will*. Gregory shows the absurdity of this argument by applying it to human begetting. If we say that the human father’s begetting was voluntary (to say otherwise would be absurd), then, says Gregory, “a few syllables have lost you your father—you are evidently a son of his will, not of your father” (29.6). Whether or not Gregory’s rejoinder is completely airtight (though it seems to be), he has achieved his rhetorical objective of persuading his audience that the case of the Eunomians is not airtight.

One of the more famous Eunomian syllogisms which Gregory dismantles comes later in the third oration. At the heart of the radical Arian claim that the Son is subordinate to the Father was the claim that being unbegotten is essential to God’s nature. We have already introduced the syllogism above which asserts that because the Son is begotten, he cannot be God. “Begottenness” is completely unlike “unbegottenness,” rendering absurd the language of the Nicene Creed (*homoousios*, same substance). But, as this is a war of words, Gregory argues that the Eunomians fail to properly use language. They

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treat “unbegottenness” and “God” as if they were identical when they, in fact, cannot be substituted for one another perfectly. God is a “relative” term while “unbegotten” is an absolute term.

God and [unbegottenness] are not identical. If they were identical, the [Unbegotten] would have to be somebody’s [Unbegotten], since God is somebody’s God, seeing that logical equivalents can be used interchangeably. But what is it the [Unbegotten] *of*? God is somebody’s—he is God *of* all. So how can “God” and [unbegotten] be identical? (29.12)

Gregory is not just splitting hairs here. Rigorously trained as he was in philosophy and rhetoric, Gregory simply refuses to cede the realm of reason to the heretics. Their philosophically nuanced demotion and dissolution of the Trinity meet their match in Gregory’s formidable, equally nuanced rejoinder.

Be that as it may, Gregory does not think that this sort of argumentation is either appropriate or adequate for describing God in his essence. Questions like “How does the Father beget?” ought to have “the tribute of our reverent silence” (29.8). But the arguments must be answered, and Gregory is not afraid to get his hands dirty if only to prove both the ineptitude of the Eunomians at such rationalizing and the ineptitude of such rationalizing for conceiving of the transcendent God. Their arguments are futile, they “overthrow the faith,” they “empty the mystery” (31.23). So much for reason’s inability to ascend to knowledge of God. Now we proceed to Gregory’s positive view of reason, founded in the theology of *theosis*.



Gregory the Theologian. Fresco from Kariye Camii, Istanbul. Copyrighted use.

### ***Theosis: Revelation as the Foundation for Proper Reasoning***

At the heart of Gregory’s defense of Nicene orthodoxy against the radical Arians lies the doctrine of *theosis*. The denial of the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit struck at the heart of Gregory’s soteriology, since the ability of both the Son and the Spirit to deify is contingent on their being equal with God. Thus, “if he has the same rank as I have, how can he make me God, how can he link me with deity?” (31.4) Scholars hold differing opinions with regard to how literal Gregory’s language was. Was he, perhaps, merely exaggerating for rhetorical effect?<sup>10</sup> Was *theosis* just a metaphor?<sup>11</sup> McGuckin argues convincingly that Gregory’s appropriation of *theosis* was a bold use of language.<sup>12</sup> This is a good place to start.

*Theosis* is indeed a bold use of language. It elevates the *telos* of man to the level of the transcendent God. In the words of Athanasius, “He became man that we might become God.”<sup>13</sup> In this respect, the salvation of man aims toward an end that is actually beyond our comprehension, just as God is incomprehensible in his essence. The imprecision of this bold theological phraseology fits right in with Gregory the rhetorician, who preferred to assert the orthodox faith and persuade his audience to faith, as opposed to arguing his audience into assent through syllogistic reasoning.

Before wrestling with the significant implications of what seems to be a blatant confusing of the creature and the creator, it is helpful to recognize that language of *theosis* has a sturdy basis in Scripture. The theological language of *theosis* grows out of the descriptions in Scripture of God's salvation of man. Psalm 82 is one famous example of such bold-sounding language: "I said 'You are gods, sons of the Most High all of you'" (Ps 82:6). Considering the implications of the relationship between a human father and his son, that Christians are God's children (Rom 8:14; Gal 3:26; Gal 4:7) or will become so (John 1:2) is itself a bold assertion. To what degree do the children share in the nature of the father? The Scripture passage which most strongly evinces *theosis* language appears to answer this question quite literally: "that you may become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:3–4). These and other Scriptural allusions supply the basis for subsequent expressions of salvation in terms of *theosis*.<sup>14</sup> Scholars are quick to observe the kinship between the Christian language of *theosis* and the Greek conception of *apotheosis*.<sup>15</sup> The teaching might easily conform to suspicions of a corruptive "Hellenization" of Christianity. That deification language was a deliberate appropriation of Greek thought<sup>16</sup> is possible, (probable, in the case of Gregory) just as the entire divine revelation occurs within a human context of culture and language. Gregory must have known about *apotheosis*, steeped as he was in the Greek tradition, but his career displays a strong desire to assert the superiority of the Christian religion to Greek religion and philosophy<sup>17</sup> even as he affirmed the helpfulness of the Greeks' achievements for Christians.<sup>18</sup>

### *Understanding Theosis*

Now, the problem with this bold theological language is that it seems to blur the lines between creator and creature.<sup>19</sup> The question here is whether humanity ceases to be human as a result, whether deification is a process of becoming more divine and *less* human. This, of course, depends on another question: What does it mean to be human? If human nature is static, self-contained, able to be defined independently from its source, then *theosis* does indeed threaten to nullify human nature by making it into something new. However, since the early church, commentators on Genesis have seen human nature as inherently dynamic. Irenaeus says that Adam and Eve were in an infant state at creation with the implication that they would mature over time by means of divine nourishment.<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, in solidarity with the scholastic tradition, recognized that "we were created for a better life in the future than this physical life would have been, even if our nature had remained unimpaired."<sup>21</sup> In view of such testimony, human nature need not be identified as static in its essence. This does not mean that humanity was not "good" (Gen 1:31) in its own right at creation, but the good of humanity was a changeable good in comparison with the changeless good of God. Again, if humanity lacked nothing outside of itself for being what it was created to be, then God's presence in the primordial garden and his conversation with the first man are difficult to explain. Man's relationship with God continues to be essential to what it means to be human. In short, growth into God by transformative participation in the life of God (i.e., *theosis*) is intrinsic to what it means to be fully human. The fall, then, can be understood as an "interruption" of the created process of *theosis*,<sup>22</sup> and redemption, a restoration of human nature to its "truly natural state."<sup>23</sup> orientation towards God, worship of God, contemplation of God.

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As a lens, therefore, through which to view the divine *oikonomia*—creation, redemption, restoration—*theosis* locates the *telos* of humanity in God. In the theological orations, Gregory recognizes God as the source, aim and fulfilment of human reasoning. He is the source in that we are created in his image (Gen 1:26–27). The human mind and reason are his next of kin, Gregory says (28.17). He is the aim because reason leads man to look for the one who made all things according to reason and implanted reason in all things (28.16). He is the fulfilment because we will know him fully: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12).

In this framework of *theosis*, humanity’s *telos* is the life of the unknowable, transcendent God whose revelation in the incarnation forms the basis for man’s ascent to God, Christ, the Logos, serving as the ladder for this ascent. Thus, for Gregory, any theology that contradicts the revelation of Scripture or dilutes God’s transcendence overthrows salvation. Since his own *telos* is situated in the incomprehensible God, Gregory does not tolerate the Eunomians’ emptying of God’s mystery (27.2; 31.23). God’s essence necessarily eludes all description and simply cannot be subjected to philosophical argumentation. Any attempt to conceive of God apart from revelation inevitably falls short. Just as God cannot be contained by any physical space, neither can he be contained by human thought or human language (28.10). Yet as he tears into the Eunomians for submitting God to their games of logic, Gregory does not denigrate but rather elevates what he sees as the proper struggle to comprehend and know God:

Not that the deity resents our knowledge: resentment is a far cry from the divine nature, serene as it is, uniquely and properly “good,” especially resentment of its most prized creation. What can mean more to the Word than thinking beings, since their very existence is an act of supreme goodness? It is not that he treasures his own fullness of glory, keeping his majesty costly by inaccessibility. (28.11)

The soul is oriented to seek after God. As McGuckin puts it, the human soul is, for Gregory, “ascentive and naturally restless in its quest for the God it relentlessly desires, because its desire can have no limit.”<sup>24</sup> Gregory never disparages this struggle to know the unknowable God. Rather, this pursuit for comprehension of God is rooted for him in what it means to be human.

### ***Recognizing Reason’s Limits as Repentance***

Gregory sees growth in the knowledge of God as inextricably bound to purification of the flesh: the character of the theologian “should be undimmed, making for a perception of light by light” (28.1). As Plato’s classic maxim goes, “like knows like.” We have already hinted at the relationship between illumination and purification above. Just as the Christian is never perfectly free from the passions of the flesh, there is always more which his reason cannot comprehend. As long as his sanctification is incomplete, his knowledge is too. This cuts both ways. Thus, on the basis of the Eunomian claim to “know all and teach all” (27.2), Gregory perceives their impiety and unrepentance. He asserts:

[Theology] is not for all people, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in



study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul. For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun's brightness. (27.3)

The Spirit's deifying work through baptism and the life of the church comes sharply into focus here.<sup>25</sup> While Jesus reveals God and accomplishes man's deification "by the power of his incarnate manhood" (30.14), we still cannot know God without the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Holy Spirit brings to fulfillment in the Church what Christ makes potential in his incarnate work. Beeley puts it well:

The Spirit's epistemic priority in bringing the new life of Christ into the Church is fundamental to Gregory's doctrine as a whole, for it makes the theologian's experience of the divine life a necessary part of the Trinitarian confession. It is only by the Spirit, who purifies and illuminates the theologian, that God can be understood, interpreted, and heard.<sup>26</sup>

Thus Gregory's objection to the Eunomians on the basis of *theosis* proves fundamental. If the Son and Spirit are not God, how can they impart knowledge of God, and how can they make us into God's image? We have shown how their philosophy sought to demote Son and Spirit. For Gregory, knowledge of God is bound together with the theologian's purification into the image of God.

### **The Limitations of Reason**

Experiencing the *Five Theological Orations* (even as a reader), one cannot help but notice the importance, for Gregory, of reason reaching its limit. In contrast to the neat syllogistic reasoning of the Eunomians, Gregory speaks passionately of matters beyond his understanding, not only in the area of theology but also in science and the natural world. "All truth, all philosophy, to be sure, is obscure, hard to trace out" (28.21), he posits. But the limits of reason are more than a cautionary tale against philosophical optimism; they are essential to a theologian's sanctification. Gregory applies his most striking powers of rhetoric at precisely those moments when he seeks to assert the limits of reason for understanding divine truth.

In one place, Gregory makes a strong case for the incomprehensibility of God based on our inability to comprehend even what lies at our feet (28.29). In a lengthy but compelling stretch of oratory (28.21–31), Gregory takes his audience through various mysteries of our earthly existence: anthropology, zoology, cosmology, astronomy, meteorology. His relentless questioning effectively presses science and philosophy to their limits. Regarding humanity:

What was the first stage in the process of molding and bringing us together in nature's workshop? What is the final stage of formative development? What is the urge to get and provide food? What is the instinct which brings us to the first springs and materials of life? What makes food nourishment for the body and speech for the soul? What is nature's spell, binding parents and children together? What goes to make stable variations of appearance, when an infinitely large number of special factors is involved? How does it come about that the same living thing is both mortal and immortal? Changing its state, it dies; giving birth makes it immortal. Now it goes away, now it comes back in again, channeled like a constant, flowing river. (28.23)

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So it proceeds in each area of the sciences. Whether science might at that time or at some time in the future have an answer to any of these questions is beside the point. The point is, as he makes clear in this oration, observation of patterns and characteristics (i.e. science) is one thing, but knowledge of things in their essence and cause is quite another (28.29). We should note that Gregory had a high level of education including familiarity with such scientific works as Aristotle's *The History of Animals* and *The Generation of Animals*.<sup>27</sup> Hence his observations of the limits of reason were not based on ignorance but, in fact, on knowledge and the experience of reasoning reaching its limit.

The revelation of Scripture is the only true grounds for human knowledge about God. The evidence for Gregory's high view of Scripture is overwhelming: in just these five orations alone, he makes over five hundred Scriptural allusions.<sup>28</sup> Here too, the human mind reaches its limit in comprehending the divine revelation. In fact, Gregory says, "theology is fuller, and so harder, with more counter-arguments, tougher solutions, than other philosophy" (28.21). He identifies with Solomon, Paul and David, who all sought to understand the wisdom of God.

Paul tries to get there—I do not mean to God's nature (that he knew to be quite impossible) but only to God's judgments. Paul found no way through, no stopping-place in his climb, since intellectual curiosity has no clear limit and there is always some truth left to dawn on us. The marvel of it all—I share his feelings as he closes his argument with impassioned wonder at the sort of things he calls "the wealth and depth of God" [Rom 11:33] in acknowledgment of the incomprehensibility of God's judgments. (28.21)

Recognizing the limits of our understanding in theological matters was of utmost importance in Gregory's debates with the Eunomians. On the basis of Scripture and its descriptions of Christ's subordination to the Father, they asserted that the two could not consist of the same nature (30.14). In response, Gregory pounds home the divinity and humanity of Jesus, juxtaposing human aspects of his life with divine aspects, maintaining the paradox boldly and unapologetically in a particularly beautiful bit of oratory:

He whom presently you scorn was once transcendent, over even you. He who is presently human was incomposite. He remained what he was; what he was not, he assumed. No "because" is required for his existence in the beginning, for what could account for the existence of God? But later he came into being because of something, namely your salvation, yours, who insult him and despise his Godhead for that very reason, because he took on your thick corporeality. Through the medium of the mind he had dealings with the flesh, being made that God on earth, which is Man: Man and God blended. They became a single whole, the stronger side predominating, in order that I might be made God to the same extent that he was made man. He was begotten—yet he was already begotten—of a woman. And yet she was a virgin. That it was from a woman makes it human, that she was a virgin makes it divine. On earth he has no father, but in heaven no mother. All this is part of his Godhead. He was carried in the womb, but acknowledged by a prophet as yet unborn himself, who leaped for joy at the presence of the Word for whose sake he had been created. He was wrapped in swaddling bands, but at the Resurrection he unloosed the swaddling bands of the grave. He was laid in a manger, but was extolled by angels, disclosed by a star and adored by Magi. Why do you take offense at what you see, instead of attending to its spiritual significance? (29.19)

It is not theological laziness or the neglect of science that prompts these flights of apophatic theology, in which language is shown to fall short of capturing the essence of truth. It is

philosophy and theology operating at full capacity. It is the recognition of mind-blowing truth breaking into reality both in creation and in the incarnation.

*Theosis*, as a lens through which to view the divine *oikonomia*, places the *telos* of man beyond the comprehension of man, in the life of God. Just as man cannot comprehend God, he cannot comprehend his own destiny. The degree to which he cannot comprehend God is the same degree to which he cannot reflect the divine image. As one who is connected to the deifying power of the incarnation in the deifying power of the Holy Spirit through the baptismal life of the church, the theologian strives to understand God and his unsearchable judgments and ways because he is being made more perfectly into the image from which his reason and understanding sprung. The more he strives to understand, the more his understanding brushes up against the incomprehensibility of God, the more he discovers what is opposed to God in himself. “God reveals himself to our limited understanding while ever remaining transcendent so as to create a dynamic of growth that moves us through yearning and wonder to ever greater degrees of purification and illumination.”<sup>29</sup> Thus reason’s place, for the theologian, lies in striving to know God (based on the revelation of Scripture and not apart from it) and in discovering the limitations of reason through such striving. The result is a theology that is at once bold and repentant, seeking to know the unknowable God and relying on him entirely.

## Conclusion

The revelation of the transcendent God is far more true and far more reasonable than the theologian can ever understand. Nevertheless, Christ and the Scriptures that testify to him bring the unknowable God into the world to be known by the world, restoring man’s likeness to God and enabling him to know God. In his *Five Theological Orations*, Gregory sees Christ as the cleft in the rock through which he catches only the slightest glimpse of God (28.3). As such, the opponents’ claim “to know all and teach all” (27.2) is an emptying of the mystery in Gregory’s view, an overthrowing of the faith. Gregory’s defense of the incomprehensibility of God calls theologians of every time and place to approach the revelation of God not as the end of the mystery—as if we knew everything we needed to know—but as the starting place on an upward journey into the image and knowledge of God. How often does church feel like a place in which everything is known, and, consequently, where nothing matters? Perhaps Norris is on to something when he suggests that poetry, art and oration might be far more compelling and useful for today than the post-Enlightenment theological treatises of logic and pure philosophy.<sup>30</sup> Gregory’s orations call us to wonder at the mystery we are engulfed in, which the image of the invisible God has pulled us up into by his appearance and enduring presence. Gregory calls us to expect revelation to be the sort of thing that leaves us with eyes shining, because that is exactly what it does.

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## Endnotes

1 See Plato *Timaeus*, 28c.

2 Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham trans., *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cleodnius*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002).

3 One hears echoes of this in Luther’s Genesis commentary: “But those who want to reach God apart from these coverings exert themselves to ascend to heaven

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without ladders (that is, without the Word),” LW 1:14.

4 Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 54.

5 Gerhard Forde approaches transcendence and revelation from this perspective, concluding that God “above you” is always a God of wrath, whereas God revealed is a God of the gospel in “Naming the One Who is Above Us,” in *Speaking the Christian God*, Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 119. Luther applied this distinction pastorally for those who saw chaos and injustice in creation and could logically conclude that there is no God or that God is evil, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2000), 315–16.

6 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), 198–211.

7 Andrew Louth, “The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 43.

8 Michael Christensen reflects on this tendency among modern theologians, “The Problem, Promise, and Process of *Theosis*” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 29.

9 Frederick W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazianzen* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 17–39.

10 Vladimir Kharlamov makes this argument in “Rhetorical Application of *Theosis* in Greek Patristic Theology,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 126.

11 Norman Russell makes this argument in *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 213–214; 222–225.

12 McGuckin points to *Orat.* 11.5 and *Orat.* 14.23 as instances of this.

13 Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 54.

14 Jordan Cooper gives an ample overview of the relevant Scriptural bases for deification in *Christification: A Lutheran Approach to Theosis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 48–72.

15 McGuckin explains *apothēsis* as “humans, especially heroes, great sages, and latterly emperors, being advanced to the rank of deity,” “Strategic Adaptation,” 95.

16 McGuckin, “Strategic Adaptation,” 95.

17 Beeley, *On the Trinity and Knowledge of God*, 4.

18 Frederick Norris, “Gregory Contemplating the Beautiful: Knowing Human Misery and Divine Mystery through and Being Persuaded by Images,” in *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections*, Joestein Bortnes and Tomas Hägg eds. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 19.

19 Christensen recognizes this to be the enduring problem behind *theosis*, providing a brief survey of the psychological, philosophical, and theological implications of “creatures becoming gods,” “The Problem, Promise, and Process of *Theosis*,” 28.

20 *Adversus Haereses* 4.38.1.

21 LW 1:56.

22 Beeley, *On the Trinity and Knowledge of God*, 119.

23 Andrew Louth, “The Place of *Theosis*,” 39.

24 J. A. McGuckin, “The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 103.

25 Not to be forgotten is the fact that Gregory is the first church father to make the bold assertion that the Holy Spirit is God, consubstantial with the Father, a thing the formers of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 380–381 were not willing to do.

26 Beeley, *On the Trinity and Knowledge of God*, 180.

27 Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 124.

28 We are indebted to Frederick William and Lionel Wickam for chasing all of these down. *On God and Christ*.

29 Beeley, *On the Trinity and Knowledge of God*, 111.