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Response
On history, theology and scholarly method

It is not every day that one receives such a review of one's work! A colleague who heard these remarks delivered orally reminded me of the old saying that the next best thing to having a noble friend is to have a noble enemy, but I don't think it applies here. Volker Drecoll is hardly an enemy, although he does show some accomplishment at playing the role of the querulous friend! I am grateful to Professor Drecoll not only for travelling from Tübingen to attend the book review panel at the 2009 Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in New Orleans, where this exchange first took place, but also for his lengthy and exacting challenge of my work.[1]

My chief intention in writing *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* was to recover for modern readers a sense of Gregory's theological achievement and to clarify his place in the Greek church of the late fourth century. I never imagined that this would be a neutral enterprise. Since most of the attention that scholars have given to this period in the last century has been paid to Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, I anticipated that the book might be somewhat jarring to readers who work primarily on the other two Cappadocians, as Professor Drecoll does. Yet I did not expect a response quite like this one. For Drecoll does not address the book's main argument at all – there is no discussion of Gregory's theological method, christology, pneumatology, trinitarian doctrine or pastoral theology – but he concentrates instead on my overall scholarly approach, certain points that I make in the book's conclusion and especially the bibliography. This last item will be an immediate signal that our exchange reflects differences between Germanic and Anglophone scholarly methods, as became evident to me during our conversation at the SBL.

The central matters under discussion, then, are two methodological questions about the place of theological judgements in historical study and the proper use of sources. I will first address these broad concerns, after which I will respond to several particular criticisms that Professor Drecoll raises about the book.

[1] Thanks also to Mark Weedman for organising the panel, to Valerie Karras and Warren Smith for their participation, and to Iain Torrance for inviting Professor Drecoll and me to publish our exchange in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.

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Theological judgements in historical study

First, I must first admit my guilt of a grave offence. I confess that I have not only analysed each of Gregory's works in their historical and rhetorical situation, but I have actually organised the results of that analysis into a coherent and readable study. The fault is entirely mine. While I now see that it would have been more proper (it would have certainly been more voluminous) to give a seriatim account of each passage text-by-text, I accept full responsibility for having prevented my readers from excessive sleep, which would have been the inevitable result of such an exercise. Curiously, Drecoll does not dispute my interpretation of any particular passage, so I can only certify that I have indeed perpetrated a work of comparison and contrast, analysis and synthesis, and I accept any and all consequences therefrom.

On a more serious note, Drecoll raises a deeper question about the place of theological judgements in historical study altogether. His view is that theological judgements threaten to distort what would otherwise be a pristine historical examination. This is an extremely important matter for the study of Christianity in any period, and one that is at present handled in different ways in different areas of church history.

In short, I believe that Drecoll's position reflects a basic category confusion. Theological and historical judgements are not two radically different kinds of knowledge which conflict with one another in and of themselves. They are not like two buyers trying to purchase the same limited number of goods, or prosecuting and defence attorneys who contend against one another for the verdict of a court case which can only go one way. Rather, they are distinct but overlapping kinds of enquiry which, in the study of historical Christianity, at times even depend on each other. In actual practice, theological and historical judgements may support, cancel out, or be indifferent towards one another, depending on the subject at hand and the questions being raised.

Drecoll's approach exemplifies the mindset which reached its zenith in high-modern European thought, when there was a great concern to preserve scholarly objectivity and certain social interests from the biases of ecclesiastical bodies. Not only do most intellectuals now reject positivist and other fantasies of pure objectivity but, after the great wars and genocide of the twentieth century, it has become painfully clear that avowedly non-theological and anti-confessional regimes are at least as capable of distorting human history (and other forms of brutality) as those with theological interests have ever been. At the moment, Anglophone, French, Italian, Latin American, Eastern Orthodox and East Asian scholars show a greater awareness of the importance of theological analysis for the study of early Christian history than those in Germanic countries, where the division of

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history from theology faculties has long reinforced their opposition. To be sure, it is possible to write poor history for any number of reasons, but the incorporation of theological analysis per se is not one of them. What should concern us instead is whether one makes *better* or *worse* historical and theological judgements, and that is a different matter entirely, to which I will return in the final section.

Yet this is not merely a question of methodological compatibility. Let me suggest that it is impossible to understand Christianity at any time without some sort of theological description, even if it is borrowed from other sources. While it is sometimes necessary to bracket theological questions in order to examine a certain aspect of Christian life and culture, such projects cannot give an ultimately plausible account of Christian individuals and communities until a theological perspective is reintegrated into the picture. In the same way, one cannot hope to understand the historical figure William Shakespeare, or sixteenth-century English drama as a whole, without some sense of the poetic and dramatic qualities of Shakespeare's work, just as it is impossible to write a history of physics if one has no understanding of physics as a science. These fields of knowledge are not encumbrances, but essential aids, to historical study.

Much to my colleague's chagrin, I argue that Gregory is the strongest Greek theologian between Origen and Maximus Confessor: a bald historical-theological judgement if ever there was one, although I am hardly alone in this regard (it is the view of much of Eastern Orthodoxy). Such an argument is not 'personal', however, in the sense that Drecoll means, but historical-theological. As such it is disputable on scholarly grounds, but in this case Drecoll again issues no material challenge; and here too we have a category confusion. To make a claim for the relative strengths or weaknesses of a given figure, institution, or what have you is distinct from the author's existential stance towards that subject. I would argue, for example, that Nietzsche is the greatest critic of Christianity in the modern period, even though I deeply oppose his stance in my own personal commitments. It is not only unnecessary, but it can even be patronising, for scholars to assume that they must protect their readers from the possibility that such commitments exist in order to produce excellent scholarship. Yet this complaint is not entirely surprising since, from the standpoint of positivist objectivism, a thorough historical-theological argument will inevitably seem hagiographical; but there is probably little that one can do about that. I happily maintain that Gregory was an astonishingly good theologian, when judged in the light of prior and subsequent developments, and I have given reasons for this judgement in every major area of his thought.

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Bibliography to the rescue

If theological judgements are thought to be a hindrance, then one thing that is certain to improve a historical work, we are told, is the exhaustive citation of ancient and modern sources. To begin again at the least serious level, we are obviously dealing with the different conventions of Germanic versus Anglophone scholarship. I am well aware that my German colleagues must produce *Dissertationen* and *Habilitationsschriften* which contain comprehensive bibliographies and prolific footnotes, and I admire their skill. Most Anglophone scholars, however, are not trained in this way, and they have a different set of expectations. There is an economic dimension to the situation as well. Most academic publishers in America and Britain, for example, would be loath to publish a 600-page monograph with exhaustive references and chapter-length source comparisons, when the same point can be made in 350 pages. In my own case, one reader for the publisher suggested that the bibliography was too long to begin with (I kept the length in order to provide the necessary references), and the final manuscript exceeded the publisher's word limit (I was graciously allowed to do so). But such are the realities of academic publishing in these countries.

Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages, which brings us to the serious side of the matter. Drecoll supposes that the more sources one cites, the better a work of scholarship will be; and it is true that German works are often impressive in this regard. Yet I prefer the sort of writing which places argumentation and readability above the demands of bibliographical comprehensiveness. One of the most important services that a scholar can provide is the judicious selection of sources. Every beginning graduate student knows how easy it is to amass citations in the environment of one's subject; what is more difficult – and surely more important – is to discern which sources are most relevant and deserving of consideration, and to engage them perceptively. What, for example, does Drecoll imagine that Ignatius of Antioch will contribute to a study of Gregory Nazianzen's trinitarian theology? Or Numenius, for that matter (as opposed to Plotinus, whom I do treat)? Significantly, he does not say – because these are merely potential sources which one could include in a list, not real points of contact. Likewise, I did not cite Drecoll's *Die Entwicklung der Trinitätslehre des Basilius von Cäsarea* because it was not pertinent to my argument, although I have discussed it elsewhere.

There seems to be some confusion about the sources which I do cite as well. I give substantial evidence for Gregory's use of Origen, if not the lengthy quotations which one finds in some French and German monographs; yet a perusal of the conclusion alone may suggest otherwise. And while a quick

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glance at the citation index might lead one to believe that the book is chiefly based on the *Theological Orations* and not on Gregory's wider corpus, as I allege, anyone who has read the actual text will know that this famous series forms the basis of less than a third of the main chapters. Again, it is what one does with sources that matters, not whether or not they appear in the bibliography or indices.

The actual results

Considering our differences on these points of method, it will be interesting to see how it all bears on the actual work of historical investigation. Drecoll's main challenge is to reassert the conventional view that Athanasius is a key source for the Cappadocians (an assumption that he makes in his book on Basil). It should go without saying that one is at risk of making an *argumentum e silencio* only where influence is otherwise assured. But in cases where it is seriously questioned, one must identify specific elements which a later author could only have derived from the source in question and not from any other or from his or her own reasoning; and that is precisely what I have shown that we do not have in the case of Gregory and Athanasius (see pp. 277–83). Basil's situation appears to be similar. While I have not studied it exhaustively, Mark DelCogliano has demonstrated that Basil's exegesis of Proverbs 8:22 derives not from Athanasius but from Eusebius of Caesarea (*JTS* 59/1) and that the pneumatology of Basil's *Contra Eunomium* 3.7 stems not from Athanasius, but Didymus the Blind (*JTS* 61/2). Drecoll is also mistaken that Basil and Athanasius exchanged letters: Basil never received a reply. To say that Athanasius is the only theologian who could have advanced *ousia* language in the 350s and 360s overlooks the minor detail that the term lay open to public view in the Nicene Creed of 325, which even the anti-Athanasian coalition sanctioned at the seminal Council of Antioch in 341 – not to mention in the work of Origen, who is the chief non-biblical source of the theologians in question. Moreover, several scholars have recently argued that multiple pro-Nicene traditions developed with relative independence from one another during this period (see e.g. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*). It is a matter of no little interest that the conventional view of broad Athanasian influence is the product of Athanasius' own polemics and their reception by fifth-century theologians and ecclesiastical historians who were favourably disposed towards Athanasius to begin with. That is just the sort of biased perspective which a careful historian will always question and seek to assess by other means.

On other figures more briefly: I still consider Basil's christology and his understanding of the relationship between theology and the divine economy

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to be dualist compared to Gregory's; to say more than I have argued in the book, however, would require a much longer study. Scholars remain divided over the philosophical provenance of Basil's metaphysics, so we must agree to disagree here as well. Otherwise, I have given a detailed account of the differences between Basil's and Gregory's pneumatologies in a recent article on the Holy Spirit in the Cappadocians (*Modern Theology* 26/1), which also explains why I disagree with Drecoll's claim in his *Trinitätslehre* that Basil migrated from being a Homoiousian to being a Homoousian. I should also point out that the *communicatio idiomatum* found in Gregory of Nyssa's *To Theophilus* is not 'early': Origen pioneered the practice a century and a half before (see *First Principles* 2.6). Concerning the dating of Apollinarius' works and their availability to Gregory Nazianzen, I agree with Kelly McCarthy Spoerl that Apollinarius probably wrote the *Detailed Confession of the Faith* by 362, and I have identified numerous similarities between the two theologians in a separate article on the early christological controversy (*Vig Chr* 65/1 (2011), pp. 1–32). In several other places Drecoll simply misreads my text: on the Pneumatomachians in Asia Minor before 372; Acacius and Eudoxius; Basil's non-involvement with Aetius; Eunomius' doctrine of unbegotten divine essence; and Meletius' identity as a Homoiousian. I do not argue that Gregory is more apophatic than Basil, but just the reverse, and that Gregory of Nyssa is the most apophatic of the three (pp. 303, 308). And I make it clear that for Gregory Nazianzen God's prevenient grace underlies the entire life of faith, including the process of purification – more clearly, in fact, than for either Basil or Gregory of Nyssa (pp. 84–5).

This leaves, finally, the question of Gregory's theological clarity in technical matters. Here I could not disagree more with Drecoll's comments. The tendency to overemphasise, or flatten, the use of technical terms has been a pervasive problem in the study of early Christianity since the nineteenth century. Technical ontological or metaphysical terms are not permanently fixed, or even always primary, indicators of a theological position; they are merely conventional terms, which carry meaning only insofar as one defines and uses them. As many theologians have noted over the centuries, they are also not the typical language of scripture. Gregory can use such terms perfectly well, which is why he agrees to confess the *homoousion* of the Son and the Spirit against his detractors (see Or. 31.10). But, as he repeatedly stresses, one need not use them at all in order to communicate apostolic doctrine, and they are not fundamental to his theological system. Far from claiming that Gregory's 'spirituality' compensates for technical imprecision (God forbid), I argue instead that he is so sophisticated a theologian and rhetorician that he is able to use technical terms to multiple purposes, and to see through the artificial fixity that others might ascribe to them. As we

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can each recognise in our own societies, rhetorically gifted authors are not less clear than flatly didactic ones, but more so, because they are able to communicate multiple levels of meaning and shades of modality which are only possible in a full rhetorical spectrum. Such was the talent of Gregory Nazianzen, and I believe it is this quality among others which made him one of the two most penetrating theologians of the early church, along with Augustine. The reason why I do not locate the distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis*, then, is that I do not believe it exists in the Cappadocians as such, although certain passages in Gregory of Nyssa do move in this direction. The report of the Constantinopolitan synod of 382 (not 381) does not establish the technical distinction with which many moderns are familiar, which comes instead from Leontius of Byzantium, who crafted it in order to defend the Chalcedonian definition in the sixth century.

But these are the sort of observations that one can make only on the basis of careful historical and theological analysis.

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