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THE ROLE OF NATURAL THEOLOGY AND ITS SOURCES
IN THE ANTI-EUNOMIAN DISCOURSE CONCERNING
COMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD²

Summary

Basil and Gregory criticized dialectics on the grounds that it tries to usurp the truths that could only be known through Revelation. Nevertheless, the Church Fathers developed natural theology in which they deliberately used arguments based on sensual cognition, human logic or philosophical tradition, and especially on common notions. Although their terminology is often inconsistent and they use technical terms interchangeably, the context provides us with clear ideas of their theses. We should admit that as, far as dialectics and philosophy were concerned, the orthodox authors despite many reservations used all possible methods to reach the truth. They favoured the Scripture and the Tradition, but also respected such sources as sensual perception, human logic or common notions and preconceptions.

Keywords: Eunomius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, natural theology

TEOLOGIA NATURALNA – JEJ ROLA I ŹRÓDŁA
W ANTYEUNOMIAŃSKIM SPORZE O MOŻLIWOŚĆ POZNANIA BOGA

Streszczenie

Bazyli i Grzegorz krytykowali dialektykę, uważając, że próbuje ona „zawłaszczyć” dla siebie prawdy, które mogą być poznane tylko poprzez Objawienie. Nie znaczy to jednak, że obaj nie korzystali tak z naturalnych, jak i nadprzyrodzonych źródeł wiedzy o Bogu. W konsekwencji rozwinęli naturalną teologię i świadomie używali argumentów opartych na poznaniu zmysłowym, ludzkiej logice, tradycji filozoficznej, a zwłaszcza prawdach powszechnie przyjętych. Choć Bazyli i Grzegorz z pogardą odnosili się do dialektyki, a nawet filozofii, to w praktyce wykorzystywali wszystkie dostępne narzędzia, aby dotrzeć do prawdy. Uprzywilejowane miejsce zajmowały oczywiście Pismo Święte i Tradycja, ale nie deprecjonowali takich źródeł poznania jak ludzkie zmysły, rozum i powszechne pojęcia.

Słowa kluczowe: Eunomiusz, Bazyli Wielki, Grzegorz z Nyssy, teologia naturalna

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INTRODUCTION

In order to present the problem of the role and sources of theology in the anti-Eunomian discourse, I have to provide some introductory remarks on the philosophical context of the debate. It is obvious that, while reading the Bible or deliberating over dogmatic problems, both Basil and Gregory used concepts that were deeply rooted in Greek cultural tradition and philosophy. (Manikowski 2012, 27; Pelikan 1993, 177-178). Basil, similarly to Gregory, rarely names his sources and is frequently eclectic in his opinions (Ayers and Radde-Gallwitz 2010, 460).

My first assumption takes into account the role of the philosophical background of each participant in the debate (Eunomius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa), as well as the great importance of methodology in the Trinitarian discussion (Terezis and Panagopoulos 2013, 3-28). This is the reason why, the controversy developed from the Trinitarian problems to comprehensibility of God's substance. Mark DelCogliano writes with great precision and attention about nuances of the dispute and various concepts of the theory of names, which is one of the crucial points of this discussion (DelCogliano 2010).

The second assumption that should be outlined at the beginning, is the fact that while reading each of those three main authors involved in the discussion (Eunomius, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa) we cannot treat them literally and believe them unconditionally. Their treatises are full of arguments *ad personam*. The authors blame their opponents for using the worst possible insults (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 1, 96), and it is not only the case of ridiculing those opponent's literary style but also their hypothetical connections with Aristotle (Chvátal 2007, 399; Runia 1989, 2; Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* I, 5), Plato (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* II, 404 – 405), Chrisipe (Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* I, 5, 43) and Philo (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* III, V, 24, III, VII, 8-9). In fact, Basil and Gregory accused Eunomius of revealing affinity with practically all philosophical schools (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 93-94). Although, in this paper, I must assume that such opinions are an example of a convention used in ancient polemical works, still I do not think that it is right to ignore them all just on those grounds. Further studies should be done with respect to this subject. As a matter of fact, it is one of the most important theological debates in which we can follow a multithreaded dogmatic discourse in which not only the arguments, but also their sources and manner of presentation, became important.

1. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND DIALECTICS

Although, Gregory constantly kept naming every dialectics, rhetoric and sophistry the Aristotelian dialectics, we should not confuse the two. E. Vandebussche points out that in the 4th century the difference between sophistry based on technique and philosophy based on searching the truth was evident (Vandebussche 1944,

47-72, 54-55, 51-52). Dialectics and logic were not the core of philosophy but could rather be placed on its borderline. When accusing Eunomius of using philosophy, the Cappadocian Fathers in fact accused him of resorting to sophistic tricks. They were extremely critical about using syllogisms and blamed Eunomius for being dependent on the best known logicians, such as Aristotle and Chrisipe (Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* I, 5, 43; Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* II, 620). Whenever they wrote about dialectics, they treated it very widely as a formal way of argumentation, and the name of Aristotle was just a kind of symbol for sophistry understood as a manipulative method, a kind of logic game that had nothing in common with truth; obviously, it had neither anything in common with Aristotle.

In my opinion, because of the fact that the anti-Eunomian polemic is the first in which methodology and philosophical assumptions are so important, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa did not feel really comfortable in this new situation. That is why, we often find their arguments about Eunomius' methodology inconsistent. When criticizing the Eunomian use of dialectics, the Cappadocian Fathers used their own syllogisms and pointed out Eunomius' lack of consistence and errors in argumentation (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 218-219, 228-230, 432). They opposed dialectics because they understood it as a method of proving one's point rather than of searching the truth. Though familiar with ancient logic and frequently referring to it, they consistently started their argumentation with generally agreed facts.

2. NATURAL THEOLOGY

Each of the three authors underlined that truth was the highest and the most important goal (Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus*, 2; Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 1, 18-19). How could a human being reach this aim? May reason be considered a sufficient tool? The criterion of truth is crucial not only on the level of faith, which teaches us that Christ is the way and the truth and the life (J 14,6) and that knowing the truth makes us free (J 8,32), but the criterion of truth is equally fundamental for the philosophical tradition, where truth is the ultimate goal. It is not equally important in sophistry.

In their argumentation, all participants in the debate referred to unquestionable premises. These premises could be identified with the sources of theology and can be divided into supernatural, which for our authors include the Scripture and the Tradition, and natural ones. As far as natural sources are concerned our authors point out at least three, namely: sense perception, human rationality, and common notions. The latter is the most complex one, so I shall start with the obvious ones and then shall try to elucidate the problem of common notions and related terms.

Sense perception is the main source of our cognition in general and though "no one has ever seen God" (J 1,18), if something can be recognized by senses it does not require further substantiation.

“[Eunomius] After claiming that on account of the common notions of all people it is self-evident that God is unbegotten, he makes an attempt to supply us with the proofs for this. In doing this, he resembles the man who at high noon wants to use rational argumentation to teach those who can see things quite well for themselves that the sun is the brightest of the stars in heaven. Now if someone who uses rational argumentation to prove what is already quite well known through sense perception is considered to be utterly absurd, how could the person who teaches what common preconceptions enable us all to agree upon not be considered guilty of the same foolishness?” (Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* I, 5)

Although Basil and Gregory maintain critical distance from dialectics, they admit that rationality of argumentation and congruity with the philosophical tradition is an important criterion of truth. Gregory of Nyssa underlines: “He would learn from an intelligent audience that every argument, so long as it is put forward categorically and without demonstration, is what they call an old wives’ tale, since it has no power in itself to settle the issue, when no case is made for what is said either from the sacred text or from human logic” (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 230). And similarly: “Neither do we know any of the philosophers outside the faith who have made this mad statement, nor does such a thing agree with either the divinely inspired texts or common sense” (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 186).

A very important argument in the theological discussion is based on common understanding of certain ideas. First of all, some terminological remarks are necessary as we have quite a few related terms that are used interchangeably, which may be sometimes misleading. First of all, the terms *ἔννοια* and *ἐπίνοια* should be distinguished. Although they have a similar meaning and Basil of Caesarea sometimes used them in a confusing way, we can deduce what he meant from the context (DelCogliano 2010, 154; Radde-Gallwitz 2009, 144-145). We can assume, that in some cases *ἔννοια* is synonymous with *ἐπίνοια*, but we should still underline that the problem of names is different from the idea of common notions. In this context, the term *ἔννοια* is used interchangeably with *πρόληψις* and *νοήμα*. Those terms overlap not only on the lexical level but also in the philosophical tradition. The word *ἔννοια* and prolepsis should describe different stages of perception where “*ἔννοιας* understood as basic notions are ‘immediately present to human mind’, a common notion (*κοινή ἔννοια*) or a natural notion (*φυσική ἔννοια*) was an ordinary, naturally well-founded concept that was available to the mind as a ‘preconception’ (*πρόληψις*)” (DelCogliano 2010, 154-155). Recent studies on stoic epistemology proved that even the authors of these concepts treated terminology quite loosely and their meaning strongly differs depending on the author (Jackson-McCabe 2004, 323-247, 324, 327, 346; Sandbach, 1930, 44-51).

Each of our writers dealt in one way or another with the problem of common notions (*κοινά ἔννοια*) and the related terms (Pelikan 1993, 182). Of course, in the majority of cases the term *ἔννοια* is used in its non-technical sense, which is: thought, reflection, concept, but we can find also a deliberate, technical usage

of this term related to the Stoic and Epicurean epistemology, where it means any “ordinary, naturally well-founded concept that is available to the mind as a ‘preconception’” (Plutarch, *De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos*, Chrysippus, *On conceptions*; Basil of Caesarea 2011, 91). This notion or preconception is an “innate concept of a thing that makes discussion, investigation, and understanding of it possible” (Basil of Caesarea 2011, 91). The problem of common notions was still popular in the 4th century and Gregory of Nyssa in his short treatise *To The Greeks. Concerning the Commonality of Concepts* makes references to such notions as a person, hypostasis. In this text Gregory shows that it is fundamental for a theological debate to have a common understanding of fundamental terms. No theological discussion is possible without such presuppositions. Common notions and preconceptions play a double role in natural theology; they do not only constitute the source of knowledge but - what is more important - being generally agreed truths, they make further argumentation possible.

3. LIMITS OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

Although the natural and supernatural sources do not oppose or contradict each other, they are not equally important and do not provide the same knowledge about God. The Fathers are aware of the limits to human cognition and accuse Eunomius and other heretics that they do not take those limits into account (Pelikan 1993, 177). Dmitri Birjukov underlines that “Generally, Eunomius’ theological method was based on mental intuition concerning God and the Son, justified by reference to the Scripture” (Birjukov 2008, 110). Contrary to Basil who, according to Mark DelCogliano, based his argumentation primarily on the Scripture. Basil of Caesarea opposed Eunomius in those words:

“Yet these men are not insolently attacking the stars or heaven, but are bragging that they have penetrated the very substance of the God of the universe. Let’s ask him from which source he claims to have comprehended it. So, then, from a common notion? But this tells us that God exists, not what God is. Perhaps from the Spirit’s teaching? Which one? Where is it located?” (Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* I, 2)

Gregory followed Basil’s concepts:

“But since Eunomius is so over endowed with this ability that his method of comprehension extends to meters beyond our nature, why did he not know the principle on which comprehension of any obscure thing in these logical undertakings comes about? For who does not know that every argument takes its first principles from things manifest and generally agreed, and thereby brings assurance in matters in dispute, and unknown thing would ever be apprehended, if things assent to did not lead us by the hand to the understanding of the obscure? But if the things we take as first principles of arguments for the clarification of things unknown were in conflict with the apprehensions of ordinary people, they would hardly be the means to clarifying the unknown.” (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 218-219)

Referring to this text, Jaroslav Pelican wrote that “According to Gregory of Nyssa, the ultimate assumption and ‘the standard of truth’ underlying the use of presuppositions from philosophy and natural theology in the system of Eunomius was ‘the concurrence of the so-called natural order with the testimony of the knowledge given from above, confirming the natural interpretation’” (Pelikan, 1993, 194-195).

4. COMMON NOTIONS AND COMPREHENSION OF GOD

After presenting the limits of natural theology and the importance of common notions as the source of truth, we should ask what were the presuppositions, if there were any, that the Cappadocian Fathers made about God and His nature. In the philosophical tradition vital in the 4th century “the common notion of God was not limited to the content that God exists but included a set of specific attributes of God” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, X, 123; Cicero, *De natura deorum* I,16, 43; Jackson-McCabe, 2004, 325). However, Basil claims that the only thing we know about God is His existence (Radde-Gallwitz 2009, 113). “Let’s ask him from which source he claims to have comprehended it. So, then, from a common notion? But this tells us that God exists, not what God is” (Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* I, 12). It seems obvious, that it was a reaction to Eunomius’ conviction of his having knowledge about God’s substance. In his letters, Basil admits that he makes a clear distinction between knowing God’s substance and God’s attributes.

“But we say that ‘knowing’ has multiple meanings. For we claim to know the greatness, the power, the wisdom, the goodness of God, as well as the providence by which he cares for us and the justice of his judgments, but not the very essence [of God]. So the question is eristic. For the one who claims that he does not know the essence does not admit that he does not know God, since our notion (ἐννοία) of God is drawn together from many things which we have enumerated.” (Basil of Caesarea, *Epistula* 234.1.5-12)

Also, in *Adversus Eunomium* he admitted that there are “common preconceptions that exist similarly in all Christians” and was afraid that Eunomius would try to violate them and “throw these notions of ours into confusion” (Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* II, 25; DelCogliano, 2010, 158). Some notions of God, common to all Christians are, according to Basil, drawn from His works described in the Scripture and revealed in the Tradition and in lives of those who believe in Him (Basil of Caesarea, *Epistula* 235.1.5-17). In this way we return to the supernatural sources of theology. The argumentation proposed by Basil could become a starting point to extract another source of theology which is *sensus fidelium*.

SUMMARY

In my paper, I have presented diverse sources of theology. The fact that supernatural sources harmoniously coexist with natural ones seems most important here. Eunomius points out three sources and justifications of his teaching – innate knowledge and the teaching of the fathers (Tradition), the Scripture (Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus*, 7, 10). Basil gives us three sources of truth (knowledge of God): first of all the Scripture, but also the common notion and sense perception (Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* I, 12, DelCogliano 2010, 136-137). Gregory points out that in his argumentation, Eunomius omits not only the philosophical tradition and Scriptural sources but even common notions (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 186, 230). I should admit that, despite many reservations that the orthodox authors had as far as dialectic and philosophy were concerned, they at the same time used all possible methods to find the truth. They favoured the Scripture and the Tradition but with honesty respected such sources as sense perception, human logic or common notions and preconceptions.

I have presented the main aspects and the context of the problem, which is the role of natural theology in the anti-Eunomian discourse concerning comprehensibility of God. As a matter of fact, all of them: the difference between philosophy and dialectic in the 4th century, understanding and limitations of natural theology, the role of common notions in the comprehension of God, could or even should be the subject of complex, extensive studies. Regardless of these limitations, the conclusions of the paper would not change.

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