"From God to Creation":

Pursuing the Trinitarian Reflections
of Gregory of Nyssa as a Critique of *Creatio ex Nihilo*

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A dominant trend in contemporary theological reflection has celebrated a strongly social doctrine of the Trinity for several reasons, not the least of which – and the most important of which for my purposes in this essay – has been in order to affirm that the Christian conviction that "God is love" finds its essential meaning and ultimate ground in God's own indescribably rich being as Father-Son-Spirit. This is thought to be important because if the very meaning of "love" demands that there be not only a lover but also a beloved – an object of the lover's love – then it would appear necessary for some *other than God* to exist of necessity (if, at least, God is

thought to *be love* necessarily and not simply accidentally). The accompanying fear seems to be that creation then would be no longer a free act of God if indeed God requires, even needs, that some world exist in order for God to be, and for God to exercise, love. If, on the other hand, one can situate the lover-beloved relation within the very being of God, then (so the argument runs) creation is no longer necessary and may, instead, be deemed to be contingent, created freely and graciously *ex nihilo.*

I confess that I am not without sympathy for this argument. However, it seems to me that two counter questions quickly assert themselves. First: Does not this new enthusiasm for the social analogy for God's being steer us very near to tri-theism? Second: Can this notion of love as flourishing *within God's being* really, truly be deemed *love* – since it remains precisely within God and thus does not extend toward an object of love other than God? Both of these questions finally root themselves in the suspicion that the social analogy compromises far too extremely on the *Shema* of Israel. Certainly throughout history many Jews, virtually all Muslims, and more than a few Christians have thought so. (In the present labor of Muslim-Christian dialogical reflection in which I am engaged, I have become freshly alerted to this issue. I do not mean to suggest that Christian theologians are answerable primarily to Muslim critics regarding the ways in which they [the former] engage in Trinitarian reflection; on the other hand, I do believe that Muslim criticisms of the Christian doctrine of God may at least provide something of an important check against unbridled use of the social analogy.)

While the social analogy cannot be attributed solely to the Cappadocians, it is nonetheless the case that Basil and Gregory – under the tutelage of sister Macrina – and their "other brother from a different mother" Gregory are generally understood to have contributed significantly to the development of this notion of social relations of love within God's own being. In the time allotted me, I wish to raise a few questions about this reading of the Cappadocians – or at least of little brother Gregory of Nyssa in his tremendous and highly influential essay, *An Answer to*

Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods. (*Library of Christian Classics* edition)

The burden of Gregory's essay, obviously, is to deny that the Christian teaching regarding Father, Son and Spirit leads to a confession of three gods – indeed, his title insists that "we should not [even] think of saying" such a thing. Don't even *think* about it.

What, then, *are* we to think? It is fairly typical of interpreters of Gregory to state that he first appeals to a generally Platonic notion of the individual human being as less real, if I may put it so crassly, than a singular, universal human nature. Thus, just as there are many human beings but only one "human nature," so, in Gregory's words, "we acknowledge three Persons and recognize there is no difference in nature between them" (257). But in this essay, Gregory in fact refuses – or at least radically reduces – the legitimacy of this analogy! He does experiment with the analogy briefly – but also, I think, half-heartedly. After a brief defense of it, in the next paragraph Gregory writes that "it is very difficult to deal with the question" and suspects that "our rather feeble powers of reason prove unequal to the problem"; a few lines later reminds Ablabius that "the question is no ordinary one" (257). There is nothing here to suggest that Gregory is particularly enamored with the social analogy as befitting God. Everything Gregory writes here, in fact, suggests that no manner of human reason or language or analogy ushers us into the divine nature. "For trifles here are far from trifling," he writes. "Therefore we must confess one God, as Scripture bears witness, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord'" (258).

It is at this point of Gregory's essay that we encounter a crucial turn. Gregory acknowledges that "the term 'Godhead' embraces the holy Trinity," and thus that this term "Godhead" might in fact seem to correspond to the singular human nature that includes a plurality of human beings. "We must now make a more careful examination of the word 'Godhead,' in order that from the meaning attaching to the word we may get some help in clarifying the matter in hand. *Most people think* that the word 'Godhead' refers to God's nature in a special way. Just as the heaven, the sun, or any other of the world's elements is denoted by a proper name which

signifies its subject, *so they say* that, in reference to the transcendent and divine nature, the word 'Godhead' is fitly applied, like some proper name, to what it represents" (259, italics mine). One can hear Gregory's sense of caution growing. "We, however, following the suggestions of Holy Scripture, have learned that God's nature cannot be named and is ineffable. We say that every name, whether invented by human custom or handed down by the Scriptures, is indicative of our conceptions of the divine nature, but *does not signify what that nature is in itself* " (259). If we were to heed Gregory's cautioning here, it would place serious restrictions on the extent to which we would employ any analogy – including, to be sure, the analogy of human sociality – with the confidence that it opens up the divine nature to human thought. But this is in fact, I think, what tends to occur in a good deal of the sort of contemporary Trinitarian reflection that trades so heavily on the notion of God's intra-relations of love.

Since, Gregory argues, "any word . . . applied to God" bears "some meaning" that originates in "the created world, . . . it is clear that the divine nature in itself" – what we theologians are accustomed to calling the essential or immanent Trinity – "is not signified by any of these terms. *Rather is some attribute declared by what is said*" (259, my italics). "By the same principle," he continues, "we find in all other cases that the significance attaching to divine names lies either in their forbidding wrong conceptions of the divine nature or in their teaching right ones. But they do not contain an explanation of the nature in itself. *We perceive, then, the varied operations of the transcendent power*, and fit our way of speaking of [that Power] to each of the operations known to us" (260, my italics). Gregory, in fact, keeps us three significant steps removed from peering into the inner life of God: 1) *we perceive* 2) *varied operations* (or activities) *of the transcendent power*, and 3) *fit our human conventions of thought and language* to those perceived divine activities. The proclivity of theologians emboldened by the social analogy is to move all too quickly to confidence regarding the inner life of God; ironically, I am arguing, one of the theologians often thought to have encouraged such confidence in fact discourages it! Gregory is more rightly thought to have been thoroughly enamored with the utter

ineffability and inscrutability of God – God who nonetheless inspires human beings to employ their stuttering tongues to speak of God in response to *God's operations in the world.*

Thus, while the term "Godhead" has a long and distinguished history within Christian reflection as a term that might seem to signify the triune divine nature, Gregory is pointing in a different direction; "we have proved by the foregoing," he writes, "that the word 'Godhead' signifies an operation and not a nature" (261). An *operation*, by Gregory's definition, is any activity of God in the world, particularly as perceived and described by human beings. Thus for Gregory the divine nature *en esse* is entirely inaccessible to human perception, reflection or description. The Godhead, for us, is not an inner nature – for example, a nature of loving relations among the divine Persons – but "an operation," that is, an activity of God toward and within creation.

Indeed, at this juncture Gregory begins to explore a new consideration regarding why "we should not think of saying there are three gods." If indeed when we speak of God we are speaking, more precisely, of what "we perceive" of "the varied operations of the transcendent power, and fit our way of speaking of [that Power] to each of the operations known to us" (260) – and if, additionally, our perceptions of such operations are shaped and informed, perhaps even provided, by Scripture – then we might think it necessary to speak of deity in the plural. If, in his own example, the New Testament can describe the operation of "seeing" to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – (note the pertinence of Gregory's selection of this "operation" in describing God, since he connects *theos* etymologically to *thea*, to behold) – then what prohibits us from assuming that there are three divine "seers" and therefore three different deities? (Perhaps, in the context of our present discussion, the same could be said for the operation of "loving": How many "lovers" are there in the divine being?) Gregory puts the problem this way: "[One] might argue that in the case of human beings, even if many share the same operation [or, in the case of the analogy, the same profession], each one separately and by himself undertakes the matter at hand. By his individual action each contributes nothing to the others engaged in the same task.

For if there are many orators, their pursuit, being identical, bears the same name despite their plurality. Yet each one who follows this pursuit goes about it on his own" (261). But Gregory replies to his problem, "With regard to the divine nature, on the other hand, it is otherwise. We do not learn that the Father does something on his own, in which the Son does not co-operate. Or again, that the Son acts on his own without the Spirit. *Rather does every operation which extends* ***from God to creation*** *and is designated according to our differing conceptions of it have its origin in the Father, proceed through the Son, and reach its completion by the Holy Spirit*" (261-262, my italics). This, of course, is what we theologians have meant by the "economic Trinity"; the typical move now is to state that the operations of God to creation are not, and cannot be, false to the Godhead, the inner being of Who God Is. Yet Gregory has in a sense erected a caution sign, if not a complete roadblock, to the human presumption of perceiving the divine nature by means of the divine operations. Let us recall that for Gregory the very term "Godhead" does not signify the divine nature but only our perceptions of the varied operations of the transcendent power, fitted to our conventions of speech. Trinitarian language, Gregory argues, describes "every operation which extends from God to creation" rather than God in God's own being. We must exercise great care and caution, in other words, in employing the social analogy in order to explicate the Christian conviction that "God is love." Indeed, in the letter of 1 John where we read this fundamental Christian theological proposition that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), it is clear that we know *what this love is* not by speculation regarding intra-Trinitarian relations, but by perceiving that "he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16).

Gregory describes the operations "which extend from God to creation" in several similar ways: they "have [their] origin in the Father, proceed through the Son, and reach [their] completion in the Holy Spirit"; or "there is one motion and disposition of the good will which proceeds from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit"; or "the Father exercises his power . . . through the Only-begotten, who by the Holy Spirit makes all power perfect"; or each operation

"issues from the Father, as from a spring, . . . is actualized by the Son, and . . . is perfected by the power of the Holy Spirit" (262, 263). The point to be made here is that in each case, the movement described is *not within God, for it does not culminate in God's being*. Rather, the movement described is consistently *from God to creation.* Where we might want to trace this movement from God to creation backwards, as it were, into a kind of "circular" dancing movement within the very being of the Triune God, Gregory of Nyssa consistently limits our attention to this "linear" movement from God to creation.

While the notion that the doctrine of the Trinity describes the graciously creative, and re-creative, movement from God to creation is hardly a new one, it merits further attention. I submit, too, that the metaphor at play in the Johannine use of *logos* provides a useful avenue for such reflection. Simply stated, if *logos* is word, speech, communication, then it already implies the divine "disposition to abundant communication," in Jonathan Edwards' felicitous phrase (cited in Migliore, 85). *Logos* signifies God's outreach, God's speech *toward an other than God.* Thus it is that Christian scripture and tradition have proclaimed that God creates by communication – by speaking, as it were – *to the creaturely.* The notion of *logos* as word, as address, virtually demands an addressee. To borrow from Geoffrey Lampe, *logos* is a "bridge term" denoting the connection of divine communication, activity and presence toward, and within, the world.

The same, or at least the similar, can be said of *pneuma.* But where *logos* bespeaks speaking, communication, word, *pneuma* suggests life-breath, animation, vitality. God does not simply communicate by speaking, so to speak, but at the same time communes by bestowing life and thus evoking lively response. *Logos* is word, meaning, communication, structure and logic – and therefore typically *yang* or "left-brain"; *pneuma* is wind, livingness, unpredictabily, vitality and vivacity – and therefore typically *yin* or "right-brain." God communicates – but God also animates, thereby making possible, even empowering, a creaturely reply. The inseparability of *logos* and *pneuma* in Christian tradition grows out of a wisdom that recognizes and appreciates this twofold nature of all of God's outworkings toward the world.

The upshot of this is that, for Christian faith, the human being Jesus of Nazareth is the embodiment of *the Word* God has spoken and is ever speaking toward creation. For Christians, Jesus' words and works as testified to in the gospels provide divine communication. In other words, Jesus is *God's word, God's speaking, toward creation.* And the gospels testify that Jesus' words and works are accomplished by the Spirit of God (or, as Luke has it in one place, "the finger of God"). Indeed, Gregory cites Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel, "If *I* by the *Spirit* of *God* cast out demons" (263, my italics), to demonstrate the streamline of divine activity "from God to creation" (262).

If indeed we can properly think of *logos* and *pneuma* as "bridge terms" that span the metaphysical gap, if you will, between Creator and creation, then we move toward another possibility for thought. If Trinitarian thought adds that *Logos* and *Pneuma* are not incidental but necessary and eternal features of God's operations, then God has never been without the creaturely – never been without some kind of world or another – to which God is speaking and in which God is evoking life and thus also invoking a lively response to the word God utters. The proposition "God is love," in this case, and following Gregory's lead, would not be thought to describe God's nature (e.g., inner-Trinitarian relations, of which we know less than nothing) but rather God's operations toward creation. The Athanasian conviction that "there was never a time when the Logos was not" would, in this way of thinking, imply that there was never a time when a creaturely realm was not – the realm toward which God's *logos* was and is being addressed, and everlastingly shall be addressed. (Christians confess that the nature and content of that everlastingly spoken *logos* has been revealed decisively in the person, words and works of Jesus; Jews are likely to identify Torah as the supreme exemplification of that *logos*; Muslims insist that this very *logos* exists as "the Mother of the Book," perfectly preserved in heaven and perfectly revealed as the Qur'an.) Further, it would imply that there was never a time when God was not this sort of God – God who speaks *logos* to creation, calling it to be, to become, to contribute its own *pneuma*-enlivened energies to creation's ongoing becoming. If God is love that is outpoured

for others (1 Jn 4:8; 3:16), then according to Trinitarian doctrine God has never been anything else. In other words, if the operations of God we have perceived through the testimony of the gospels lead us to confess that God is love and thus *loves the other*, then it makes theological sense to speculate that God is indeed everlastingly communicating with, and communing with, world upon world. While such a possibility is far from a denial of *creatio ex nihilo*, I would argue that *creatio ex amore* – a formulation whose genealogy goes back at least to Paul van Buren, from whom I learned it – is a far more adequate way of speaking of God's relation to creation. This is what it means to say that God is relational. If God has never been other than such love as this – a love that is indeed a "disposition to abundant communication" – then there has never been a time when the world was not. . . . and presumably never will be.