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THE GOD OF THE GREEKS  
AND THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

In his *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought*, a book whose scholarship and clarity of exposition is characteristic of its author, Robert Grant showed that a debate, generally assumed to be peculiar to modern thought, in fact had its counterpart in ancient philosophy and in early Christian apologetic and theology. In a paper written in his honour, it seems not inappropriate to take another philosophical problem which looms large in modern discussions and enquire how far it was recognised and discussed by philosophers of the ancient world and in particular by patristic theologians. The problem chosen is that of religious language: to what does such language refer? What sort of meaning does it have? How does it function? My purpose is to show that ancient philosophers and the early Christian Fathers were aware that religious language has peculiarities, and does not function in precisely the same way as ordinary language.

Of course, the intellectual context of the ancient world was markedly different from our contemporary situation; the questions do not always appear to be the same, and the arguments were conducted according to different presuppositions and terms of thought. Underlying modern discussions is the suspicion that God-talk is somehow all a misleading hoax, that in the absence of empirical tests theology can have no claim to be a formal discipline of enquiry into reality; whereas in the ancient world the issue was how to talk about a being defined as inexpressible. It is important that this difference not be obscured, and that we avoid the pitfall of distorting the ancient intellectual tradition in an artificial attempt to solve modern problems. In order to keep the discussion firmly anchored in its proper intellectual context, a patristic text will be taken as a basis from which arguments and presuppositions may be

extracted, then to be explained and illustrated from other ancient material. The *Five Theological Orations* of Gregory Nazianzen seem admirably suited to serve as a springboard of this kind, partly because they may be regarded as a concise summary of the patristic theological consensus, but more especially because a central issue in the controversy with Eunomius, the extreme Arian theologian of the time, was the possibility of knowing and talking about God. Selected passages relevant to these issues will provide triggers for our discussion.

## 1. RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AND THE BEING OF GOD.

The *Second Theological Oration* (Or. 28) is concerned with the question of God's being, and it is here that we find statements about the possibility of using meaningful theological language. Gregory distinguishes two problems, the question of God's *existence* and the problem of his *essence* or nature. His concern is with the latter. At the outset, then, we meet the difference between ancient and modern discussions — though the problem of God's existence is not entirely independent of the question of what sort of a being we are discussing. Gregory, however, assumes an intellectual tradition which required a cosmological first cause in order to avoid an infinite regress, and identified that first cause with God<sup>1</sup>. Gregory dismisses the whole question of God's existence in a brief paragraph whose very language reflects a long tradition of philosophical thought (*Orat.* 28.6):

For, that God exists and that he is the creating and sustaining cause, sight and natural law teaches us, sight by encountering visible things beautifully ordered and progressing, immovably moved, so to speak, and carried around, natural law by reasoning back through things seen and ordered to their author. For how could all this be established or constituted unless God brought it all into being and sustains it? For no one who sees a beautifully made lyre, well-tuned and in good order, or who hears its melody, thinks of anything else but the lyre-maker or musician, and

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1. PROCLUS, *Elements of Theology* Proposition 11: there must be a first cause to avoid an infinite regress (cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* 994a). For discussion of the cosmic god as the first principle, see e.g. Arnold EHRHARDT, *The Beginning* (Manchester, 1968); A. J. FESTUGIÈRE, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, Vol. 2: *Le Dieu Cosmique* (Paris, 1949).