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## Plato and Gregory of Nazianzus: Echoes of Plato in Gregory's conception of Theology and Theologian in the first *Theological Orations (Oration 27)*

### Abstract

This paper deals with Gregory of Nazianzus' appropriation of Plato in defining the nature of Theology and the character of a theologian. These issues were fundamental in order to understand the nature of a theological system years before the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. In this paper I will analyze the arguments of Frederick Norris from his commentary on the *Theological Orations* that Gregory alluded to Plato's historical conflict with Sophists and considered



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himself as someone in line with Plato's tradition. I will show how Gregory echoed Plato's definition of philosophy and philosopher in contrast to sophists and rhetors, in his attempts to develop the definition of theology and to define the character of theology in contrast to Eunomians. By this delineation and juxtaposition I will demonstrate the influence of Greek *paideia* in Gregory and how he appropriated it for theology.

#### Keywords

Gregory of Nazianzus, Eunomians, Plato, Sophists, Gorgias, Rhetoric

## 1 Introduction

The nature of Theology as a discipline and the qualifications and character of a theologian to perform theological tasks are fundamental issues which defined the nature of the theological systems of Eunomians and pro-Nicenes years before the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. Gregory of Nazianzus took pains to define the boundaries of these issues in his first theological oration (*oration 27*) against his opponents Eunomians. These issues were foundational as these definitions contributed to the way each developed other doctrines in their respective theological systems. These were deciding issues because, during the time when different theological trajectories of previous centuries clashed for legitimacy in the official church, theologians from each camp claimed to be in line with the apostolic tradition of the church and labeled the opponents as heretics and defining the basics became necessary to judge the whole theology. Vaggione describes the historical context aptly by saying when the theologians reflected on the positions of their

opponents, “they found that what needed addressing was not the propositions themselves (which were often identical), but the place they occupied within an alien framework.”<sup>1</sup> This prompted Gregory to begin his *Theological Orations* by defining the nature of theology and the character of theologians before entering into the exposition on the doctrinal differences. While doing so, he uses well-known historical dispute about the use and abuse of rhetoric between Plato and Sophists through which Plato distinguished philosophy from sophistry and defined the nature of philosophy and the characteristics of a philosopher. Norris points to Gregory’s allusion to Plato by saying, that “for Nazianzen, the opponents are sophists (...). Thus part of this theological argument renews the older disagreements between Plato and Gorgias. Only a sound knowledge of both the early debate between Philosophy and rhetoric and the proposals for a philosophical rhetoric made by Plato and Aristotle can make sense of this series.”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will focus on the argument of Norris by analysing his assumption that Gregory alluded to Plato’s historical conflict with Sophists and considered himself as someone in line with Plato’s tradition. I will further argue that it was Plato’s definition of philosophy and philosopher by contrast to sophists and rhetors which gave Gregory a model to appropriate in his contention against Eunomians. To demonstrate this hypothesis, I will focus on Plato’s *Gorgias*, in which Plato defines the task of philosophy and the character of the philosopher by contrasting it with the art of the sophists, and Gregory’s first theological oration (*Oration 27*) in which Gregory develops the na-

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Paul Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1991), p. 86.

ture of theology and the character of the theologian to lay foundation for his fuller Trinitarian doctrine of God in his contention with Eunomians. This delineation and juxtaposition of Plato's conception of philosopher and philosophy and Gregory's conception of theologian and theology will demonstrate the influence of Greek *paideia* in the later fourth century theologians and how they appropriated it for theology.

## **2 Rhetoric in the crossfire**

Though persuasion is a human universal, "self-conscious reflection on the theory and practice of persuasion is a Greek achievement, initiated in the fifth century BCE and culminating in the fourth."<sup>3</sup> However, it soon became a matter of contention, and during the time of Plato, this contention contributed to the longstanding dispute between philosophy and sophistry which was immortalized partly by Plato's fame. At a time when the terminologies to designate philosophy, sophism and rhetoric was fluid and not fixed, big names in the classical world such as Isocrates, Plato and Aristotle defined their art by making Sophists their foil. While Sophist projected rhetorical education as a practical skill to succeed in democracies of the Greek city-states, Isocrates – a student of Gorgias and a teacher of rhetoric – wanted education to help students to lead a civilized life which would contribute to the *polis*. He contrasted his educational methodology against Sophists and called his art as a phi-

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and Their Successors*, Issues in Ancient Philosophy, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 2.

losophy.<sup>4</sup> Many dialogues of Plato have Sophists as the interlocutor, and they are mostly presented in a poor light in order to highlight the character and nobility of Socrates and his philosophy.<sup>5</sup> In *Gorgias* where Socrates confronts Gorgias, Plato denounces the sophistic rhetoric as a knack without proper guidance of theory and presents the philosophy and philosophical rhetoric as alternatives. Aristotle treated sophists with respect as a part of Hellenistic cultural tradition yet furthered their craft by providing it a theory and “sought to correct the reasoning of Sophists” by “following Plato’s steps” in critiquing them and attempting to “extend the rhetorical tradition they had begun.”<sup>6</sup> The heart of the matter is not whether it is legitimate to use rhetoric but how Sophists used their rhetorical skills and what they taught the Greeks of their time. So, the use of rhetoric became a foundational issue for Plato in defining the discipline of philosophy and the character of the philosopher. Gregory of Nazianzus’ context in the later part of the fourth century AD was also similar to that of Plato with regards to the polemics of his day. Eunomians became a strong anti-Nicene force which insisted on the monarchy and sovereignty of one God against the trinitarian understanding of the Nicenes. The leaders of this movement Aetius and Eunomius claimed to know the essence of God through the name “ingenerate” and

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<sup>4</sup> Isocrates, “Against the Sophists,” in *Isocrates*, vol. 2, ed. E. Capps and W.H.D. Rouse T.E. Page, trans. George Norlin (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1929).

<sup>5</sup> Some dialogues where Sophists appear, or the subject matter is rhetoric are: *Apology, Protagoras, Gorgias, Republic, Sophist, Phaedrus, Menexenus, Euhtydemus and Ion*.

<sup>6</sup> John Poulakos, “Extending and Correcting the Rhetorical Tradition: Aristotle’s Perception of Sophists,” in *Theory, Text, Context: Issues in Greek Rhetoric and Oratory*, ed. Christopher Lyle Johnstone, Suny Series of Speech Communication (New York: State University of New York Press), p. 63.

distinguished it from the generated nature of the Son.<sup>7</sup> This resulted in a bold theological epistemology which expresses greater confidence in human ability to know God. This confidence could be seen in a quote ascribed to Eunomius by the historian Socrates that "God knows no more of his own substance than we do; nor is this more known to him, and less to us: but whatever we know about the Divine substance, that precisely is known to God; and on the other hand, whatever he knows, the same also you will find without any difference in us."<sup>8</sup> For Eunomius, the knowledge of God known by human subject should be the same as the self-knowledge God possesses about himself, because of the understanding that direct, unmediated knowledge is the superior kind of knowledge com-

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<sup>7</sup> Aetius, "Syntagmation of Aetius the Anomean," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 19, no. 2 (1968), p. 545. (Syn. 5); Eunomius, *Eunomius: The Extant Works*, trans. Richard Paul Vaggione, Oxford Early Christian Texts, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 117. (Frag. 1); For clearer discussion on Eunomian theology. See John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology: The Nicene Faith*, vol. 2 (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), pp. 267-82; R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 598-636; Thomas A. Kopecek, *A History of Neo-Arianism*, vol. 1, Patristic Monograph Series, vol. 8 (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd, 1979); Mark DelCogliano, *Basil of Caesarea's Anti-Eunomian Theory of Names*, vol. 103, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Socrates, "The Ecclesiastical History," vol. 2, trans. A. C. Zenos, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 1995; reprint, 2), p. 98; Eunomius, *The Extant Works*, p. 179. (Frag. 2) Ayres considers this as a quote put into Eunomius mouth but Behr and Hanson believe that this could be a summary of his teaching because it concurs with other bold statements made by Eunomius; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 149; Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, p. 271; Hanson, *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 629.

pared to mediated knowledge. In this debate, the task of maintaining a balance between the positive affirmation of the trinitarian nature of God and the incomprehensibility of God became a delicate task cut out for the post-Nicene fathers. Eunomians used all popular rhetorical techniques to build support base by enchanting the masses. In this scenario, Gregory chose to start from the fundamentals of theology to refute Eunomian theology.

### 3 The Philosopher and the Sophists in *Gorgias*

A cursory look at Plato's dialogues will reveal Plato's antagonism with the Sophists and portrayal of Socrates as the true philosopher against them. However, this is much more complex when we look deeply, as McCoy says, "careful attention to the multiple layers of Plato's dialogues reveals a Socrates who sometimes looks more like his opponents than he would like to admit and vice versa."<sup>9</sup> While Plato makes Socrates use the rhetorical techniques of the Sophists, he contrasts it with the philosophical rhetoric which Socrates uses to establish philosophical truths and in the process defining the meaning of true philosophy.<sup>10</sup> In this process, as McCoy says, Plato is equating Socrates with the term philosopher and in his writings "the claim that Socrates is a philosopher rather than a sophist is a normative rather than merely a descriptive claim."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Marina McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> See Kastely for use of philosophical rhetoric in political realm in *Republic*. James L. Kastely, *The Rhetoric of Plato's Republic: Democracy and the Philosophical Problem of Persuasion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> M. McCoy, *Plato*, p. 3.

This phenomenon is clearly visible in *Gorgias* where Plato presents Socrates as having a dialogue with two rhetoricians Gorgias and Polus, and with a politician Callicles. These characters are carefully chosen to give representation to rhetoric in its theoretical and practical form.<sup>12</sup> Socrates describes the theme of this dialogue, by saying,

The subject we are discussing is one about which even a man of small intelligence should be seriously concerned; it is nothing less than how a person should live. Is he to adopt the life to which you invite me, doing what you call manly activities, speaking in the Assembly and practicing oratory and engaging in politics on the principles at present in fashion among you politicians, or should he lead this life – that of a philosopher.<sup>13</sup>

Gorgias as a rhetor and as one who claims to have the capacity to produce rhetor of anyone says that “the greatest good [is] (...) the power of ruling his fellow-citizens.”<sup>14</sup> This art produced conviction based on belief which is a contrast to the conviction based on knowledge, as Socrates asks with an affirmative answer from Gorgias: “Oratory, then, as it seems, produces conviction about right and wrong which is a matter of persuasion and belief, not the result of teaching and learning?”<sup>15</sup> With this type of persuasion, Gorgias boasts, saying, “you might well be amazed, Socrates, if you knew the whole truth and realized that oratory embraces and controls almost all other spheres of hu-

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<sup>12</sup> Though Socrates refuses to consider rhetoric as *techne* with proper logic and theory to guide, I here mean that Gorgias and Polus represent the teachers who teach rhetoric and Callicles as a budding politician representing the application of the sophistic art in the realm of politics.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Walter Hamilton and Chris Emlyn-Jones (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.



man activity.”<sup>16</sup> Gorgias gives an example of how he had convinced a patient to take his medicines with the help of oratory when even the doctor could not convince him and in the same way he claims that in the assembly an orator has better chance to convince the members to do what he wants – appoint a medical officer or any professional – than an expert in those particular areas.<sup>17</sup> This makes Socrates to state with the affirmation of Gorgias that with the possession of rhetorical skill “an ignorant person is more convincing than the expert before an equally ignorant audience.”<sup>18</sup>

Plato follows this pattern of pushing the interlocutors to accept the shortcomings of rhetorical art in Socrates’ conversations with Polus and Callicles in the second and the third part of this dialogue. Socrates claims that rhetoric is “a sort of knack gained by experience (...) producing a kind of gratification and pleasure.”<sup>19</sup> Socrates tells to Polus, “I call this sort of thing pandering (...) it makes pleasure its aim instead of good.”<sup>20</sup> Through Callicles answers to Socrates and his attitude, Plato demonstrates the practical implications of the moral-less rhetoric in the realm of politics. Callicles boldly affirms that nature and convention are different and by nature “right is judged to be superior ruling over the inferior and having the upper hand.”<sup>21</sup> He also identifies good with pleasure and ridicules Socrates’ insistence on self-control by saying that man should “encourage his appetites to be as strong as possible instead of repressing them, and be able by means of his courage and intelligence to satisfy them in all their intensity by providing them with whatever they hap-

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

pen to desire.”<sup>22</sup> Contrasting to this, Socrates is equating the Greek ideal of “excellence” with “certain order and rightness.”<sup>23</sup> He allows for “two kinds of political oratory” in which one is “pandering and shameful mass oratory” and the other “is fine, which aims at making the souls of the citizens as good as possible and is always striving to say what is best, whether it is pleasing or not to the ears of the audience.”<sup>24</sup>

The right use of rhetoric in politics will bring order and rightness in the souls of people. He evaluates the careers of the celebrated politicians of the past – Pericles, Cimon, Themistocles, and Miltiades of Marathon – and finds them wanting in this aspect of bettering the people under their care.<sup>25</sup>

Socrates asks, “am I to do battle with the Athenians with the intention of making them as good as possible, like a doctor, or to behave like a servant whose aim is to please?” to which Callicles says, “you should be the city’s servant” implying that Socrates should please the people than to strive to make their souls better.<sup>26</sup> Socrates at the end of the dialogue points that a true politician should be “a good man devoted to the practice of virtue.”<sup>27</sup>

In this dialogue, Plato is contrasting his art of Philosophy with the popular alternative of Sophism of his days. He was developing the definitions of a true philosopher and philosophy against the conception of Sophists. He portrayed philosophy as something which strives at the betterment of people’s soul though it is unpopular like a doctor among the children whereas the pan-

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

dering as a cook who delights children with goodies.<sup>28</sup> In the same way, he portrayed Socrates, who is willing to live a righteous life and suffer wrong, like a true philosopher and seeker of truth in contrast to a self-seeking politician who is expert in pandering.<sup>29</sup> Through the dialogue with Callicles, Plato shows the danger of tyranny lurking in the educational values taught by Sophists and shallowness of mere persuasion which lacks instruction. Plato is aiming to “draw a sharp line of demarcation between the activities of philosophy and rhetoric.”<sup>30</sup> McCoy further says in concluding her analysis of the dialogue:

In the *Gorgias*, Plato seems to move between pushing together and pulling apart the philosopher and the rhetorician in order to make the unclear clear, but also the clear unclear again, in order to develop his understanding of philosophy. Part of the activity of the philosopher is to continue to explore the boundaries of philosophy in relation to other activities. Rhetoric is not merely a useful foil for drawing contrasts between it and philosophy. Plato sees rhetoric as sharing a sufficient number of characteristics with the philosophical, such that it also forces us to ask further critical questions about the nature of reasoning, the value of the intellectual life, the consistency of belief, and the like.<sup>31</sup>

The full development of these themes and the application of the discipline of philosophy in politics will be fully explored by Plato in the later dialogues. The philosopher-king presented in *Republic* could be seen as a complete contrast to Polus idea of a tyrant whom all envy and Callicles’ vision of a politician who would use rhetoric for his own advantage or to appease the masses. Guthrie says that in *Gorgias* Plato, “deplored the breach

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> M. McCoy, *Plato*, p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

between the man of action (whom the world called *sophos*) and the philosopher, and described in detail in the *Republic* the ideal combination of philosopher and ruler."<sup>32</sup> Subtly, Plato had explored his ideas of philosophy and a philosopher with Sophists and their application of rhetoric in education and politics as his foil.

#### 4 Gregory and Eunomians

Gregory's descriptions of his opponents in the opening lines of the first theological oration invoke the image of Sophists in the writings of Plato. Talking about his opponents, Gregory says,

I shall address my words to those whose cleverness is in words (...). There are people, believe me, who not only have 'itching ears:' their tongues, also and now, I see, even their hands itch to attack my arguments. They delight in the 'profane and vain babblings and contradictions of the Knowledge falsely so-called,' and in 'strife of words' which lead to no useful result. 'Strife of words' – that is the term given to all elaborate verbiage by Paul (...). These people I speak of have versatile tongues and are resourceful in attacking doctrines nobler and worthier than their own. 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.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy: Plato the Man and His Dialogues*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 299.

<sup>33</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, "The Five Theological Orations," in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, vol. 13, ed. A.F.J. Klijn J. den Boeft, G. Quispel, J.H. Waszink and J.C.M. van Winden, trans. Lionel Wickham and

He continues to talk about Eunomians love for sensationalism and “complete obsession with setting and solving conundrums,” by saying:

They are like the promoters of wrestling-bouts in the theaters and not even the sort of bouts which are conducted in accordance with the rules of the sport and lead to the victory of one of the antagonists, but the sort which are stage-managed to give the uncritical spectators visual sensations and compel their applause. Every square in the city has to buzz with their arguments, every party must be made tedious by their boring nonsense. No feast, no funeral is free from them: their wranglings bring gloom and misery to the feasters and console the mourners with the example of an affliction graver than death. Even women in the drawing-room, that sanctuary of innocence, are assailed, and the flower of modesty is despoiled by this rushing into controversy.<sup>34</sup>

Eunomians are conducting theology like a political campaign by garnering the public support through rhetorical activities and creating strife through doctrinal divisions. Gregory utilized this to describe them in the platonic mold to brand them as Sophists. He was alarmed by these methods used by Eunomians to propagate their theology in a highly charged political environment before the Council of Constantinople. He was also equally flabbergasted by the way Eunomians went about doing the task of theology which trivialized it. He says that because of these behaviors “the great mystery of our faith is in danger of becoming a mere social accomplishment.”<sup>35</sup> Gregory was concerned that the very nature of theology which is mystical and spiritual

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Frederick Williams, *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), p. 217, (27.1).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* (27.2).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

for him was at the risk of being turned into a logical accomplishment of the theologian. The character of the theologian is also at being misrepresented. So in the first theological oration, Gregory sets out to define both theology and the theologian according to the tradition of the Church and the Scripture.

Eunomians considered knowing God as a logical problem which is to be solved rationally. That is evident in their conception of knowing God through God's name – 'ingenerate.' These assumptions affected the way they conceived the task and nature of theology. Vaggione describes the method of Eunomius as follows:

By applying rational argument, he had abandoned the humble confidence essential to faith. His error, then, was as much one of orientation as of method, for after all in other hands 'logic' had proved harmless enough. If in his, 'theology' had become 'technology' the reason could only lie in the attitude with which it was used, that of overweening curiosity or presumption.<sup>36</sup>

Eunomians methodology changed the nature of theology to technology. But contrary to this methodology, Gregory underlined the limits of logic and reason, as Norris says: "Nazianzen's antagonists were logic choppers, people who did not grasp the limited nature of the discipline, let alone the major issues entailed theology. As I have argued elsewhere, the Theologian was a master of technical rhetoric who knew the rules and went beyond them with panache."<sup>37</sup>

Gregory considered Eunomians' excessive use of logic, clever words and unduly optimistic theological epistemology as con-

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<sup>36</sup> R. P. Vaggione, *Eunomius*, p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> Frederick W. Norris, "Gregory Contemplating the Beautiful: Knowing Human Misery and Divine Mystery through and Being Persuaded by Images," in *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections*, ed. Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), p. 22.

trary to the real nature of theology. For him, theology – which has knowing God and talking about Him as its primary objective – has great dignity and it should not be trivialized. He says, “Discussion of theology is not for everyone (...) it is no such inexpensive or effortless pursuit. Nor (...) is it for every occasion, or every audience; neither are all its aspects open to inquiry. It must be reserved for certain occasions, for certain audiences, and certain limits must be observed.”<sup>38</sup> Theology is more than mere intellectual arguments to win a debate, but the Eunomians were trivializing it by making “every square in the city (...) buzz with their arguments.”<sup>39</sup> For Gregory, there is a due season for the discussion of theology. Theological content of ‘generation’ of God and God’s being are not to be talking in front of non-believers, because it would ultimately lead them to “take it in a crude, obscene, material sense.”<sup>40</sup> There are so many other philosophical issues a person can debate about and “in these questions to hit the mark is not useless, to miss it is not dangerous,” but it is not the same with God because “the knowledge we shall have in this life will be little.”<sup>41</sup> The dignity due to God ought to be given when someone approaches Him. Seeking his opponents’ mutual agreement “to utter spiritual truths with the restraint due to them, to discuss holy things in a holy manner, and not to broadcast to profane hearing what is not to be divulged,” Gregory sets a boundary for talk about God and Godly things.<sup>42</sup>

The nature of theology is dignified because of the subject matter it deals with. Gregory considers the vision of trinitarian God

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<sup>38</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, “Theological Orations,” in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, p. 218. (27.3).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217, (27.2).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220, (27.6).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223, (27.10).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220, (27.5).

as the real scope of theology. However, immediately points to the limitations to this theological inquiry. He says in the second theological oration, “no one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in his nature and essence.”<sup>43</sup> One should investigate “only aspects within our grasp, and only to the limit of the experience and capacity of the audience” because it is just like “excess of sound or food” which “injures the hearing or general health.”<sup>44</sup> But immediately clarifies by saying “it is not the continual remembrance of God I seek to discourage, but continual discussion of theology.”<sup>45</sup>

There is a clear distinction in his theology between *theologia* and *oikonomia*. He unequivocally affirms that no one can see the “averted figure of God” but only “the grandeur,” “the majesty inherent in the created things he has brought forth and governs.”<sup>46</sup> He lists the saints of the Scripture – Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Elijah, Manoah, Peter, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul and John – and says that despite their supernatural experiences they had only “the vision of God” or “presence” of God which is completely different from God’s nature or essence.<sup>47</sup> In this way, Gregory describes theology as a task which should be done differently than how Eunomians were doing.

The juxtaposition of the nature of theology in Eunomians and Gregory brings out the bigger picture. The rationalistic tendency of Eunomian theology had the danger of exalting the rational subject over the object because, as Anatolios says, “the claim to know the essence is akin to naming oneself as the ‘parent’ of a

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 233, (28.17).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 218-19, (27.3).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 219, (27.3).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 225, (28.3)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 234-6. (28.18-20)



reality.”<sup>48</sup> However, in the second theological oration Gregory demonstrates that this rationalistic understanding is not even possible with things around us whose empirical data we possess, let alone the infinite being of God.<sup>49</sup> He says later: “when we abandon faith to take the power of reason as our shield when we use philosophical inquiry to destroy the credibility of the Spirit, then reason gives way in the face of the vastness of the realities (...) Faith is what gives fulness to our reasoning.”<sup>50</sup> Gregory is not opposing the reason but rather Eunomius’ use of only reason in theology.<sup>51</sup>

Because the end of theology is not rational and comprehensible knowledge of God but salvation through the saving knowledge, for Gregory, “theology is ultimately not a speculative *theoria* that produces knowledge from deduction, rather a personal communion with God which initiates by intimation or sanctification.”<sup>52</sup> Norris summarises the *spiritual nature of theology* in Gregory by saying: “For him, theology is fundamentally mysterious; it is not logical/propositional. Theology is a confessional endeavor best pursued through preaching and worship led by one who understands such things.”<sup>53</sup> In this way, contrary to Eunomians’ rationalistic, objectivistic and propositional theo-

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<sup>48</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 163.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, “Theological Orations,” in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, pp. 237-42, (28.22-29).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260, (29.21).

<sup>51</sup> Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 113.

<sup>52</sup> John A. McGuckin, “‘Perceiving Light from Light in Light’ (Oration 31.3): The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Gregory the Theologian,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39, no. 1-2 (Spr 1994), p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> F. W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness*, p. 101.

gy, Gregory presents a picture of theology which is experiential, subjectivistic and relational.

The portrait of the theologian emerging from the Eunomian system is that of a logic-chopper who would understand God non-discursively and conceive the infinite reality with one name.<sup>54</sup> Eunomius derives this conception from his doctrine of creation and the belief in the pre-existence of the soul. He believed that God created souls in the act of creation and at birth, this pre-existent soul is infused in the body by the providence of God.<sup>55</sup> This pre-existent soul has an innate knowledge of necessary things, and this knowledge includes the name of God. He developed his theory of names around this understanding. He argued that God had given each created thing a name which describes its nature accurately because without this Adam and Eve would not have known which plant to eat and which was poisonous.

Thus for Eunomius names are not created by human usage but rather given by God according to their nature. So the event of Adam naming animals brought to him by God in the Genesis account "did not indicate that man invented the names of the living creatures but that God gave names to them which not only were naturally adapted to the creatures themselves but also were adapted to man's need to know and use the creatures."<sup>56</sup> Thus the soul's innate knowledge implies that a theologian need not try hard to understand God but just need to know one name to describe everything about God.

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<sup>54</sup> R. P. Vaggione, *Eunomius*, p. 93.

<sup>55</sup> Nemesius of Emesa, *On the Nature of Man*, ed. William Telfer, vol. 4, *The Library of Christian Classics*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), 281-3; R. P. Vaggione, *Eunomius*, p. 119.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas A. Kopecek, *A History of Neo-Arianism*, vol. 2, *Patristic Monograph Series*, vol. 8 (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd, 1979), p. 463.

Contrasting this, Gregory portrays a different picture as Beeley says, “Christian theology involves and represents a dynamic, lived relationship between God and the theologian” in which the theologian is transformed through purification “within the horizon of God’s presence and activity in the world, as it is recognized and celebrated in the life of the Church.”<sup>57</sup> Gregory believes in the synthetic nature of human being. In his oration on Theophany, Gregory says that God first created the “intelligible world” with Angelic beings and then the “material and visible.”<sup>58</sup> The third stage is the creation of the human being like a mixture of previous stages – a synthetic being, as Gregory says,

From matter, which already existed, he took the body, putting within it the breath that comes from himself. (...) So he set upon the earth a kind of second world, great in its littleness: another kind of angel, a worshiper of mixed origins. (...) He is at the same time spirit and flesh... He is a living being: cared for in this world, transferred to another, and, as the final stage of the mystery, made divine by his inclination towards God.<sup>59</sup>

This account effectively modifies Eunomian conception of creation, as Ruether comments that in Gregory “the pre-existence of the human soul as part of the spiritual creation is rejected and is replaced by the more conventional scheme of man’s creation after the creation of the material world.”<sup>60</sup> This account also infuses spiritual meaning to the task of theology as man is now conceived as a part of the “creation rooted in the material order but not limited by its terms, whose ultimate destiny is to rise

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<sup>57</sup> C. A. Beeley, *Trinity*, p. 64.

<sup>58</sup> Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 121, (38.9 & 10).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122, (38.11).

<sup>60</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (Lima: Academic Renewal Press, 2003), p. 130.

beyond corporeal limitation to a spiritual union with God.”<sup>61</sup> This makes Gregory to insist that the theologian should undergo “purification of body and soul.”<sup>62</sup> Norris comments on this emphasis by saying that the theologian “must have been educated, tested and presently be in the process of purification because the human condition makes it painstakingly difficult to raise philosophical questions about God at the right time.”<sup>63</sup> For Gregory words proper to God are developed only in contemplative life and “an Orthodox theologian had to develop within himself a keen sense of moderation and the awareness that ‘words proper to God’ can only be obtained by taking up ascetic life.”<sup>64</sup> That is why he accuses Eunomians of trying “to mold other men 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.”<sup>65</sup> He is asking rhetorically whether the theologian who wants to speak about God has practiced self-sacrificing ascetical actions like hospitality, brotherly love, wifely affection, virginity, feeding poor, singing psalms, nightlong vigils, penitence, mortification of the body with fasting, establishing mastery over passions etc.<sup>66</sup> These disciplines prepares a theologian to

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<sup>61</sup> John A. McGuckin, “The Vision of God in St. Gregory Nazianzen,” in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 32, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1997), p. 150f.

<sup>62</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, “Theological Orations,” in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, p. 218, (27.3).

<sup>63</sup> F. W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness*, p. 89.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel Rogich, “The Development of a Theologian According to Saint Gregory the Theologian,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39, no. 1-2 (Spr 1994), p. 71f.

<sup>65</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, “Theological Orations,” in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, pp. 222-3, (27.9).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221, (27.7); Brian Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus, Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), pp. 39-45; Dariusz Zagórski, “The Model of the

know God and to talk about him, as McGuckin explains “for asceticism quiets, simplifies, and prepares the soul for contemplation, and this is an image of the next age when the human conditions will be radically simplified, when it will transcend all motion and division, and when it will receive God ‘in the heart’ as it is finally ‘made like to God.’”<sup>67</sup> These ascetical practices bring about an ontological transformation to the theologian because it removes the hinderances of flesh and makes human beings to see God better. Though the ascetical practices initiated by the theologian play an important role in the process of purification, its ontological character makes God the author of this process as Beeley points out that “while purification involves real ascetical effort and concrete practices, Gregory is equally concerned to emphasize that the ultimate source of purification is God.”<sup>68</sup> Theologian also does not possess the full knowledge of God but only a partial yet real knowledge. In the fourth theological oration, Gregory says, “Our noblest theologian is not one who has discovered the whole – our earthly shackles do not permit us the whole – but one whose mental image is by comparison fuller, who has gathered in his mind a richer picture, outline, or whatever we call it, of the truth.”<sup>69</sup> Gregory defines the nature of theology as a quest to know God despite the human limitations which ultimately transforms the seeker into a spiritual person to know and talk about God in a

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Perfect Christian in the Writings of Gregory of Nazianzus,” in *Sudia Patristica*, vol. 51, ed. T. Khomych A. Brent, O. Vakula and M. Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2011), pp. 69-73. Zagórski presents Gregory’s teachings on perfection in three stages: *praxis negativa* (cleansing from evil), *praxis positiva* (progress towards good) and contemplation of God.

<sup>67</sup> J. A. McGuckin, “Perceiving Light from Light in Light,” p. 16.

<sup>68</sup> C. A. Beeley, *Trinity*, p. 84.

<sup>69</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, “Theological Orations,” in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, p. 274, (30.17).

limited sense because of humanly limitations. This is contrasted continuously with the boldness and rashness of Eunomians in talking about God as if he were a material object. In the same way, Gregory also portrays the theologian as a seeker of God who gradually grows in the knowledge of God through ascetical practices and gets transformed in his person to talk about God meaningfully by the limitations placed by the synthetic nature of man, without violating the incomprehensible nature of God. He develops it against the Eunomian notion of a theologian who is a logician who can encompass the divine reality in a single name and talk about the essence and nature of God without any inhibition.

## **5 Conclusion**

The result emerging out of this comparison is the way Plato and Gregory defined philosophy and theology, keeping their opponents as a foil. We have seen how Plato utilized the issue of the use and abuse of rhetoric in *Sophist* to define philosophy and highlight the shortcomings of sophistical rhetoric. In *Gorgias*, he highlighted the theoretical inconsistencies in the sophistical rhetoric and stark lack of moral obligation in its application in politics to portray Socrates as someone who embodies the true notion of philosopher and practitioner of philosophy. Gregory also defined theology by contrasting the method used to conduct the theological inquiry. He highlighted the dignity and nature of theology to showcase its inconsistency with the character and behavior of the Eunomians. The portrayal of Eunomians as political lobbyists and logician is a stark contrast to the definition of theology and character of theologian he develops in the *Theological Orations*. Gregory effectively made use of the historical dispute between Plato and Sophists for the task of

defining these fundamental issues. He also scored a polemic point against the Eunomians by invoking the image of Plato-Sophists dispute in the mind of educated Greek audience at Constantinople. When the pro-Nicene cause was under siege by the 'logic choppers,' Gregory's attempt effectively highlighted the moral and theological problem in the Eunomian theology which distorts the true nature of theology and misrepresents them. This became the entry point for Gregory to successfully talk about the doctrinal issues about God and his being. Holmes describes this polemic move in the face of popular support Eunomians enjoyed in the capital during that time by saying,

Gregory's point would seem to be polemical: he is suggesting or implying that the Eunomian majority in Constantinople have been neglecting instruction on the core matters of the gospel to promote their own partisan views. In so doing, they show themselves careless of people, who need practical instruction in Christian spirituality, not polemic speculations about the eternal life of God. Anyone so careless of the proper charge of a Christian teacher should not be believed when he speaks about matters of theology since he has already demonstrated that he lacks the necessary virtue and holiness.<sup>70</sup>

This similarity not only shows the influence of Plato on Gregory but also the role of Greek *paideia* in later fourth-century theology which helped Gregory to use this famous historical conflict imbedded in Greek historical consciousness for the service of Christian theology. Thus, the pointer of Norris that "for Nazianzen, the opponents are sophists (...) part of this theological argument renews the older disagreements between Plato and Gorgias"<sup>71</sup> is demonstrable when we read Gregory in the light of

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<sup>70</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity*, Christian Doctrines in Historical Perspective, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), p. 111.

<sup>71</sup> F. W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness*, p. 86.

Plato's disagreement with the Sophists. There is no doubt that the words of the *Theological Orations* of Gregory would have made the listeners to equate the Eunomians with Sophists who were *mere* rhetoricians who sensationalize and score a point for their own benefit and to consider Gregory as a theologian who has contemplative experience and spiritual competence to talk about God. No wonder within a few decades from this oration – in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon – he has conferred the privilege of being called, apart from Apostle John, “the Theologian.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12. Later Symeon was called the New Theologian by the Eastern Orthodox Church.



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