

‘One Commixture of Light’ (Or. 31.14): Rethinking some modern uses and critiques of Gregory of Nazianzus on the unity and equality of the divine persons

Gregory of Nazianzus’ doctrine of the Trinity is both a constructive source and an object of critique for Leonardo Boff’s account of the Trinity. I argue that Gregory’s account of the unity of the Trinity in the monarchy of the Father does not entail the ontological subordination of Son and Spirit nor otherwise obviate the equality of the divine persons. On Gregory’s account, the unity and equality of the divine persons is bound up with that of their distinct identities in the very particular modes in which they relate to one another: a unity transcending all human commonality. By contrast, Boff’s theology of the Trinity seems to elide the real distinction between God and creatures and erode the differences between the divine persons, so subverting the social programme he derives from his doctrine.

Acclaim for and appeals to Gregory of Nazianzus’ doctrine of the Trinity have a twofold quality. Praise for having drawn attention to the relational character of personhood has been balanced by concern for the apparently subordinationist consequences of his account of divine unity. Leonardo Boff’s *Trinity and Society* is one example of the coincidence of these two reactions. It represents wider patterns of the use and critique of Gregory’s doctrine and provides the opportunity to test their merits as readings of Gregory. I shall argue that both Boff’s appeal and his critique are misplaced, and also that when we compare their doctrines, Gregory’s sheds light on problems on Boff’s social doctrine of the Trinity and its applications.¹

1. Boff on Trinity and communion

Doctrines of the Trinity seek to explicate the Christian belief that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God without subverting the objectivity of the three and the distinctions between them. Boff aims to do just that and to show how from a proper conception of the Trinity follows a normative ideal for the critique of social relations

¹ This article is based on a paper delivered to the Trinity and Christology Seminar of the Society for the Study of Theology in March 2007. I am grateful to the members of the Seminar for their comments and questions, and for its convenor, Stephen R. Holmes, for suggesting I seek publication of it here. I am also very grateful and indebted to the two anonymous reviewers who examined the article for their generous, detailed and helpful comments and suggestions.

and the inspiration of liberation. In this way, he hopes also to show the relevance of the doctrine in an age in which it has ceased to be the mystery of salvation: a practical relevance that pertains to the liberation of the poor.²

At the heart of his proposal is a notion of the person. For Boff, persons are constituted by interiority and openness to the other.³ In respect of God, we can also say, analogically, that ‘each divine Person is a centre of interiority and freedom, whose *raison d’être* (nature) consists in being always in relation to the other Persons, thereby avoiding a purely tritheistic conclusion.’⁴ Because divine persons, like human persons, are persons not only in their inwardness but also in their openness to one another, the three divine persons cannot be said to be three gods, Boff argues.

On this account, the unity of God is tied up with the relations between divine persons as such. ‘There can be unity only between persons, because only persons are intrinsically open to others, exist with others and are one for one another.’⁵ Here, ‘the permanent interpenetration, the eternal co-relatedness, the self-surrender of each Person to the others form [*sic*] the trinitarian union, the union of Persons.’⁶ This perichoresis, or communion, is co-original with the persons and cannot be thought of apart from them, or they from it. In summary, he says that ‘It is... the eternal relationships bringing about, realizing, the interpenetration and co-inherence of the divine Three that, properly speaking, constitute the trinity and unity of God.’⁷ These mutual relations, he later makes clear, are relations of mutual revelation and recognition.⁸

The practical value of the doctrine of the Trinity lies, Boff claims, in the proposal that ‘The Trinity can be seen as a model for any just, egalitarian (while respecting differences) social organization.’ By the same token, the doctrine provides a norm

² See Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1988), p. 19, where he quotes Kant to the effect that the doctrine of the Trinity provides nothing of practical value.

³ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 89.

⁴ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 89, reproduced by kind permission of Continuum International Publishing Group.

⁵ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 5.

⁶ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 5.

⁷ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 128.

⁸ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 142.

against which to critique injustices.⁹ For the errors in the ideas of God that legitimate unjust societies may be diagnosed by their divergence from the model of the Trinity.¹⁰ The doctrine thus offers a source of inspiration to the oppressed in their struggle for liberation: ‘The community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit becomes the prototype of the human community dreamed of by those who wish to improve society and build it in such a way as to make it into the image and likeness of the Trinity.’¹¹

2. Boff on Gregory and the Cappadocians

In making this case, Boff appeals to the Cappadocian Fathers, and to Gregory Nazianzen especially. In this way he is quite representative of other social Trinitarian theologians: Jürgen Moltmann, for example, claims that Cappadocian Fathers incline strongly to a social doctrine of the Trinity and appeals to Gregory Nazianzen’s analogy with Adam, Eve and Seth for the idea that the image of God lies in human sociality.¹² Boff’s appeal is more extensive and sophisticated. For him, the Cappadocians made the Divine Persons, rather than their unity of nature, primary, so that the unity that is their essence ‘springs from the communion and relationship between them.’¹³ For them, he asserts, ‘The Trinity can only be conceived of as an interplay of mutual relations of truth and love.’¹⁴ The Cappadocians adumbrate the basic intuition of the social doctrine of the Trinity, on this account, and in so saying Boff singles out Basil of Caesarea and Gregory Nazianzen in particular for identifying the relationality of the persons.¹⁵

Like John Zizioulas, Boff also acknowledges that in the Cappadocians’ account the monarchy of the Father is just what secures the inter-personal nature of God’s existence.¹⁶ In such accounts, like that of Gregory of Nazianzus, ‘the nature... of God is personalized at the outset.’¹⁷ For it is the Father, and not the divine essence, who

⁹ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 13.

¹⁰ As Boff does in respect of paternalism, *Trinity and Society*, p. 14, cf. p. 22.

¹¹ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 7.

¹² Or. 31.11; Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, (London: SCM, 1981), p. 199.

¹³ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 54.

¹⁴ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 54.

¹⁵ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 55 (on Augustine), p. 92 (on Basil and Gregory), cf. 115, where this intuition is attributed to the Cappadocians along with Aquinas, Bonaventure and Duns Scotus.

¹⁶ Zizioulas, ‘Personhood and Being’ in *Being as Communion*, (Crestwood, NT: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), pp. 40-41. Boff, however, does not reference Zizioulas in the pertinent sections of *Trinity and Society*.

¹⁷ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 82.

‘establishes the original relationships out of himself.’ Unlike Zizioulas, however, Boff thinks we can do without the notion of the Father’s monarchy, which he has linked explicitly to Gregory, and that we are much better off without it. For in such accounts, he avers, ‘The Father is, in the final analysis, everything, with the other Persons being eternal derivations of him.’¹⁸ Such formulations thus ‘favour a subordinationist understanding’: they tend to imply that the Son and Spirit are inferior in nature.

Though Boff qualifies this criticism, he cites the risk of the monarchian approach as justification for pursuing his own course, which, in the passage at hand, he sets over against the view represented by Gregory.¹⁹ For Boff, it is better to state that ‘There is one God because there is eternal communion and unity between the three Persons.’²⁰ Thus, he adds, explicitly distinguishing the two positions, the unity of the three divine persons ‘rather than [being] a unity of substance or origin (the Father), would be a unity of Persons by reason of the reciprocal communion between them.’²¹ An account of interpersonal union, he contends, does more justice to the equality of the persons in their unity than union in a common substance or origin. Boff is also critical of accounts of Father as cause for a second reason: he finds the language of causality highly problematic as applied to God, both because there is no before and after in God, and because such language risks or gives the impression of ‘theogony’, wherein the persons are not equal since one produces the others.²²

3. Pannenberg and Meijering on Gregory

In these criticisms, Boff approaches two other modern critiques of Gregory on the Trinity, which help to put the case against him with greater force. First, Wolfhart Pannenberg reinforces Boff’s concerns about the subordination of Son and Spirit by claiming that Gregory’s account of the Father as source of Son and Spirit ‘seems to rule out genuine mutuality in the relations of the trinitarian persons.’²³ For here the order of origins runs ‘irreversibly from Father to Son and Spirit.’ There seems to be

¹⁸ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 83.

¹⁹ See for example Boff *Trinity and Society* p. 137, and pp. 143-145.

²⁰ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 84.

²¹ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 84.

²² Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 141.

²³ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. G.W. Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), pp. 311-312, reprinted with the permission of the publisher, The Continuum International Publishing Group.

no equal bestowal of being on the Father by Son and Spirit and hence mutuality is lacking. Where, moreover, one interprets, with Gregory, the mutual definition of the distinctiveness of the persons by relations of origin, this thought ‘does not lead to the thought of an equally mutual ontological constitution of their personhood.’ Instead, Gregory’s position falls back into subordinationism. In other words, Pannenberg claims that if Father is source and origin of deity, Son and Spirit are constituted by their relations to him, but the converse is not true, and they are ontologically his inferiors. Later he equates this subordination with the subversion of the persons’ equal deity.²⁴

The second critique is that advanced by E.P. Meijering, to which some other modern students of Gregory also adhere.²⁵ Meijering compares Gregory with two of his figures who, Meijering claims, influenced Nazianzen on the role of the will in the generation of divine beings: Athanasius on the Trinity and Plotinus on the divine Principles. He finds Gregory caught between two alternatives: consistently affirming with Plotinus the ontological inferiority of caused to cause, with respect to both God and creatures, and affirming the consubstantiality (and thus ontological equality) of Father and Son, where Father is cause of Son, as Athanasius does.²⁶ Gregory seeks to say both that the Father is superior to the Son as cause, and that Father and Son are consubstantial. This position, Meijering contends, is in internal contradiction: one must choose one of the alternatives, for consubstantiality is incompatible with ontological subordination and Gregory only combines them by speaking of ‘cause’ in an arbitrary way.²⁷ For he maintains both that God is uncaused, and so superior to creatures, and that the Father is cause of Son yet not therefore superior to him in every

²⁴ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 322-323, citing Gregory Or. 40 (PG 35 420B). Not all modern theologians have found such subordinationism in Gregory. Thomas Torrance argues that Gregory later rejected the monarchy of the Father (The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Gregory Nazianzen and John Calvin’, in his *Trinitarian Perspectives*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), pp. 29-30). The passages he cites, however, do not require this interpretation and are more easily reconciled with other passages in the same Orations, with closely contemporaneous texts and with the temporal sequence in which they were delivered on the reading of Gregory’s doctrine given here.

²⁵ Meijering, ‘The Doctrine of the Will and of the Trinity in the Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus’, in *God being History: Studies in Patristic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 224-234 [pp.103-113 in original pagination]. Others to endorse his position on this element in Gregory’s thought include Frederick Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning* (1991), pp. 45-6.

²⁶ Meijering ‘The Doctrine of the Will’, p. 232.

²⁷ Meijering ‘The Doctrine of the Will’, p. 232-233.

respect. The result, Meijering contends, is that a cause is sometimes superior to what it causes, and sometimes is not so superior: an arbitrary use of the notion of cause.²⁸

3. *Monarchia* and the Father as cause of his equals in nature

I intend to make Gregory's defence of the doctrine of the Trinity in Orations 27-31 the focus for my exposition here. These Orations, delivered in Constantinople in 380, constitute in their present form a series and an extended argument.²⁹ The actual defence of the doctrine of the Trinity itself begins in Oration 29, where Gregory states that of the three options concerning God – several sovereign powers (*polyarchia*), an absence thereof (*anarchia*) or a single such power (*monarchia*) – Christians hold to the latter, but believe in a 'monarchy' not circumscribed by a single divine person, but established by their unity.³⁰

Gregory's use of these terms indicates the fuller implications of speaking of God as *archē*. For he dismisses both *anarchia* and *polyarchia* on the grounds that the first amounts to disorder, and the second also results in disorder. *Archē* here, then, seems to denote a sovereign power capable of bestowing and maintaining order, since an absence or multiplicity of such powers is said to be inimical to that capacity. It is in just this sense that Gregory argues in the previous Oration 'that there is a God, and a creating and sustaining cause of all is the teaching of our eyes and the natural law.'³¹ It follows that to be capable of ordering and sustaining the cosmos God must be self-sufficient and internally united. It is this thought that underlies Gregory's concern is to show that belief in the Trinity is consistent with the implications of believe in God as First Cause.

Christians, he asserts, believe in a *monarchia* which is established by:

Identical dignity of nature, harmony of will, and identity of movement, and the tendency to unity of those who come from it, which is impossible for created nature, so that though divided in number, they are not sundered in substance.³²

²⁸ Meijering, 'The Doctrine of the Will', p. 233, n. 43.

²⁹ As is generally accepted amongst students of Gregory. Paul Gallay states the case clearly in his introduction to *Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours 27-31 Sources Chrétiennes 250*, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf), pp. 7-10.

³⁰ Or. 29.2.

³¹ Or. 298.6.

³² Or. 29.2.

Gregory thus lists four conditions for stability and unity in God: they must be of identical dignity of nature, since inequality impairs unity; they must have one will, the condition for their activity *ad extra* to be united. He then adds two apparently strange conditions: identity of movement and the tendency (or inclination or convergence) to unity of those from come from it.

What Gregory means is made clear by the way he sees these conditions to be fulfilled.

For this reason, ‘from the beginning’, the monad, moving into duality, was established in Trinity. And this, for us, is the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit: who are the begetter and projector (I mean without passion, a-temporally, and incorporeally), the begotten, and the projected respectively.³³

The movement of the monad into duality and Trinity, Gregory implies here, is that of the eternal begetting of the Son and the projection of the Spirit by the Father (eternal is what Gregory indicates by the phrase ‘from the beginning’ and by ‘a-temporally’). Thus, we may infer, Gregory holds that the Father is ‘always’, and without beginning or end or division of moment, begetting the Son and projecting the Spirit.³⁴ And he does so willingly, as Gregory implies, adding: ‘Let no one dare to speak of an overflow of goodness... let us never introduce an involuntary generation’, in which context he criticises the apparently Plotinian language of divine overflow. This movement, then, is that referred to when Gregory speaks of ‘identity of movement’ in God: a single movement of divine generation; a movement which must be not only eternal but also non-spatial and spiritual because incorporeal.³⁵ The generation of Son and Spirit from the Father also indicates that it is Son and Spirit who converge upon or incline back to the Father from whom they originate, thus illuminating the last of Gregory’s conditions for unity in God.

Basic and implicit to this view is the idea that the Father is cause, source, or origin (Gregory uses these terms interchangeably) of the divinity of the other two persons, an idea well attested elsewhere in Gregory’s corpus. Christ as Son is to be referred to

³³ Or. 29.2.

³⁴ Gregory says in Oration 38, God ‘always “Is”’ in his transcendence of fragmentary time, Or. 38.7.

³⁵ C.f. Or. 28.10, where the absurdity of defining the incorporeal and unlimited God by spatial location is made by rhetorical questions. For another example of Gregory on spiritual movement in God, see Or. 38.9, where Goodness is said not to be satisfied to move (*to kineisthai*) only in contemplation of itself...’

the Father as his origin, Gregory argues in Oration 2.³⁶ In Oration 20 he says that Son and Spirit are to be referred to one cause, and goes on to identify the Father in distinction from them as ‘source, cause and eternal life’.³⁷ Similar affirmations are made in Orations 23 and 31.³⁸

For Gregory, though, this idea is not only consistent with but explanatory of the equality of nature of the three Persons in God. For him, those the Father generates are as divine as him, as he also implies in Oration 29.2. So Gregory also asserts in Oration 2 that the Father’s dignity as Father pertains to his being the source of the divinity and goodness of Son and Spirit.³⁹ In Oration 40 he says that the Father is the one from whom ‘his equals have their equality and their existence.’⁴⁰ This idea leads to another, also found in Gregory, namely that the divine nature is the Father’s in the first instance, and imparted by him to Son and Spirit, so that they manifest *his* deity.⁴¹ On the one hand, there is a sense for Gregory in which ‘God’ is a name which belongs first to the Father, so that in Oration 23 he speaks of God being the principle of the divinity of Son and Spirit.⁴² On the other, there is the idea that the Father is recognised in the Son, who is the Image of his *ousia*; the Son, in turn, is said to be recognised in the Spirit.⁴³ As Gregory implies elsewhere, the Son and Spirit are what the Father is in their own distinct ways: as he says of the Son, ‘the Son was in a generated way just what the Father’s existence is ingenerately.’⁴⁴ For Gregory, then,

³⁶ Or. 2.38.

³⁷ Or. 20.7. The word I have translated ‘cause’ here (*aition*) can also be translated ‘author’, but in fact in this context Gregory uses *aition* synonymously with *aitia* – usually rendered as ‘cause’ – as well as with *arche* (‘origin’) as John P. Egan has shown (‘αἰτιος/‘Author’, αἰτία/‘Cause’ and ἀρχή/‘Origin’: Synonyms in Selected Texts of Gregory Nazianzen’, *Studia Patristica XXXII* (1997), 102-107). This variety of synonyms reflects a necessary vagueness on Gregory’s part as to the nature of divine causality, which has no creaturely parallel.

³⁸ Or. 23.6-7 and Or. 31.14, on which see further below.

³⁹ Or. 2.38.

⁴⁰ Or. 40.43. Gregory says he would like to say the Father is greater as the cause of his equals, but has reservations on account of how his opponents may abuse the term ‘greater’ by making it absolute, applying to nature as well as the Father’s role as cause. This caution, then, does not concern the idea itself but its expression in a specific situation of doctrinal controversy. Torrance (‘The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity...’ pp. 29-30) misses this nuance in maintaining that this statement represents a change of mind for Gregory.

⁴¹ As Christopher Beeley rightly says in his in his ‘Divine Causality and the Monarchy of the Father in Gregory of Nazianzus’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 100:2 (April 2007), p. 213.

⁴² Or. 23.6.

⁴³ See Or. 6.22 and Or. 30.20.

⁴⁴ Or. 20.10. Gregory also says that the difference represented by the different names ‘Son’ and ‘Spirit’ is ‘a difference of manifestation, so to speak, or relation toward one another’, that is, the different ways in which they come forth from the Father, a difference identical to the difference between them in their mutual relations (Or. 31.9).

the monarchy of the Father as cause is central to the unity and equality of the divine Persons. Is Gregory's position coherent and consistent, however, in view of the criticisms outlined above?

4. The logic of divine causality in Gregory

To place Gregory in a position of having to choose between Athanasius' affirmation of consubstantiality and Plotinus on the superiority of cause to caused is a rather artificial quandary, and one that elides the possibility of attending to a distinct account of divine causality on Gregory's part. Besides, the most likely allusion to Plotinus in the context of divine generation a critical one and Athanasius himself affirmed following Christ's words in John, that the Father was greater on account of the Son's generation from the Father.⁴⁵ Meijering's charge of inconsistency and arbitrariness, however, rests on his analysis of Gregory's texts themselves, and must be answered. We must begin with the polemical context to which those texts belong.

The views of Eunomius of Cyzicus, who denied the deity of Son and Spirit, are clearly Gregory's target in Oration 27-31.⁴⁶ As Michel René Barnes has shown, Eunomius conceived of divine causality in moral or political terms, so that what is supremely at stake in divine causality is God's freedom.⁴⁷ Thus the Son is the product of God's will, and not his natural offspring inheriting the same nature, for talk of natural generation seems to imperil divine freedom and transcendence, as though God reproduced biologically, a view reflected in Gregory's Oration 29 when he addresses the objection that the Son is the product not of the Father's nature but of his will, unless God generated him involuntarily.⁴⁸

In contrast to this view, Gregory takes seriously application to Father and Son of the language of natural generation found in Scripture. Indeed, it supplies him with the

⁴⁵ Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 1.58. I owe this reference to one of the IJST reviewers. Meijering finds an allusion to Plotinus' *Enneads* V.2, 7-9 in Or. 29.2. Paul Gallay (SC 250, 181, n. 4) and Frederick Norris (*Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991, p 44) prefers *Ennead* V.1, 6; Michel René Barnes thinks *Ennead* III.8, 10 more likely.

⁴⁶ Eunomius' views are clearly the target of Nazianzen's Orations 27-31, as M. Jourjon argues in his contribution to the Introduction to *Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours 27-31*, pp. 29-34.

⁴⁷ Barnes, 'Eunomius of Cyzicus and Gregory of Nyssa: Two Traditions of Transcendent Causality', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 52.1 (Feb, 1998), pp. 59-87. I am grateful to one of the IJST reviewers for bringing this article to my attention.

⁴⁸ Or. 29.6.

basic logic of his position, which is exposed when he refutes the claim that the begetter and the begotten must be different in nature. Gregory replies, ‘they must necessarily be identical [in nature].’⁴⁹ For ‘it is the very nature of begetter and begotten that the begotten is identical to the begetter in respect of nature.’ Here is a model of causality in which cause and caused are necessarily equal in nature, because the begetter imparts his own nature to the begotten. Given Eunomius’ views, such a position drew fire from his followers, and so Gregory takes pains in Oration 29 to qualify what *divine* generation does not mean without qualifying away the causal logic of this language. Thus he rules out any passion or corporeal biogenesis in divine generation, distinguishes between the Son and Spirit’s having an origin for their existence in the Father, and their having no temporal origin and suggests that in God willing and generating are one so that the latter is entirely voluntary.⁵⁰ Gregory’s caveats on the language of causation, which are the object of Meijering’s critique, belong to this context, and must be seen in light of the basic logic of the account he was seeking to defend.

On Eunomius’ account, if the Father is cause of the Son, he must be of a superior nature, an inference Gregory anticipates in Oration 29.15, and refutes as an unwarranted move from a qualified to an unqualified assertion: from the superiority of the Father as cause, to his superiority in every respect, including nature.⁵¹ The Father, he replied, is greater as cause, but not by nature. Gregory certainly does seem committed to the idea that a cause *as cause* is superior to what it effects. The question Meijering raised is in effect how this notion is consistent with the implications of Gregory’s answer to his own question in Oration 30.2: ‘Which being is without cause? The divinity.’⁵² Gregory implies, rightly, that God can have no cause by definition as the First Cause. Does Gregory then both affirm and deny that *every* cause is superior by nature to *everything* caused, and if not, is he coherent on this question?

⁴⁹ Or. 29.10

⁵⁰ See Or. 29.2-3 and Or. 29.6-7, c.f. Or. 20.7, Or. 25.15. Here, says Gregory, cause does not precede caused temporally any more than the sun precedes sunlight (*pace* Boff).

⁵¹ In Or. 29.15. He makes the same reply in Or 30.7 and Or. 40.43.

⁵² Meijering ‘The Doctrine of the Will’, p. 112, n. 43.

When Gregory affirms that God is uncaused, his concern is, I suggest, specifically for the independence of the First Cause from any other being. Gregory believes that whatever the divine nature is, it must possess an independent existence, as he clearly implies in Oration 30 when arguing for why ‘He who Is’ (Ex. 3.14 LXX) is the proper name of God: ‘for we seek a self-existent nature, not bound to any other, and Being is properly God’s, whole, not limited or curtailed by any before him or any after him, for there was not and will not be.’⁵³ This sense of God’s radical independence explains Gregory’s meaning when he insists in Oration 30.2 that God is uncaused and asks rhetorically who can say what the cause of God is (which must be anterior to him), and especially when he says more clearly in Oration 31.33 that God ‘is the cause of all things, and has no anterior cause.’ For God can have no anterior cause because otherwise God has not that independent self-existence we attribute to a First Cause. Since there is no explicit mention in either passage of a general principle that every cause is superior in nature to what it causes, and since there is no need to attribute such a principle to Gregory to explain his thinking in these passages, it seems superfluous to do so, and therefore the problem of internal contradiction in Gregory is redundant.

Why is the Father superior as cause? He is so relative to the Son and Spirit, because he is independent in his possession of divinity, whereas the Son and Spirit depend on him for theirs. Does this solution entail a fresh arbitrariness, where God is and is not independent of another? It does not, for the divine nature is, as we have seen, the Father’s in the first instance, in whom it is independent. As instantiated in the Son and Spirit their possession of it depends only on God, so that God remains free in his donation of his own divinity to the Son and Spirit, and they share fully in his uncaused divinity. It is this kind of causation for which, for Gregory, the biblical language of generation supplies us with the basic logic of the relationship between cause and nature.

Divine generation and creation, then, are simply different kinds of divine action, because they involve the impartation of different kinds of existence: the Father’s infinite self-existence in the modes of Sonship and Holiness to Son and Spirit, and

⁵³ Or. 30.18.

finite existence contingent on God's will and act to creatures, respectively. The cause is greater than the cause is both respects but the difference is ruled by the difference in action. Gregory's use of causation is not arbitrary.

4. The Father as the point of unity

Gregory's main concern in Oration 29.2, however, is not with divine causality and its implications, but with how such a plurality of divine persons may be consistent with divine unity. His answer, quoted above, is to the effect that the Father generates Son and Spirit not in divergent motions, contrary to unity, but one single motion, in which the three are distinguished, as begetter-projector, begotten and projected, without separation. Nor is the divine dynamic solely one of generation. As we have seen, when Gregory speaks of the convergence or tendency (*sunneusis*) to unity of those from, he must mean the tendency of Son and Spirit back toward the Father from whom they come, their inclining back to him, which suggests a return to their source, to the end that though divided in number they are united in substance.

Gregory makes the same point in an illuminatingly different way in Oration 42. There he instructs the assembled bishops of the Council of Constantinople in his own understanding of the Trinity: 'The point of unity is the Father, from whom and to whom the rest are led, not so that they are smudged together into one, but so that they cleave to one another, separated neither by time nor will nor power.'⁵⁴ Here again, the generation of, it is implied, Son and Spirit by the Father, and their return to him results in a close cohesion in which the divine persons are inseparably in time, will and power, implying also that they enjoy unity of action.⁵⁵

We are now in a position to address Pannenberg's concerns about the mutuality and equality of the divine persons when the Father is cause of Son and Spirit. It is certainly true that for Gregory the persons do not possess symmetry in their identities relative to one another: Son and Spirit do come from the Father; he does not come from them. The persons are not, for Gregory, mutually constitutive of their shared

⁵⁴ Or. 42.15.

⁵⁵ Lewis Ayres has also noted this idea of the return of the persons to the source, but fails to specify that Gregory means the return of Son and Spirit to the Father, and thus tends to elide the particular character of the dynamic movement towards unity he rightly finds Gregory asserting in Orations 29 and 42. See his *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), p. 246.

essence, and it is false to claim that the persons have genuine mutuality simply in the facts that the Father is not Father without Son or Projector without the Spirit, for all that these facts entail is that the Father begets the Son and projects the Spirit, in which there is no mutuality or reciprocity. But in fact there is reciprocity on Gregory's account, for he holds that Son and Spirit return to the Father. Furthermore, when Gregory argues that a fully divine Son and Spirit honour the Father (and conversely that by depriving him of the same he is dishonoured), his argument implies that Son and Spirit confer honour upon him.⁵⁶ Beyond these considerations, Gregory's position asks us to reconsider whether equality and unity in God must mean symmetry in mutuality so that none can be prior in any way to the others: I submit that there is no obvious reason why they should. For one can think of human relationships which lack such mutuality but which are not without equality or reciprocity, especially where gifts are freely given and blossom in the recipient in a way that is full of dignity and blesses the giver. The biblical analogue to divine equality in generation that Gregory develops – that of parents and their children – is one area of human life in which such relationships are possible and do in fact occur. In this light one would have to give a good reason for requiring symmetrical mutuality as a condition for the equality of the divine persons, for the latter does not seem to require the former.

5. The quality of the unity of the Trinity

It is in light of the passages examined above that we should read a similar statement in Oration 31, as John P. Egan Christopher have argued.⁵⁷ To do so will help us focus more closely upon one of the two most significant issues for the comparison of Gregory and Boff: their conceptions of the unity of the Trinity. For Christians, says Gregory,

there is one God, because there is one divine nature, and [because] those from One return to it, even though we believe there are three. For none is more or less God, neither is one before and another after, nor are they sundered in will nor divided in power. Nothing found in divided beings subsists here, but... the divinity exists without division in those who are distinct, like one commixture of light in three suns indwelling one another. Thus we look toward the divinity and the First Cause

⁵⁶ Or. 20.6-7, c.f. Or. 31.12.

⁵⁷ J.P. Egan, 'Primal Cause and Trinitarian Perichoresis in Gregory Nazianzen's *Oration* 31.14, *Studia Patristica* 27 (1993), pp. 21-28; Beeley, 'Divine causality' pp. 210-11.

and the monarchy it is the unity that appears to us, but when we look to those in whom the divinity is, and who exist a-temporally and with equal glory from the first cause, those who are worshipped are three.⁵⁸

The latter part of the passage is more problematic, because it would appear more natural to understand Gregory to say that all three divine persons derive from the First Cause, meaning the divine nature. Such a reading, however, would be contrary to the bent of his argument in Oration 29, which is to argue the coherence of believing that the First Cause is the Trinity, and against the evidence that he thinks the Father is cause of Son and Spirit. There is, however, a good case for arguing that Gregory refers to the Father as ‘First Cause’ in the second instance, as several authors have already suggested.⁵⁹

This argument avoids supposing a drastic difference between the two uses of ‘First Cause’ here, for it says the Father is First Cause in the sense that in divine creative activity, causation proceeds from the Father, is effected through the Son and perfected by the Spirit. In Oration 34.8, in the context of the distinction between God and creatures, Gregory refers to Father, Son and Spirit in just this sense as ‘cause and maker and perfecter.’ In Oration 31.14, then, ‘First Cause’, denotes the Father in respect of his role in the activity of the Trinity *ad extra* and asserts that he is also the source of Son and Spirit, a claim that we find him affirming elsewhere.⁶⁰ In this way, Gregory again asserts the unity of those who also act as a single divinity towards creatures. The Three accordingly are not only those from the First Cause, but those who answer to at least one of the descriptions, ‘those in whom the divinity is’ and ‘those who are from’, descriptions which both apply to Son and Spirit (as Gregory says elsewhere), but of which only the first applies to the Father.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Or. 31.14.

⁵⁹ As John P. Egan notes, Pseudo Cyril, A.J. Mason and A. Theodorou all read this section of Or. 31.14 in this way, and in light of other scholars’ exegesis of other passages supporting the Father’s role as cause of the other two persons, he concurs. See his ‘Primal Cause and Trinitarian Perichoresis’, pp. 21-28.

⁶⁰ For example, in Oration 23.6: ‘However, as much as God is more honoured than creatures, by so much is more magnificent for the First Cause, to be the principle of divinity than [that of] creatures’, where by God Gregory clearly means the Father who is principle of the divinity of Son and Spirit.

⁶¹ See Or. 25.16: ‘common to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is not to become and the divinity. Common to the Son and Holy Spirit is to be from the Father.’

In the first part of the passage, one need not identify the ‘One’ with the ‘divine nature’ mentioned antecedently, nor ‘those from it’ with the three persons mentioned afterwards. Rather, in light of the passages examined just above, the ‘One’ from whom those who are from it must be the Father, and those from it are not all the divine persons, but the Son and Spirit.⁶² As in Oration 29, so here: those who come from the Father and return to him are with him one God with a unity surpassing any found amongst divided beings. For so united are the three in these relations that the nature they share is concretely rather than abstractly one: it is found undivided in those who are distinct, as though they were like three suns that together possess a single light. They are, this imagery implies, so united in their luminous essence that their illumination *ad extra* is one: again, the internal unity of the Trinity grounds their united activity.

It is important to note that Gregory here distinguishes the unity of the divine persons from the unity human beings enjoy in virtue of their common nature and does not argue that God is one by the latter kind of generic unity.⁶³ Humanity, Gregory points out, ‘has unity only when contemplated in thought.’⁶⁴ Human beings are ‘greatly separated from one another by time, experiences and capacity.’ Each member of the Trinity, however, ‘is not less united with his neighbour than himself, by the identity of being and power.’⁶⁵ Once again, the unity of the Trinity is unique in kind, distinguished from all others by its identity of a concrete nature and the intensity of commonality that that identity entails.

6. Distinction in unity and unity in distinction

How, though, are the persons distinct in such a union? In Oration 42, attempting to reconcile East and West in regard to their doctrines of the Trinity, Gregory offers an explanation of the key terms for what there are three of in God: ‘What is the meaning of the hypostases of the one party, and of the persons of the other? ... That they are three, who are distinguished not by natures but by properties.’⁶⁶ The properties (*idiotēta*) of the persons or hypostases distinguish them from one another, without

⁶² As Beeley also argues in ‘Divine Causality’, pp. 210-11.

⁶³ C.f. McGuckin, “‘Perceiving Light from Light’”, pp. 24-25.

⁶⁴ Or. 31.15.

⁶⁵ Or. 31.16.

⁶⁶ Or. 42.16.

difference in nature, Gregory asserts. Although Gregory sometimes speaks as if ‘property’ were a term equivalent to, rather than explicatory of, hypostasis or person, the former usage is clearer and represents his thought best.⁶⁷ So he says, for example, in Oration 20: ‘we must hold to there being one God, and confess the three hypostases or three persons, each with his property.’⁶⁸

Shortly afterwards in the same Oration, Gregory indicates what these ‘properties’ are, in the course of underlining the distinctness of the hypostases ‘without conceiving of any fusion or separation or confusion’.⁶⁹ He begins with the Father: ‘[Let us preserve] the properties, conceiving and speaking of the Father as unoriginate and as principle – that is, principle as cause and as source and as eternal light.’⁷⁰ What matters here is that the properties have to do with the differences that arise from the generation of Son and Spirit by the Father. For example, ‘the Father as cause is principle of the Son’, and also differs from the Son by not being caused himself.⁷¹ It is in this way that in Oration 29 Gregory distinguished the three persons as ‘the begetter and producer... the begotten and the produced.’⁷² Such a difference, as Gregory argues famously in Oration 29.16 in respect of the names ‘Father’ and ‘Son’, is a difference not in nature but in relation, or, as he puts it more clearly, ‘how the Father is relative to (*pros*) the Son, or the Son relative to the Father.’⁷³ Likewise in Oration 31 he argues that the difference between Son and Spirit is a difference ‘of manifestation... or of relation between them’: a difference in their relations of origin from the Father, namely filiation and procession respectively.⁷⁴ It is in this context and to support this point that Gregory appeals to the example of Adam, Eve and Seth: not an analogy between unity and distinction in the Trinity and the human family, as Moltmann and others claim, but as an example to show that there may be two different modes of generation amongst beings sharing a common nature.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ E.g. in Or. 39.11.

⁶⁸ Or. 20.6.

⁶⁹ Or. 20.7.

⁷⁰ Or. 20.7.

⁷¹ Or. 20.7.

⁷² Or. 29.2.

⁷³ Or. 29.16, c.f. Or. 31.9.

⁷⁴ Or. 31.9

⁷⁵ Or. 31.11, c.f. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 199.

Thus, on Gregory's account, unity and distinction are entirely bound up with one another in the Trinity, for it is by the very relations that distinguish the persons that the one divinity is imparted undivided by Father to Son and Spirit, so that they come from, and in turn return to, him. The relations by which they are distinct from one another also unite them in nature, will and movement in an indissoluble unity, qualitatively different from creaturely unity, and unique in kind, so that in respect of them we must speak of one God.

For this reason, Gregory says elsewhere that we cannot think of the three divine persons apart from this unity, nor the divine nature apart from its undivided instantiation in the three. So he says in Oration 40: 'I cannot think of the one before I am illumined all around by the three; I cannot distinguish the three before I am led back to the one.'⁷⁶ So closely entwined are their unity and distinction that one cannot think of the one without being aware of the other, for, as we have seen, the manner in which they are distinct is a function of the manner in which they are united, and vice versa.

7. Boff and Gregory on communion and the identities of the persons

A clearer conception of Gregory's account weakens Boff's claim of continuity with his thought. Boff's claim that for the Cappadocians the 'unity that forms the essence of the Persons springs from the communion and relationship between them' is inaccurate in respect of Gregory. Where Boff has Gregory identify the nature the persons share with the unity they enjoy, for Gregory their equality of nature is one condition of their unity. Boff also elides the distinctive character, found in Gregory, of the communion between the three in the movement in which the Father generates Son and Spirit and their return to him. Furthermore, as André de Halleux has argued against John Zizioulas, it is by any means evident that the category of causality carries personalist connotations. Neither does the Father's monarchy entail giving priority in general to the category of person over that of nature, for the Father does not cause his own nature, but causes it to be imparted to others.⁷⁷ In several formulations we have seen, Gregory places equal emphasis on both the hypostases and the divine nature.

⁷⁶ Or. 40.41.

⁷⁷ André de Halleux, 'Personnalisme ou essentialisme trinitaire chez les Pères cappadociens?', *Revue théologique de Louvain* 17 (1986), p. 149.

In Oration 25 Gregory asks rhetorically what will be left, if we seek to comprehend the modes of divine generation, ‘for those who alone are attested to know one another and be known by one another?’⁷⁸ Such mutual knowledge of the divine persons, however, is neither opposed to divine causality in God, nor does it carry the personalist connotations of three centres of interiority and freedom in openness to one another. That notion still trades on a distinction between the interior of the persons and those external to each of them, to whom they are ecstatically open and to whom they go forth in communion, whereas in Gregory there is not that sense of an inner reserve overcome in communion: each is as united with the others as with himself. And when it comes to drawing analogies with the human mind, he compares all three persons in their unity and distinction with the unity and distinction of the components of one human mind, not three: Father, Son and Spirit are a little ‘like mind, reason and spirit in us, insofar as one can compare things spiritual with things perceptible and things that are very great with those that are small’, for no comparison is entirely adequate here.⁷⁹

The differences between Gregory and Boff in respect of the unity and communion between the persons have further implications. For Gregory, the unity of the divine persons is the consequence of the very particular dynamic they share, one that inheres in a movement of generation and procession which has an irreversible order, and in which the distinct identities of Father, Son and Spirit are bound up. Boff, by doing away with this sense of origination and order and making the persons constitute one another with identical mutuality in effect undercuts his insistence that the difference between persons is preserved in communion.⁸⁰ As a result, he tends to elide, against his explicit intentions, the particular identities of the divine hypostases in favour of reciprocity in mutual revelation in which it is difficult to discern real difference between one person and another. Nowhere is this consequence better illustrated than when he claims that ‘What theological tradition calls unbornness, begetting and procession is really a single, tri-une act of mutual recognition and mutual revelation in

⁷⁸ Or. 25.16.

⁷⁹ Or. 23.11. C.f. the case for a psychological analogy to the Trinity in Gregory of Nyssa in Michel René Barnes and others, e.g. Barnes, ‘Divine unity and the divided self: Gregory of Nyssa’s trinitarian theology in its psychological context’, in Coakley, S., ed., *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 51. I owe this reference to one of the IJST reviewers.

⁸⁰ He asserts as much in passing in *Trinity and Society*, pp. 128-130, 139-140, 151 and 206.

which each of the three Persons participates simultaneously.⁸¹ Three different modes of being God are here reduced to the same mode: recognition and revelation, and though Boff recognises an ordering in this mutuality, it does not amount to a real difference in the way in which each person is God, for each is simply said to reveal himself and recognise the others.⁸² Therefore we have reason to suspect that were Boff's model of the Trinity applied practically to the ordering of society, it would tend to legitimise the suppression or at least the neglect of real human differences, despite his claims to the contrary.⁸³

Gregory gives us reason to think, moreover, that the mutual indwelling, cohesion and unity of the divine persons is of an order qualitatively different from what might pertain among creatures, as we have seen: a difference of an order not found between different creatures. On the evidence examined above, however, and despite claiming to speak analogically, Boff appears to use 'persons' and 'communion' univocally in respect of God and creatures, for he makes no clear distinction between the kind of unity enjoyed in God and amongst creatures by their participation in God. Divine communion merely seems for him to be a more perfect, eternal and immediate version of the communion to be had amongst human persons. The danger is the implied suggestion that differences in God are like differences between us, implying also that the difference between God and us is like the differences between persons, thus compromising God's otherness. Boff's account of God as persons in communion seems to make the mystery of personhood – common to God and creatures – the mark of divine difference, rather than seeing that difference as residing in the infinite mystery of the nature of God, as Gregory does.

Finally, relations of mutual revelation and recognition, which Boff prefers to relations of origin, are not of the same order of unity as those of a single movement of generation and return to a single principle. One may have mutual recognition and revelation between those separated in time and space and divided in will and knowledge (or there would be no such recognition or revelation amongst human beings). Unity in Boff's notion of perichoresis is of a far lesser order of intensity than

⁸¹ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 206.

⁸² Boff speaks of order from Father to Son to Spirit in *Trinity and Society*, p. 157, for example.

⁸³ For example, that in the Trinity, 'Unity does not... mean negation of differences or the reduction of them all to One,' *Trinity and Society*, p. 139.

that which Gregory seeks to adumbrate, and than that which is required in respect of the Trinity. So alike, in Boff's account, is the Trinity to a community of human persons that his theology seems still to court the charge of tritheism in a way that Gregory's does not.

6. Conclusion

A close re-examination of some modern uses and abuses of Gregory Nazianzen's doctrine of the Trinity indicates not only its resilience but also its relevance to the extent that it exposes significant problems in one leading account of the social Trinity. On this comparison of Gregory and Boff, any use of the doctrine of the Trinity as offering a model for a political programme seems highly problematic both in respect of its effects on the doctrine itself and the shape of society modelled upon it. The distortion of the doctrine and the flattening of human differences are both results of the elision of the difference between God and creatures that is integral to using the doctrine as such a model, a picture of what social relations should look like.

Yet it may be too soon to say that the doctrine is of no practical value or that one may not affirm such value by appeal to Gregory. In Oration 22, Gregory exhorts the warring pro-Nicene parties at Antioch to reconciliation by praising peace, asserting that the good of concord between people 'takes its origin from the Trinity, to whom nothing is more proper than unity in nature and peace with itself'.⁸⁴ This unity and peace, he explains, are shared first with the angels, then the whole ordered cosmos and are also found in our own human constitution, in the complementarity of virtues in the soul and the mutual accommodation and adjustment of elements and members in the body. Implicit herein is a view of ecclesial relations that, whilst not without potential problems (the risk of the legitimation of an existing and unjust order of power), might bear careful extension to the mission of the church in society and in both contexts offer a vision of sociality in which human particularities and distinctives are upheld and flourish in a peace that is more than the absence of conflict. For Gregory calls us to a peace in which particular people and constituencies are bound in harmony by the reconciling work of God, just as are the various angels, the different elements of the cosmos, the virtues in the soul and the members of the human body.

⁸⁴ Or. 22.15

As the language of harmony indicates, such peace involves the union of irreducibly distinct elements in relation to one another, and is both beautiful and wholesome: Gregory tells us it is called both beauty and health. It adorns its constituents. This peacemaking work of God, Gregory implies, has its fount in the incomparable unity-in-distinction and distinction-in-unity that is the peculiar preserve of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That peace of the Trinity is not a model, but the active principle to which the effects of its activity *ad extra* bear a dim resemblance: the archetype to their image. It is to that reconciling activity of the Trinity focused in Christ that we should look for guidance in our own peacemaking, just because they make sense and are to be valued as the partial and finite outward expression in creatures of the ultimately inexpressible unity-in-distinction found uniquely in the Trinity.