
Theology and the “Knowledge” of God

Discussion of theology is not for “anytime anywhere” nor everyone

Discussion of theology is not for everyone, I tell you, not for everyone - it is no such inexpensive or effortless pursuit. Nor, I would add, is it for every occasion, or every audience; neither are all its aspects open to inquiry. It must be reserved for certain occasions, for certain audiences, and certain limits must be observed. It is not for all people, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul. For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness.¹

Theologians don’t know everything!

No man has yet breathed all the air; no mind has yet contained or language embraced God’s substance in its fullness. No, we use facts connected with him to outline qualities that correspond with him, collecting a faint and feeble mental image from various quarters.

Our noblest theologian is not one who has discovered the whole - our earthly shackles do not permit us the whole - but one whose mental image is by comparison fuller, who has gathered in his mind a richer picture, outline, or whatever we call it, of the truth.²

The “relative” knowledge of God attributed to people in the Bible

No one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in his nature and essence. As for a discovery some time in the future, let those who have a mind to it research and speculate. The discovery will take place, so my reason tells me, when this God-like, divine thing, I mean our mind and reason, mingles with its kin, when the copy returns to the pattern it now longs after. This seems to me to be the meaning of the great dictum that we shall, in time to come, “know even as we are known.”³

But for the present what reaches us is a scant emanation, as it were a small beam from a great light⁴ which means that anyone who “knew” God or whose “knowledge” of him has been attested in the Bible, had a manifestly more brilliant knowledge than others not equally illuminated. This superiority was reckoned knowledge in the full sense, not because it really was so, but by the contrast of relative strengths.⁵

¹ Or. 27.3 (*On God and Christ*, pp.26-7)

² Or. 30.17 (*On God and Christ*, pp.106-7)

³ 1 Cor 13:12

⁴ Wis 7:26

⁵ Or. 28.17 (*On God and Christ*, pp.49-50)

How is the Son “begotten”?

His begetting would be a triviality if it could be understood by you, who have no knowledge of your own genesis and are ashamed to explain in full the limited understanding you have. Do you really think you know it all?

... How has he been begotten? I re-utter the question with loathing. God’s begetting ought to have the tribute of our reverent silence. The important point is for you to learn that he has been begotten. As to the way it happens, we shall not concede that even angels, much less you, know that. Shall I tell you the way? It is a way known only to the begetting Father and the begotten Son. Anything beyond this fact is hidden by a cloud and escapes your dull vision.⁶

Gregory’s “explanation” of the procession of the Holy Spirit

What, then, is “proceeding”? You explain the ingeneracy of the Father and I will give you a biological account of the Son’s begetting and the Spirit’s proceeding - and let us go mad the pair of us for prying into God’s secrets. What competence have we here? We cannot understand what lies under our feet, cannot count the sand in the sea, “the drops of rain or the days of this world,” much less enter into the “depths of God” and render a verbal account of a nature so mysterious, so much beyond words.⁷

All analogies for the Trinity ultimately fail

There is nothing to satisfy my mind when I try to illustrate the mental picture I have [of the Trinity], except gratefully taking part of the image and discarding the rest.

So, in the end, I resolved that it was best to say “goodbye” to images and shadows, deceptive and utterly inadequate as they are to express the reality. I resolved to keep close to the more truly religious view and rest content with some few words, taking the Spirit as my guide and, in his company and in partnership with him, safeguarding to the end the genuine illumination I had received from him, as I strike out a path through this world.

To the best of my powers I will persuade all men to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the single Godhead and power, because to him belong all glory, honour, and might for ever and ever. Amen.⁸

⁶ Or. 29.8 (*On God and Christ*, pp.75-6)

⁷ Or. 31.8 (*On God and Christ*, p.122)

⁸ Or. 31.33 (*On God and Christ*, p.143)