5. The Development of Negative Theology in the Latter Half of the 4th Century

The reaction to Eunomius’ claims on comprehensibility of the substance of God goes much deeper than the responses of Basil and Gregory. Moreover, in the latter half of the 4th century, we can observe not only the reaction to Eunomius,683 but also a deeper penetration of the field of negative theology that would influence Christian theology for good, even when the risk of the Neo-Arian heresy disappeared. The main authors, apart from Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, who are the most obvious participants in the polemic with Eunomius, are Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom. Their writings were to a large extent provoked by the Eunomians’ teaching and are analysed here in this context. But before we turn to those two important figures, we must first discuss certain aspects of the negative theology of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa which have not been mentioned in the preceding chapters but seem important in order to fully expose the extent of negative theology in their writings.

5.1 Basil of Caesarea’s incomprehensibility of οὐσία

The first remark that should be made at the beginning, which is absolutely clear in the context of the anti-Eunomian polemic, is the fact that for all the participants in the discussion, God is without doubt the οὐσία, and they never seriously considered that God could exceed the categories of existence.684 We should always keep it in mind as the multiplicity of Neoplatonic similarities,685 especially pointed out in various studies may obscure this obvious truth. It is perfectly obvious for Basil that the substance of God is incomprehensible for creatures. We can find many places where Basil

684  It is still not very clear how does Basil understand οὐσία in Contra Eunomium, and in my opinion, further studies should be conducted. Cf. David G. Robertson, Stoic and Aristotelian Notions of Substance in Basil of Caesarea, VCh, vol. 52, no. 4 (Nov. 1998), pp. 393–417.
admits the same idea in quite similar words both in Contra Eunomium and Homilies in Hexaemeron, so he is consistent at the very beginning as well as the end of his writing activity. The two following passages are a very good example of this claim:

“I think that comprehension of God’s substance transcends not only human beings, but also every rational nature. Now by ‘rational nature’ here, I mean one which belongs to creation.”

“It is to be expected that the very substance of God is incomprehensible to everyone except the Only-Begotten and the Holy Spirit.”

But, as a matter of fact, in his argumentation, Basil goes even further and claims that we have no knowledge not only about the substance of God but about the substance of the created world as well. Although we recognize creatures and we are encouraged by Basil to contemplate them and even admire them and their Creator, the accidents cannot provide us any knowledge about the essence:

“In the same way we shall counsel ourselves with regard to the essence of earth [the context is an exegesis of Gen 1,1]. We will not meddle about its essence proper (ἡτίς ποτέ ἐστι), nor waste our thoughts searching for the substrate itself (αὐτὸ τὸ υποκείμενον), nor try to find some nature devoid of qualities, existing in such a way on its own account. For we are well aware that whatever is seen around it (περὶ αὐτῆς) has been rendered fully by the account of being as completer of the essence (συμπληρωτικὰ τῆς οὐσίας). You arrive at nothing [therefore] if you try to take away by reason each of the qualities it possesses. If you take away black,
cold, depth, density, the qualities associated with taste a substance possesses, or any other that may be seen around it, the substrate will be nothing.”

The impossibility of knowing any substance at all, not only God’s substance, is Aristotle’s thesis formulated in book VII of *Metaphysics*. Aristotle presents the process of abstractions which in the end gives us no knowledge about the *ousia* and states that “it is beyond us to say what else [it] is.”

The attention that Basil pays to utter incomprehensibility of the essence is of course a reaction to Eunomius’ concept of rationality which was expressed as cognoscibility of God’s essence. In order to explain that the lack of knowledge about the very substance is not equivalent to complete ignorance, in his later writings, Basil says that although we know ourselves, even our own substance is out of our reach. We also do not have any knowledge of our own essence, but we still know ourselves:

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**689** *In Hex.* I, 8 (SC 26, p. 120; tr. Schaff, p. 230).

**690** *Cf. Met.* VII, 3, 1029 a, 9–26. “The statement itself is obscure, and further, on this view, *matter* becomes substance. For if this is not substance, it is beyond us to say what else is. When all else is taken away evidently nothing but matter remains. For of the other elements some are affections, products, and capacities of bodies, while length, breadth, and depth are quantities and not substances. For a quantity is not a substance; but the substance is rather that to which these belong primarily. But when length and breadth and depth are taken away we see nothing left except that which is bounded by these, whatever it be; so that to those who consider the question thus matter alone must seem to be substance. By matter I mean that which in itself is neither a particular thing nor of a certain quantity nor assigned to any other of the categories by which being is determined. For there is something of which each of these is predicated, so that its being is different from that of each of the predicates; for the predicates other than substance are predicated of substance, while substance is predicated of matter. Therefore the ultimate substratum is of itself neither a particular thing nor of a particular quantity nor otherwise positively characterized; nor yet negatively, for negations also will belong to it only by accident” (tr. Barnes).

**691** *Met.* 1029 a, 10–11. εἰ γὰρ μὴ ἀφτῇ οὐσία, τίς ἐστιν ἄλλη διαφεύγει· (tr. Barnes).

**692** *Cf. Con. Eun.* II, 22, 39–43. ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ μὲν τῶν ταπεινῶν καὶ σαρκικῶν νοημάτων ἐν τοῖς περὶ Θεοῦ δόγμασι καθαρεύειν, γέννησιν δὲ τῇ ἁγιωσύνῃ καὶ τῇ ἀποθείᾳ τοῦ Θεοῦ πρέπουσαν ἐννοεῖν· (SC 305, pp. 90–92). “He knows that when it is a question of doctrines about God he should purify words of lowly and fleshly concepts and think of the begetting that is suitable for the holiness and impassibility of God” (tr. DelCagliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 164).
“For thus and in this sense I both know and am ignorant even of myself. For I know myself, who I am, but I do not know myself, insofar as I am ignorant of my substance.”

Basil introduces here a paradox that will be in fact crucial for the theological knowledge. One may know and not know at the same time: καὶ οἶδα καὶ ἀγνοῶ. In order to correct the Eunomian mistakes, Basil uses negative theology, but he avoids the error of agnosticism, sees the risks of this method, and distances himself from this method when limited only to the alpha privatium technique. Basil employed alpha privatives to say what God is not, i.e., ἄφθαρτος - unspoken, ἀορίς - unseen, ἀθάνατος - immortal, ἀπαθής - not suffering and so on, but he remarks that even privative forms used in the descriptions give us knowledge about what God is not and what kind of attributes cannot be connected with Him.

Simultaneously, Basil uses natural theology based on contemplation of nature and positive theology based on the Bible.

“Again, we say that God is ‘good’, ‘Just’, ‘Creator’, ‘Judge’, and all such things. So, then, as in the case of the terms we just spoke about which signified a denial and rejection of what is foreign to God, so here they indicate the affirmation and

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695 Cf. Con. Eun. I, 9, 34–41. Ὑπτ ῃ τοῖν πο τοῦ ἀφθαρτοῦ τῷ μὴ προσεῖναι τῷ Θεῷ φθορὰν σημαίνει· καὶ τὸ ἀόρατον τῷ ὑπερβαίνειν αὐτὸν πᾶσαν τὴν διὰ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν κατάληψιν· καὶ τὸ ἀσώματον τῇ ὑπάρχειν αὐτοῦ τριγῆ διαστατὴν τὴν οὐσίαν· καὶ τὸ ἀθάνατον τῷ μὴ διάλυσιν αὐτῶ προσεγγίσεσθαι· οὕτω φαμέν καὶ τῷ, ἀγέννητον, δηλοῦν τὸ γέννησιν αὐτῷ μὴ προσεῖναι. Εἰ μὲν οὖν μὴ δὲν τούτων στερητικῶν τῶν ὀνομάτων, οὐκ ἐκεῖνο (SC 299, pp. 90–92). “Just as ‘incorruptible’ signifies that no corruption is present to God, and ‘invisible’ that he is beyond every comprehension through the eyes, and ‘incorporeal’ that his substance is not three-dimensional, and ‘immortal’ that dissolution will never happen to him, so too do we also say that ‘unbegotten’ indicates that no begetting is present to him. So, then, if none of the former terms is privative, then neither is the latter” (tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, pp. 103–104).

existence of what has affinity with God and is appropriately considered in connection with him."697

But what exactly can we know about God? This problem is developed by Basil later on, and most probably, it was related to the discussion and attacks of the Eunomians who accused Basil of ignorance.698 We can know God’s attributes699 that are common to the divine essence. Because we can recognize God from His activities in the created world, we know Him as the Creator of the world and the source of all beings. It is God’s will to let us gain the knowledge about Him.700 In this process, Christians refer to a


698 Cf. Ep. 234, 2: Therefore, we know that the saying is of mockers: “If you are ignorant of the substance of God, you worship what you do not know” (Courtonne, vol. 3, p. 43; tr. LCL 243, p. 375).

699 Cf. Ep. 234, 1. Καὶ γὰρ τὴν μεγαλειότητα τοῦ θεοῦ εἰδέναι λέγομεν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν καὶ τὴν σοφίαν καὶ τὴν ἀγαθότητα καὶ τὴν πρόνοιαν ἣν ἐπιμελεῖται ἡμῶν καὶ τὸ δίκαιον αὐτοῦ τῆς κρίσεως, οὐκ αὐτὴν τὴν οὐσίαν. Ὡστε ἐπιρρεαστικὴ ἡ ἐρώτησις. Οὐ γὰρ ὁ τὴν οὐσίαν μὴ φάσκων εἰδέναι ὡμολογήσει τὸν θεὸν μὴ ἐπισταθεῖ, ἐκ πολλῶν ὧν ἀπηριθμησάμεθα συναγομένης ἡμῶν τῆς περὶ θεοῦ ἐννοίας (Courtonne, vol. 3, p. 42). “For instance, we say that we know the greatness of God, and His power, and His wisdom, and His goodness, and His providence, whereby He cares for us, and the justice of His judgment, not His very substance. Therefore the question is captious. For he who says that he does not know the substance has not confessed that he does not know God, since the concept of God is gathered by us form the many attributes which we enumerated” (tr. LCL 243, pp. 371–273).

700 Cf. Con. Eun. I, 14, 14–20. Πάν γὰρ πού τὸ ἐναντίον, εἰκὸς αὐτῆς μὲν τὴν οὐσίαν ἀπεριόπτων εἶναι παντὶ, πλὴν εἰ τὸ μονογενῆ καὶ τὸ ἀγίῳ Πνεύματι ἢ δὲ τὸν ἐνεργεῖν τοῦ θεοῦ ἀναγομένων ἡμᾶς, καὶ διὰ τῶν ποιμένων τὸν ποιητὴν ἐννοοῦντας, τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ καὶ τῆς σοφίας λαμβάνειν τὴν σύνεσιν. Τούτῳ γὰρ έστι τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ὁ θεὸς ἐφανέρωσεν (SC 299, pp. 220–222). “It is to be expected that the very substance of God is incomprehensible to everyone except the Only-Begotten and the Holy Spirit. But we are led up from the activities of God and gain knowledge of the Maker through what he has made, and so come in this way to an understanding of his goodness and wisdom. For what can be known about God is that which
very unique starting point on the way of cognition of the image of God in man. lw701 We do not search God as an abstract idea; we search God who reveals Himself in created beings. The divine names reveal His energies which descend towards the created world, yet they do not lead man closer to His inaccessible essence.

Negative theology in Basil’s thought is inseparably connected with the positive and eminent way. His theology is not so mystical as Gregory’s, but it is radically opposite to the rationalism of Eunomius. lw702 Basil reminds his readers that the aim of Christian life is not knowledge but salvation. The very first step along this way is epistemological humility.

“But I do know that He exists, but what His substance is I consider beyond understanding. How then am I saved? Through faith. And it is faith enough to know that God is, not what He is, and that He is a rewarmer of those who seek Him. Knowledge of His divine substance, then, is the perception of His incomprehensibility; and that is to be worshipped which is comprehended, not as to what its substance is, but as to that its substance exists.” lw703

If we give up the illusory desire to possess the knowledge of God’s essence and concentrate on natural theology, which will lead us to the knowledge of God’s existence, the next obvious step provoked by our admiration of the divine activities in the world will be faith and worship. lw704 Knowledge,


lw703 Ep. 234, 2: Ἐγὼ δὲ ὅτι μὲν ἐστὶν οὐδα, τί δὲ ἡ οὐσία ύπερ διάνοιαν τίθεμαι. Πῶς οὖν σώζομαι; Διὰ τῆς πίστεως. Πίστες δὲ αὐτάρκης εἰδέναι ὅτι ἐστὶν ὁ Θεός, οὐχὶ τί ἐστι, καὶ τοῖς ἐκζητοῦσιν αὐτὸν μισθαποδότης γίνεται. Εἴδησις ἄρα τῆς θείας οὐσίας ἡ αἰσθήσις αὐτοῦ τῆς ἀκαταληψίας, καὶ σεπτὸν οὐ τὸ καταληφθὲν τίς ἡ οὐσία, ἀλλ’ ὅτι ἐστὶν ἡ οὐσία (Courtonne, vol. 3, p. 43; tr. LCL 243, p. 375).

lw704 Cf. Ep. 235, 1. Ἐν δὲ τῇ περὶ Θεοῦ πίστει ἤγειται μὲν ἡ ἐννοια ἡ περὶ τοῦ ὅτι ἐστὶ Θεὸς, ταύτην δὲ ἐκ τῶν δημιουργημάτων συνάγομεν. Σοφὸν γὰρ καὶ δυνατὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ πάντα αὐτοῦ τὰ ἄνωτα ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου κτίσεως νοοῦτος ἐπιγινώσκομεν. Οὕτω δὴ καὶ Δεσπότην ἑαυτοῦ καταδεχόμεθα. Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ παντὸς μὲν τοῦ κόσμου δημιουργὸς ὁ Θεός, μέρος δὲ κόσμου ἡμῶς, καὶ ἡμῶν ἀρα δημιουργὸς ὁ Θεός. Ταύτη τῇ γνώσει ὃ πίστες ἀκολουθεῖ καὶ τοιαύτη πίστει ἡ προσκύνησις” (Courtonne, vol. 3, p. 44). “But in faith in God, the notion of
faith, and worship constitute for Basil three stages of the relationship with
God. In this perspective, the discovery of existence of God the Maker is
the very first step\(^{705}\) to recognize His goodness and wisdom, to discover
God who reveals His actions in the Holy Bible and the created world. The
culmination and final aim of this path is to worship God.

But the relationship between faith and knowledge seems to be more
complex in Basil’s case. In Letter 234, those terms seem to be mixed:

“So worship follows faith, and faith is confirmed by power. But if you say that the
believer also knows, he knows from what he believes; and vice versa he believes
from what he knows. We know God from His power. We, therefore, believe in
Him who is known, and we worship Him who is believed in.”\(^{706}\)

In this and other texts, Basil seems to treat knowledge and faith interchange-
ably as two terms referring to cognition. Georgios Martzelos recalls one
more text and another type of the relationship between εἴδησις and πίστις.
In *Homilia in illud Attende tibi ipsi*, faith precedes the knowledge of God.
As the knowledge of God cannot be achieved by means of sensual organs,


“One must first believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek
him” [Heb 11.6]. For it is not the investigation of what he is, but rather the
confession that he is, which prepares salvation for us.” (tr. DelCogliano/
Radde-Gallwitz, p. 113).

but by means of intellect, which is equipped through faith.\footnote{Cf. G. Martzelos, The Significance of the Distinction between the Essence and Energies of God according to St. Basil the Great, p. 155; Basil, Homilia in illud Attendete tibi ipsi. Αὐσίματον ἐννοεῖ τὸν θεὸν ἐκ τῆς ἐνυπαρχούσης σοι ψυχῆς ἁσωμάτου, μὴ περιγραφόμενον τόπῳ: ἐπειδή οὕτως ὁ σὸς νοῦς προηγουμένην ἔχει τὴν ἐν τόπῳ διατριβή, ἀλλὰ διὰ τῆς πρὸς τὸ σῶμα συναφείς ἐν τόπῳ γίνεται. Ἀόρατον τὸν θεὸν ἔστω, τὴν σεαυτοῦ ψυχὴν ἐννοήσας, ἐπεὶ καὶ αὐτὴ σωματικῶς ὀρθαλμὸς ἀληπτός ἐστιν. Οὕτω γὰρ κέχρωσται, οὔτε ἐπειδὴ οὐδὲ ὁ σὸς νοῦς προηγουμένην ἔχει τὴν ἐν τῷ διατριβή, ἀλλὰ διὰ τῆς πρὸς τὸ σῶμα συναφείς ἐν τῷ διατριβή, τὴν ἐπιτρέψας τὴν πίστιν, νοητὴν ἔχει ἐπεὶ αὐτῷ τὴν κατάληψιν (PG 31, 216 A).} We can see that despite the complex relationship\footnote{Cf. also Con. Eun. I, 7, 19–23. καὶ ὡς τῇ λαμπρότητι τῆς γνώσεως τοὺς κακαθαρμένους τὸ ὄμμα τῆς ψυχῆς καταγάζων· ἀμπελὼν δὲ, ὥς τοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ κατὰ τὴν πίστιν ἐρημομένους ἐπὶ ἐργὸν ἁγαθῶν καρποφορίας ἐκτρέφων. (SC 299, pp. 222–224). “He also calls himself ‘vine’ because he illuminates those who have purified the eye of their soul with the splendor of his knowledge. He calls himself ‘vine’ because he nurtures those who have been planted in him by faith so that they may bear the fruits of good works” (tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 99).} of those two realities (ἐἴδησις and πίστις), both should be treated as mutually complementary tools on the way to knowing God. Basil’s theology leads us to other than rational cognition of God. Only in worship do faith and knowledge find their aim and their deeper meaning and significance.\footnote{Cf. G. Martzelo, op. cit., p. 156; Cf. Basil Ep. 234 and 235 (Courtonne, vol. 3, pp. 41–47).} At the very end of \textit{Contra Eunomium} when speaking about the nature of the Holy Spirit, Basil gives us the perspective of cognition that is reserved for Christians whom he encourages:

“to be convinced that experience and exact comprehension of him is reserved for us in the subsequent age, when, passing beyond the vision of the truth that comes \textit{dimly in a mirror}, we will be deemed worthy of contemplating \textit{face to face} [1 Cor 13:12].”\footnote{Con. Eun. 3,7, 38–40. Εὐσεβοῦς γὰρ ἐστὶ διανοίᾳ τὰ ἀποσιωπηθέντα ἐν ταῖς ἀγίαις Γραφαῖς εὐλαβείσθαι ἐπιφομένων τῷ ἄγιῳ Πνεύματι, πεπείσθαι δὲ τὴν ἐμπειρίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκριβῆ κατάληψιν εἰς τὸν ὀστρεν ἡμῖν ἀποκείσθαι αἰώνα, ὅταν, διαβάντες τὸ δὲ ἐσώμπρος καὶ αἰνίγματος ὀρθῆν ἡλίθεια, τῆς πρὸς πρόσωπον θεωρίας ἀξιωθῶμεν (SC 305, p. 174; tr. DelCogliano/Radde-Gallwitz, p. 196).}
5.2 Negative theology and mystical experience in Gregory of Nyssa

In Contra Eunomium, Gregory of Nyssa refers to Basil as his teacher on the incomprehensibility of God.\(^{711}\) So, if it is not only a rhetorical figure, he thinks of himself as the continuator of his brother’s theology also in the field of negative theology, and, therefore, Basil’s thought seems to be one of the factors which pushed Gregory to develop further negative speaking of God. But before we look more closely at the negative theology of Gregory of Nyssa, especially in its mystical dimension, it is worth making some remarks on negative language in general.

It must be pointed out that although Gregory constantly underlines the ineffability of God’s essence, he never denies the possibility of speaking about God.\(^ {712}\) We have observed in the preceding chapter that he makes an effort to secure the position that names which we multiply indeed say something about God, and our naming Him is not pointless. A good example of this is his discussion of the descriptive character of the lack of properties. Although Gregory of Nyssa strongly criticizes Eunomius as regards the positive meaning of the name “Unbegotten,” he very often uses negation (στέρησις) to define some properties or even entities. Among those, we find darkness, ignorance, and evil. C. Stead argues that Gregory is not systematic, and, therefore, many problems arise with respect to his use of negation. Most of all, he does not express how negation is related to other categorical terms.\(^{713}\) It can be seen when Gregory considers the problem of what knowledge and ignorance are (ἡ γνῶσις καὶ ἡ ἄγνοια). This is important for him since he constantly repeats that living in God is the life of the soul, and this life is to know God. On the contrary, the lack of knowing God is the alienation from Him and evil. A very significant example of this is a fragment of On Infants’ Early Deaths.\(^{714}\) Knowledge and ignorance can

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\(^{711}\) Cf. CE II, 138, 1–11 (GNO I, 265, 24–266, 2).

\(^{712}\) Cf. G. Maspero, Trinity and Man, op. cit., p. 31.


\(^{714}\) Inf. (GNO III/2, 80, 25–81, 22).
be both counted as relations (τὸ πρὸς τί), and, therefore, they cannot be understood as substances, but they also cannot be seen as equal:

“If, then, knowledge is not a substance, but a perfected operation of the soul, it must be conceded that ignorance must be much farther removed still from anything in the way of substance; but that which is not in that way does not exist at all; and so it would be useless to trouble ourselves about where it comes from.”715

Although ignorance must somehow exist in the subject because it is a relation, Gregory is not sure how to describe its ontological status. It must exist, but it has no existence (ὕπαρξις) of its own, since it is the “negation of the operation of knowing.” (γνώσις ἐνεργείας ἀναίρεσις).716 Therefore, in the case of the soul, a negative attribute refers to some kind of reality, whereas in the case of God, it merely states the absence or inconvenience of something which is denied of Him in a negative statement.717

This fragment is significant because, although Gregory does not use the term στέρησις, it shows the same problems which we have seen in Aetius and Eunomius who wanted to convince their opponents that “unbegotten” is not a negative predicate. But we can certainly see here an attempt to define the ontological status of a feature which can be characterized in a negative way, and this discussion very much resembles Aristotle’s statements on blindness as the negation of the operation of seeing.718 The case of ignorance is then a good example of how Gregory treats philosophical sources. Although he often expresses his disapproval of philosophy, especially in the

715 Inf. (GNO III/2, 80, 16–20). εἰ οὖν ἡ γνώσις οὐσία οὐκ ἔστιν, ἀλλὰ περί τι τῆς διανοίας ἐνέργεια, πολὺ μᾶλλον ἡ ἁγνὸς πόρρω τοῦ κατ’ οὐσίαν εἶναι ὑμιλολόγηται. τὸ δὲ μὴ κατ’ οὐσίαν ὃν οὐδὲ ἔστιν ὁλως, μάταιον τοῖνυν ἄν εἴη περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος τὸ ὃθεν ἔστι περιεργάζεσθαι (tr. NPNF II, vol. 5, p. 36).

716 Inf. (GNO III/2, 80, 23–24).

717 Cf. CE II, 143, 3–5. οὐ μήν τι περί οὗ λέγεται διὰ τῶν ὄνομάτων ὁ λόγος παρίστησιν. τί μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ἔστι, δι’ ὅν ἢκούσαμεν ἐδιδάχθημεν, τί δὲ ἔστι, ἢ τῶν εἰρημένων οὐκ ἐνεδείξατο δύναμις (GNO I, 267, 6–9).

718 Top. I, 106b, 13–20. Aristotle discusses in this passage the contradictory opposites saying that the lack of seeing could have two meanings. If somebody does not possess the power of seeing, it is the privation of the power, but in case of having this power, it is simply the privation of the activity (ἐνεργεία) of seeing.
context of the discussion with Eunomius, he does not refrain from using philosophy when it serves his theological purposes.\footnote{Cf. C. Stead, *Ontologie und Terminiologie bei Gregor von Nyssa*, op. cit., p. 107. He also notes that on one hand Gregory’s philosophical conceptions are original and forceful, but on the other, they “are confused by his habit of citing received philosophical opinions at second hand, without criticizing the term in which they are framed” (p. 117).}

The passage presented above contains yet another characteristic feature of Gregory’s negative theology. It is almost always presented in the context of having a life in God or even more often as part of a mystical doctrine. Although the discussion with Eunomius would seem to direct the issue to purely doctrinal and theoretical considerations, incomprehensibility of God is the fundament for understanding the path to man’s unity with God. As we saw above, even considering the name “God,” Gregory talks about it as describing the activities which He performs in the human soul. This is significant because in the majority of his works, the passages on the ineffability of God constitute a starting point to the discussion of His activities.\footnote{Cf. G. Maspero, *Trinity and Man*, op. cit., p. 31.}

So the problem of the incomprehensible substance of God and the personal dimension of the work of His activities are intrinsically linked.

When characterizing the mystical doctrine of Gregory of Nyssa, A. Louth points out that the most important feature of his teaching is a radical division between the Creator and creations. This gap is so deep that it leads Gregory to the denial of the possibility of ecstasy.\footnote{Cf. A. Louth, *The Origins...*, op. cit., p. 79.}

I would argue that not only the radical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was the cause of such claims, but also the teaching of the role of the Divine activities devised during the discussion with Eunomius led Gregory to such conviction.

Usually the path to God is divided into three stages,\footnote{Gregory follows Origen in describing the spiritual growth by the corresponding books of the Holy Scripture: infancy with Proverbs, youth with Ecclesiastes, and maturity with the Song of Songs. But those three stages can be also characterized as light, cloud, and darkness, cf. A. Louth, *op. cit.* pp. 80–81.} and at each of these stages, we can find elements of negative theology, because the most important aspect of each is to remove false conceptions of God. Gregory describes it his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, when he talks about the...
ascent of Moses. The first transition which must take place is from darkness to light: “…the first withdrawal from false and erroneous notions about God takes the form of a transition from darkness to light.” 723 But in this context, what is called darkness means the false notions which we can obtain from the sensual world. From this point, the vision of the soul and its knowledge only becomes more and more accustomed to darkness:

“More attentive apprehension of hidden realities, which leads the soul to the invisible realm by way of what appears, is like a cloud that casts a shadow on everything that appears but yet induces and accustoms the soul to look upon what is hidden. But the soul that has made its way through these stages to higher things, having left behind whatever is accessible to human nature, enters within the innermost shrine of the knowledge of God and is entirely seized about by the divine darkness; and in this darkness, since everything that appears and is comprehended has been left outside, only the invisible and the incomprehensible remain for the soul’s contemplation – and in them God is, just as the Word says concerning the Lawgiver: ‘Moses entered into the darkness where God was’ (Exod 20:21).” 724

Getting closer to the mystery of God means leaving behind everything that is “accessible to human nature.” Therefore, we can say that the knowledge which man has of God from His activities must be abandoned at this stage. In a similar passage from The life of Moses, Gregory explains that the ascent of Moses teaches us that the soul must leave behind not only what the senses observe, but also the notions of intellect:

723 *In Cant.* XI ή πρώτη ἀπὸ τῶν ψευδῶν καὶ πεπληγμένων περὶ θεοῦ ὑπολήψεων ἀναχώρησις ή ἀπὸ τοῦ σκότους εἰς φῶς ἐστι μετάστασις (text and tr. Norris, pp. 340, 1–2).

724 *In Cant.* XI, ἡ δὲ προσεχεστέρα τῶν κρυπτῶν κατανόησις ἡ διὰ τῶν φαινομένων χειραγωγοῦσα τὴν ψυχὴν πρὸς τὴν ἀόρατον φύσιν οἷον τις νεφέλη γίνεται τὸ φαινόμενον μὲν ἀπὸν ἐπισκιάζουσα πρὸς δὲ τὸ κρύσων | βλέπειν τὴν ψυχὴν χειραγωγοῦσα καὶ συνεθίζουσα, ἡ δὲ διὰ τούτων ὁδεύουσα πρὸς τὰ ἄνω ψυχῆ, ὡςον ἑρικτὸν ἐστι τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ φύσει καταληπτοῦσα, ἐντὸς τῶν ἁπάντων τῆς θεογνωσίας γίνεται τῷ θείῳ γνόφῳ πανταχόθεν διαληφθεῖσα, ἐν ὧν τοῦ φαινομένου τε καὶ καταλαμβανομένου παντὸς ἐξω καταλειφθέντος μόνον ὑπολείπεται τῇ θεωρίᾳ τῆς ψυχῆς τὸ ἀόρατον τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον, ἐν ὧν ἐστὶν ὁ θεὸς, καθὼς φησὶ περὶ τοῦ νομοθέτου ὁ λόγος ὁτι Εἰσῆλθε δὲ Μωϋσῆς εἰς τὸν γνώφον οὐ ἢν ὁ θεὸς (Norris, pp. 340, 2–12).
“For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.”

Since even an intellectual notion must be rejected then, there is no concept which can truly refer to God. Also contemplation is for Gregory only a necessary stage of knowledge, which corresponds to the way of the cloud, whereas the ultimate knowledge is the “non-seeing.” Therefore, this doctrine differs not only from Plato, but also from Origen and Evagrius. But it is worth asking whether one can find any answer in Gregory on how to understand this kind of knowledge above knowledge or seeing without seeing. We can find a very interesting attempt to explain this kind of seeing God in the *Homilies on Beatitudes*. At the beginning, Gregory notices the profound problem of the ambiguity which can be found in the Holy Scripture. The sixth beatitude promises seeing God to those of the pure heart (Mt 5:8), but simultaneously, there are passages which deny such a possibility. Gregory quotes the Gospel of John (1:18), the first letter to Timothy (6:16) and once again returns to the figure of Moses. This contradiction goes even further because when Moses says that no one can see God and stay alive (Ex 22:20): “Nevertheless life eternal is to see God, and this is ruled impossible by the pillars of the faith, John and Paul and Moses.” Gregory then once again points out the intrinsic relationship of having the

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725 De Vita Moysis II, 163, 1–8. Καταλιπὼν γὰρ πᾶν τὸ φαινόμενον, οὐ μόνον ὅσα καταλαμβάνει ἡ αἴσθησις, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅσα ἡ διάνοια δοκεῖ βλέπειν, ἢς πρὸς τὸ ἐνδότερον ἔσται, ἦς ἄν διαδῷ τῇ πολυπραγμοσύνῃ τῆς διανοίας πρὸς τὸ ἀδέατον τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον κάκει τὸν Θεὸν ἵδη. 'Εν τούτῳ γὰρ ἡ ἀληθὴς ἦστιν εἰδήσεως τοῦ ζητουμένου καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τὸ ιδεῖν ἐν τῷ μὴ ιδεῖν, ὅτι ὑπέρεκται πάσης εἰδήσεως τὸ ζητουμένου, οἶν τινι γνόφῳ τῇ ἀκατάληψις πανταχόθεν διειλημμένον (SC 1, pp. 210–212; tr. Malherbe/Ferguson, p. 94).


728 De Beat. VI, 1 (GNO, VII/2, 137, 13–20).

729 De Beat. VI, 1 (GNO, VII/2, 137, 23–24; tr. Hall, p. 66).
knowledge of God and participating in His life. Therefore, seeing God is necessary not only because man is constantly longing to see Him, but also because otherwise there is no possibility for the soul to have the unending life and to possess God since in the biblical meaning “to see” means “to possess.” Since Moses and Paul deny the possibility to see God:

“then it would appear that what is proposed by the Word in the present Beatitude is an impossibility. What good is it to us to know how God is seen, if the possibility of it is not also given to our understanding.”

Therefore, the Lord demands something which is beyond our nature, and to answer this dilemma, Gregory first turns to his doctrine of divine activities. While: “what the divine nature might be in and of itself transcends all conceptual comprehension, being inaccessible and unapproachable to speculative thoughts,” there are other means to see and comprehend this nature. We can somehow see the artificer through the beauty of his works, but this is rather the apprehension of the skill and craftsmanship of the Maker, not his very nature. Therefore: “He who is by nature invisible becomes visible in his operations (ἐνεργείαις), being seen in certain cases by the properties he possesses.”

Although the problem seems to be resolved, Gregory does not stop here because he realizes that the beatitude promises the real seeing of God, not only His activities, so there must be something more that was promised in the beatitude, because “the Lord does not say that knowing something about God is blessed, but to possess God in oneself.” But what does it mean to possess God? For Gregory, this means that if the heart of a man

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730 De Beat. VI, 2 (GNO, VII/2, 137, 10–14).

731 De Beat. VI, 2. ἀδύνατον ἐοικὲ τι εἶναι τῷ μακαρισμῷ νῦν ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου προκείμενον. τι ὤν ἡμῖν τὸ κέρδος ἐκ τοῦ γνῶναι πῶς ὁ θεὸς ὄραται, εἰ τὸ δυνατόν τῇ ἑπινοίᾳ μὴ πρόσετιν (GNO, VII/2, 139, 3–6; tr. Hall, p. 67).


733 De Beat. VI, 3 (GNO, VII/2, 141, 1–3).

734 De Beat. VI, 3 ὁ γὰρ τῇ φύσει ἀόρατος, ὁ ἀπαντάς τῇ ἑπινοίᾳ γίνεται, ἐν τειν τοῖς περὶ αὐτὸν καθορώμενοις (GNO, VII/2, 141, 25–27; tr. Hall, p. 69).

735 De Beat. VI, 4. ὅτι οὐ τὸ γνῶναι τῷ περὶ θεοῦ μακάριον ὁ κύριος εἴναι φησιν: ἀλλὰ τὸ ἐν ἐαυτῷ σχέν τὸν θεόν (GNO, VII/2, 137, 13–15; tr. Hall, pp. 69–70).
is pure, the soul can hold the image of God and can see God in this image. Thus, the Word in his blessing seems to comfort the soul longing for God by saying:

“You men who have some longing for the vision of what is really good, when you hear that the divine majesty is exalted above the heavens, its glory inexplicable, its beauty ineffable, its nature inaccessible, do not fall into despair of being able to see what you desire. The measure of what is accessible to you is in you, for thus your Maker from the start invested your essential nature with such good. God has imprinted upon your constitution replicas of the good things in his own nature, as though stamping wax with the shape of a design.”

Despite all negative statements of the impossibility of any comprehension of the substance of God, Gregory seems to find a positive aspect of our knowledge. Although man is constantly longing for God, always desiring to know God, whom he could not know, Gregory seems to admit that seeing God in the image is real, but this is only the participation in God, while His substance in itself remains incomprehensible. As A. Louth points out, this is not an alternate way of seeing God different to seeing in a cloud, but it is rather the positive side of the same experience.

Therefore, we can say that what Gregory’s claims about seeing God shows best the unity of his doctrine. We can constantly see his struggle to preserve absolute incomprehensibility of God, whose nature can be known only in His activities, but at the same time, he always wants to convince his readers that such statements do not make God inaccessible to man. Therefore, in his mystical doctrine, he speaks about the real vision of invisible and incomprehensible God present in the soul of man, thanks to his image.

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736 De Beat. VI, 4. ὃ ἄνθρωποι, ὧσοις ἐστί τις ἐπιθυμία τῆς τοῦ ὄντως ἄγαθοῦ θεωρίας, ἐπειδὴ ἀκούσητε ὑπὲρ τοὺς οὐρανούς ἐπήρθη τὴν θείαν μεγαλοπρέπειαν, καὶ τὴν δόξαν αὐτῆς ἀνεμιστηκόν τίνι, καὶ τὸ κάλλος ἀφραστὸν, καὶ τὴν φύσιν ἀψφάλειαν· ἐστιν τοῦ μὴ δύνασθαι καταδείκτην τὸ ποθούμενον. τὸ γὰρ σοι χωρητὸν, τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ κατανόησις μέτρον ἐν σοί ἐστιν, οὕτω τοῦ πλάσαντός σε τὸ τοιοῦτον ἄγαθόν εὐθὺς τῇ φύσει κατοικισάντος. τῶν γὰρ τῆς ἒστιν οὗτος φύσεως ἄγαθόν ὁ θεὸς ἐνετύπωσε τῇ σῇ κατασκευῇ τὰ μιμήματα, ἀφὸν τινα κηρὸν σχήματι γλυφῆς προτυπώσας (GNO, VII/2, 142, 24–143, 9; tr. Hall, p. 70).

737 This is the famous doctrine of Gregory which J. Daniélou calls epektasis, cf. Platonisme et Théologie Mystique, Paris 1944, pp. 309–326.

738 Cf. A. Louth, op. cit., p. 89.
5.3 Unknown God of Gregory of Nazianzus

The complex teaching about God’s cognoscibility can be found in Gregory’s orations, among which the most famous are the so-called Theological Orations. They are also important for us since they were a response to the Neo-Arian teaching. As we are informed, Eunomians were present in Constantinople and they were a real problem for the community and their bishop. The Theological Orations constitute an attempt to deal with theological controversies, including God’s cognoscibility. But in order to present complete Gregory’s teaching on the human knowledge about God, we should also take in consideration other orations, in particular Oration 20 (On Theology, and the Appointment of Bishops), Oration 38 (On the nativity of Christ), and Oration 40 (On Baptism), as well as Oration 45 (On Holy Pascha).

Gregory confronts Eunomius on several levels, and some of his arguments are directly while others – indirectly addressed to them. We find in Gregory’s teaching the same elements as in his predecessors, the statements in common with Basil and Gregory of Nyssa that we know that God exists but we do not know anything about His οὐσία.

“No man has yet breathed all the air, no mind has yet contained or language embraced God’s essence in its fullness”

It is obvious that we cannot comprehend what is the very nature of God if we cannot understand even our own nature and the nature of the created world. Gregory calls for some moderation in the striving at full comprehension. Not to acknowledge the limits of our reason is, he says, “to be

739 Cf. Or. 27–31 (PG 36, 12–172).
740 Cf. Or. 27, 1 (PG 36, 12 A). “There are people, believe me, who not only have ‘itching ears;’ their tongues, also and now, I see, even their hands itch and attack my arguments” (Wickham/Williams, p. 218) Or. 20, 10 (PG 35, 1077 A). “All of this is what our abusers argue; all of this belongs to those who rashly attack everything we say.” and “I am constantly repeating the same argument, since I fear for the crude and material style of your thought” (tr. B.E. Daley, Gregory of Nazianzus, New York 2006, p. 103).
741 Or. 30, 17 (PG 36, 126 C; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 274).
fetched in an abyss of nonsense with no halting place.”742 Natural theology is limited to a discovery of God’s existence from the beauty and order of visible things.743

After a long description of various problems that we are not able to resolve, Gregory ascertains that “if you do not fully grasp these things, of which your own sense faculties are witnesses, how do you suppose you can know with accuracy what and how great God is? This is really a lot of foolishness!”744 Neither our mind nor language can grasp God’s οὐσία.745 For Gregory of Nazianzus, God’s essence is unknowable not only to an ordinary man but also to biblical heroes such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Elijah, and Peter.746 According to F. Norris, the assertion that the divine nature is incomprehensible is the most often repeated one in Theological Orations.747

Gregory points out that if we do not know visible things, the invisible ones are even more above our range. In Gregory’s teaching, we observe the antinomy between what is sensual and spiritual even more clearly than in Basil.748 It is our bodily existence that makes a contact with God difficult.

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742 Or. 28. 8 (PG, 36, 36 B; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 228). Cf. also C.A. Beeley, Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God. In Your Light We Shall See Light, Oxford 2008, p. 111.
743 Cf. Or. 28, 13 (PG 36, 41 C-43 A).
744 Or. 20, 11 (PG 35, 1080 A; tr. Daley, p. 104).
745 Cf. Or. 30, 17 (PG, 36, 125 B). “Our starting-point must be the fact that the God cannot be named. Not only will deductive arguments prove it, but the wisest Hebrews of antiquity, so far as can be gathered, will too. The ancient Hebrews used special symbols to venerate the divine and did not allow anything inferior to God to be written with the same letters as the word ‘God’ on the ground that the divine should not be put on even this much of a level with things human” (tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 274). Or. 30, 17 (PG, 36, 125 B-C). “No man has yet breathed all the air; no mind has yet contained or language embraced God’s essence in its fullness. No, we use facts connected with him to outline qualities which correspond with him, collecting a faint and feeble mental image from various quarters” (tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 274).
748 Or. 37, 11 (PG 36, 296 B). 'Ἡ σὰρξ τῷ κόσμῳ προσέδησεν, ἀλλ’ ὁ λογισμὸς πρὸς Θεόν ἀνήγαγεν· ἢ σὰρξ ἑβάρησεν, ἀλλ’ ὁ λογισμὸς ἐπέτρωσεν· ἢ σὰρξ ἐδήσεν, ἀλλ’ ὁ πόθος ἐλεύσεν.
“That may be the reason this corporeal gloom stands barrier between us and God like the cloud of the time between Hebrews and Egyptians, being, it may be, too, the ‘darkness which he made his hiding place, meaning our grossness, through which few but briefly peer.”\(^749\)

According to J. Pelikan, accepting those limitations of human reason, functioning within them, and not allowing the reach of reason to exceed its grasp is not a sacrifice of the intellect, nor an abdication of the rational philosophical activity.\(^750\) Gregory in various places mentions the reasons of God’s incomprehensibility. According to Beeley, for Gregory, the incomprehensibility of God is the necessary result of the infinitude of God’s being and the finitude of creaturely existence, including human thought.\(^751\)

“God is the most beautiful and exalted of the things that exist (τῶν ὀντῶν) – unless one prefers to think of him as transcending being (ὑπὲρ τὴν οὐσίαν), or to place the sum total of existence (τὸ εἶνα) in him, from whom it also flows to others.”\(^752\)

In his discourse of divine incomprehensibility, he compares the greatness and magnitude of God the Creator to a theologian’s ability to know him.\(^753\) *Via eminentiae* seems to be a necessary complement of negative and positive ways of speaking about God. Therefore, He not only surpasses all things in magnitude and greatness, but He is the “supreme nature” (φύσις ἀνωτάτω).\(^754\) So God is not only supremely great and beautiful but He is even more supreme to the category of greatness and other categories, as well as time and space.\(^755\) In *Oratio* 28, Gregory preaches that God’s nature is not simply “greater” than our ability to understand, or even “above
all things” (ὑπὲρ ἄπαντα), in the sense of being superior to them on their own terms, but He is “first and unique” (πρῶτης καὶ μόνης) in an absolute sense,756 and in Oratio 25, God’s existence is presented as a kind radically different from our own.757

In his polemic with Eunomians, Gregory first of all put points that not everybody can be called a theologian and dispute about divine matters.758 He begins Theological Orations with a presentation of his theological method. As an answer to the theories produced by Eunomians,759 Gregory points to the Orthodox theology and reminds its fundamental conditions.

“Discussion of theology is not for everyone, I tell you, not for everyone – it is no such inexpensive or effortless pursuit. (…) It is not for all men, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul.”760

The idea that the knowledge of God is closely related to morality was rather absent in the Eunomian doctrine but was constantly present from the beginnings of a philosophical inquiry.761 Here, not only unknowability of God, which is clearly the essence of the dispute, distinguishes the Orthodox from heretics, but also an inseparable connection between the practice and the possibility of practising theology. Gregory bases the necessity of transformation and detachment from mundane matters directly on Platonic assumptions that the similar clings to the similar. In Oration 20, Gregory encourages the faithful:

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756 Cf. Or. 28, 31 (PG 36, 72; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 244).
757 Cf. Or 25, 17 (PG 35, 1224 A).
758 Cf. Or. 27, 3 (PG 35, 1224 A).
759 Cf. Or. 20, 1. “When I see the endless talkativeness that haunts us today, the instant sages and designated theologians, for whom simply willing to be wise is enough to make them so, I long for the philosophy that comes from above; I yearn for that ‘final lodging,’ to use Jeremiah’s phrase, and I want only to be off by myself” (PG 35, 1065 A-B; tr. Daley, p. 98).
760 Or. 27, 3 Όυ παντός, ού οὔτως, τό μέγα θεόν, εὐθυγραμμῆνον, οῦ παντός, ούχ οὔτως τό πράγμα εἰσόιν καί τῶν χαμά, ἐριθομένων. προσθήσον δὲ, οὔδε πάντοτε, οὔδε πᾶσιν, οὔδε πάντα, ἀλλ᾽ ἐστὶν ὅτε, καί οίς, καὶ ἐφ᾽ ὅσον. οῦ πάντων μὲν, ὅτι τῶν ἐφηθημένων καί διαβεβηκότων ἐν θεωρίᾳ, καί πρὸ τούτων καὶ ψυχῆν καὶ σῶμα κεκαθαρμένων (PG 36, 14 D-16 A; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 218).
761 We can see it already in Letter VII of Plato (Ep. VII 326 B-C).
“Approach it by the way you live: what is pure can only be acquired through purification. Do you want to become a theologian someday, to be worthy of the divinity? Keep the commandments, make your way forward through observing the precepts (τὰς ἐντολὰς φύλασσε): for the practical life (πρᾶξις) is the launching-pad for contemplation (θεωρία).”\(^7\)

As Jean Plagnieux observes, it is impossible to separate Gregory’s doctrine of God from his doctrine of the means by which God is known.\(^6\) The concept that what is unclean cannot be unified with what is pure is constantly repeated in Gregory’s orations:\(^4\)

“For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness.”\(^5\)

“Therefore, the first requirement is to purify oneself, then to associate oneself with the One who is pure.”\(^6\)

As in many other cases, it is a good example how biblical and philosophical influences intermingle in an author’s work without the possibility to identify the exact source of direct inspiration. Both in pagan as well as Christian philosophy, there is a common idea of purification which leads to *theosis*.\(^7\) Just to point one though crucial passage of the sixth blessing which was so

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72 Or. 20, 12. Διὰ πολιτείας, ἄνελθε· διὰ καθάρσεως, κτῆσαι τὸ καθαρὸν. Βούλει θεολόγος γενέσθαι ποτὲ, καὶ τῆς θεότητος ἄξιος· τὰς ἐντολὰς φύλασσε· διὰ τῶν προσταγμάτων ὁδεύσον· πρᾶξις γὰρ ἐπίβασις θεωρίας· ἐκ τοῦ σώματος τῇ ψυχῇ φιλοσόφησον (PG 35, 1080 B; tr. Daley, p. 104).


75 Or. 27, 3 (PG 36, 16 A). μὴ καθαρῷ γὰρ ἀπετεσθαί καθαροῦ τυχὸν οὐδὲ ἁσφαλές, ὡσπερ οὐδὲ ὄψει σαθρᾷ ἡλιακῆς ἀκτῖνος (tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 218).

76 Or. 20, 4 (PG 35, 1069). Καὶ διὰ τούτου καθαρτέον ἐαυτὸν πρῶτον, εἶτα τῷ καθαρῷ προσομιλητέον (tr. Daley, p. 100). And nearly exactly in the same words in Or. 39, 9 (PG 36, 344 B; tr. Daley, p. 131) and similar Or. 2. 39, 71; 17. 12; 18. 3; 30. 20.

important for Gregory of Nyssa: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5.8). 768 We can find similar assumptions in Plato’s *Phaedo*: “it cannot be that the impure attain the pure.” 769 As Beeley notes, Plato’s doctrine of purification became widely influential in later Hellenistic traditions, and Plotinus,770 whom Gregory with much probability read, strove to popularize the modified Platonic doctrine of purification.771

Gregory also describes the means of purification which are first of all mindfulness of God (μεμνῆσθαι θεοῦ), meditation, and worship.772 After purification comes illumination which precedes a mystical union. Gregory continues the scheme introduced by Origen, who applied this distinction to the three protocanonical books of Wisdom ascribed to Solomon: *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and the *Song of Songs*, where ethics is assigned to Proverbs, physics assigned to Ecclesiastes, and enoptics assigned to the *Song of Songs*.773 There are three stages that the soul must pass through progressively: first – learning virtue; next – adopting a right attitude to natural things; and then – ascending to the contemplation of God. Illumination is conditioned by purification and proportionate to it.

> “Where there is fear, there is observation of the commandments; where the commandments are observed, there is a cleansing of the flesh, that cloud that blocks the soul’s vision and keeps it from seeing clearly the rays of divine illumination; but where there is cleansing, there is also illumination, and illumination is the fulfilment of desire for those eager to share in the greatest things—or in the greatest Thing, or in That which is beyond the great!” 774

Gregory’s primary concept for God’s nature is light, and he frequently refers to the knowledge of God as illumination or coming to share in the divine light.775 The ultimate aim of human existence is participation in God.776

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768 μακάριοι οἱ καθαροί τῇ καρδίᾳ, ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν Θεὸν ὄψονται.
769 *Phaedo* 67 B: μὴ καθαρῷ γὰρ καθαρὸν ἐφάπτεσθαι.
770 E.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.2.7: Καὶ γὰρ ἡ νόησις ἐκεῖ ἐπιστήμη καὶ σοφία, τὸ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡ σοφροσύνη, τὸ δὲ οἰκείον ἔργον ἢ οἰκειοπραγία, τὸ δὲ οἶον ἀνδρία ἢ ἀυλότης καὶ τὸ ἐφ’ αὐτοῦ μένειν καθαρόν.
771 Cf. C.A. Beeley, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
772 Cf. *Or.* 27, 4 (PG 36, 16CD; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 219).
774 *Or.* 39, 8 (PG 36, 343 A; tr. Deeley, p. 131).
Those who are purified, he says, will come to know that the Trinity as well as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are known by one another.\textsuperscript{777}

In Oration 21, Gregory gives a very suggestive account of \textit{theosis}. It may be even interpreted as the possible ascent of the soul to God, even in the present life, a type of the soul’s ascent to deification, but in other \textit{Oractions}, Gregory remarks that this union and knowledge is possible only in future life.\textsuperscript{778} We must remember that just like for Gregory of Nyssa, each stage of ascent relies on some kind of negation: negation of impurity, negation of our concepts of the Divine, etc.

Gregory gives his clearest statement on the positive knowledge of God in the Epiphany orations, and in the anti-Eunomian context of Oration 28, he naturally emphasizes the incomprehensibility of God showing that in the Orthodox faith, there is place for both knowing and absolute mystery – that there is no space for easy answers and that an apological attitude often leads us to certain simplifications. We can observe that Gregory himself tries to avoid such traps of common patterns of thinking. When commenting on the use of negation in theology, he omits its long philosophical tradition with respect to privation\textsuperscript{779} and very clearly explains that although it is not a mistake to define God in the categories of negation when we attribute to Him, such terms as incorporeal, generated, and immutable,\textsuperscript{780} it would not help us in any way to define who He is and what His essence is. Negative theology should be accompanied by positive assertions.\textsuperscript{781} “A person

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\item \textsuperscript{777} Cf. Or. 25, 17 (PG 35, 1221 C-D). Γενοῦ τι τῶν εἰρημένων πρῶτον, ἢ τοιοῦτος, καὶ τότε γνῶση τοσούτων, δόσον ὑπ’ ἀλλήλων γινώσκεσθαι. Νῦν δὲ διδάσκει τοσούτων εἰδέναι μόνον, μονάδα ἐν Τριάδι, καὶ Τριάδα ἐν μονάδι προσκυνομένην, παράδοξον ἔχουσαν καὶ τὴν διαίρεσιν καὶ τὴν ἕνωσιν (tr. Beeley, p. 102).
\item \textsuperscript{778} Or. 20, 12 (PG, 35, 1080 C). “Yet I consider this to be nothing else than to share in what is purest and most perfect; and the most perfect of all things that exist is the knowledge of God. Let us, then, hold on to what we have and acquire what we can, as long as we live on earth; and let us store our treasure there in heaven, so that we may possess this reward of our labor: the full illumination of the holy Trinity – what it is, its qualities and its greatness, if I may put it this way – shining in Christ himself, our Lord, to whom be glory and power for the ages of ages. Amen” (tr. Daley, s. 105).
\item \textsuperscript{779} Cf. R. Mortley, \textit{From Word to Silence}, \emph{op. cit.}, p. 108.
\item \textsuperscript{780} Cf. Or. 28, 9 (PG 36 C-37 A; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 228).
\item \textsuperscript{781} Cf. Or. 28, 9 (PG 36, 37 A-B; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 229).
\end{itemize}
who tells you what God is not but fails to tell you what He is, is rather like someone, who asked what twice five are, answers “not two, not three, not four, not five…” In his apology of God’s incomprehensibility, Gregory shows the need to use also positive theology against the Eunomian doctrine.

A similar paradox is found when the figure of Moses is being recalled. He is the one who ascends the Mountain to meet God and who has left all of the impurity below. According to Ch. A. Beeley, Gregory is largely responsible for creating the image of Moses as a primary model of Christian growth and the vision of God. This archetype was first used by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius followed Gregory Nazianzen’s work. The motif itself became standard in Eastern and Western spirituality. The figure of Moses is used here to underline the absurdity of Eunomius’ claim, since even Moses who prayed to comprehend God could only see His averted figure and not His face.

But still according to Gregory, the main aim of human existence is participation in God who is the greatest reward for all efforts. In the life to come, He can draw those who are purified and lightened to Himself and let them know God without any of the limitations of the present state of

782 Or. 28, 9 (tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 229).
783 Cf. C.A. Beeley, op. cit., p. 65.
784 Or. 28, 3. ἐπεὶ δὲ προσβλέψα, μόλις εἰδὸν θεοῦ τὰ ὀπίσθια· καὶ τοῦτο τῇ πέτρᾳ σκεπασθεὶς, τῷ σαρκωθέντι δὲ ἡμᾶς θεῷ Λόγῳ· καὶ μικρὸν διακύψας, οὐ τὴν πρώτην τε καὶ ἀκήρατον φύσιν, καὶ ἐμπρός, λέγω δὴ τῇ τριάδι, γινωσκομένη, καὶ ὅσα τοῦ πρώτου καταπτάσματος εἶσω μένει καὶ ὑπὸ τὸν χερουβιμ συγκαλύπτεται, ἀλλ’ ὅσα τῇ τριάδι καὶ εἰς ἡμᾶς φθάνουσα. ἦ δὲ ἐστὶν, ὅσα ἐμὲ γινώσκειν, ἢ ἐν τοῖς κτίσμασι καὶ τοῖς ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ προσβλήμενοις καὶ διοικομένοις μεγαλόποις, τὰ γὰρ θεοῦ τὰ ὀπίσθια· ὅσα ἐμὲ ἀκραίφνει τοῦ φωτὸς νικῶν τὴν ἀίσθησιν (PG 36, 36 B-C). “Peering in I saw not the nature as it abides within the first veil and is hidden by the Cherubim, but as it reaches us at its furthest remove from God, being, so far as I can understand, the grandeur, or as divine David calls it the ‘majesty’ inherent in the created things he has brought forth and governs. All these indications of himself which he has left behind him are God’s ‘averted figure’. They are, as it were, shadowy reflections of the Sun in water, reflections which display to eyes too weak” (tr. Wickham/Williams, pp. 225–226).
human existence. But Gregory claims that even in the present state, we may be conducted to the knowledge of God but it is God’s not human act. He is sceptic about the possibility of knowing God by our own means, but limitations of human intellect do not separate Christians from God since “faith, in fact, gives fullness to our reasoning.”

785 Cf. Or. 38, 7 (PG 36, 317 C). “For he contains the whole of being in himself, without beginning or end, like an endless, boundless ocean of reality; he extends beyond all our notions of time and nature, and is sketchily grasped by the mind alone, but only very dimly and in a limited way; he is known not directly but indirectly, as one image is derived from another to form a single representation of the truth: fleeing before it is grasped, escaping before it is fully known, shining on our guiding reason – provided we have been purified – as a swift, fleeting flash of lightning shines in our eyes. And he does this, it seems to me, so that, insofar as it can be comprehended, the Divine might draw us to itself – for what is completely beyond our grasp is also beyond hope, beyond attainment – but that insofar as it is incomprehensible, it might stir up our wonder, and through wonder might be yearned for all the more, and through our yearning might purify us, and in purifying us might make us like God; and when we have become this, that he might then associate with us intimately as friends – my words here are rash and daring! – uniting himself with us, making himself known to us, as God to gods, perhaps to the same extent that he already knows those who are known by him” (tr. Daley, p. 120).

786 Cf. Or. 39, 8–10 (PG, 36, 344 D-345 A). “For the same Word is both fearful to those who are unworthy on account of its nature, yet on account of its loving kindness also accessible to those who are converted in the way we have described, who have driven out the unclean, material spirit from their souls, and have swept and adorned their own souls by self-examination and who, besides fleeing from evil, practice virtue and make Christ to dwell within them entirely, or at least as much as possible. [When we have done this] and so enlightened ourselves with the light of knowledge, then let us speak of the wisdom of God that is hidden in a mystery and enlighten others. Meanwhile, let us purify ourselves and be initiated into the Word, so that we may do as much good to ourselves as possible, forming ourselves in God’s image and receiving the Word when he comes – not only receiving him, in fact, but holding onto him and revealing him to others.” (tr. Daley, in: Beeley, pp. 69–70, with my own alterations).

787 Or. 29, 21 (PG 36, 104 A; tr. Wickham/Williams, p. 260).
5.4 John Chrysostom against Eunomius

John Chrysostom wrote twelve homilies against the Anomoeans, which can be divided into two series. The first five, which deal with God’s incomprehensibility, were preached when he was a priest in Antioch and were addressed both to the Heterodox and the Orthodox. This is the reason why they are not so theologically and philosophically sophisticated as Basil’s and Gregory’s texts, unlike even Gregory of Nazianzus, whose Orations were full of theological and philosophical analyses, John Chrysostom presents a more pastoral attitude. But it does not mean that Chrysostom was not aware of all the nuances of the controversy. On the contrary, we find many proofs that he deliberately simplified his teaching. Additionally, John Chrysostom, as J. Daniélou mentioned in his introduction to the critical edition, quotes not only the thoughts of Gregory and Basil, but includes his own ideas as well. The aim of the homilies is apologetic: “The time I spend on these arguments will both increase your knowledge about the Anomoeans and will make my prize of victory over those heretics a brighter one.” We can also observe that to provide better reception, John uses mainly biblical examples.

The general content of the homilies is similar to the predecessors in the polemic: divine essence is incomprehensible not only for human beings but also for angels. John declares it in many places in a beautiful style:

“Let us call upon him, then, as the ineffable God who is beyond our intelligence, invisible, incomprehensible, who transcends the power of mortal words. Let us call on him as the God who is inscrutable to the angels, unseen by the Seraphim,

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791 Hom. IV, 8–12 (SC 28bis, p. 228; tr. Harkins, p. 115).
792 Cf. Hom. V, 251–257 (SC 28bis, p. 292). “But why do I speak of the essence of the angels when we do not even know well the essence of our own souls? Rather, we do not have any knowledge whatsoever of that essence” (tr. Harkins p. 149).
inconceivable to the Cherubim, invisible to the principalities, to the powers, and to the virtues, in fact, to all creatures without qualification, because he is known only by the Son and the Spirit."\textsuperscript{794}

Not only divine essence but also divine economy is inaccessible for the people.\textsuperscript{795} Man is unable to know even the created word\textsuperscript{796} and his own soul, so how can he comprehend angels\textsuperscript{797} or the reality that is above him.\textsuperscript{798}

In his attitude, we can observe the lack of the trust in human cognition typical of the authors of the latter half the 4th century, which is according to J. Daniélou a commonplace between pagan and Christian philosophy in the late Antiquity.\textsuperscript{799} What Chrysostom underlines is the fact that even pretending that we can know the essence of God is true ignorance, madness, and even blasphemy\textsuperscript{800} – the blasphemy which does not harm God but its author.\textsuperscript{801} In order to visualize the absurdity of heretical views\textsuperscript{802} to ordinary listeners, he uses simple examples:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{794} Hom. III, 53–59 (SC 28bis, p. 190; tr. Harkins, p. 97).
  \item \textsuperscript{795} Cf. Hom. I, 280–281 (SC 28bis, p. 124).
  \item \textsuperscript{796} Cf. Hom. II, 473–480 (SC 28bis, p. 180). “But we do not know what the essence of the sky is.” (tr. Harkins, p. 91).
  \item \textsuperscript{797} Cf. Hom. III, 194–196 (SC 28bis, p. 202). “And why do I speak of that blessed essence of God? A man cannot even look upon the essence of an angel without fear and trembling” (tr. Harkins, p. 105); Hom. V, 257 (SC 28bis, p. 292). “But why do I speak of the essence of the angels when we do not even know well the essence of our own souls? Rather, we do not have any knowledge whatsoever of that essence” (tr. Harkins, p. 149).
  \item \textsuperscript{798} Cf. Hom. V, 249–266 (SC 28bis, p. 292).
  \item \textsuperscript{799} Cf. J. Daniélou, Platonism et théologie mystique, Paris 1953, p. 131.
  \item \textsuperscript{800} Cf. Hom. V, 371–373 (SC 28bis, p. 302); Hom. I, 188–190 (SC 28, p. 116). “I urge you, then, to flee from the madness of these men. They are obstinately striving to know what God is in his essence. And I tell you that this is the ultimate madness” (tr. Harkins, p. 59); Hom. II, 163–165, (SC 28, pp. 154–156; tr. Harkins, p. 79).
  \item \textsuperscript{801} Cf. Hom. III, 32–41 (SC 28bis, pp. 188–190). “In the same way, the man who hurls blasphemies at that blessed essence of God would never do any harm to it. God’s essence is much too great and far too high to receive any hurt. The blasphemer is sharpening his sword against his own soul because he has become so arrogant toward his benefactor” (tr. Harkins, p. 96).
  \item \textsuperscript{802} Cf. Hom. I, 190–195 (SC 28bis, p. 116). “Not only is it clear that the prophets do not know what his essence is but they do not even know how vast his wisdom is. Yet his essence does not come from his wisdom, but his wisdom
\end{itemize}
“How great is the distance between the knowledge which is going to be
given to us and the knowledge which we now have? How great is the dis-
tance between a complete and perfect man and an infant at the breast? For
that is the degree of superiority of the knowledge to come in comparison
to our present knowledge.”

John compares an attempt to pretend of having full knowledge of divine
essence with Adam’s pride in paradise. The first man lost everything that
he had received from God because he exceeded the set limits. Similarly,
the Anomeans who claimed to have obtained perfect knowledge, which
is impossible here on earth, would lose any possibility to know God in
eternity.

John explains that the impassable barrier in our cognition is based on
the difference in nature:

“...for the distance between God and man is as great as the distance between the
potter and the clay. Rather the distance is not merely as great but much greater.
The potter and the clay are of one and the same substance. It is just as Job said: ‘I
admit it as for those who dwell in houses of clay because we are ourselves formed
from the same clay.’”

The distance between the essence of God and the essence of man is so great
that according to John neither words can express it, nor the mind can
measure it. It means that the exact knowledge of God is possible only
for those who share the same nature with Him. When Chrysostom com-
ments on the text that nobody knows the Father, he explains that the term
“nobody” is always used to express the exclusion of creatures alone.

comes from his essence. When the prophets cannot perfectly comprehend
his wisdom, how mad and foolish would the Anomoeans be to think that
they could” (tr. Harkins, p. 59); Hom. II, 159–165 (SC 28bis, pp. 154–156).
“Does this require refutation? Must I prove it not the mere utterance of the
words enough to prove, godlessness of the Anomoeans? In these words we the
obvious folly, an unpardonable madness, a new kind of piety and godlessness.
(..)You miserable Anomoeans! Think of who you are and in things you are
 meddling” (tr. Harkins, p. 79).

knowledge about God exceeds our spiritual powers,\textsuperscript{808} and he emphasizes the vanity of our human nature which is worthless compared not only with the excellence of God\textsuperscript{809} but even with angels.\textsuperscript{810} For Chrysostom, God is not only unknowable (\textit{ἀκατάληπτος}), but also inaccessible (\textit{ἀπρόσιτος}), which is in this context even stronger.

“However, he did not say: ‘Who dwells in incomprehensible light,’ but: ‘in unapproachable light,’ and this is much stronger than ‘incomprehensible.’ A thing is said to be incomprehensible when those who seek after it fail to comprehend it, even after they have searched and sought to understand it. A thing is unapproachable which, from the start, cannot be investigated nor can anyone come near to it. We call the sea incomprehensible because, even when divers lower themselves into its waters and go down to a great depth, they cannot find the bottom. We call that thing unapproachable which, from the start, cannot be searched out or investigated.”\textsuperscript{811}

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\item \textsuperscript{808} Cf. Hom. III, 35–38 (SC 28bis, p. 188; tr. Harkins, p. 98).
\item \textsuperscript{809} Cf. Hom. II, 296–300 (SC 28bis, p. 166; tr. Harkins, p. 83); Cf. Hom. II, 166–177, (SC 28bis, p. 156). “You are only a man, and the bare names we call a man are enough to prove how excessive your madness is. A man is dust and ashes, flesh and blood, grass and the flower of grass, a shadow and smoke and vanity, and whatever is weaker and more worthless than these. And do not think that what I am saying is an accusation against nature. I am not the one who says this, but it is the prophets who are expressing their thoughts on the lowliness of man. Nor are they seeking to heap dishonor on humankind but they are trying to check the conceits of the foolish. Their aim is not to disparage our nature but to discourage the folly of those who are mad with pride” (tr. Harkins, p. 79).
\item \textsuperscript{810} Cf. Hom. III, 182–193 (SC 28bis, p. 202). “And the fact is that we do not know God in the same way in which those powers above know him. Their nature is far more pure and wise and clear-sighted than man’s nature. The blind man does not know that the sun’s rays are unapproachable as does the man who can see. So we do not know the incomprehensibility of God in the same way as these powers do. The difference between a blind man and a man with sight is as great as the difference between us men and the powers above. So, even if you hear the prophet say: ‘I saw the Lord,’ do not suspect that he saw God’s essence. What he saw was this very condescension of God. And he saw that far less distinctly than did the powers above. He could not see it with the same clarity as the Cherubini” (tr. Harkins, pp. 104–105).
\item \textsuperscript{811} Hom. III, 124–133 (SC 28bis, pp. 196–198; tr. Harkins, p. 100). Άλλ’ οὐδὲ φῶς οἰκῶν ἀκατάληπτον ἔτην, ἀλλὰ ἀπρόσιτον, ὅ τοῦ ἀκατάληπτου πολλῷ μεῖζόν ἐστι. Τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἀκατάληπτον λέγεται, ὅταν ἔρευνθην καὶ ἐπετήθην μὴ καταληφθῇ παρὰ τῶν ἑτούντων αὐτῷ ἀπρόσιτον δέ στιν, ὅ μηδὲ ἐρευνήσῃς ἀνέχεται τὴν ἀρχήν, μηδὲ ἐγγὺς αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι τις δύναται. Οἶον ἀκατάληπτον λέγεται πέλαγος, εἰς ὃ
\end{itemize}
Just like Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, John defends believers against the Eunomian accusation of not knowing God\(^{812}\) and reminds that “All that we are required to know is that God exists; we are not asked to be busybodies and be inquisitive about his essence.”\(^{813}\) He makes a distinction between the knowledge we can receive from the revelation and human inquiries about the truth and understanding of divine mysteries.\(^{814}\)

“Paul said this because on the one hand he knows that God exists, whereas, on the other, he does not know what God is in his essence. He knows that God is wise but he does not know how great his wisdom is. He knows that God is great but he does not know how or what his greatness is. He also knows that God is everywhere present but he does not know how this is so. He knows that God provides for all things and that he preserves and governs them to perfection. But he does not know the way in which God does all these things. Therefore, he said: ‘Our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesying is imperfect’,\(^{815}\)

\(\text{kathéntes éauntoús oi kolymbhtai kai prós polú kataphrómenoi báthos, to perás ádúnatousin éphéin. ápéríston dé ékeíno légetai, ò mýte tìn árchiin zhtithnai úndotón, mhē Ýreunthnai.}\)

812 *Cf. Hom. V*, 366–369 (SC 28bis, p. 302). “What is the wise objection and argument of these Anomoeans? They say: ‘Do you not know what you are adoring?’ *First and foremost*, we should not have to reply to this objection because the Scriptures afford such strong proof that it is impossible to know what God’s essence is. But since our *purpose in speaking is not* to arouse their enmity but to correct them, come, let us show that being ignorant of God’s essence but contending obstinately that one does know his essence, this is *really not to know him*” (tr. Harkins, p. 153).


814 *Cf. Hom. I*, 156–167 (SC 28bis, pp. 110–112). “I, too, know many things but I do not know how to explain them. I know that God is everywhere and I know that he is everywhere in his whole being. But I do not know how he is everywhere. I know that he is eternal and has no beginning. But I do not know how. My reason fails to grasp how it is possible for an essence to exist when that essence has received its existence neither from itself nor from another. I know that he begot a Son. But I do not know how. I know that the Spirit is from him. But I do not know how the Spirit is from him. [I eat food but I do not know how it is separated into phlegm, into blood, into juice, into bile. We do not even understand the foods which we see and eat every day. Will we be inquisitive, then, and meddle with the essence of God?]” (tr. Harkins, pp. 57–58).

John does not hesitate to use privation or negation to describe God, and that fact can be clearly associated with not only Plato’s, Philo’s, and Clemet’s inspiration, but also with the Bible.816 We can see it in the use of such terms as: invisible ἄόρατος,817 unspeakable ἄρρητος,818 unreachable ἀπρόσιτος,819 impossible to contemplate ἀθέατος, and many others.820 The negative language is complemented by the transcendent descriptions with ὑπερ.821 Like his predecessors, John believes that Christians will achieve the full knowledge of God in future life, but in the present state, they are not left without help as God can be seen by men or angels only by condescension (συγκατάβασις) and accommodation (ἐπιμετρέω). In his Third Homily, when John describes the knowledge of angels, he presents the definition of condescension:

“They did not see the pure light itself nor the pure essence itself. What they saw was a condescension accommodated to their nature. What is this condescension? God condescends whenever He is not seen as He is, but in the way one incapable of beholding Him is able to look upon Him. In this way God reveals Himself by accommodating what reveals to the weakness of vision of those who behold Him.”822

According to John Chrysostom, God wants to be known by His creation but everything that was revealed to us about Him is very distant from the true knowledge about His nature.823

816 Cf. e.g. Rom 1: 20; 2 Cor 9: 15.
823 The same motif was used by Cyril of Jerusalem: “‘What?’ someone will say. ‘Doesn’t Scripture say that the angels of the little ones “always behold the face of my Father in heaven”’ (Mt 18.10)? But the angels see God not as he is, but according to their capacity. For Jesus himself said: ‘Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the one who is from God, he has seen the Father’ (Jn 6.46). The angels see according to their capacity, and the archangels according to their ability; the Thrones and Dominations more than the first, but still fail
In the thought of all authors presented in this chapter, we could observe same schemes of demonstrating the incomprehensibility of God. The basic truth of the impossibility to know the essence of God is always defended, but there are different accents as well. While Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa present a more speculative attitude, for Gregory of Nazianzus and especially for John Chrysostom, a pastoral approach is more natural. But this does not mean that such pastoral care was less important, since the Anomeans were effective not only in the field of doctrinal demonstrations, but also in their missionary activity.

Finally, it is worth adding that those four writers are the most famous ones, and, therefore, they are the best examples of a rapid development of negative theology in the late 4th century. But they certainly are not all writers who contributed to the growing interest in negative theology in the latter half of the 4th century. Among others worthy of mentioning is Cyril of Jerusalem and Didymus the Blind, who also accepted the basic outcome of the debate, namely that the essence of God is incomprehensible.

824 It is worth quoting at least one quote from Cyril of Jerusalem’s orations which shows that negative theology was commonly present at that time: “For we do not say as much as needs to be said about God, but as much as human nature can grasp and our weakness can bear. We do not explain what God is; we admit with a good grace that we do not know the exact truth about him. For in what concerns God the height of knowledge is to admit one’s ignorance” (Cat. VI; 1; PG 33, 357A-340 B; tr. Yarnold, p. 115).