

Patristic Precedents

Enter the Trinity

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER I DISCUSSED SEVERAL CONTESTED QUESTIONS in placial reflection, among them: What (if anything) causes place? Is place primarily a feature of preconstituted expanses, or of subjective experience and intellection, or of both? Do certain places signify things across cultures? And finally, what accounts for the seeming association between placial analysis and epistemological analysis? I also proposed a working definition of place—or better, placial sensibility—on which to base my later constructive proposal. Taking cues from Bachelard, Heidegger, and Tuan, I suggested that place, generally speaking, is best understood as having to do with both subjective experience and the given-ness of the world. Each of the three thinkers just mentioned parse this differently, but each uphold it; and moreover, this understanding of place draws on some of the same philosophical currents which influence Moltmann and Marion.

In this chapter I shall leap backward in time to the fourth century, the time during which many of the foundations of Christian trinitarian thought were laid down. For this is not just a dissertation on place, but on place and trinity. When one takes a placial eye to trinitarian theology, one notices placial language and concepts were a part of trinitarian discourse from the beginning—and, further, that their presence tends to indicate questions about how human beings can have knowledge of God.

I shall then all too briefly discuss four trinitarian models—two ancient, and two contemporary—as evidence for an affirmative answer to this question. I chose these particular theologians because they help me to tell

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a particular story, one in which encountering the Logos—perceiving it, receiving it, having it show up within some kind of field or horizon or experience—means very different things depending on one’s assumptions about place. So, too, with the Spirit. How one understands the Spirit’s work to be “here” in creation, depends in no small way upon what one understands by “here.” These placial assumptions, I suggest, invariably become formalized in a theologian’s understanding of the trinity.

Laying the problem out in this fashion goes a long way toward suggesting which sorts of passages are most attention worthy for the present project. What I am looking for is some kind of consonance between how an author positions the three persons vis-à-vis each other, and how that same author understands place more generally. Sometimes the influence will run more in one direction—a theologian’s assumptions about place dictating how the three persons may be conceptually arranged—and sometimes it will run in the opposite direction. Most often, I think, we see a dual influence, a sympathy between what triunity is supposed to accomplish and how place and place are supposed to work. And, of course, there are also important points of dissimilarity as well, which I shall try to note: the stops, the qualifications, the reserve that each author uses to keep God God and creation created.

With that, let us turn to the focus of the present chapter. Here I shall consider a few examples of the placial elements of fourth century trinitarian thought, and how they intersect with theories of knowledge on the one hand and pneumatology on the other. These are offered as examples only, albeit ones particularly fruitful for the constructive project I will begin to sketch in chapter five. I regret that these will need to be offered as examples only—rather than a more systematic treatment of patristic notions of place—but the scope of my argument requires it. I shall discuss four church fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine) and the three conceptual angles (pneumatology, place, and theory of knowledge); and one could write an entire dissertation by taking any name from the first grouping and pairing it with any theme from the second. That said, I have not chosen my interlocutors haphazardly. Pneumatology, triunity, and the possibility for knowledge of God—all of these occupy Christian theological reflection to a profound degree in the fourth and early fifth centuries, and happily that has been covered by abler interpreters than I.¹ What I shall attempt to contribute, though, is attention to

1. To name but one example, Jaroslav Pelikan’s Gifford lectures treat exactly this

how those theological concerns draw upon, refuse, qualify, and illuminate place—or better, placial language and metaphors; since place itself is not categorized in the way which I will ultimately advocate for.

One more preliminary word on my choice of interlocutors. Pitting Augustine's trinitarian thought against that of the Cappadocian fathers has become a well-established and well-pedigreed theological move. Whereas the Basil and the Gregories defined the three divine persons through their relationships to each other, the argument goes, Augustine affixed the trinity to a single and static divine essence. This is believed to account for the persistent tendency in the West to stick with a metaphysic of substance, a universe of fixed and self-enclosed things only incidentally related to all the other fixed and self-enclosed things. God, on this view, winds up as the very thingiest of things—so fixed as to be unchanging, so unconditioned as to need nothing, never changing, never qualified. In order to resolve this unhappy state of affairs, the West would do well (according to this particular critique) to retrieve some theological resources from the East, which has consistently outperformed the West in its ability to find a place for relation and alterity. In particular, a more Cappadocian trinitarian theology would present God in terms of dynamic relation rather than fixed essence. Versions of this criticism have been offered by, among others, Karl Rahner, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, John Zizioulas and Colin Gunton. Recent years have seen a reaction against this tendency, with Lewis Ayres, Michel Rene Barnes, and John Cavadini urging caution against reductive or anachronistic readings of Augustine—readings, for example, that portray Augustine as a Neo-Platonist with only the thinnest of Christian veneers; or, conversely, readings that portray Augustine as fundamentally an exegete of a proto-modern subjectivity.²

I do not intend to engage this dispute head-on, but I cannot manage to sidestep it entirely. Within the very narrow confines I have specified—that is, the placial aspects of these thinkers' trinitarian models and theological epistemology—I do detect a fundamental similarity. Basil, Nyssen, Nazianzen, and Augustine all sense a similar danger when it comes to placing the trinity: the danger that human knowledge may presume to mark and measure God. (This is, to put it mildly, a worry shared by at least one of the contemporary theologians we shall consider, Jean-Luc Marion.) There may well be a difference in emphasis, on this point, between a generally

nexus of themes in Cappadocian theology. Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*.

2. Cavadini, "Darkest Enigma," 119–32.

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Cappadocian expression of this worry and Augustine's expression. For the Cappadocians, delimiting something conceptually typically involves a movement around the boundary of the thing—a delimitation, a marking of a perimeter. This holds when they warn against making God into something circumscribed (*perigrapton*). I see it evoked as well by *epinoia*, the abstracted means of apprehending the hidden things which are true of God but which nonetheless do not presume to pick out the divine nature. For Augustine, generally, knowledge about God is refracted onto finite intellects according to a logic of “inner” and “outer.” To presume to see God as an item in one's own landscape—to pick God out, and represent God to oneself as a quantity one understands exhaustively—is, for Augustine, to make a mental representation of something, call it “God,” locate it in one's mind, and then believe that one straightforwardly knows God. If there is a difference, it is difference in emphasis only, and not a point of disagreement. In any event, the sting of the worry is the same: the potential for an arrogant and overreaching human intellect to deem worthy of worship a product of its own activity.

At the same time, knowledge of the triune God must still be possible, or how can such a God be worshipped and loved? This worry haunts the Cappadocians, and certainly haunts Augustine. If we cannot pick God out as just another item accessible to human intellect, how can we know God at all? I see the Cappadocians, and Augustine, answering this question in ways whose placial implications are both similar and pneumatologically significant. Here Basil, the Gregories, and Augustine are concerned that presuming to locate God makes human intellect, so to speak, “fill all things.” Human reason, in such an instance, acts as the master situater that is not itself situated; it marks off, delimits, circumscribes, and generates straightforward representations of all things, even God. This state of affairs is theologically disastrous because, of course, God must be confessed as the one who fills all things—marking off and delimiting the cosmos, creating and circumscribing and ordering all creatures. In the previous chapter, we encountered critiques of a definition of place having only to do with extension in domains. That critique is not explicitly indicated here, either for the Cappadocians or for Augustine. On the few occasions when place is thematized, for all the patristic interlocutors treated in this chapter, it does tend to indicate corporeal extension within the created domain. Mostly, less is said; place shows up just long enough for it to become clear that God is not placed, by which all four mean that God is not extended. So while it would

be a mistake to portray these fourth-century theologians proto-Cartesians, neither (for example) are they proto-Bachelardians.

Yet certainly Basil and Augustine, and possibly also the Gregories to a lesser degree, indicate a kind of placial rehabilitation that is not altogether hostile to some of the insights of the modern and postmodern placial advocates. Such a rehabilitation will not put God into place—indeed, emphatically will not do so—but it will put certain things, which we can anachronistically call placial, into the trinitarian economy. What we postmodern readers might thematize as the placial aspects of experiential knowledge, are, for these theologians, situated by the trinitarian economy, which it is possible—under certain conditions—to imagine as a place. This trinitarian placing is sometimes christologically indicated, but often seems especially appropriate to the Spirit.

Basil of Caesarea

For Basil, Nyssen, and Nazianzen, and their contemporaries, to know something typically involves an activity of circumscription: picking out an intra-cosmic sensible or intelligible thing from among its surroundings, and understanding it through the conformation of mind to thing. But when faced with the Arian and semi-Arian heresies of the day—particularly those of the Eunomians—the Cappadocians qualify the scope of human knowledge in order to safeguard the divinity of the Son and the Spirit. Through appeals to causality and time, and by mapping the difference between “unbegotten” and “begotten” onto a difference in essence, the Eunomians argued that the Son was below the Father in rank and divinity. Unbegotten, they had contended, “circumscribed” the Father while begotten “circumscribed” the Son; this is true simply by virtue of how description and apprehension normally work. A difference is named, and therefore—according to the Eunomians—we are clearly talking about two different things: the unbegotten Father and the begotten Son. The ongoing hashing-out of the Son’s status yielded a number of theological positions related to the divinity of Christ and Nicaea’s famous *homoousios*: from those in the Nicene camp who disagreed over how and to what extent the Son was *homoousios* with the Father; to the semi-Arians who affirmed *homoousios* but, practically speaking, preferred to stress the differences between Father and Son; to the outright Arians who believed the Son to be a creature. Indeed, even the categories of “deity” and “creature”—and their scope—were

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under negotiation; and this may have been the most contested issue of all. As Ayres explains, the fourth century controversies were not a matter of asking “Are the Son and Spirit divine?” with one side answering “yes” and the other “no.” Rather, at issue was the proper way to talk about divinity, and more than that, what sort of a property divinity is—whether it can be possessed in degrees, for example.³

As the controversy raged on, all parties realized that the status of the Spirit was very much a live issue too. Indeed, whoever managed to win the day on pneumatology would also be victorious on the matter of the Son.⁴ For if the Spirit admitted semi-divinity, then the force of Nicene Christology—the force of *homoousios*—would be attenuated if not entirely undermined. Likewise if, through reflection on the Spirit, divinity proved to be all-or-nothing, then none of the arguments for a lesser Son could stand. Basil’s status in securing the divinity of the Spirit—and therefore providing substantial parts of the foundation for the conceptual architecture of the trinity—is well established. As David Anderson observes, between 325 and 381, creedal confession proceeded from “We believe in the Holy Spirit” to “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father; and who with the Father is worshipped and glorified.” In between the two is Basil of Caesarea.⁵

At stake for Basil, among other things, was the liturgical language of the church. Not only did his Arian, semi-Arian, and Eunomian opponents presume to divide Father from Son from Spirit. They also presumed to divide up prepositions—in, through, with, etc.—and insist, for example, that a preposition like “through” is appropriate to the Son, who (they believed) mediates the Father’s divinity to humanity while not exactly sharing in it to an equal degree. The Father, according to this logic, could be worshipped “through the Son” but not “with the Son.” Likewise, the Father could be worshipped “in the Spirit” but not “with the Spirit.” Among the many problems with this scheme, in Basil’s eyes, is the fact that it contradicted many churches’ liturgical practices, where prayers and baptisms either implied or outright used “with.” Rhetorically, throughout *On the Holy Spirit*, Basil portrays his opponents as sowers of division. They divide churches from each other by casting doubt on established liturgical practices. They carefully parse and delineate their prepositions, specifying exactly which word

3. Ayres, “On Not Three People,” 449.

4. Anderson, “Introduction,” 11.

5. *Ibid.*, 7.

may be used under which set of conditions, and which other word must be used under which other set of conditions. Most grievously of all, they divide Father from Son from Spirit. In fact, all of these divisions amounted to the same strategy, in Basil's eyes. The heretics' "old trick," Basil bemoans, is to act as though dissimilarity of words entails dissimilarity in fact. They act as if "things whose natures are dissimilar are expressed in dissimilar terms," unfailingly, and that the converse is true also: "dissimilar terms are used to describe things whose natures are dissimilar."⁶

What would account for such a crude and simplistic optimism towards human thought? Basil remarks that his opponents have been "led into this error . . . by their study of pagan writers."⁷ And with that Basil embarks on what I see as a spatial dismantling, offering the faintest beginnings of a placial retrieval. Early in *On the Holy Spirit* Basil recites the Aristotelian typology of causes—final, efficient, material, formal. He also includes "time and place."⁸ "Time and place," he explains, "might seem to contribute nothing to what is being produced, but outside them it would be impossible to make anything, since things are caused within the framework of place and time." The sting of Basil's critique lies in the accusation that his opponents have categorized God according to these categories. "Pagan philosophers... refer[red] to lifeless tools or the most abject work," he asserts, "but now Christians bind the Master of all with prepositions, and are not ashamed to describe the Creator of the universe with language fit for a hammer or a saw."⁹ To do this is to take God—who is simple, and who transcends such distinctions—and introduce divisions, solely for the purpose of making God more comprehensible. The false god thus rendered manifests all the divisions of the divisive human intellect whose terms it meets. This god can be explained according to "[c]ause [which] has one nature, an instrument [which] has another, and place yet another."¹⁰ A perverted pseudo-trinity emerges—with the Father as cause, the Son as instrument, and the Spirit as place—but full of divisions.

Created divisions—for Basil as for Nazianzen and Nyssen—entail frustration, competition, incompleteness, exclusion. They simply cannot be internal to God. In this spirit Basil launches into the (very spatial) spoof of

6. Anderson, *St. Basil the Great On the Holy Spirit*, 18.

7. *Ibid.*, 19.

8. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

9. *Ibid.*, 20.

10. *Ibid.*, 22.

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the only logical conclusion of his opponents' theological divisiveness: the Father and the Son fighting over a chair. "If they think," he mocks, "that the Son sits below the Father, in a lesser place, so that the Father sits above, and pushes the Son to the next seat below, let them say so, and we will be silent."¹¹ Here, again, a close connection emerges between place and epistemology—here having to do specifically with knowledge about God. Human knowledge operates according to divided causes, divided locations, divided vocabulary, and distension across space and time. To allow such reasoning to determine who God is—to demand that trinitarian thought accommodate itself to such divisions—is to require Father, Son, and Spirit to compete for that tiny plot of knowledge to which human reasoning holds the deed. Here the theological error becomes explicitly placial, for it contradicts divine omnipresence. "Anyone with a sound mind believes that God pervades everything," Basil points out, but those who oppose Father and Son "divide up from down." The fact that they have sneaked spatial division into their theological system belies, Basil suggests, their belief in the Father's incorporeality. Functionally, they locate Father and Son "in defined places," even though "[f]orm, shape, and bodily position cannot be invented for God[.]"¹²

Thus spatial and conceptual delimitation, and its close connection to the divisive tendencies of human knowledge, is a constant theme throughout *On the Holy Spirit*. Basil criticizes his opponents' tendency to subsume God to place, time, and causality. At the same time, Basil does not wish to invalidate the possibility of *any* sort of human knowledge about God. Given the deep connection between knowledge and location, might we not therefore assume that Basil theologically rehabilitates both?

"The goal of our calling," he writes, is "to become like God, as far as this is possible for human nature. But we cannot become like God unless we have knowledge of Him[?]"¹³ Yet so often the unmoored pursuit of knowledge leads to the kind of self-indulgent philosophical conversations Basil has been lambasting—where participants vainly categorize and re-categorize different sorts of causality and the kind of prepositions appropriate to each, and assume that God must fit within divisive and partial human concepts. Ultimately Basil affirms a kind of knowledge about God is possible—just as it is possible to make proper theological use of prepositions

11. Ibid., 30.

12. Ibid., 30–31.

13. Ibid., 16.

like “in,” “through,” and “with.” What separates folly from piety—and what separates false circumscription from an appropriate sort of divine-human placing—is the acknowledgement of *human* delimitation and location. God fills all things; we are delimited and finite. If this is admitted, then certain placial terms can be readmitted as well, even if appended to God. *We* are placed *by God*—and specifically by the Holy Spirit.

Here he recalls the earlier, crudely rendered pseudo-trinity of his opponents—where the Father is the cause, the Son is the instrument, and the Spirit is the place. Concerning the Spirit’s status as place, Basil turns his opponents argument against them; the Spirit, correctly understood, actually reverses the prideful human tendency to put God into a place, because the very name Spirit makes incorporeality evident in a way that refuses God’s circumscription. “His first and most proper title,” Basil asserts, “is Holy Spirit, a name most especially appropriate to everything which is incorporeal, purely immaterial, and indivisible”—all traits which human reasoning cannot comprehend. For this reason:

... the Lord taught the Samaritan woman, who thought that God had to be worshipped in specific places, that “God is Spirit.” He wanted to show that an incorporeal being cannot be circumscribed. When we hear the word “spirit” it is impossible for us to conceive of something whose nature can be circumscribed or is subject to change or variation. . . . Instead, we are compelled to direct our thoughts on high[.]¹⁴

Notice the rhetorical contrast here. In one sense, the Spirit functions as a placial refusal—with the Spirit’s “first and most proper title” exactly naming God’s refusal to be circumscribed, in human thought, or in a location. Yet this very Spirit compels us to “direct our thoughts on high.” Nor is this an isolated instance of positive placial language cropping up in the course of Basil’s pneumatology. “[W]ho can listen to the Spirit’s titles and not be lifted up in his soul?” Basil asks.¹⁵ Basil refers to the Spirit as “tak[ing] . . . up His abode in someone’s life.”¹⁶ Later he remarks that “[t]hrough the Holy Spirit comes our restoration to Paradise, our ascension to the Kingdom of heaven[.]”¹⁷ Finally Basil makes it explicit. “Although paradoxical” he

14. *Ibid.*, 42.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 59.

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says, “it is nevertheless true that Scripture frequently speaks of the Spirit in terms of *place*—a place *in* which people are made holy.”¹⁸

Basil holds that it is both possible and appropriate to envision the Spirit as placing Christians, as placing the church—but only if one first roots out one’s own presumptuous tendency to place and circumscribe God. Being placed “in the Spirit” therefore involves a humbling shift in one’s understanding of knowledge itself. “This ‘place,’” he explains, “is contemplation in the Spirit, and when Moses entered this ‘place’ God revealed Himself to him.”¹⁹ As an image, it coheres nicely with the Son’s status as “door” or “way” which Basil had earlier discussed in chapter eight. These titles are not predicated according to the divine nature or essence, but according to the divine energies—those means “by which [God] satisfies the needs of each in His tenderheartedness to His creation.”²⁰ The Spirit is not the place of the Father and Son—“it is more appropriate to say that [the Spirit] dwells *with* them”²¹—but as a place within the trinitarian economy of redemption. In other words, the Spirit places us; and by placing us, allows us to perceive the limited scope of our own finite, circumscribing manner of knowing and placing. “To worship *in* the Spirit implies that our intelligence has been enlightened[,]” not least about its own finite scope.²²

Other features of place remain, however: directionality, navigability, and dwelling. For here is an underlying logic of ascent and descent in Basil’s thought; believers, once “inseparably joined to the Spirit of knowledge[,]” are “led up” through the Son to the Father.²³ This movement is initiated by the descending divine activity it mirrors: the Father’s manifestation in the Son, which is communicated by the sending-down of the Spirit of truth.²⁴ Indwelling abounds—but in ways that confound the calculus of circum-

18. Anderson, *St. Basil the Great On the Holy Spirit*, 94; also given (with translation of “chora”) in Bobrinsky, “Indwelling of the Spirit of Christ,” 57.

19. Anderson, *St. Basil the Great On the Holy Spirit*, 95.

20. *Ibid.*, 36.

21. *Ibid.*, 95.

22. *Ibid.*, 97.

23. *Ibid.*, 74.

24. See especially Anderson, *St. Basil the Great On the Holy Spirit*, 65 (Basil’s 16, 32). Bobrinsky points out that the same logic is evident in Basil’s *Against Heresies*, in which Basil describes “the movement and the pattern of ascension of those who are saved: they ascend through the Spirit to the Son, and through the Son to the Father, and at the end the Son will yield up his work to the Father.” Basil, *Against Heresies*, V.36.2, quoted in Bobrinsky, “Indwelling of the Spirit of Christ,” 55.

scription and delimitation. On the one hand “[t]he Spirit is indeed the dwelling-place of the saints,” but at the same time “the saint is a suitable abode for the Spirit, since he has supplied God with a house, and is called a temple of God.”²⁵ Spirit and saint co-inhere, each dwelling in the other, effecting a bridging of difference. If the heretics would subsume God to place—thereby circumscribing God and introducing division—the Spirit accomplishes precisely the opposite, in ways that evoke place without subsuming God to place.

To be sure, *On the Holy Spirit* is not the only work of Basil’s whose theological themes and arguments pertain to place. In the *Hexaemeron* Basil’s meditation upon the ordering of the cosmos took sharp polemical aim at philosophical sophistry and hubris, but in an innovative and revealing way. Isaac Miller suggests that Basil went further than Philo did in *De opificio mundi*, and indeed stretched the genre conventions of hexaemeral commentary. For Basil, “[t]he natural world was not simply the object about which philosophical debates were waged; it was a participant in these debates, the key to its polemical position being contained in the literal meaning of Genesis.”²⁶ This polemical tone emerges as early as his gloss on Genesis 1.1 in the first homily. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.’ I stop struck with admiration at this thought. What shall I first say? Where shall I begin my story? Shall I show forth the vanity of the Gentiles?”²⁷ The very cosmos argue against the pagan creation accounts which Basil quickly runs through—the arguments of those “philosophers of Greece [who] have made much ado to explain nature” through emanationism or atomism or causality—all “because they knew not how to say ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.’”²⁸ Basil further suggests that these philosophical tendencies accompany an affective tendency towards an unwholesome fascination with the material world. In the third homily, in the reflection on Genesis 1:8—“And God called the firmament heaven”—Basil compares the beauty of the scriptural account of heaven to that of a “chaste woman [which] surpasses that of the harlot,” which he in turn likens to “the inquisitive discussion of philosophers” and

25. Anderson, *St. Basil the Great On the Holy Spirit*, 95.

26. Miller, “Idolatry and the Polemics of World-Formation from Philo to Augustine,” 137.

27. Basil of Caesarea, “The Hexaemeron,” Homily 1, section 2, in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 8.

28. *Ibid.*

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their speculation about heaven.²⁹ And in the fifth homily, Basil goes so far as to say that God chose the third day for the “adornment of the earth” with grants and plants, with an eye to ruling out heliolatry, “that those who worship the sun, as the source of life, may renounce their error.”³⁰ Of course, the more predominant theme in the *Hexaemeron* is not how the cosmos refute theological error, but how they display theological truth. The cosmos displays God’s wise and intricate arrangement of creatures and their respective powers, activities, and environments—a theme we shall shortly see put to use in Gregory Nazianzen’s Theological Orations.

Thus, although I lack the space for an extended treatment of Basil’s *Hexaemeron*, these very sparse quotations indicate a complementary view of place to that used in *On the Holy Spirit*. Revealed knowledge has what we might—somewhat anachronistically, but not entirely anachronistically—call a placial aspect. This holds whether one is considering the place-like activity of the Spirit through which the believer is brought to knowledge about God, as seen in *On the Holy Spirit*. It also holds when one the activity of the cosmos itself which—thanks to God’s providential ordering in the act of creation—actually refutes theological error.

Gregory of Nazianzus

In Gregory of Nazianzus’ Theological Orations, the placial elements are somewhat more muted than in Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit*, although they are not absent. The epistemological elements, though, come out in full force. As Beeley notes, although the Theological Orations constitute Nazianzen’s most famous trinitarian defense, he “begins not with ideas about God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit, but with a rhetorically charged prologue that focuses on the reader’s own character and attitude about God, in order to establish the human conditions for the possibility of knowing God.”³¹ Early

29. Basil, “The Hexaemeron,” Homily 3, section 8, in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 8. As Miller notes, this strikes a different chord than that struck by Augustine in his anti-Manichean writings, in which “Augustine noted in opposition . . . that God took ‘pleasure’ at his own creation. This exegetical reference reversed the message of Basil’s sexual metaphor to warn off the sensuous attachments of the natural philosophers. Divine pleasure, rather than chaste indifference, was the affective model for human contemplation of the cosmos,” Miller, “Idolatry and the Polemics of World-Formation from Philo to Augustine,” 139.

30. Basil, “The Hexaemeron,” Homily 5, section 1, in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 8.

31. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, 65.

on Nazianzen stipulates that knowledge of God does not belong to any thoughtful person whatsoever, but rather to those “who have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified.”³² Even if one has the proper philosophizers, the other conditions might be wrong. “Not before every audience, nor at all times, nor on all points” can one speculate about God, but only “on certain occasions, and before certain persons, and within certain limits[.]”³³

The need for such discretion stems from our tendency to distort things by making them fit the conditions that are easy for us—as creatures possessing both sense and intellect—to impose. Conversely, what we apprehend can overwhelm us—as too much light can overwhelm an eye. Moreover, when such distortions are directed at God, it is (to put it mildly) self-serving. Not only is it easy—in a sloppy and haphazard sense—to set up (for example) the sun as a deity, Nazianzen suggests; but it sets up the human knower as a connoisseur of divinity. Therefore, knowing God involves purifying one’s intellect of that habit into which human beings lapse with frightening ease—namely, taking our own finite sense-perception as the measure and revealer of all that is. From this it follows that part of knowing God is to realize that one will never exactly know God, certainly not in the way one knows another finite creature. Thus in the Second Theological Oration Nazianzen offers the “opinion [that] it is impossible to express [God], and yet more impossible to conceive him” because the “thick covering of the flesh is an obstacle to the full understanding of the truth.”³⁴ It is not that human reasoning is worthless, or natural theology entirely wrongheaded. After all, “our very eyes and the law of nature teach us that God exists and that he is the efficient and maintaining cause of all things.” With our senses—sight in particular—we perceive “visible objects,” their “beautiful stability and progress,” and thereby perceive “natural law, because through these visible things and their order it reasons back to their author.”³⁵ Nazianzen does not merely permit this sort of thinking, but recommends it. Recognition of the basic intelligibility and beauty of creation and its laws is essential for

32. Gregory of Nazianzus, “First Theological Oration,” section 3, in Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 129.

33. Ibid.

34. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Second Theological Oration,” section 4, in *ibid.*, 138.

35. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Second Theological Oration,” section 6, in *ibid.*, 139.

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understanding God as creator, “[A]nd very wanting is sense is he who will not willingly go thus far in following natural proofs[.]”³⁶

The rules change, though, when humans attempt to know God. “Who ever reached this extremity of wisdom?”³⁷ he asks. As with Basil, separation and circumscription serve as hallmarks of finite, embodied knowledge. To overlay any of these onto God is to imply that God is both corporeal (because delimited) and divisible (because corporeal). In other words, to subsume God’s identity to human reason, to bring God under humanity’s purview—even unintentionally, even out of habit—is implicitly to affirm all of these traits of God. For such are the “approximations of reason[.]” Reason identifies circumscribable bodies, finite things, things that can be divided into parts and classified. “[W]hat will you conceive the Deity to be,” asks Nazianzen, “if you rely upon [these] approximations[?] . . . [H]ow is he an object of worship if he be circumscribed? Or how shall he escape being made of elements, and therefore subject to be resolved into them again, or even altogether dissolved?”³⁸

Nazianzen’s point, like Basil’s, is that the Eunomian logic only holds if Father, Son, and Spirit are appropriate quantities for human reasoning to exercise its powers upon. If they are—if “Father” and “Son” function like “table” and “chair”—then indeed the terms “begotten” and “unbegotten” would indicate that Father and Son are two discrete entities. But that is hardly a theologically joyous outcome, suggests Nazianzen. For it implies that division—not only division between Father and Son, but also division between *all* entities that facilitates their being mentally circumscribed—wins the day. No happy fate, when one considers what division ultimately admits: “For every compound is a starting point of strife, and strife of separation, and separation of dissolution.”³⁹ This is true of corporeal things, but Nazianzen’s point is that his opponents are treating God as a corporeal thing by treating God as a quantity upon which finite human reasoning operates perfectly. This contradicts other basic assumptions about God which all parties to the debate would have shared—that “God is boundless (*apeiron*), limitless (*aoriston*), formless (*aschêmatiston*), impalpable (*anaphes*) and invisible (*aoraton*), since all these properties are incompatible with the no-

36. Ibid., 140.

37. Ibid.

38. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Second Theological Oration,” section 7, in Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 140

39. Ibid.

tion of body.”⁴⁰ If we exclude these from the notion of body in God’s special case, then either we are no longer talking about something about which finite concepts and thoughts no longer straightforwardly apply (which is Nazianzen’s claim); or else we are talking about a body that is especially lacking—because it shows up nowhere and has no form. Furthermore, if God is a body, then eventually God will suffer separation (*diastasis*) and dissolution (*lusion*).⁴¹

Nazianzen’s rhetoric implies that his Eunomian opponents are masters of division, separation, and dissolution: they divide Father, Son, and Spirit; they divide the church; and all because they allow human reason—with its finite, fleshy habit of separating corporeal things from each other so as to understand them—free reign. Given half a chance they would introduce theological misunderstandings that threaten to dissolve the very God they claim to worship. Happily, asserts Nazianzen, they are incorrect, and God is *not* corporeal or divisible or circumscribable, “[f]or no inspired teacher has yet asserted or admitted such a notion[.]” If the lexical distinction between “begotten” and “unbegotten” confounds human reasoning, then that is because human reasoning is finite; not because either Father or Son can be divided and circumscribed. In section ten, the discussion of God’s indivisibility, lack of circumscription and (especially) incorporeality naturally turns to a question about God’s place. “Now that we have ascertained that God is incorporeal,” remarks Gregory, it is time to “proceed a little further” and ask, “Is [God] nowhere or somewhere?” If God is nowhere, he continues, then how can one even say that God exists? On the other hand, if God is somewhere, God must be in the universe—either the whole universe, or just a part of it—or in some domain above the universe, which (according to Nazianzen) makes little sense. On what basis would one posit a domain “above” the universe but not include it in the universe? And in any case, he continues, if God’s location is the universe then where was God before the universe was created.⁴²

To this, Nazianzen offers something of a non-answer, but it is an instructive non-. The question itself is nonsensical, he explains, which is precisely why he raised it in the first place. “[M]y purpose in doing so[.]” he explains, was “to make clear the point at which my argument has aimed

40. Narkevics, “Skiagraphia,” 87.

41. Ibid.

42. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Second Theological Oration,” section 10, in Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 142.

The Place of the Spirit

from the first.” Simply put, the fact that one cannot even make sense of the question “Is God nowhere or somewhere?” suggests an important theological truth: “[t]hat the divine nature cannot be apprehended by human reason, and that we cannot even represent to ourselves all its greatness.”⁴³ Believers must always keep this fact in mind, Nazianzen urges, for human reason is lazy. Frankly, our intellects find it much easier to generate a circumscribable, comprehensible, separable, compound, extended, and located God. Nazianzen is haunted by this ease with which human intellects do this. He speculates as to why a good God would have made it so difficult to know the true God, and so easy to lapse into imagining false gods. Perhaps, he speculates, it was because we tend to care more about things won after much difficulty. Or perhaps God intended to spare human beings the fate of Lucifer, for whom apprehension of God’s “full light” was an occasion for the fall. Or perhaps God means to reward all the more greatly those who have persevered despite the distorting tendencies of their mental powers.⁴⁴ But this, he says resignedly, is our lot. “[O]ur mind faints to transcend corporeal things, and to consort with the incorporeal,” but such longings remain unfulfilled. This same mind, which cannot conceive of anything “apart from motion and diffusion,” must resign itself to looking “with its inherent weakness at things above its strength.”⁴⁵

Moreover, the weakness of the human intellect affects how human beings view the cosmos. Despite the fact that Nazianzen began the Second Theological Oration by acknowledging the legitimacy of natural theology, beginning with section thirteen he discusses how even regarding the cosmos can be an occasion for danger. Not only do we all too easily make God into what amounts to a corporeal entity, but we also tend to make corporeal entities into gods. Many people, Nazianzen reminds his opponents, divinize elements of the cosmos, making “a god of the sun, others of the moon, others of the host of stars, others of the heavens itself . . . [and others] any chance visible objects, setting up the most beautiful of what they saw as their gods.”⁴⁶ Again, people do this because it is easy, whereas “the truth . . . is full of difficulty and obscurity.”⁴⁷

43. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Second Theological Oration,” section 11, in *ibid.*, 143.

44. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Second Theological Oration,” section 12, in *ibid.*, 144.

45. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Second Theological Oration,” section 13, in *ibid.*, 144–45.

46. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Second Theological Oration,” section 14, in *ibid.*, 145.

47. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Second Theological Oration,” section 21, in *ibid.*, 150.