CHRISTOLOGICAL TITLES – CONCEPTUALLY APPLIED?

(CE II 294–358)

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Gregory of Nyssa entered the Eunomian controversy late. In his Contra Eunomium he rebuts a lengthy writing by Eunomius which in its turn was an answer to a book Basil had written some twenty years earlier against a (yet again) previous book by the sometime bishop of Cyzicus. In many ways, Gregory’s Contra Eunomium is, more than anything else, an apology for his elder brother against the attacks levelled against him by his anomoian foe. For us this means that reconstructing Gregory’s argument is impossible without some glance at what Basil had said. Eunomius had, in his second book, largely confined himself to a refusal of Basil’s position pointing out mistaken assumptions, wrong conclusions and weak demonstrations in the Adversus Eunomium. Gregory’s primary task is it to counter this attack by showing that, far from being mistaken, wrong and weak, Basil’s arguments were valid refutations of Eunomius’ heretical distortions of the Christian faith and powerful demonstrations of the orthodox truths of the Church.

After some preliminary remarks about relevance and difficulty of the problem broached here (1) I shall, therefore, start from a consideration of some relevant passages in Basil’s Adversus Eunomium (2) to proceed with a tentative reconstruction of Eunomius’ counterarguments (3). This will be followed in turn by a discussion of Gregory’s apology for his brother (4). Some concluding remarks bring this paper to an end (5).

I. Eunomius’ challenge and the problem of divine attributes: some preliminary remarks

The passage in Gregory’s Contra Eunomium II that is under discussion in this article takes its starting point essentially from one section of Basil’s Adversus Eunomium the main idea of which is to urge that the titles applied to Christ by scripture have their origin in
human conception. Why would that be so? The answer is not as straightforward as one may expect.

The immediately apparent reason, of course, is that Eunomius, in his *Apology*, had claimed that the name ‘unbegotten’ was God’s ‘real’ name, not one applied “according to human conception” but “according to truth”:

When we say ‘Unbegotten’, then, we do not imagine that we ought to honour God only in name, according to human conception; rather according to truth, we ought to repay him the debt which above all others is most due to God: the acknowledgement that he is what he is. What Eunomius means to say here is fairly obvious: God is unbegotten whether human beings think of him in this way or not, whether they employ this term or not, whether they exist or not:

Expressions based on conception have their existence in name and utterance only, and by their nature are dissolved along with the sounds [which make them up]; but God, whether these sounds are silent, sounding or have even come into existence, and before anything was created, both was and is unbegotten.

It appears that Eunomius does not here wish to enunciate a specific theory of ἐπίνοια disregarding the possibilities of the human mind. He seems to take it for granted that there is a difference between what later thinkers would call in intellectu and in re. The ascription of ‘unbegotten’ to God expresses what God really is and not only what people think of him. Is this objectionable from an Orthodox point of view? I doubt it. It seems evident that, when church fathers

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2 Eunomius, *Apologia* 8 (Vaggione 40,16–42,1): ἀγέννητον δὲ λέγοντες, οὐκ ὀνόματι μόνον, κατ’ ἐπίνοιαν ἀνθρωπίνην, σμηνύνειν οἰόμεθα δειν, ἀποστινύναι δὲ κατ’ ἀληθείαν τὸ πάντων ἀναγκαίότατον ὀρθόμα τῷ θεῷ τὴν τοῦ εἶναι ὁ ἐστὶν ὑμολογάν. ET: Vaggione (with changes). In the following, translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
4 Gregory, in fact, confirms it at *CE* II 161–163 (GNO I 271f ). Eunomius’ wording evokes the frequent claim in early Christian thought that, what in the human mind is transitory, in God is real. Historically this is one of the roots of the use of hypostasis-terminology with regard to God. Cf. e.g. Basil, *De spiritu sancto* 17,41,17–21 (SC 17bis, 394): ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἃν πιστεύομεν εἰς τοσοῦτον αὐτούς παραπληξίας ἐλαθόντος, ὅπερ φανεῖ τὸν θεόν τῶν ἁλων, ὥσπερ κοινότητα τίνη, λόγῳ μόνῳ θεορητῆν, ἐν οὐδεμίᾳ δὲ ὑποστάσει τὸ εἶναι ἐχοῦσαν, εἰς τὰ ύποκείμενα διαμείβεται.