Jnl of Ecclesiastical History, *Vol. 60*, *No. 3*, *July 2009*. © Cambridge University Press 2009
doi:10.1017/S0022046908005976 Printed in the United Kingdom

REVIEW ARTICLE

Gregory of Nyssa

by LIONEL WICKHAM
Skelmanthorpe
E-mail: Lpatristic@aol.com

Gregory of Nyssa. Contra Eunomium II. An English version with supporting studies. Proceedings of the 10th international colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (*Olomouc, September 15–18, 2004*). Edited by Lenka Karfíková, Scot Douglass and Johannes Zachhuber (with Vít Hušek and Ladislaw Chvátal). Pp. xxi + 554. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2007. 147. 13 978 90 04 15518 3; 10 90 04 15518 X; 0920 623x

Trinity and man. Gregory of Nyssa's Ad Ablabium. By Giulio Maspero. (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*. Text and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language, 86.) Pp. xxxii + 216. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2007. 89. 978 90 04 15872 6; 0920 623x

Gregory of Nyssa. The letters. Introduction, translation and commentary. By Anna M. Silvas. (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, 83.) Pp. xx + 283 incl. map + colour frontispiece. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2007. 119. 13 978 90 04 15290 8; 10 90 04 15290 3; 0920 623x

Gregory of Nyssa. Ancient and [*post*]*modern*. By Morwenna Ludlow. Pp. x + 314. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. £55. 978 0 19 928076 6

Four books, almost an embarrassment of riches, witness to lively interest in an author capable of inspiring equal degrees of admiration, irritation and bewilderment: admiration for his thrilling notions of the soul's yearning for the divine, as it were journeying infinitely into ever more beautiful and mysterious country; irritation over sentences which may run to twenty-six lines on the printed page;[1] and bewilderment at a controversialist whose arguments are stained by scurrility[2] and misrepresentation. Official standard of orthodoxy for the Church of the Emperor Theodosius, deeply

[1] See, for example, *Contra Eunomium II*, ed. W. H. Jaeger, in *Gregorii Nysseni opera*, Berlin 1921–5, i. 351, line 12–352, line 7. [2] See the opening chapters of *Contra Eunomium I*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046908005976 Published online by Cambridge University Press

influential on John Damascene's handbook of patristic teaching and elsewhere, he has had his detractors in ancient as in modern times. John Philoponus, the sixth-century first professional Christian philosopher, thought Gregory's account of resurrection absurd and berated him for incompetence.[3] H. F. Cherniss, writing *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* in 1930,[4] concluded that he was a sort of twentieth-century Modernist, a timorous companion of Reason until Dogma intervened and made him walk in opposite directions. That conclusion is false to Gregory's milieu and his style but at least conveys an admonition that his readers ought to value him for what he is and not so falsely praise, as did the reverent circle (clique, indeed) of the Nyssene's admirers around Jean Daniélou fifty years ago, that the praise loses credibility and provokes the just and negative comments voiced by Christopher Stead,[5] and others.

Contra Eunomium II continues Gregory's long-running defence of his dead brother Basil's counterblast to Eunomius' *Apology*, the *Adversus Eunomium*, and responds to Eunomius' answer to Basil, the *Apology for the apology*. Gregory was to write a *Contra Eunomium III* in ten books and a separate work, the *Rebuttal of Eunomius' statement of faith*. The correct order, with a brief history of the writing of the works, is given by Peter of Callinicus (non-Chalcedonian patriarch of Antioch 580/581–91) in *Contra Damianum* III.19;[6] this supplements the information given by Werner Jaeger in the prologomena to volume ii of his edition. There was confusion already in the sixth century, so Peter shows, about the numbering and sequence of the books. Peter quotes Severus, in a sense his predecessor at some removes at Antioch (512–18), as explaining that *Contra Eunomium III* + the *Rebuttal* + the *Statement* were circulating in a single volume separately from the earlier two books. When Photius[7] records his admiration for the cogency and style of the 'other opus of Gregory against Eunomius', he may well mean this second volume rather than the *Contra*

[3] See L. Wickham, 'John Philoponus and Gregory of Nyssa's teaching on resurrection: a brief note', in H. R. Drobner and C. Glock (eds), *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der christlichen Spätantike*, Leiden 1990, 205–10.

[4] H. F. Cherniss, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa*, Berkeley 1930, esp. p. 63.

[5] See, for example, G. C. Stead, 'Why not three gods? The logic of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian doctrine', in Drobner and Glock, *Gregor von Nyssa*, 149–63.

[6] Peter of Callinicus, *Contra Damianum*, ed. R. Y. Ebied, A. Van Roey and L. R. Wickham, *CCSG* xxix (1994; bk II), xxxii (1996; bk III.1–19), xxxv (1998; bk III. 20–34), liv (2003; bk III.35–50 and indices etc.). A passage in *Contra Eunomium I* and quoted by Peter (*Contra Damianum* III.21, lines 204ff. [Eng.trans.]) as from chapter 30 partially fills a lacuna noted by Jaeger (i. 154), as does another as from *Contra Eunomium III*, bk VIII (Jaeger ii. 247) quoted by Peter in *Contra Damianum* III.45, lines 142–82. Some Greek words missing in Jaeger i.149 *ad init.* before τῆς οὐσίας are quoted by Peter as from *Contra Eunomium I* c. 29 in *Contra Damianum* III.5 lines 76ff. The chapter headings of *Contra Eunomium I*, printed separately by Jaeger, are noted as by Gregory himself; the divisions known to Peter do not correspond with the Greek manuscripts used in *PG*. Peter attests only the incipit of *Contra Eunomium II*.

[7] Photius, *Bibliotheca* VII; cf. Jaeger, ii, p. xvii.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046908005976 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Eunomium II treated of in detail at Olomouc in 2004 through two essays of general introduction, eight of specific commentary and twelve supporting studies; Stuart Hall has accompanied these with a reliable rendering in English of which only those who do not need it could complain. Its theme is God and, as corollary, of speech about God. For Eunomius, God is underived (ingenerate) substance (ἀγέννητος οὐσία), indeed 'The Underived' (or 'Absolute'), that descriptive name and naming description being itself in some way absolute and true independently of external observation. Basil had argued that 'underived' was, as a ruling out of inapplicable attributes, sufficient to indicate but not to define the indefinable God and Father. Eunomius' response was that Basil relativised Godhead by making it dependent on contrast with creation. On 'ingeneracy', and on the role of ἐπίνοια (translated here as 'conception') in speech about God, the book's debate, therefore, turns. For Eunomius ἐπίνοια meant humanly invented fancy and fancying; the Syriac translators aptly rendered it as 'invention', 'discovery', of the mind.[8] Basil claimed it as the tool of conceptualisation. Gregory, enlarging upon Basil, made it the vehicle of all cultural innovation including the invention of language. Eunomius had indeed supposed that divine communication demanded truth unimpaired by fancy and found it assured only in divinely implanted human speech. Gregory's rebuttal does not leave all Eunomius' arguments recoverable: just how God instituted language is obscure. The contributions to the colloquium (all worthy, if unequally, of publication) together offer a full and critical interpretation of this part of the controversy in most of its aspects. Missing is any account of its subsequent influence. The Cappadocian understanding of 'ingeneracy' as a privative concept was generally accepted; I am, I hope pardonably, ignorant of any subsequent discussion in antiquity of ἐπίνοια and the invention of language. Theo Kobusch hails Gregory as champion here of human God-given spontaneity and freedom. Johannes Zachhuber is more reserved and points to deficiencies in Gregory's case. There is a good piece also by Studer on the theological background. Other essays too deal with the theological and historical background, often making the same point: much is said about Origen on ἐπίνοια, nothing about Arius in the *Thalia*.[9] On the whole, I judge that the contributors have taken the measure of the opposing views, which might fairly be represented as mirror images of one another. Eunomius thinks that ingeneracy is the defining characteristic of Godhead which is therefore simple and knowable; Gregory that no definition is possible and that the divine and simple is unknowable. Eunomius believes that God reveals metaphysics in divinely initiated concepts; Gregory that words and concepts are of human devising. The list of contrasts could be

[8] E.g. Peter of Callinicus, *Contra Damianum* III.8, line 484.
[9] Cf. Philostorgius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 10, 2–4, and Aetius, *Syn.* 12.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046908005976 Published online by Cambridge University Press

much increased, for, indeed, the Cappadocian account of God in Trinity is built up dialectically by contrast with Eunomius' philosophical theology and is not comprehensible without an understanding of its roots. I do not think that the importance of the notion of ἀναλογία for both Gregory and Eunomius has been properly considered by any of the contributors, who treat the word and its cognates as if they meant merely 'illustration' or 'example'. They mean, in fact, 'proportion' in a strict sense. There is, for Eunomius, a strict proportion between 'substance'/οὐσία and its 'activity'/ἐνέργεια. and between a concept in its application to the divine in Scripture (for example a title of Christ) and its homonymous use elsewhere. Tollefsen writes, for example, of a 'loose connection' (an unlucky phrase suggesting a fault in the wiring) between the substance of the Son and the Ingenerate source. No, there is no connection but there is strict proportion between the power of the Ingenerate (= the Father) and the product of its will (= the Only Begotten). Two pieces offer salutary surprise: Joseph O'Leary shows a harmony between Aquinas's view of the divine attributes as identical with the divine substance and Eunomius' on divine ingeneracy. Indeed one can go further and contend that Basil's and Gregory's underlying epistemology and ontology are crude makeshift affairs a long way removed from anything as coherent and satisfying as can be found in the tradition Aquinas inherited. John Demetracopoulos attacks the consistency of Gregory's own argument and his version of Eunomius' views *in toto*. The contribution refreshes, mitigating any bland acceptance of the master's *ipse dixit* detectable elsewhere; but a defence of Gregory is immediately invited against this destructive and, in my view, only partially convincing criticism.

Such destructive criticism of a church Father is, according to Giulio Maspero, in principle unacceptable. 'Worth noting', he writes in his quaint English (responding to Christopher Stead's description of the piece as a 'confidence trick') 'is the difficulty to consider an ancient writer or thinker, particularly a Father of the Church as incongruent' (meaning 'inconsistent'/'illogical'). The author's poor English and reverential approach do not, however, rule this book out of serious consideration, though they present obstacles to the reader. It is in fact quite good. It studies in detail the treatise *Ad Ablabium* (plausibly dated here to *c.* 390) which belongs to a group of short pieces expounding, against the charge of Tritheism, the quasi-social doctrine of God in Trinity that Gregory shares with Basil. Interpreted as a simple response to the question 'Why not "three Gods"?' the piece must always have seemed strange and there were few who took it up, so far as I know, in antiquity. The 'argument' (if that is what it is) is that the human species is a knowable natural unit divided by particular wills but the hypostases of the Godhead the unity of an unknowable nature united by will. This corresponds with, and indeed is founded upon, his idiosyncratic epistemology according to which the primary reference of ἄνθρωπος is to the species, though how the species is a finite unit he never fully explains. This in turn coheres after a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046908005976 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fashion with Gregory's account of ἐπίνοια as the function of secondary mental discrimination and particularisation. Maspero shows effectively that the piece is consistent with the rest of Gregory's account of human nature and its transformation in Christ. He might even persuade that it coheres with the obviously simpler quasi-modalistic account Gregory gives elementary instructors in the faith of God in Trinity in the Catechetical Oration. He shows, incidentally, that to interpret Gregory as preaching universal salvation irrespective of human striving is false to him.

Gregory must have written many letters. Few, though, have survived but amongst them at least some treasures: to Bishop Flavian of Antioch, describing an unpleasant encounter with the disagreeable and rude metropolitan, Helladius. The piece is transmitted under the name of the Theologian Gregory, but justly placed here in this volume, admirably edited by Anna Silvas, which also contains the relevant letters of Basil and the Theologian. The letter to Kensitor, on pilgrimages, castigating them as worse than useless for spiritual development, figured with dubious justice, on its publication in the seventeenth century, amongst anti-Roman Catholic propaganda; the important letter to Peter ('Basil's' *ep.* xxxviii) on the difference between the divine οὐσία and ὑπόστασις appears here and other pieces plug gaps in the history of Gregory. Silvas writes a good introduction and full notes to them with the best short biography that I know of. I doubt whether anything longer in the way of life story can be written in view of the relative paucity of information. Love of her subject has made her a shade generous towards a man whom contemporaries saw as a model of orthodoxy and worthy of preferment to metropolitan status but whom family and friends found something of a simpleton and prone to embarrassing errors of practical judgement. Too much has been written in recent years by too many, beginning with Jean Daniélou, on Gregory's marital status. Here and elsewhere also, discussion of Gregory has had the hidden agenda of twentieth-century debate: in this case about sex, gender and ministry. The matter should now be regarded as settled: so far as the evidence goes (which is not far) it may be concluded, with Silvas, that Gregory was widowed probably before ordination; and that there is no reason to identify the Theosebia who turns up in the writings as Gregory's wife. But neither these letters nor contemporary accounts convey Gregory's personality in private life which has to be guessed at, supposing that this is worthwhile in the case of a thinker whose continuing relevance for contemporary philosophical theology, if he has any, must lie in his published thoughts.

This relevance is Morwenna Ludlow's theme. She expertly surveys the study and interpretation of Gregory (a 'subtle and creative' but also 'elusive' thinker – well chosen adjectives) from the middle of the last century by anglophone theologians. The four parts of the book deal with Gregory's *De trinitate*, on the economy, on sex and gender, and on theology (meaning questions on the life of faith and the nature of theological understanding). On

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046908005976 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the first theme she shows how Alan Torrance and Jean Zizioulas slant their interpretations to fit preconceptions whereas David Brown and Robert Jenson pick out details 'to use as launching-pads for their own Trinitarian theologies'. Gregory on the economy has vivid illustrations but the theory (if there is a single theory that accompanies them) early became suspect: Cyril excused his Christology as well-meaning but unreliable; it has currently obtained a more sympathetic hearing. 'Feminist scholarship on Gregory has added something new to his interpretation' (p. 226) even if 'feminist readings of Gregory nicely demonstrate the way in which diametrically opposite conclusions can be drawn from the same writer' (p. 124). John Milbank (the 'post-modernist') is lightly criticised but commended with a certain warmth for his general understanding of Gregory as theologian. Ludlow writes as a sympathetic reader of Gregory and accomplished scholar who has taken on board the large corpus of secondary literature, a surprisingly large amount of which is worth reading, for, whatever view one takes of Gregory, it must be allowed that he has evoked some extremely interesting interpretations. Like the infinite he spoke of he draws the student of his ideas onward and upward in a yearning to discover whether sense can be made of them. He will continue to fascinate.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046908005976 Published online by Cambridge University Press