

GREGORY OF NYSSA (c. 335-c. 395), also known as Gregory Nyssen; Christian theologian. With his elder brother, Basil of Caesarea (c. 329-379), and Basil's lifelong friend, Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-c. 391), Gregory of Nyssa was a principal architect and interpreter both of the trinitarian settlement canonized by the ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381) and, in his later years, of the ascetic and mystical tradition of Eastern monasticism.

Little is known of the details of Gregory's life. The child of an aristocratic Christian family of Cappadocia, he had two bishops among his brothers, while his elder sister, Macrina, whose biography is numbered among his works, was a noted and saintly ascetic. Destined for an ecclesiastical career, Gregory was early made a lector in the church and was educated in the local schools at Caesarea, thus missing the opportunity to study, as Basil had, at one or more of the great cosmopolitan centers of learning. Nevertheless, Gregory decided in favor of marriage (with a woman named Theosebeia) and the career of a professional rhetorician, which he took up in earnest around 365.

Gregory's first known work was the treatise *On Virginity*, which he wrote in defense of the ascetic life, apparently at the behest of Basil. Shortly after its composition, Basil, now the metropolitan bishop of Caesarea, found himself badly in need of episcopal allies in his struggle with the Arian orthodoxy of the imperial court. Accordingly, he induced Gregory to be ordained bishop of Nyssa (371), a small town on the river Halys, some eighty miles northwest of Caesarea. The job fit neither Gregory's tastes nor his talents, but he carried on until a synod of Arian bishops, assembled at Nyssa in his absence, deposed him (376) on a charge of maladministration of funds.

The year 379, which saw both the death of Basil and the accession of an anti-Arian, pro-Nicene emperor in the person of Theodosius I, marked a turning point in Gregory's life. For one thing, it raised him to prominence in the life of the church: he was chosen (though by his own choice he did not long remain) the metropolitan bishop of Sebaste in Armenia I; he figured prominently at the Council of Constantinople in 381; and he functioned as a regular "special preacher" in Theodosius's capital.

More important still, Gregory, on the death of Basil, took up the cudgels against his brother's principal theological opponent, the radical Arian Eunomius. In all he composed four treatises entitled *Against Eunomius* during the years 380-383. His continuation of his brother's work in the debate with Arianism was paralleled by his completion of Basil's exegetical homilies on the creation story of Genesis 1. To this end Gregory wrote a lengthy treatise, *On the Making of Man*, many of whose themes and issues are echoed in his contemporary *Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection*, which he presents as a conversation between himself and his dying sister Macrina. In all of these works Gregory exhibits a remarkable knowledge not only of the Origenist tradition in Christian theology, which Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus had "rediscovered," but also of pagan philosophy in the Neoplatonic idiom; and his indebtedness to these traditions is not the less obvious because he is critically aware of the problems they created for Christian theology.

In his defense of the orthodoxy of the Nicene tradition (i. e., of the doctrine that Son and Spirit are "of one being" with God), Gregory insists, with Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus, that the three hypostases of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share a single being or substance (*ousia*): each is all that the others are. Furthermore, every action or operation of God is one in which all three hypostases share: as there is one divine being, so there is one divine *energeia*. What differentiates the "persons" is solely the relations of causation or origination in which they stand to one another. God appears in Gregory's thought as a single being that is articulated through relations of strict self-reproduction.

In taking this stand, Gregory repudiated the Arian hierarchy of divine hypostases, which established the identity of the Son, or Word, and the Spirit by insisting that they were things of a different (and inferior) order in relation to God, mediating between God and world. The fundamental error in this Arian position, as Gregory saw it, lay in the belief that the being of God is definable and hence limited: that Son and Spirit can be distinguished from God because their definitions are different from God's. He insists, on the contrary, that no human words or ideas grasp the *ousia* of God, which is infinite and illimitable Good; and for this reason the distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit belongs not to the order of being but to that of cause or relation.

This doctrine of the divine infinity is closely related to a central anthropological theme that appears in Gregory's treatise *On the Making of Man* as well as in certain of his later ascetic works. As might be expected in one whose thought was so closely allied to Platonist and Christian-Platonist traditions, Gregory, like Origen before him, has difficulties about the bodily dimension of the human being. On this score he corrects Origen by insisting that soul and body come simultaneously into being and that embodiment is no product of a previous fall. Nevertheless he makes this critical move with a caution that reveals his sympathy with Origen's deprecation of the body. Where he corrects Origen most firmly is in the latter's treatment of human finitude and mutability. For Gregory, mutability, the capacity for unending change, is the characteristic of the human creature that corresponds to divine infinity and incomprehensibility. It is envisaged not primarily as the ever-present possibility of departure from God, but even more as the condition of eternal progress into the infinite Good—Gregory's definition of salvation.

These theological themes are developed in Gregory's later ascetic writings (especially in his *Life of Moses* and his fifteen *Homilies on the Song of Songs*) into the beginnings of a mystical doctrine that is closely integrated with his understanding of baptism and the life that it initiates. For him the processes of moral purification and spiritual illumination come to no final end precisely because there is no end to the Good that they seek. They issue, as did Moses' pilgrimage, in an entrance into "the cloud" that symbolizes divine incomprehensibility and infinity. In Gregory's spiritual teaching, therefore, there is an anticipation of the path that apophatic mysticism was to take in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite.