

Conclusion

Our discussion showed clearly that in the later 4th century, we can observe a significant growth of the importance of negative theology. This was certainly caused by the Anomean thesis that the substance of God is comprehensible. However, since for all Christian writers the basic reference is the Holy Scripture, both the opponents and the supporters of negative theology could certainly find the source of their opinions in the Old and the New Testament. As we have seen, the Bible is ambiguous on the topic of comprehensibility of God, who reveals Himself but simultaneously hides His face. Therefore, there was not one and only interpretation of the Christian doctrine on how to know God, and in the Early Church both positions could see themselves as being in accordance with the Orthodoxy. For Apologists, who opposed pagan conceptions of God, a confirmation that Christians possess true knowledge revealed in the Holy Scripture was coherent with the claims that pagans have a false conception of God, whose true nature is incomprehensible. Similarly, we have observed that later Clement of Alexandria sustained strong apophatic claims, while for Origen incomprehensibility of God was merely a marginal issue. It must be noted that the works of Philo of Alexandria were held in high esteem especially by Clement of Alexandria but also by later Christian writers, but their influence exerted a special mark in the case of negative theology.

The situation of the ambiguous attitude of Christians to negative theology continues at the beginning of the 4th century. If our reconstruction of the claims of Arius is right, we can assume that for him negative theology was an important idea in arguing on the difference between the Father and the Son. While the Son, who is also Logos and Wisdom, is known to us, Father stays beyond the powers of human intellect and remains unknown. Because of such difference in comprehensibility, Arius could argue on the similar, but not the same essence of the Son of God. It is also significant that Athanasius, the most important opponent of Arius, has a significantly more positive attitude to the possibility of knowing God by man, but because of the strong division between the Creator and creations, he saw this possibility as the effect of the perfection of God's revelation in Christ rather than

in the power of human intellect, weakened by the fall into sensual things, caused by sin.

Another opponent of Arius – Marius Victorinus was also a Neoplatonic who rejected negative theology, so using Neoplatonic sources he tried to establish the ultimate mode of speaking of God as transcendental synthesis, in which negative and positive theologies were somehow reconciled, since this transcendent mode of speaking is above affirmation and negation. Thanks to such reasoning, Marius Victorinus was able to reject the opposition between two mode theologies as the way of showing dissimilarity of the Father and the Son.

The problem of the comprehensibility of God became a fundamental issue upon the rise of the Neo-Arian movement of Anomeans. However, the doctrine of the first important Heteroousian – Aetius – was rather pointed at showing inconsistencies and contradictions of the Orthodox convictions. He also focused the discussion on the positive meaning of the main name of God, which was “Ingeneracy.” Although we find those topics in the writings of his disciple Eunomius, he shifted the Anomean doctrine to an entirely new level.

Eunomius popularized Anomean opinions, and it seems that he also played a paramount role in establishing the most troublesome way of the discussion with the Orthodox by coming up with the question which led to a paradox: “Do you worship what you know, or what you do not know?” The question itself focuses the discussion on the problem of the comprehensibility of God, and, therefore, to answer it the Orthodox were forced to enter into the discussion on the possibility of knowing the essence of the one who is worshipped by Christians. There is also another very important aspect which this question introduces. It shows that for the Christians of the 4th century, comprehensibility of God was not a theoretical issue but had a fundamental impact on the practical issue of proper worship of God.

Eunomius not only focused on showing the contradictions in the claims of the opponents, but also proposed new ways to demonstrate the comprehensibility of the essence of God. As we have seen, the key concept in his theological methods was the idea of activity of God. Therefore, to understand Eunomius’ doctrine, it was necessary to trace the problem of ἐνέργεια from its beginnings. This historical view allowed us to see that Eunomius had predecessors in using this term, and he could be convinced

that by placing ἐνέργεια in his system he only made the exegesis of the passages from the Holy Scripture. But it was Eunomius who ascribed such great importance to activities of God, and it seems that the two ways of theology based on the relationships between οὐσία and ἐνέργεια were his own invention. Whereas the second way (from activity to substance) was in a sense already present in earlier writings, the first way (from substance to activity) was rather entirely his own invention.

It is significant that the opponents of Eunomius (mainly Gregory of Nyssa) do not undermine the importance of the relationship between οὐσία and ἐνέργεια in their polemic. The first method of Eunomius, since it depended on the previous knowledge of essence, thanks to the theory of names, which stated that the name “Unbegotten” signified and to some extent was the essence of God, was entirely unacceptable for the Orthodox. Especially, Basil of Caesarea noted that undermining the theory of names will effectively invalidate Eunomius’ first way. If one demonstrates that it is impossible to know the essence, thanks to the name “Unbegotten,” argumentation concerning the character of the activity of generation from essence is pointless.

Gregory of Nyssa, especially in the first book of his *Contra Eunomium*, focuses on the second method, which leads from activity to substance. But this time the method itself is not the object of criticism. Gregory concentrates rather on explaining that although the method is not invalid, Eunomius did not understand it correctly. At this point, we have observed that Gregory argued for two kinds of the activities of God. Internal activities that are eternal and infinite acts which take place in the essence of God are completely incomprehensible since they are identical with the substance. Therefore, generation of the Son also cannot be comprehended by any act of human intellect. But there are also external activities, by which we can recognize God’s presence in the creations. Here Gregory agrees that they can give us certain knowledge, but it is the comprehension of the activities only, not of the essence of God. As we have seen Gregory is convinced that the knowledge which we can obtain is true because it is the knowledge of activities. Therefore, the doctrine of activities allows him to secure the validity of human knowledge, while at the same time he was able to draw a clear borderline beyond which any intellectual perception is impossible.

In the case of Gregory, we could see once again that the problem of the comprehensibility of God is not only a theoretical issue, but is closely

related with the way of man towards unity with God. The concept of activities is so important because the first place where God reveals himself is the soul of man. Therefore, the activities present in human soul are indispensable when man enters the way towards unity with God; they assure him that God is present and that he is on the right path. It is indispensable since the ascent of the soul is infinite, and all the time the soul merely gets closer to God and never reaches Him. Gregory then shows that total incomprehensibility of God is the fundamental truth of mystical life, which cannot be conceived without accepting insufficiency of the constantly performed efforts to know God to whom the soul ascends.

The examination of the thought of two other figures of the 4th century: Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom allowed us to observe that the incomprehensibility of God was the strongest sign of being Orthodox at that time. The best way to reject the doctrine of Eunomians and to weaken their missionary activity was to argue on the impossibility of knowing the essence of God, and, therefore, it became the main topic of the orations of Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom.

There is another common feature of those doctrines which can be observed in all four authors presented in the last chapter. Although for the purpose of the polemic they constantly repeat the truth of the incomprehensibility of God, we can also notice the effort to show that negative theology does not conclude in making spiritual life pointed at nothingness. Admitting the insufficiency of human reason is a necessary statement on the limits of intellect, but not on the absence of the object of belief. Even for Gregory of Nyssa, who is certainly “most negative” of them, God, who can never be fully reached, is constantly present in the cloud and in darkness. But this effort to show that God is present and reachable to some extent is the symptom of certain uneasiness, that going too deeply into negative theology would result in missing God on the mystical path.

The two fundamental effects of the 4th-century debate on the comprehensibility of God can be seen in a later development of Christian theology. Especially thanks to the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, the claim on the incomprehensibility of the essence of God will settle for good in Christian thought. Gregory formulated the strongest negative theology until his time and found that equally strong negative statements could be found earlier. But it was not the end of the development of negative theology. Thanks

to the new understanding of apophatic statements presented by Proclus, Christian negative theology will flourish in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, who seemed to be under Gregory's influence.⁸²⁵

Another outcome of the debate can be seen in a further development of the concept of the Divine activities. Although after the Cappadocians the interest in the topic significantly diminished, it gained a new life in the system of the same Dionysius the Areopagite.⁸²⁶ Thanks to the thought of the unknown author of *Corpus Dionysiacum*, the doctrine of activities became the fundament of the Eastern theological tradition because of its development in Maximus the Confessor and in the Middle Ages in Gregory Palamas.⁸²⁷

Therefore, it seems that Christian theology and especially Christian mysticism owe much to the debate between Eunomius and the Cappadocians. But the importance of the debate goes beyond Christian theology and has much to offer also to natural theology, philosophy of religion, and even metaphysics. Because of a growing interest in negative theology in those field of studies, it seems that one of the most important debates on this topic which took place as long ago as in the 4th century AD is still worth taking into account.

825 Cf. Y. de Andia remarks on similarities between Gregory and Denys the Areopagite in: *Henosis. L'Union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite*, Leiden, New York, Köln 1996, pp. 17–18; 306; on the stages of mystical life: pp. 356–360; 371–373; especially on the divine darkness: pp. 334–342.

826 Cf. D. Bradshaw, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

827 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 188–220; 234–242.

