

# Preface

Looking at the philosophical and theological traditions, one can see that man has been constantly trying to describe the Absolute. Those attempts have always been confronted with the problem of how to speak about the reality which is somehow known to man, but also remains beyond the reach of human intellect. That is why negative theology seems indispensable in such attempts to describe the one who remains mysterious despite all efforts to describe him. Negative speaking on God exposes many fundamental problems of epistemological and linguistic nature. It urges one to reconsider the limits of human knowledge, the capability of the human language to express the reality, since man has to use words to express the Unsayable.

The tradition of negative theology is so prolific because it is not only a theoretical issue of naming the First Principle, but it is intrinsically linked with the human experience of the Absolute. Negative theology is then almost a fundament of the mystical tradition, and it seems that God that unveils Himself when He is experienced is most often described in negative terms.

But negative theology is not an outdated view of the past ideas. It seems that it is still alive and present in the currents of modern thought. When presenting the complicated situation of contemporary philosophy of religion, J.A. Simmons points out that this field of study is in the state of crisis and seeking the new directions.<sup>1</sup> Negative theology is recognized as one of the basic problems which must be confronted in the study of philosophy of religion, and therefore the study of traditions of this way of speaking on God is also given as the proposition of a new direction and exploration of new frontiers.<sup>2</sup>

In this study, we shall examine the negative theology of a period which was of utmost importance for shaping the Christian doctrine – the 4th century. It was the time of looking for new concepts and possibilities of expressing Christian dogmas, and negative theology was certainly one of them. The most important debate of that period, started by Arius,

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1 Cf. J.A. Simmons, *Old Questions and New Frontiers in Philosophy of Religion*, in: *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy*, ed. N. Brown, J.A. Simmons, Palgrave Macmillan 2017, pp. 1–4.

2 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

concerned the problem of the status of the Son of God: whether He was equal to the Father or rather an inferior and first created being. It seems that negative theology also played an important role at the early stage of the controversy. There were writers who used negative and positive theology to support their positions. It will be seen during the course of this study that positive or negative claims of God on the one side of the conflict almost always caused the opposite claims on the other side. However, to understand the role of negative theology in this discussion, it is necessary to show briefly the development of negative theology starting from the most obvious point of reference for Christian writers, namely the Holy Scripture. Although the Bible is ambiguous on this topic, we observe the constant growth of the importance of negative speaking on God in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Nonetheless, the 4th century seems crucial to the understanding how negative theology settled for good in the Christian thought.

There is certainly an important role of negative argumentation on inferiority of the Son of God in Arius himself, which will be investigated together with the Orthodox response. But there was a significant shift of the debate when the Anomeans (Aetius and Eunomius) started to spread their opinion that the essence of God can be known. Especially Eunomius was the one who skilfully argued on this claim and provoked the response of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. There is no need here to describe the complete timeline of this phase of the discussion since we have many studies which explain well the sequence of writings,<sup>3</sup> but for the purpose of this study, it seems necessary to recall the basic facts.

## **The timeline of the discussion between Eunomius, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa**

Most of all, it is worth remembering that Eunomius and his teacher Aetius were not Arians in the strict sense. In their own lifetime, they were recognized as a separate group which was most radical since they claimed that the Son has the substance which is different and dissimilar with that of

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3 The most important of them is certainly: T. A. Kopecek, *A History of Neo-Arianism*, Cambridge 1979, pp. 299–543. Cf. also: M. DelCogliano, *Basil of Caesarea's Anti-Eunomian Theory of Names*, Leiden, Boston 2010, pp. 3–14.

the Father. Therefore, they are rather Neo-Arians, and in their own times, they were also called Anomeans (from ἀνόμοτος - dissimilar).

The first Anomean writing was *Syntagmation* by Aetius, but that text had a formal structure and was complicated; therefore, it was not popular and did not play any important role during the conflict.<sup>4</sup> Eunomius was a disciple and secretary of Aetius since the late 340s.<sup>5</sup> There is still a debate among scholars as to when the first work of Eunomius: *Liber Apologeticus* was created. We can assume that the most accurate date – 359 – was proposed by Thomas Kopecek, who also claimed that it was presented at the Council of Constantinople.<sup>6</sup> However, both Basil and Gregory objected that *Apology* was never presented, but rather written, and Eunomius only claimed that he had presented it because he wanted to convince the readers that he provided answers to Orthodox arguments.<sup>7</sup>

Basil of Caesarea wrote his *Contra Eunomium* because the heteroousian doctrine significantly spread out after the success of the Council in 359. There is also a disagreement among scholars as regards the date of its creation. Having reconsidered various opinions, Mark DelCogliano claims that it was written after the accusation of Valens, and, therefore, the most probable date is 364 or 365.<sup>8</sup> However, T. Kopecek points out that after the Council in 359, the next Council in Constantinople accepted the

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4 Cf. L. R. Wickham, *The Syntagmation of Aetius*, JTS 19 (1968), pp. 533–537.

5 Cf. M. DelCogliano, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

6 F. Diekamp was the first who tried to establish the date on which *Apology* was written. He claimed that it was presented at the end of 360, when Eunomius was recalled by the gathering in Constantinople (F. Diekamp, *Literargeschichtliches zu der Eunomianischen Kontroverse*, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 18 (1909), pp. 1–13). T. Kopecek claimed that *Apology* was presented at the synod at Constantinople at 359, where Eunomius was as a deacon with his teacher Aetius (T.A. Kopecek, *op. cit.*, pp. 299–306). In his edition of extant works of Eunomius R. P. Vaggione claims that *Apology* was written in 360–361, because it must have been created before Basil's response in *Contra Eunomium* in 364 (R.P. Vaggione, *Introduction*, in: Eunomius, *The Extant Works*, New York 2002, p. IX). R. Willing also agrees on this date (R. Winling, *Introduction*, in: Grégoire de Nyse, *Contre Eunome*, SC 521, p. 28).

7 Basil, *Con. Eun.*, I, 2 (SC 299, pp. 149–157); Gregory of Nyssa, CE I, 61–66 (GNO I, 43–45).

8 Cf. M. DelCogliano, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

homoiousian symbol of 359 and deposed all homoousian bishops, including Basil's mentor Eustachius of Sebasta, from offices. Those events probably induced Basil to write *Contra Eunomium*, so taking into account the internal and external testimonies, T. Kopecek sets its date as 360 or 361.<sup>9</sup>

The response of Eunomius was written after he had been expelled to the island of Naos in 370, where he started to work on his *Apologia apologiae*. Two books of the work were ready in the year of the death of Emperor Valens in 378.<sup>10</sup> T. Kopecek suggests that Eunomius took advantage of the interregnum to attack his opponent.<sup>11</sup> We are not sure whether this work contained two or even as many as five books,<sup>12</sup> but we have only fragments of the first three books, thanks to the quotations made by Gregory in his *Contra Eunomium*.

At the end of 379, Anomeans began the missionary activity in the diocese of Gregory in Nyssa, and after he returned from the Council of Antioch in the autumn of 379, he encountered the successive spreading of their doctrine. Therefore, when Gregory gained access to the text of two books of *Apologia Apologiae*, he started to write the response as Basil died in 379. The answer to the first book was published at the end of 380.<sup>13</sup> The situation also alarmed Gregory of Nazianz, and, therefore, he presented his Theological Sermons between 14 of July and 24 of November 380.<sup>14</sup> The second book of Gregory's *Contra Eunomium* was finished before May of 381, because we know that he presented two completed books of his work to Gregory of Nazianz and Hieronymus.<sup>15</sup> In 381, Eunomius probably published the third book of *Apologia Apologiae*, and Gregory answered before 383.<sup>16</sup>

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9 Cf. T. A. Kopecek, *op. cit.*, pp. 362–372.

10 Cf. F. Diekamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–10.

11 Cf. T. A. Kopecek, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

12 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 442.

13 Cf. F. Diekamp, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

14 Cf. T.A. Kopecek, *op. cit.*, p. 496.

15 Cf. Hieronymus, *De viris illustribus* 128 (PL 23, 753 A).

16 M. Cassin, *Contre Eunome III: Introduction*, in: *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium III. An English Translation with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, Leiden, Boston 2014, pp. 4–5.

The situation changed in 381, and after Theodosius's edicts against Eunomians in 383/394, the entire movement was outlawed.<sup>17</sup> But Anomeans were still strong, especially in Antioch, where their rise began, and, therefore, in 386, John Chrysostom presented five speeches against their doctrines.<sup>18</sup> After Eunomius' death in 394, it slowly began to lose its cohesiveness, and vanished, not only because of the death of its main figure, but also thanks to Emperor Theodosius, who was committed to strengthening Nicene Orthodoxy.<sup>19</sup>

## The status of research on negative theology and the problem of ἐνέργεια in the 4th century

Although since the late 1970s, scholars have recognized the importance of Eunomius, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa to the understanding of the 4th century theological debate,<sup>20</sup> there was very little interest in the influence of the discussion on rapid development of Christian negative theology. The figure of Gregory of Nyssa was recognized as especially important, but there was but little recognition that his negative theology was shaped as the response to Eunomius. In her important book on negative theology in the Platonic tradition, Deidre Carabine only briefly states that the negative theology of Gregory of Nyssa "cannot be divorced from complex theological background of the 4th century,"<sup>21</sup> but she only mentions the Arian conflict without any specification of the negative theology of Arius. Eunomius is also only mentioned and the author does not speak about the importance of the concept of God's activity as the way to the knowledge of his substance.

Probably, the most extensive study on the topic was done by Raul Mortley, who in the second volume of his work *From Word to Silence* extensively discusses the use of the negative theology of Eunomius, Basil and Gregory of

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17 Cf. T.A. Kopecek, *op. cit.*, p. 519.

18 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 529.

19 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 542–543. Two sons of Theodosius: Arcadius and Honorius also continued their father's attitude towards Eunomians.

20 Cf. M. DelCogliano, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

21 D. Carabine, *The Unknown God. Negative theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, Eugene 1995, p. 234.

Nyssa.<sup>22</sup> However, he concentrates his analysis of Eunomius on the logical problems of the language and shows that the Neo-Arian was in fact an active participant of the contemporary philosophical discussion on the meaning of negation, and in some cases, he was even a precursor of the late Neoplatonic discussion on positive and privative negation.<sup>23</sup> Although those problems are certainly present in *Liber apologeticus*, I would argue that they do not play the most important role in Eunomius' theology. Besides, it does not seem plausible to call somebody who claims that we can comprehend God's essence a negative theologian. An analysis of the structure of Eunomius' work will show that the concept of the activity of God, which is generation of the Son, is far more important for him. If we look at negative theology from Gregory of Nyssa's point of view, we also see that the problem of ἐνέργεια has a more profound meaning for negative theology, since the claims made by Eunomius brought about his elaborate answer as to impossibility of knowing the substance of God by means of His activities.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, the problem of understanding ἐνέργεια and its relation to οὐσία is extensively discussed in the fourth chapter of this book. Fortunately, this topic has been lately a point of interest of scholars, and we have two important studies published by David Bradshaw<sup>25</sup> and

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22 It is also worth mentioning his very important article on the role of negative theology in Arius: R. Morley, *Alien God in Arius, in: Platonism in the Late Antiquity*, ed. S. Gersh, Ch. Kannengeisser, Notre Dame 1992, pp. 205–215.

23 R. Mortley even states that: "...probably the best way to understand Eunomius would be to write a philological commentary on him, treating all his vocabulary as if it came from Proclus, Syrianus and Dexippus." (R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 2: *The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek*, Bonn 1986, p. 147).

24 R. Mortley's thesis on the negative theology of Basil the Great is rather controversial since he concludes that: "Basil's negative theology is little more than an enhanced sense of the transcendent, or a form of piety." and he call it "the negative theology of the amateur" (*op. cit.*, p. 170). He has a higher opinion on the the negative theology of Gregory of Nyssa (*op. cit.*, p. 171), but he also states that: "There is no science of negation in Gregory" (*op. cit.*, p. 191).

25 D. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West. Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, Cambridge 2004. The publishing of this book provoked a wide discussion on the problem of Divine activities, especially in Orthodox circles, since the doctrine of energies is the core of Orthodox theology, *cf.* C. Schneider, *Beyond Agnosticism and Pantheism*, in: *Divine Essence and Divine Energies*, ed. C. Athanasopoulos, C. Schneider, Cambridge 2013, pp. 9–13.

Jean-Claude Larchet.<sup>26</sup> The study of D. Bradshaw shows well the philosophical background and development of ἐνέργεια, but he only briefly mentions the importance of the claims of Eunomius, and, therefore, he seems to underestimate Gregory's response.<sup>27</sup> The book by Jean-Claude Larchet, on the other hand, more widely discusses Christian sources and the obvious fact that for the Church Fathers, the problem of ἐνέργεια was the exegesis of the Holy Scripture rather than exploration of philosophical sources.<sup>28</sup> Hence, although both studies seem to give a complete view of the topic, none of them recognizes Eunomius' dual theology. Thus, we found it important to present more broadly both sources of the tradition in the first part of the fourth chapter of this study to provide a background for the understanding of Eunomius's methods. The most important figure of the discussion of ἐνέργεια is of course Aristotle since he invented the term and used it for the first time to describe the activity of God. Although D. Bradshaw's study is very profound in presenting Aristotle's ideas, it is also worth mentioning a very important book by Johnathan Beere in which he proposes a new interpretation of ἐνέργεια in *Metaphysics*.<sup>29</sup>

## Terminological remarks

Before we go any further, we must make some remarks on the terminology the reader will encounter throughout this study. Especially, in the case of ἐνέργεια, we face the problem of a proper translation which would render the full signification of the term. Johnathan Beere points out that there is no English term or phrase that describes the meaning of ἐνέργεια. In the case of Aristotle, there are two traditional translations of this term: "actuality" and "activity."<sup>30</sup> The problem was also recognized by the scholars who studied

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26 J.-C. Larchet, *La théologie des énergies divines. Des origines à saint Jean Damascène*, Paris 2010.

27 Cf. D. Bradshaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–161.

28 I find the chapter discussing the usage of ἐνέργεια in the Septuagint and New Testament especially important (*op. cit.*, pp. 83–93).

29 J. Beere, *Doing and Being. An Interpretation of Aristotle's "Metaphysics Theta"*, Oxford 2009.

30 Cf. J. Beere, *op. cit.*, p. 159. D. Bradshaw also makes a similar remark, cf. *Aristotle East and West*, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–15.

the works of Eunomius and the Cappadocians. It is sometimes rendered in a Latin transliteration as “energy” or in translations as “action” or “activity.” But it seems that currently in the studies concerning the thought of Aristotle and Christian writers, the term “activity” has been recognized as the most proper; however, it does not convey the full depth of the Greek original.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, in our study, apart from Greek ἐνέργεια, “activity” will be consistently used.

Another terminological remark concerns a more general problem of understanding and naming negative theology. Many scholars use the term ἀπόφασις describing the negative theology of early Christian authors such as Clement of Alexandria or Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>32</sup> The case of the latter is significant since for Gregory of Nyssa, the term ἀπόφασις has mainly a positive meaning and refers to something “clear,” “determined.”<sup>33</sup> This is in accord with what D. Carabine claims in her book on negative theology. She points out that until Proclus and development of the negative language in the 5th century, we cannot properly speak about *apophatic* theology. Earlier occurrences of the negative language could be seen as a simple negation or privation (στέρησις, ἀφαίρεσις). In the writings of Proclus, especially in the rigorous analysis of the First Hypothesis of Parmenides, he established ἀπόφασις as the method of negative theology.<sup>34</sup> Therefore,

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31 In his translation of the extant works of Eunomius, R. P. Vaggione uses the term “action” (e.g. LA 20, 8, in: Eunomius, *The Extant Works*, p. 58). In their translation of Basil’s *Contra Eunomium* Mark DelCogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallvitz propose to use “activity” (St. Basil of Cesarea, *Against Eunomius*, Washington 2011, p. 77). When commenting on the translation of ἐνέργεια in the works of Gregory of Nyssa, Giulio Maspero says: “Following Daniélou, it would seem that the best choice for translating ἐνέργεια is ‘activity’ rather than ‘energy’.” (G. Maspero, *Trinity and Man. Gregory of Nyssa “Ad Ablabium”*, Leiden, Boston, 2007, p. 39).

32 In the case of Clement, it can be seen in the very title of Fiskå Hägg’s book: *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, Oxford 2014. In the case of Gregory, the use of the term is very common cf. e.g. M. Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern*, Oxford 2007, p. 232; M. Larid, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith. Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, Oxford 2004, pp. 180; 198; 211 etc.

33 Cf. G. Maspero, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

34 Cf. D. Carabine, *op. cit.*, pp. 184–185.

although the use of the term “apophatic theology” is common, one must be alert and does not attribute apophatic theology in its fully grown version to those early authors.

## The problem of philosophical sources

The last introductory problem concerning the figure of Eunomius and his opponents as well as all Christian writers is the extent to which they used Greek philosophy. This issue almost always provokes a debate between scholars concerning many Early Christian figures, but as regards the 4th century, it seems to be particularly complicated. As we will see, from both sides of the Arian debate, there were constant accusations of being a philosopher, logical chopper, technologist, etc. Both the Arians and the Orthodox certainly referred to a Greek legacy. A good example is the doctrine of Eunomius, who is the central figure in our investigation. Eunomius has been commonly perceived by scholars as a Neoplatonist.<sup>35</sup> During our discussion, we will see that this position may be challenged because of fundamental disagreements and rejection of the Neoplatonic doctrine which we find in Eunomius and this is best seen in the crucial problem of the activity of God. He strongly opposed the view that any activity of God could be identified with the substance. The claim that was made already by Aristotle, but in the strongest manner confirmed by Plotinus in his theory of two activities. But this does not mean that he rejected philosophical teaching as such. He, for example, quotes and accepts the definition of time from *Timaeus*<sup>36</sup> because it well serves his purpose at this stage of demonstration, but some chapters later reject the notion of a receptacle as pagan and foolish.<sup>37</sup> This is of course only an example, but if we try to estimate Eunomius’ attitude

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35 The most significant opinion on the matter was presented by R. Mortley, who stated: “Eunomius’ philosophy has its roots in the Greek philosophy of the period: it makes for more use of Neoplatonic logic than does Patristic philosophy in general.” (R. Mortley, *op.cit.*, p. 138). Similar although less strong claims were made by: J. Danielou, *Eunome l’Arien et l’exégèse néo-platonicienne du Cratyle*, in: *Revue des études grecques*, 69, 1956, p. 428; B. Sesbüë, *Introduction to l’Apologie d’Eunome*, SC 305, pp. 191–195; A. Meredith, *Studies in the Contra Eunomium of Gregory or Nyssa*, Oxford 1972, pp. 62–72.

36 Cf. LA 10, 5–6 (Vaggione pp. 44–45).

37 Cf. LA 16, 4–6 (Vaggione, pp. 52–53).

towards Greek Philosophy on the basis of his texts, we must conclude that he felt free to use some of the doctrines while rejecting others.

Therefore, this is not the problem of which philosophical writings he knew, but rather how he used those which he had read and what was his purpose in any given passage. It seems that we may make similar claims with respect to other Christian writers who also freely used philosophy when it helped them to understand and explain the faith. Therefore, we entirely agree with Johannes Zachhuber's conclusion concerning the use of philosophical texts by Gregory of Nyssa. The main problem with Gregory is that he did not collect the excerpts of philosophical writings like Clemens and Eusebius, while at the same time, he was one of "the more philosophically minded Church Fathers."<sup>38</sup> Thus, his writings are certainly full of echoes and references to philosophical sources which were incorporated in his system. But in the case of Gregory, as well as many other figures of the 4th century, we have very little data as to their philosophical education, and we remain uncertain whether he could have known certain works. As J. Zachhuber rightly notes: "uncertain does not mean non-existent."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, if the writers we examine themselves freely used philosophical sources, any trace of resemblances suggests that they could have read a given philosophical work. Therefore, J. Zachhuber seems to be right in his claim that working on Gregory he will: "freely adduce parallels from late ancient philosophers without committing [himself] to the assumption that Gregory must have read any particular book."<sup>40</sup> Such a methodological assumption seems profitable, since it allows to concentrate on the thought of the discussed author, while recalling philosophical sources where they are necessary to understand the presented doctrine.<sup>41</sup>

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38 J. Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa*, Leiden, Boston 2014, p. 9.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

41 It must be noted that some of the works of philosophers were more available and more common. Among those were surely those which were also widely used in philosophical schools of the period. The list of such works used in curricula was presented by A.C. Lloyd, *cf.*, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*, Oxford 1990, pp. 4–6.