

ARTICLES

# Synonymous with Christ: Gregory of Nyssa on Biblical Language and Credal Orthodoxy

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This article considers a particular text from Gregory of Nyssa as a way to reflect on the role of Nicaea in discussions of ecumenism and orthodoxy. Against a dogmatically minimalist approach that sees the creed figuring insignificantly and with a limited scope, the approach suggested here appeals to a late fourth-century attempt to contend with anti-Nicene theology that focuses on the meaning of credal language and spiritual practice. Opposed to a confession of faith written by Eunomius of Cyzicus in 383, two years after the Council of Constantinople in 381, Gregory's *Refutation of Eunomius's Confession* lays out a biblical framework for understanding how and why credal language is germane to the Christian life. The implication of this project is that considering the broader implications of credal language can help encourage a more capacious role for the creed in ecumenical discussion.

## Introduction

The present article is intended, within the larger scope of this journal's symposium, to consider how the Nicene Creed figures in discussions of ecumenism and orthodoxy today. In brief, I am working within a line of thinking that envisions the creed as part of a thick theological culture, or *habitus*, of Nicene orthodoxy, while working against a dogmatic minimalism for which the creed serves merely as a bare expression of words to which one can minimally subscribe to signal ecclesial alignment.<sup>1</sup> As Alexis Torrance has recently described it, "The dogmatic minimalist position quietly assumes that the Nicene Creed is safely in its tomb, something we need no longer worry too much about. It acts as a crystallized formula that allows us to produce a rough roadmap to start us out on the exciting theological journey ahead, the journey that really matters" (Torrance 2025, 246). It seems to me that one of the assumptions undergirding dogmatic minimalism is a failure to see how credal language connects with other aspects of the Christian life. In this essay, I am trying to account for the ways in which the creed connects with both biblical reading practices and growth in virtue. How, in other words, does the

<sup>1</sup> Among the prominent examples of this approach, I would include works like Ayres (2003), Behr (2004), and Anatolios (2011).

creed lend itself to shaping biblically informed lives of faith, and how might this way of understanding the creed shape our approach to ecumenism and orthodoxy today?

There are many ways one might go about such an endeavor. For my part, I have found close attention to particular theological texts to be the best course of proceeding. In this case, the illustrative case is Gregory of Nyssa's *Refutation of Eunomius's Confession* (hereafter *Refutation*).<sup>2</sup> Written in response to the events of the Council of Constantinople in 383, two years after the more well-known council that met in Constantinople and approved the version of the Nicene Creed we know today, Gregory's *Refutation* does not mention Nicaea, council or creed, at all. It is, however, a profound exercise in Nicene theological exegesis aimed at assimilating the Christian to participation in Christ. The *Refutation*, especially when read alongside other works in Gregory's corpus, such as *De Professione* and *De Perfectione*, which also deal with the question of biblical names and titles, reveals an understanding of credal language that expresses how a Christian can become, as Gregory puts it, "synonymous with Christ" (Callahan 1967, 84).<sup>3</sup>

The *Refutation* was the last piece of writing from a decades-long rivalry between Gregory, his brother Basil, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus against one of the principal opponents of the Nicene vision of Christianity, Eunomius of Cyzicus. In the summer of 383, Emperor Theodosius summoned a council at which five different theological-ecclesiastical parties were invited to submit their sect's confession of faith, one of which was written by Eunomius. Shortly thereafter, Gregory produced a line-by-line commentary on Eunomius's confession, placing his opponent's confession in sharp contrast with the Trinitarian faith handed down from Christ in Matthew 28:19: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In its focus on how credal language shapes the spiritual life of the Christian faithful, Gregory's *Refutation* provides a helpful window into how we might envision the place of credal orthodoxy in ecumenical dialogue today.

### Constantinople 383

The events of the 383 council in Constantinople are themselves interesting for reflecting on the question of ecumenism and orthodoxy. While many standard narratives of the fourth century present the Council of Constantinople in 381 as the definitive closure to the debates, the reality is that heated political and doctrinal debates continued throughout the 380s.

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek text of Gregory's *Refutation* may be found in Jaeger (1960), and Van Parys (2016). Translations of this text are my own, which are being prepared for published translation. Eunomius's *Confession* may be found in Greek and English in Vaggione (1987), in Greek and French in Van Parys (2016), and in English in Radde-Gallwitz (2017).

<sup>3</sup> This phrasing is found in both *De Professione* (= *Prof.*) and *De Perfectione* (= *Perf.*), cited from Callahan (1967, 84 and 102, respectively).

In 383, with the capital city still in tumult, Theodosius called for another synod—a “general conference of the sects,” as the historian Socrates would call it—to address matters further (Socrates, *Eccl. hist.* 5.10; Schaff and Wace 1952, 2, 122).<sup>4</sup> Socrates and Sozomen give us the most detail about the council. According to them, Theodosius requested the assistance of the pro-Nicene bishop Nectarius, who had succeeded Gregory of Nazianzus as bishop of Constantinople, to assemble representatives of the major theological parties to discuss their doctrinal difference in a reasonable fashion, through dialectic and debate, so that, as Socrates puts it, “a universal agreement may be achieved by finding and removing the sources of discord” (Socrates, *Eccl. hist.* 5.10; Schaff and Wace 1952, 2, 122). Nectarius, however, was anxious about such a proposal, and so he enlisted the Novatian bishop, Agelius, for support. Agelius is depicted as a suboptimal theologian who then procured the involvement of one of his lectors, Sisinnius, a man well-versed in Scripture and philosophy and who would later become a Novatian bishop. Sisinnius advised Nectarius to forgo the planned dialectical debate and instead to have everyone declare their deference to church authorities who lived before the schism. This tactic would, presumably, force the three anti-Nicene groups either to reject the pre-Nicene fathers or have their own theological divergencies revealed.

When the participants were asked whether everyone would indeed defer to the ancient authorities, many of them, according to Socrates, balked at this proposition. As a result, each party was tasked with selecting a representative to put forth in writing “their own peculiar tenets.” “Accordingly those who were accounted the most skillful among them, drew up a statement of their respective creeds, couched in the most circumspect terms they could devise. A day was appointed and the bishops selected for this purpose presented themselves at the palace” (Socrates, *Eccl. hist.* 5.10; Schaff and Wace 1952, 2, 123)

Five parties presented confessional statements: Nectarius for the “homoousian” party, Agelius for the Novatians, Demophilus (deposed at Constantinople 381) for the “Arians,” Eleusis of Cyzicus for the Macedonians, and Eunomius for the Eunomians. After a courteous reception, the emperor took the respective creeds and considered them privately. Reading them and praying about the matter, Theodosius then approved the two pro-Nicene groups and condemned the other three. Theodosius then decreed a new law prohibiting the convening of heretical churches and condemned bishops who wrote consolatory notes to their congregations, many of whom are reported to have “defected” to the pro-

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<sup>4</sup> On this council, see Graumann (2010, 133–68) and Wallraff (1997, 271–79).

Nicene parties. Socrates reports that they console themselves by now citing Matthew 22:14: “many are called, but few are chosen” (Socrates, *Eccl. hist.* 5.10; Schaff and Wace 1952, 2, 123).

It seems unlikely that Theodosius really would have considered any one of the non-Nicene statements as a new confessional standard for the empire. More likely, he was attempting to find ways to accommodate those willing to find common ground with the Nicene position. This seems to be his approach to the Novatianists present at the council, for example, as well as the approach taken with other groups, such as the Luciferians who had taken a more hard-line sectarian stance against the Arians. Both the Novatianists and the Luciferians opposed what they perceived as the more lenient approach among the mainline pro-Nicenes, but their affirmation of the Nicene doctrine of *homoousios* allowed them to keep gathering for worship under imperial sanction (Graumann 2010, 146–49). Eunomius’s *Confession* demonstrates that he was willing to make no such concession.

Before turning to the contents of the *Refutation* itself, it is worth commenting on two features of the historical circumstances. The first is simply that, in the year 383, we are still very much in a time of doctrinal conciliarism and debate. Eunomius is still invited to the table to present his position, even if superficially. Ecumenism and orthodoxy are being approached as a matter of theological dialogue and discussion as well as ecclesial and imperial adjudication. The emperor first appears as a convener for dialogue but by the end has become the one determining the final arbitration. Second, we also notice here the complex interplay between doctrinal debate and appeals to tradition. The shifting plans—first asking everyone to defer to ancient witnesses and then to write out varying confessions—show the ways in which both ongoing theological reflection and deference to the past are important for coming to conclusions about the boundaries of true faith. It is not clear what authorities are appealed to or how they are being considered as holding to the “Nicene” faith, but the fact that these appeals are made at this point sheds light on the role of tradition and its retrieval.

## The Jesus Creed and Biblical Names

Let me now turn to the text of Gregory’s *Refutation* itself. At the outset, Gregory makes clear that he will be basing his argumentation on the trinitarian baptismal formula laid out by Jesus himself in Matthew 28:19. As Andrew Radde-Gallwitz has argued, Matthew 28:19 functions as a kind of “creed” for Gregory in this text, one that has been delivered from on high by Christ himself, the true Lawgiver (*nomothetēs*).<sup>5</sup> Gregory deploys a variety

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<sup>5</sup> As Radde-Gallwitz puts it: “The erudition, the dizzying array of imagery, the ornate rhetoric, and the length one encounters in Gregory’s Trinitarian writings must not distract one from the foundational role played therein by the Matthean baptismal formula” (2018, 3–4).

of language to convey its significance. It is the “teaching of the Lord,” the “word of faith,” the “mystery of piety” (1 Tim. 3:16); he also uses a variety of law-based terminology, describing Christ as “legislating” or “ordaining” this dogma.<sup>6</sup> The apostles, in turn, receive this dogma from the voice of the Lord himself, and any modification of its exact formulation can only come from the “father of lies” (John 8:44; *Ref.* 2).<sup>7</sup> Eunomius’s *Confession*, in other words, is presented as a direct counter-creed, promulgated by an ersatz lawgiver who sets himself in opposition to Christ.

Gregory does occasionally allow himself to agree with Eunomius on certain points, though he is always clear to refute his opponent’s evaluations and discredit his motives. Given that so much of what Eunomius includes is biblical language, Gregory cannot dispute these passages. So whenever Eunomius quotes a passage of Scripture or says something that aligns with the true faith, Gregory will comment in those instances that Eunomius merely provides evidence against himself.<sup>8</sup> As Gregory puts it in one of the last paragraphs of the treatise, “The truth reveals itself even in the enemy’s mouth” (*Ref.* 230).

By far the most significant exegetical feature of Eunomius’s *Confession* and Gregory’s *Refutation* is that they give considerable attention to the role of biblical names and titles for God. As Richard Vaggione puts it, Eunomius’s *Confession* amounts to “thickets of scriptural quotations and allusions” (Vaggione 1987, 133). The use of names and titles was a prominent feature of early Christian theological writing, and it is interesting to see the retrieval of this mode of theological reflection in recent modern theological writing (Soskice 2023). Soskice highlights that the emphasis on names and titles, as opposed to the later use of divine attributes, has to do with the way early Christians viewed such names as ways of speaking to God, not just about God, since the very meaning of theology is bound up with the way our language functions to draw us into a living encounter with the Lord.

One of the most prominent examples of this kind of exegesis is Origen’s *Commentary on John*, which catalogues a wide range of scriptural *epinoia*, often translated as “conceptualizations,” of Christ—terms such as “light,” “resurrection,” “way,” “truth,” “life,” “door,” “shepherd,” and so forth (see Heine 2004, 93–95). The multitude of these designations, Origen explains, owes to the different capacities that human beings have for knowing God. The unity of the Word and the multiplicity of biblical divine names, for Origen, become a way to articulate how God is mediated to humanity.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ref.* 6, 16, 108, 120, 170, 184, 198 (see Radde-Gallwitz 2018, 83–84).

<sup>7</sup> The word *phōnē* can be translated as “voice” but also as an “utterance of words,” that is, “speech,” “expression,” or “statement” (see Lampe 1961, 1503–4). There is a deliberate slippage of this term throughout the *Refutation*, which makes it both hard to translate consistently and a notable rhetorical feature about the handing down of the Matthean “creed.”

<sup>8</sup> See *Ref.* 216, 224, 227, 230, 231. I owe this distinction to Radde-Gallwitz (2018, 110).

The many instantiations of God's presence in the world find their unity and rationale in the Word—the *logoi* in the Logos, to use the expression of Maximus the Confessor many generations later. Lewis Ayres has noted that Origen's approach to titular exegesis has three distinct but related components (Ayres 2017). First, Origen emphasizes that while biblical names tell us something about God, they must be stripped of any corporeal or material interpretations. Second, each term must be brought together with related terms in the biblical witness, which may then inform, correct, or develop these terms. Third, the significance of these terms is related to how the Christian grows in likeness to God through learning the true meaning of these terms. Taken together, we see the emergence of a complex practice of spiritual exegesis that is cognizant of the wide range of biblical language for naming God and the unique character of this exegesis in cultivating likeness to God.

The exegesis of names and titles for God featured prominently in the early fourth-century debates that led to Nicaea, with the differing traditions of Origen represented by the sees of Alexandria and Caesarea offering different responses to questions about whether or in what sense biblical terms like "Father" and "Son" convey to human minds God's eternal substance, or how language describing the Son's generation belongs to God's eternal nature or his involvement in creation. These questions were taken up again in a slightly different register in the controversies between the Cappadocians and Eunomius.<sup>9</sup> Here we see more explicit reference to philosophical categories about the relationship between human language and signified realities, such as the kind of discussion posed in Plato's *Cratylus* (see Radde-Gallwitz 2018, 133–46). For Eunomius, there are certain names that comprehensively designate the divine nature. Were this not the case, humanity would be stuck beneath an unbridgeable metaphysical gap between human language and divinity. In earlier writings, Eunomius famously focused on the title "unbegotten" (*agennētos*) as the term that really or truly predicates the divine nature, whereas other scriptural names for God are used only in a metaphorical or symbolical sense. As Eunomius puts it in his *Apology*, "We do not understand his essence to be one thing and the meaning of the word which designates it to be something else. Rather, we take it that his substance is the very same as that which is signified by his name, granted that the designation applies properly to the essence" (*Apol.* 12; Vaggione 1987, 48–49). By the time he wrote his *Confession*, Eunomius was less insistent on the designation *unbegotten* as the key term for predicating God. However, he did still maintain that the title "one and only true God" accurately conveyed the divine nature, for "we do not honor him with untruthful speech (for he speaks no untruth) but as he really is" (*Conf.* 2).

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<sup>9</sup> This issue becomes central in Basil's *Against Eunomius* and furthered in book 2 of Gregory's *Against Eunomius*. See Radde-Gallwitz (2009) and DelCogliano (2010).

Against Eunomius's view of language, Gregory, following Basil, argued that all scriptural designations, including "unbegotten," offered true but noncomprehensive knowledge of God. In a paradigmatic expression from *Contra Eunomium* 2, Gregory writes about the importance of the variety of biblical titles:

Many such things are said of the divine Nature by which we learn what we must understand God to be; but what in itself it essentially is, the words do not teach us. While avoiding every kind of concurrence with any wrong notion in our views about God, we make use of a great variety of names for him, adapting our terminology to various concepts. Since no one title has been discovered to embrace the divine Nature by applying directly to the subject itself, we therefore use many titles, each person in accordance with various interests achieving some particular idea about him, to name the Divinity, as we hunt amid the pluriform variety of terms applying to him for sparks to light up our understanding of the object of our quest. (*Eun.* 2.144–45; Karfíková et al. 2007, 90).

Because God by nature transcends all human language, Gregory argues, human speech about God ultimately falls short. But humanity is not bereft of knowledge of God because the divine nature condescends to the finite capacities of creaturely language and gives to humanity the gift of speech. Language, as a feature of human corporeality, is a gift from God to guide the human quest for true knowledge of God (see *Eun* 2.387–402). As a result, scriptural language about God may be understood as referring to God's activities in the world (*energeia*), but not the divine essence (*ousia*). This entails that, on the one hand, scriptural terms are not merely mental conceptions that have no contact with God at all—which is what Eunomius was worried about—but they also are not univocal concepts that comprehensively exhaust the human capacity to speak about God. In referring to divine activities rather than the divine essence, Gregory can map out a distinctive theology of divine naming that offers a real but incomprehensive grasp of God.

In his *Refutation*, Gregory offers a much briefer explanation of how names and titles function. "Each of these titles," Gregory writes, "understood in its natural sense, is a canon of truth and law of piety for Christians" (*Ref.* 5). He describes the process of hearing and intellectual knowledge in terms of leading and guiding: When we hear someone say the word "heavens," for example, or the name of an animal, our minds are led, as it were, by the hearing of that word to an image of what it represents. When we hear the audible sound of a word, an image of the signified reality is stamped or impressed into our souls, provided we have a right interpretation or understanding of the word. This is how all language works, Gregory thinks,

including language about God. When we hear the various titles for Christ in Scripture—terms like “light,” “life,” “wisdom,” “only-begotten,” or “first-born”—these become impressions of divine reality upon our souls; they do not deliver the true nature of divine reality, but they do provide real knowledge of God through the process of the impressed word leading us to an image of what the word signifies. These terms provide a “canon of truth,” regulating our speech about God so that the images of the divine impressed upon our souls are images of the true God and not a false god or a demonic intervener.

The language of “canon of truth” is distinct but not unrelated to the ways that such language is used in early Christian and ancient philosophical discourse. In Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement, *regula fidei* language is deployed to distinguish true and false speech about God vis-à-vis the concern to regulate the proper interpretations of Scripture (see Osborn 1989, 40–61; Fogleman 2023, 25–30, 54–61, 87–92). In ancient philosophical discourse, especially among Epicureans and Stoics, meanwhile, the language of a *canōn* and *critēria* focused on a similar question: How do our apprehensions of sensory input lead to real knowledge and not false knowledge or mere opinion? I think we can see Gregory’s application of the term “canon of truth” in the *Refutation* in a similar fashion. He is addressing the question of how biblical terms provide impressions upon the human mind and thus how the Christian’s knowledge of Scripture can be said to be a participation in divine knowledge.

In the *Refutation*, Gregory makes it clear that he does not think that any term applies in the same way about God. The names “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” operate as an especially significant “canon of truth” for knowing God, since these were the precise terms that the Lord himself had given to the disciples.

For although there are many diverse names by which the divine is signified in the history, the prophecy, and the law, leaving them all to the side, Christ the master provided these expressions since they are better able to bring us to faith concerning the one who is (Exod. 3:14), declaring that it is sufficient for us to hold fast to the title of Father and of Son and of Holy Spirit for the knowledge of the one who truly is, which is both one and not one. (*Ref.* 5)

In Gregory’s exegesis of Matthew 28:19, he notes that the singular term “name” is unspecified in this context. “What does the unnamable name signify, about which the Lord said, baptizing them in the name, but did not add the very term that signifies what is indicated by the name?” (*Ref.* 5). The use of the unspecified “name” in Matthew signals the ineffable divine nature that is “above every name.” It cannot be named because it

transcends all earthly speech. However, the three names of the hypostases, or the “identifying characteristics” of God, do present names that can serve as a canon of truth for knowing the true God. Gregory writes,

But only the uncreated nature that is confessed in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is superior to every signification of names. This is why when the Word said “name” in the handing over of the faith, he did not add “the what”—for how can a name be found for a thing that is above every name? (see Phil. 2:9)—but rather gave authority, so that our thinking, when it operates piously, might be able to find some name indicative of the transcendent nature and apply it similarly to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whether “good” or “incorruptible,” which each person considers to be worthily invoked in order to indicate the undefiled nature. (*Ref.* 5)

Later in the text, Gregory will reiterate this point and clarify that some terms in Scripture refer to the divine nature “in itself,” while other terms refer to the divine economy in creation. Names like “immortal,” “invisible,” or “only wise” indicate the divine majesty, while other terms like “compassionate,” “merciful,” “shepherd,” and “creator”—names that imply a relationship with created things—refer to the divine activities in creation that emerge from God’s love for humanity (*Ref.* 124).

### **Synonymous with Christ**

Gregory’s insistence on the proper understanding of words and titles is not simply about having the correct view of God’s nature or simply avoiding wrong thinking. He holds the conviction that the Scriptures contain human language that God’s Spirit has used to lead human beings to saving knowledge of God. This point is made especially clear in other texts in Gregory’s corpus—namely, in *De Professione Christiana* and *De Perfectione*. In these texts, Gregory focuses on biblical titles of Christ so that, as he puts it, Christians may become “synonymous” with Christ. By rightly understanding these names within a biblical framework, we receive them into our souls and become transformed into the image of Christ, the true Image. Here is how he puts it in *De Professione Christiana*:

If we, who are united to Him by faith in Him, are synonymous with Him whose incorruptible nature is beyond verbal interpretation, it is entirely necessary for us to become what is contemplated in connection with that incorruptible nature and to achieve an identity with the secondary elements which follow along with it. For just as by participating in Christ we are given the title “Christian,” so also are we drawn into a share in the lofty ideas which it implies. (Callahan 1967, 84)

Having a proper understanding of these names, for Gregory, is crucial for how the Christian is re-formed into the image of God and how one becomes capacitated for relating to God through prayer. As Michael Motia puts it, “As Christians take the names of Christ into the soul, the names become containers for what is uncontainable, and what fills them expands and changes them into a new shape, a new name, a name that will facilitate more prayers that will continue to expand and advance the soul” (Motia 2022, 123). By contemplating and praying these names, we do more than speak or pronounce a verbal utterance. Taking in these names shapes the contours of the Christian person, so that we become Christian in actuality and not only nominally. We become synonymous with Christ.

Gregory does not frame the discussion of biblical names and titles in an anti-Eunomian register in *De Professione* or *De Perfectione*. However, I think these texts are helpful for understanding what is at stake for Gregory in his debate with Eunomius about the meaning of credal language. Against Eunomius, Gregory must expose the false interpretations that Eunomius gives to biblical names and titles because these words provide the soul with a means of containing the uncontainable name. Thus, interpreted wrongly, they become, in Gregory’s language in the *Refutation*, “lethal poisons” that “only those who have trained the senses of the soul can detect” (*Ref.* 116).

To appreciate, then, Gregory’s—as well as Eunomius’s—concern for understanding the names and titles of Christ, we should keep in view this understanding of language and its ability to afford a transforming knowledge of the divine. This kind of knowledge is not merely propositional or cognitive but is a mode of contemplation, prayer, and holiness. Gregory’s *Refutation* is thus, we can conclude, an exercise in training the senses of the soul to discern where lethal poisons have been substituted for Scripture’s medicinal names of God.

## Conclusion

In concluding, let me draw back and make some general comments about the nature of credal reflection in ecumenical dialogue. I began by positioning this paper within a line of scholarship that sees itself as working against a kind of dogmatic minimalism in which the creed merely serves as a minor and relatively unimportant text in ecumenical dialogue. Dogmatic minimalism takes the creed merely as a baseline for entrance into a conversation, but the real work happens elsewhere—beyond questions about the meaning and purpose of creeds. I should qualify these remarks by noting that to have the creed at all as a feature of ecumenical dialogue, even a small one, is no insignificant feat. There are, of course, many traditions in which the creed does not feature even at a minimalist level. All the same, to treat the creed merely as a point of entry, which can quickly be forgotten and does not hold potential for ecumenism, does an injustice to how the creed functioned in the period of its formulation and how it could again operate today.

What I have tried to outline here, through attention to Gregory of Nyssa's *Refutation against Eunomius's Confession*, is one way that we can see credal language within the larger scope of the Christian life. The creed, in other words, is more than just a creed. The creed can, or should, signify a broader pattern of Christian thinking and acting—what John Behr simply calls “the Nicene faith” (Behr 2004). In particular, I have tried to show the ways in which credal or confessional language is related to biblical exegesis and the life of virtue—how, that is, that creeds are enmeshed within the process of the Christian person becoming conformed to the image of Christ. Especially when read alongside of and in light of other writings in Gregory's corpus that focus on the meaning of biblical names and titles—and here I have just focused on *De Professione* and *De Perfectione*—the *Refutation* illuminates the way in which the language of creeds and confessions, as “thickets of scriptural quotations and allusions,” to use Vaggione's image again, can be understood as drawing the believer into the divine life, transforming the soul into the image of the true Image (Vaggione 1987, 133).

We might expect Gregory, in the year 383, to counter Eunomius simply by appeals to ancient tradition, recent councils, or imperial sanction. But Gregory does not do that here. He does not mention earlier creeds or councils. The only creed he appeals to is the creed of Christ delivered to the apostles in Matthew 28. His main recourse is to the way in which the language of Scripture, compressed in credal formulae, impinges upon the Christian life in Christ and how, conversely, misappropriations of such language can poison the soul. These claims are no mere flights of rhetorical excess taken up to silence his opponents. The substance of Gregory's text, tightly focused on the exegesis of biblical names, is about how confessional language functions in the spiritual life. The words of the creed are biblical words, given by the Spirit through divine providence, to enable the believer to arrive at a true and saving knowledge of God.

In terms of ecumenical discussion today, my hope is that we can find better ways to articulate the spiritual value of creeds in the pursuit of orthodoxy. Often, the role of creeds is a judicatory one; appeals to creeds are made to draw boundaries and build fences to determine who is included or excluded. It should be clear from my appeal to Gregory's anti-Eunomian writings that such a task is essential. Drawing clear lines at the borders is necessary for developing a clear understanding of what a particular tradition opposes and thus what it permits. Such a task is not only necessary but unavoidable.

At the same time, the more important contribution I have tried to offer here is that the negative fence-building task is not ultimate. The larger purpose of credal fence-building is the higher task of allowing biblical language to shape an orthodox *habitus* in which a shared vision of scriptural virtue can be pursued. What Gregory helps us to see is that heresy-talk and growth in

virtue are but two sides of the same coin. Refutational discourse, in Gregory's mind, is commensurate with the pursuit of virtue through exegeting divine names that one finds in *De Professione* and *De Perfectione*.

Again, I do not want to dismiss the value of creed's function in adjudicating the boundaries of right belief or as a baseline for cooperative activity across ecumenical bodies, and I certainly do not want to be seen as somewhat contrasting ecclesiology and ascetical formation. I want instead to advocate for a kind of ecumenism that foregrounds the role of the living faith of Christians. My hope is that the Nicene Creed might be seen, as it might be if we take an approach such as Gregory's, as offering a thicket of spiritual allusions that provide real and enduring value to the Christian life. The Nicene Creed, symbolically representing the entire scope of Nicene Christianity, gives us not merely a baseline of right thinking but a spiritually substantive guide by which we can, through contemplating and meditating on these words, foster an abiding union with the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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