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A Christian Anarchist? Gregory of Nyssa's Criticism of Political Power

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The Cappadocian Church father Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395 AD) frequently attacks political power and domination in different forms. He does not present a systematic political philosophy, but there is a range of underlying theological, anthropological, and moral philosophical ideas at play in Gregory's criticism. Especially important is Gregory's theological anthropology, and the unity of humankind. In this article, it is argued that Gregory's political thinking can be described as "anarchism," in so far this is defined as the universal rejection of all kinds of domination and the identification of justice with any positive political state of affairs.

Introduction

"If God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God's?"¹ asks the Cappadocian Church father Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 –395 AD) in his famous attack on slavery. As a number of other early Christian thinkers, Gregory was critical of political power and domination. But where others had often merely recommended a withdrawal from the public sphere, politics, and military service, Gregory takes his criticism a step further. In the following, it will be argued that Gregory's thinking suggests a kind of religious "anarchism," understood as a radical and universal opposition to domination and political power.

Though (Christian) religion and anarchism are often contrasted, there are examples of what has been called Christian anarchism. The Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874 – 1948) defined "the Kingdom of God" as "anarchy," which he in

¹ Hall SG, editor. *International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory of Nyssa, homilies on Ecclesiastes: an English version with supporting studies: proceedings of the seventh international colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (St. Andrews, 5–10 September 1990) (Berlin, New York: W. de Gruyter; 1993), p. 74.*

turn defined as the lack of domination.² Similarly, the French philosopher Jacques Ellul (1912–1994) defined (Christian) anarchism as the total rejection of violence in all forms and argued that Scripture and early Christian thinking leaned toward this conception.³ It is definitions such as these that should be kept in mind when Gregory of Nyssa’s thinking is described as “anarchism” in the following.

There are many examples of denunciation of political power in early Christian authors.⁴ But seldom did this amount to criticism of political power as such. Though for example Tertullian and Origen recommended withdrawal from public affairs, both explain that while the Christians do not take part in military service, they offer their prayers to God, so that in this way the Emperor can win battles and preserve peace.⁵ Denunciation was particular, rather than universal. Gregory of Nyssa is a good example how this changed, since his critique tends to be universal, attacking domination and political power as such. If we define “anarchism” as the universal rejection of domination, understood as ruling through actual or potential violence, there are good reasons for placing Gregory in this category. There is no systematic political philosophy in Gregory, but there is a range of underlying ideas in common in many scattered remarks on such issues as power, government, slavery, and property. In particular, the idea of the unity of human nature is important.

The term anarchism should in the following be understood according to a rather narrow, negative definition, not (necessarily) implying the kinds of radical egalitarianism, which is of-

² Berdyaev N. Slavery and freedom. 2nd enl. ed (San Rafael: Semantron Press; 2009), p. 147–148.

³ Ellul J. Anarchy and Christianity. 1st English ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans; 1991).

⁴ Kalantzis G. Caesar and the lamb: early Christian attitudes on war and military service (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books; 2012).

⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.73.

- Berdyaev N. Slavery and freedom. 2nd enl. ed. San Rafael: Semantron Press; 2009.
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to bring about justice. Such political idealism would be equal to trying to make God comprehensible through positive definitions, which could then be realized analogically in human life. Rather, rightly understood justice and peace are reflections of God's indefinite being, anticipated in human practices through prayer and active negation of their opposites as these can be observed and comprehended in the definite *status quo*.

If we from Gregory's thinking can infer something that can be labeled as "anarchism," it must be a critical, non-idealistic version of such. Christian anarchism is in this way the complete negation of any comprehensive ideal and all attempts at legitimizing political states of affairs of whatever kind. But it is simultaneously a radical affirmation of God's incomprehensible justice, and its realization in the history of the atonement where humanity was set free from the slavery to death, and all masters besides that. This conception of the atonement must, as the Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver reminds us, be realized in the life of the Christian through imitation of God in a peaceful narrative rooted in the gospel story.⁶²

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⁶² Weaver JD. *The nonviolent atonement* (Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans; 2001).

ten implied by modern forms of anarchism. Gregory was himself a bishop and would have been a hypocritical one if he attacked all kinds of offices without distinction. It is not order, as such, that must be negated, but only that based on domination, understood as the violent subjugation of the wills of others to one's own.

Berdyaev was to a large degree inspired by Gregory whom he argued came closest to formulating a true Christian anthropology in his time.⁶ Gregory's negative theology and his anthropology (if one may use such a modern term) are important for understanding his views on ethics. The following will begin with Gregory's anthropology, and his virtue ethics, especially as related to the desire for political power, which for Gregory is the product of pride or "the disease of love of rule." This is not what makes political power wrong in itself, though. Rather, the inherent wrongness in the exercise of political power follows from an equation of political power and domination, and the idea that humanity (not just individual human beings) is created in the image of the infinite God. This is discussed in the following part, in which it is argued that, for Gregory, the exercise of political power is a kind of domination, which (1) goes against the unity of humankind and (2) the example of Christ. I then discuss Gregory's conception of justice, which for Gregory is nothing but God the Word himself. This means that there can be no final, positive worldly ideas of justice as political states of affairs. It is especially the equation of political power and illegitimate domination, combined with the fact that he does not have a compromised or realist view on justice, that makes Gregory an "anarchist." The final part discusses the implications of this.

⁶ Berdyaev N. *The problem of man. Towards the construction of a Christian anthropology*. Vol. 1936, n.d.

Gregory's theological anthropology and virtue ethics

A significant feature of Gregory's theology is his radical distinction between Creator and creation. There is, for Gregory, a fundamental divide between God and everything else, what Sokolowski calls "the Christian distinction."⁷ God is infinite (*ἄπειρον*) in the sense of being radically different from finite things.⁸ There is a gap (*διάστημα*) between Creator and creation, but this gap is nothing but creation itself, says Gregory (i.e. the gap is intrinsic to creation).⁹ The primary characteristic of creation is for Gregory that it is not God, as von Balthasar has argued.^[10] Being a part of creation, human beings are unable to reach beyond the limits of this gap,¹⁰ making God essentially ineffable and incomprehensible. Thus, God must be described by negative or apophatic theology. Names for God, such as immortal and incorruptible, are names made up by conception (*ἐπίνοια*), by negating God's opposites, death and decay.¹¹ Only as God reveals himself historically, in the person of Jesus Christ is it possible to use positive definitions for such things as God's mercy and justice.

Just as important is Gregory's trinitarian theology. This was especially developed against the Neo-Arian Eunomius of Cyzicus (d. c. 393), who claimed that the Father and the Son could not have the same essence, since one was unbegotten

⁷ Sokolowski R. *The God of faith and reason: foundations of Christian theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press; 1995).

⁸ Brightman RS. *Apophatic theology and divine infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa*. *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*. 1973;18:97–114.

⁹ Hall, editor, *International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, GNO 729. 10 von Balthasar HU. *Presence and thought: essay on the religious philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa, a communio book* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press; 1995), p. 27.

¹⁰ Hall, editor, *International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, GNO 412.

¹¹ Jaeger W. * *Con. Eun.* vol. 1960, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* 1.1 & 2.2 (Leiden: Brill; n.d.), p. 477.

harmony," by banishing evils from the human race.⁶⁰ Peacemaking is the negation of anger, and could as such be called a negative action (though, of course, non-violent). While peace is a positive thing, it is, like justice, not a quality which can be realized as a definite political state of affairs, but a reflection of God's incomprehensible and indefinite goodness, which is brought about by the negation of its opposite.

Imitation of God cannot rest on a speculative idea of political justice as a certain political state of affairs that can be derived from or reduced to a positive theology. One might complain that such peacemaking is also a way of exercising power, and add that it is simply impossible not to exercise power over others in some form. One might argue for the validity of this claim from the universality of sin, but Gregory clearly believes that the imitation of God's humility, as shown in the incarnation, is possible, and also required. Because of the incarnation it is possible to live, like Christ did, without exercising domination. Christ's peaceful victory over the powers of death means that it is possible to be cured of the "disease of love of rule," the "primary and fundamental cause of propensity to the bad."⁶¹

But what about the "revolutionary" aspects of anarchism? Based on Gregory's thinking, it seems that peace and justice only exist as negations of all present political states of affairs. Gregory's thinking is at least formally compatible with the formal negativity of modern anarchism. Both rests on a hopeful conception of reality, and the belief that present injustice and domination is the result of a disorder that must be negated. For Gregory, the peace and justice gained by such negation can never be a human property, but only God's. Hence Gregory's thinking is not idealistic, that is, it is not driven by ideals for certain political states of affairs, which must be attained in order

⁶⁰ Drobner, Viciano and Gregory of Nyssa, editors, *International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 82 GNO 159.

⁶¹ Schaff, and Wace, editors, *Gregory of Nyssa, dogmatic treatises*, p. 493.

leads to a certain “activism” can we talk of Gregory’s critique of power as “anarchism.” Another reason for being skeptical about labeling Gregory’s thinking as “anarchism” could be that modern anarchism often rests on a belief that human nature is essentially good and that inequality and domination is only the product of material or sociological circumstances, rather than “sin.” From this often follows an idea that peace and justice will more or less automatically come about as a result of the active (sometimes violent) negation of the *status quo*.

To the first objection may be mentioned that much of Gregory’s polemics against domination and “the disease of love of rule” can be found in his sermons, rather than in his more philosophical writings, which suggests that Gregory believed his principles to be relevant in practice. The attacks on the practice of slavery must have been heard by people for whom it was not completely irrelevant. Moreover, Gregory’s theological and anthropological thinking has practical consequences through his idea of moral perfection as a continuous negation of our ideas about what is not God, which must also be the case with regards to our ideas of justice. No particular political states of affairs can represent or imitate God’s justice, only the total, apophatic negation of injustice can do that.

But does Gregory at all intend human beings to imitate the unknowable character of God? Gregory did not seem to believe that full and final imitation of God’s nature is possible. But he did at least emphasize human freedom. Imitation of God is, for Gregory, simultaneously an imitation of his nature, resulting in freedom on the one hand, and his activities and works in the person of Christ, resulting in works of love, on the other.

This can be seen in such a thing as peacemaking, as this is discussed in Gregory’s seventh sermon on the beatitudes. According to Gregory, the peacemakers (οἱ εἰρηνόποιοι) are those who imitate God by eliminating the disease of anger and envy from human life. The peacemaker “binds the family together in goodwill and peace, and [...] brings human beings into friendly

(ἀγέννητο), while the other was begotten (γεννητο). In his defense of Nicene trinitarian orthodoxy Gregory applied the so-called social analogy: As Adam and Abel were two human persons, the one unbegotten, the other begotten, who shared a common human nature, the Father and the Son are two divine persons sharing a common divine nature.¹² As there is one humanity but many human persons, there is one divine essence or nature (οὐσία, φύσις), but three divine persons (ὑπόστασι).

Gregory emphasizes the unity of human persons. Referring to those who are not divided in nature in the plural is, says Gregory, a “customary abuse of language.”¹³ Saying that there are many humans comes close to saying that there are many different human natures. Using a particular name for a particular person can only be a way of separating that person from the multitude. Human nature is, says Gregory in his letter to Ablabius:¹⁴

[...] an absolutely indivisible unit, not capable of increase by addition or of diminution by subtraction, but in its essence being and continually remaining one, inseparable even though it appear in plurality, continuous, complete, and not divided with the individuals who participate in it.¹⁵

Human nature and persons can be analogous of divine nature and persons because human nature is created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). Human beings thus participate in human nature, as well as in the godhead.¹⁶ Sin is an active darkness

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, * Ad Simplicium de fide* .

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Ablabium quod non sint tres dei*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Schaff P, Wace H, editors. Gregory of Nyssa, dogmatic treatises (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics; 2007), p. 332.

¹⁶ Balas D. *Metousia Theou – man’s participation in God’s perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa.*, vol. 1966, *Studia Anselmiana* (Rome; n.d.).

(skóto6 énergeian) that makes human nature incapable of reflecting God, says Gregory.¹⁷ To be saved from sin means to regain one's ability to reflect God. Since God is infinite and thus incomprehensible, reflecting God means to be beyond particular characteristics, which is why in Christ there is no male or female, Jew or Greek and so on (Gal. 3:2).¹⁸

Human freedom is important in Gregory's thought. In the dialogue on the soul and the resurrection, his sister Macrina says that "[...] liberty (éleyuería) is the coming up to a state, which owns no master (ádespoton) and is self-regulating (avtokraté6)."¹⁹ Virtue has no master, Gregory says in his homilies on the Song of Songs with an allusion to Plato and Albinus, and "is voluntary and free of all compulsion."²⁰ But, says Gregory, human beings are in their present situation hardly capable of imitating God's nature.²¹ Moreover, because the good is infinite, human perfection cannot be achieved in a final sense, but rather "the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness"²² (so-called epektasis), as Gregory argues in his treatise *On the Life of Moses*. Human perfection must imply imitation of God's works in history. Gregory talks of this in terms of "following" (ákoloyuía).²³ While freedom is negatively defined, following means a positive imitation of God's works in history, especially the humility of Christ. Just

¹⁷ Aubineau M. *Grégoire de Nysse. traite' de la virginité'*, vol. 1966, Sources Chrétiennes 119 (Paris; n.d.), 12.7.

¹⁸ See for example Gregory's *De Opificio Homini* (*On the Making of Man*).

¹⁹ Migne J-P. *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)* (MPG), vol. 1857 –66, 46 (Paris; n.d.), p. 101 –105.

²⁰ Langerbeck H. In *canticum canticorum, Gregorii Nysseni Opera* 6 (Leiden: Brill; 1960), p. 161.

²¹ Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus (series Graeca)* (MPG), vol. 1857 –66: 44.82.

²² Gregory of Nyssa. *The life of Moses*. Translated by: Malherbe (New York: Paulist Press; 1978), p. 31.

²³ Mu'hlenberg E. *Discours cate'che'tique*, vol. 2000, Sources Chrétiennes 453 (Paris; n.d.), p. 35.

tion of present things.⁵⁸ The good always lies ahead, and every time we think we have grasped the good and made it comprehensible, we must negate our notions about it. Moral progress is not, for Gregory, something self-contained. If this is also true for justice, then human justice, as an anticipation and analogy of God's justice, must be achieved through a continuous negation of injustice. Every time we think we have achieved a final definition of justice, this idea must be negated.

Anarchism? Really? (Conclusion)

The radical distinction between Creator and creation adhered to by Gregory is a challenge to all attempts at firm political ontologies. God is not the one principle that everything else can be reduced to. Neither is God a cosmic principle or the ground of all authority. Rather God negates every attempt to reduce particular aspects of reality to a more fundamental principle through violence and is thus what makes human liberty, autonomy, and freedom from domination possible. By his incarnation, death and resurrection God dissolves such domination, through non-violent means. Hence, the classical anarchist slogan "no god, no masters" ("Ni Dieu ni maître"⁵⁹) would be non-sensical to Gregory. It is exactly because God is who he is, that it is possible for human beings to be without masters. This suggests that anarchism, understood as the total rejection of all kinds of domination, is not incompatible with (Christian) religion, and that the traditional hostility of anarchism toward religion must be considered non-essential.

One might argue that even if Gregory in theory presents a set of anthropological and ethical doctrines that render political power immoral, this is not equivalent to saying that his teaching has practical consequences, and that only if theory

⁵⁸ Ibid., GNO 249.

⁵⁹ Louis Auguste Blanqui 1881.

thus incomprehensible, we must continuously make up negative definitions of God through conception (ἐπίνοια), by negating our ideas of whatever is not God, even our own ideas about God.⁵⁴ This means that when God is defined as justice, this must be done through a negation of injustice: God is not unjust.⁵⁵ Injustice is, as death and corruption, something with a certain definite form. The negation of such injustice points at the infinity of God, not anything definite. Justice, God himself, cannot have any definite “form,” but must be defined indirectly, through negations. This means that human “justice” can be nothing more than an analogy of God’s justice, but it can only be this by being the negation of concrete injustices, not by being a certain political state of affairs. As the human soul according to Gregory paradoxically has a perfect likeness to God by not being comprehensible,⁵⁶ it seems to follow that human justice can reflect God’s justice in an incomprehensible way by not being anything definite: No definite political state of affairs can represent God’s incomprehensible justice, but this is exactly why the negation of any political state of affairs can point to God’s justice. Does this mean that human justice cannot participate to some degree in divine justice? This depends on whether God’s justice is to be identified only with God’s nature, which human beings cannot, according to Gregory, participate in, or also God’s activities, which human beings can participate in. But in both cases, human justice cannot be identified with certain political states of affairs.

Gregory’s theory of language influences his notion of moral perfection. Negation and affirmation, “yes” and “no,” are inseparable.⁵⁷ Moral perfection is the unceasing reaching out for God (so-called *epektasis*), which consists in a continuous nega-

⁵⁴ Jaeger, *Con. Eun.* 1960:2.89.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1960: 132.

⁵⁶ Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)*, 1857 –66: 44.156.

⁵⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the song of songs*, GNO 374.

as mercy and justice cannot be defined positively except as God reveals himself, the humility of God is not an abstract property of the divine nature, but refers to the fact that Christ, the King of kings, became a servant.²⁴

Virtue is for Gregory first of all a matter of not being controlled by passions and of loving God, rather than creation. Material things should not be esteemed too highly, since they are subject to corruption and instability.²⁵ In this, Gregory’s thinking is not far from his contemporary Neo-Platonism and similar schools of thought. That nothing in human life should be considered absolutely valuable is, says Gregory in his sermons on Ecclesiastes, what the ecclesiast learned through experience: “This is human life: ambition is sand, power is sand (κόσμοσ ἡ *dynasteía*), wealth is sand, and sand each of the pleasures eagerly enjoyed in the flesh.”²⁶ But power is not just a “thing” like delicious food, wine, gardens, and whatever else in which the Ecclesiast attempted to find happiness. Political power, says Gregory, is the means through which ownership over material things is gained, and as such it is simultaneously the product of inordinate desire, and the reason for the pleasures that follow when these desires are realized (and pleasure is, to be sure, not a good thing).

Rational thinking cannot lead to a comprehension of the nature of the good, says Gregory, but everyone should be able to acknowledge that nothing created has absolute value, which should also lead to a dismissal of the value of authority and political power. But the reason that most people do not arrive at this insight, is custom and tradition:

Most people do not judge for themselves how things stand by nature (*prágmata wúseo6*). In-

²⁴ Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus (series Graeca)* (MPG), 1857 – 1866: 84.

²⁵ Hall, editor, *International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41, GNO vol. 5, 290.18.

stead, they look to the customs of their forebears and fail to achieve a sound judgment about reality, because they set up an irrational habit as their criterion of the good rather than any intelligent consideration. Consequently, they thrust themselves into positions of authority (ἄρξά6) and power (dynasteía6) and make much of prominence in this world and of material things [...].²⁷

As many philosophers before him, Gregory juxtaposes tradition and nature. While tradition is often corrupt, giving a wrong conception of what is good, the natural is identified with the right. Since the pursuit of political power is the product of a wrong conception of the good presented by custom and tradition, pursuing political power is against nature. In this sense, criticism of tradition becomes a criticism of political ideology, understood as a set of idealized practices produced by a society's material circumstances (or rather: a certain attitude to these circumstances).

circumstances). In his catechetical speech, Gregory explains how the devil was subject to “the disease of love of rule,” which he describes as the “primary and fundamental cause of propensity to the bad and the mother, so to speak, of all the wickedness that follows.”²⁸ That the “disease of love of rule” is at the root of sin is of course not equivalent to saying that ruling or political power is in itself sinful. But it suggests a tendency or a temper in Gregory, so to speak. Political power is, if not always then very often, the product of pride and inordinate desire for material things. This has to do with

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa. *Homilies on the song of songs*. Writings from the Greco Roman World 13 Translated by: Norris RA, Jr. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; 2012), p. 73.

²⁸ Schaff, and Wace, editors, Gregory of Nyssa, dogmatic treatises, p. 493, modified.

acts unjustly. In his sermon on the words “give us today our daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer, Gregory says that:

[...] we say to God: Give us bread. Not delicacies or riches, nor magnificent purple robes, golden ornaments, and precious stones, or silver dishes. Nor do we ask Him for landed estates, or military commands, or political leadership. We pray neither for herds of horses and oxen or other cattle in great numbers, nor for a host of slaves. We do not say, give us a prominent position in assemblies or monuments and statues raised to us, nor silken robes and musicians at meals, nor any other thing by which the soul is estranged from the thought of God and higher things; no – but only bread! [...] if God is justice, anyone who procures food for themselves through covetousness cannot have his bread from God. You are the master of your prayer if your abundance does not come from another’s property and is not the result of somebody else’s tears; if no one is hungry or distressed because you are fully satisfied. For the bread of God is, above all, the fruit of justice.⁵³

Gregory links traditional asceticism (“but only bread!”) with justice. But again, justice is nothing but God himself, and not an intrinsic quality of human affairs, even if it is not possible to pray sincerely if justice is not reflected in one’s life. In prayer is anticipated the substance of things to come, says Gregory. But this future good is not anything definite, but the infinite God himself.

So how do we define “justice”? Gregory’s apophatic theory of language is a good place to start. Since God is infinite and

⁵³ Graff HC. St. Gregory of Nyssa, the Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes, Ancient Christian Writers (Paulist Press; 1953), p. 67.

deduced can be considered true, since it is directly refuted by the unfairness of real life.⁴⁹

Gregory's argument seems to be an attempt at refuting the whole idea of justice as a matter of political states of affairs. He does this through what may be called a practical *reductio ad absurdum*: If in order to treat everyone equally one needs to procure superiority over others, then equality presupposes inequality, which is absurd. Even if Gregory might not be logically successful in this argument, his argument expresses what seems to be his main concerns in the sermon, namely that the ends does not justify the means, and that justice is not at all a matter of certain positive political states of affairs.

Being just, says Gregory, is not a matter of ruling (*ἄρχειν*) or apportioning (*dianémein*), or of administration (*oikonomēin*).⁵⁰ Justice is not only not merely distributive, it is not at all a matter of ruling in a certain way. But neither is justice an intrinsic quality of the human soul, or a quality of any other created thing for that matter. Justice is, says Gregory, nothing but "God the Word himself".⁵¹ When Jesus says that "blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice (*thn dikaiosúnēn*), for they shall be filled," he is offering himself to the appetite of his hearers, says Gregory. Gregory seems quite aware that he is going against common conceptions of justice, as he refers to his claim as a "daring account."⁵² That justice is not a matter of positive political states of affairs, or a state of the soul (as Gregory had suggested earlier in the fourth sermon on the beatitudes), but God himself, does not mean that it is irrelevant for worldly matters. On the contrary, since God is justice, it is not possible to relate to God if one

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 49.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 55.

⁵² Ibid.

psychological and moral elements, or what we could call "the subjective side of political power."

The cure for "the disease of love of rule" is humility. In his first sermon on the beatitudes ("blessed are the pure in spirit", Matt 5:3), Gregory argues that while we cannot imitate God in essence, we can at least imitate the humility that Christ showed when he became a servant:

Just because the sense of superiority is ingrained in almost every member of the human species, the Lord makes this the starting-point of his beatitudes: he evicts pride from our character as being the prime source of evil, when he counsels us to imitate the one [Christ] who voluntarily became poor [...].²⁹

Gregory exemplifies the difference between pride and humility by distinguishing between two kinds of kings, one who has succumbed to pride by believing his kingship to be of real value, and one who plays the part of king as if on a stage, without any attachment, or inordinate feelings of pride. The "disease of pride" does not affect the latter, who performs his kingly duties without inflicting harm. But in practice, too often political power is not just the expression of, but also the cause of pride. Gregory says that:

As often as not imperial office and the exercise of its power become the excuse for pride. [...] Those however who strut on the stage of life because of imperial office [...] stay no longer within the bounds of human nature, but assume divine power and authority. They believe they have sovereignty over life and death because to

²⁹ Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)* (MPG), vol. 1857 -66: 84.

some of those who are judged by them they give sentence of acquittal, while others they condemn to death; and they do not even consider who is truly the sovereign of human life and determines both the beginning of existence and its end.³⁰

Again, Gregory attacks the feelings of pride that make people pursue political power, and the feeling of superiority that rises from such power. So far, political power is not in itself necessarily wrong, but the desire for power is. So, even if the exercise of political power were, for Gregory, not wrong in itself (which it is, as will be argued below), the fact that political power expresses an immoral desire for ruling (immoral because any desire which is not for God is immoral), makes it problematic.

Below it will be argued, that the metaphor of a king that plays his role without attachment as on a stage should hardly be taken to be a neutral assessment of political power, and that for Gregory there are objective reasons for the inherent wrongness of the exercise of political power.

Political power as a corruption of human nature (the main argument)

When rulers believe themselves to have sovereignty over human life they make themselves gods, says Gregory in his sermons on the Beatitudes (quoted above). But to this Gregory adds, that when we see how rulers are taken away by death in

³⁰ Drobner HR, Viciano A, Gregory of Nyssa, editors. International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nyssa, homilies on the Beatitudes: an English version with commentary and supporting studies: proceedings of the eighth international colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, Paderborn, 14–18 September 1998. Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, v. 52 (Leiden, Boston: Brill; 2000), p. 30.

bring about certain “political” aims. Instead, Gregory seems to reject all political states of affairs as being problematic. Hence, we should not be surprised if Gregory’s thinking does not fit neatly into a modern realism–idealism distinction. Justice is not a matter of using the means at hand in the right way, nor is it a matter of approximating an ideal political state of affairs.

In his third sermon on the beatitudes, Gregory at first argues that justice (*dikaíosunh*) is a question of moral virtue. When the beatitudes says “blessed are they that hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall have their fill” (Matt 5:6), we should understand that “hunger” is the desire for what one is lacking spiritually. While finite things never bring lasting satisfaction, devotion to God does, since God is the only true, infinite good. Happiness consists in loving God and those who “hunger and thirst” after justice will have their fill since justice is not a question of ruling fairly, but of practicing devotion. Gregory’s view here is somewhat reminiscent of Plato’s in the *Republic*. Plato argues that justice is not only a question of the harmony of the city state but also of the soul. Justice is in this sense a matter of a harmonious relationship between the other virtues. All the virtues are indicated by the word “justice” (*dikaíosunh*), says Gregory.⁴⁷ Gregory adds that justice cannot be merely distributive, since the poor would not be able to be just, having nothing to distribute.⁴⁸ But justice is something universal, which must be available to all. Gregory goes even further than this, when he argues as follows:

For if equality is, according to the secular account, the goal of the just (*ó skopòs tō dikaíō*), and superiority implies inequality (*ἡ δὲ ὑπεροχὴ τὸ ἄνισον ἔχει*), there is no way that the account of justice

⁴⁷ Drobner, Viciano and Gregory of Nyssa, editors, International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, p. 52.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

of the world, but something completely different. It is only to ease communication that the kingdom of heaven is called a kingdom, says Gregory.⁴⁵

That not even God seeks to hold power over human beings, as Gregory says, means that the idea of a “Christian” political system is nonsensical. Gregory’s criticism of what could be called the “objective side” of political power is not only grounded in his anthropology, but also in an idea of the atonement, where God’s justice is expressed as a refusal to use violence. God does not rule by force, but by not ruling (that is, ruling without domination). Liberation from death does not lead to a new bondage. As Nikolai Berdyaev says in the passage quoted above, the kingdom of God is freedom and the absence of domination.

The “true definition” of justice

Gregory’s conception of political power does not seem to allow that political power can be exercised in ways consistent with Christian anthropology and ethics. This does not mean, of course, that this was also Gregory’s view in matters of daily political routine. One thing is the pulpit, another thing the reality of messy, concrete politics. Hence, proponents of so-called “Christian realism” may argue that things are not ideal, so we should do the best on the terms that are available.⁴⁶ So perhaps, we cannot talk of absolute justice in a world with domination, but may we not talk of relative justice? Gregory’s definition of justice does not seem to allow that, as should become clear from the following. Neither is Gregory arguing for non-domination or peacefulness as a “political” ideal or a way to

⁴⁵ Drobner, Viciano and Gregory of Nyssa, editors, *International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 33.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr R. *The nature and destiny of man: a Christian interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons; 1964).

the middle of their rule, this should remind us that they do not possess power over life and death:

How then can he be sovereign (κύριο6) over life which does not belong to him (ἀλλοτρία6 ζωῆ6), when his own does not belong to him? Even that person, therefore, if he becomes poor in spirit, looking to the one who willingly became poor because of us, and observing the equal respect (ὁμότιμον) we owe to members of our race, will not inflict injury on those who share his origin (τὸ ὁμογένε6) as a result of that mistaken masquerade of government (ἀρχὴν τραγωδία6) [...].³¹

Rulers should become humble, as Christ was, because we owe equal respect to members of our own race, says Gregory.³² In this can be seen the two primary points in Gregory’s criticism of political power, namely that this goes against the unity of human nature, on the one hand, and the example of Christ, on the other.

Titles are no more than titles, from which “no superiority over the subordinate” accrues, says Gregory in his sermons on Ecclesiastes.³³ In other words, one may hold a political office, but the exercise of this office is far from being unproblematic. Gregory argues against the practice of gathering riches, since this expresses an inordinate desire for material things (such criticism follows from Gregory’s virtue ethics). But even

³¹ Ibid.

³² Hans Boersma argues that the claim, made by Lionel Wickham and Klein and others, that Gregory in this sermon only condemns pride and arrogance rather than slavery and domination itself, “goes much to far.” Boersma H. *Embodiment and virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: an anagogical approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2013), p. 157.

³³ Hall, editor, *International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 75. 35 Ibid., p. 76 GNO 339,12. 36 Con. Eun. 1.1.524.

if there is nothing wrong in itself in gathering riches, and if there were no inordinate desires, when royal power gathers riches, this means to “impose tribute, to exact tithes, to compel their subjects to pay taxes.”[35] This way of gathering riches is not something innocent, says Gregory. So even if such activity is not the result of inordinate desire for gold, or an immoral attitude to political power (a “disease of love of rule”), it is still problematic, because of the way royal power functions, by force.

Hence, in addition to the criticism against viceful attitudes to political power, there is an objective side to political power, which must also be criticized. Both elements – the critique of the “disease of love of rule” and the critique of the actual exercise of political power – frequently come together in Gregory’s arguments. We should be aware of this since it is easy to overlook one for the other. That not all political power is necessarily an expression of inordinate desires, does not mean that there cannot be other reasons why political power is in itself wrong. Such reasons can be found as Gregory argues from his theological anthropology, on the one hand, and his understanding of the works of Christ, on the other. These things do not concern the passions and desires at work in political power, but rather the problematic relations between human beings in actual political states of affairs. Trinitarianism has practical consequences through the social analogy. As God is three persons sharing one common nature, humanity is many human persons sharing one common nature. According to Gregory, this means that saying, as Eunomius did, that the Son (Christ) is not equal to the Father is like saying that some human beings are not equal to others and vice versa.[36] As a further argument against Eunomius’ claim that Christ is created, Gregory asserts that if Christ was a part of creation, then Christ’s rule would amount to thrusting down creation from kinship to subjection,

Hence, in his criticism of slavery, Gregory does not only argue from abstract ontological premises, but also from historical – theological premises and the idea of imitation of God as a matter of following Christ: God has not enslaved human beings, but liberated them. As God in the atonement did not enslave human beings, but set them free, neither should human beings enslave each other. Gregory’s line of thinking is reminiscent of Matt 20:25 –28 where Jesus explains to his disciples that the Son of Man has not come to be served, but to give his life as a ransom for many.

The idea of Jesus’ death as a ransom to the enemy whereby God in a peaceful manner overcame death plays a central role in Gregory’s theory of the atonement, and distinguishes it from later medieval as well as protestant theories where the death of Christ is a payment to God (rather than God’s payment to death, as it is in Gregory).⁴² God’s justice is seen in the atonement in that he does not use violence in overcoming death, Gregory explains in his catechetical speech.⁴³ The comments made on slavery in the sermon on Ecclesiastes above, suggests that Gregory agrees with Matt 20:25 –28 that this means, that just as Christ came to serve, not to rule, his disciples should likewise not exercise lordship (*katakryrieúoyin*) and authority (*katejoysiázoyin*), as does the leaders of the Gentiles, but serve others instead (Matt 20:25).

Gregory’s point seems to be that the kingdom of God cannot be modeled on human kingdoms. When we pray for the coming of the kingdom of God, says Gregory, we pray that we may be delivered from the reign of death and the tyranny of evil, and “that the adversary may never dominate” us.⁴⁴ The kingdom of God is not, however, a substitute for the kingdoms

⁴² Aulén G. *Christus Victor: an historical study of the three main types of the idea of atonement* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock; 2003), p. 49.

⁴³ Muhlenberg, *Discours cate’che’tique*, para. 22.

⁴⁴ Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)*, 1857 –66: 44.1156d –1157a.

God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God's?⁴⁰

Gregory adds that ownership of the whole of creation has been given to humanity as such. Hence, when someone attempts to gain possession over another human being, the property of that person follows along. Attempting to buy another human being is absurd since this implies attempting to buy the whole creation. The absurdity rises from the fact that there would be nothing to pay with if everything is included in the object that is attempted bought: You cannot buy everything since there would be nothing to pay with, then.

As a side remark, we may note that there is an almost Kantian line of thought in Gregory's arguments (not least according to the second definition of the categorical imperative)⁴¹: The division of the human species in two is a logical absurdity. Of course, Gregory's theological context is different from Kant who believed that the doctrine of the Trinity could not have any practical consequences, whereas Gregory derived his anthropology from theological ideas. But both agree that the division of humanity in two leads to a logical fallacy, though they differ in so far that for Kant this is what grounds its wrongness, while for Gregory such absurdity only reveals a moral quality, that is derived from certain theological premises.

In the passage quoted above, Gregory most importantly notes that not even God himself holds power over human beings since He, "[...] when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom." Gregory is referring to God's work in the atonement, where Christ through his death liberated humanity from its bondage to sin and death.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 73–74 GNO 336.

⁴¹ Kant I. *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*. Revised ed. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2012), Chapter 4.

and make it bend before a kinsman.³⁴ Authority is tyrannical if it is not based on an actual ontological difference, between ruler and ruled, says Gregory:

It would equal to tyranny (tyrannídi) not to assign authority (tò kráto6) to a superiority of being (oúsiá6 úperoxḗ), but to divide the creation (merisuḗnai tḗn ktísin) that by nature has equal value (tῶ ómotímō tḗ6 wúsev6) into slave and ruling power (doyleían kai kyrióthta), one part in command (ǎrxein), the other in subjection (úpoxeírion).³⁵

Dividing creation into a sovereign part in command or power (ǎrxein) and one in subjection (úpoxeírion) would be an arbitrary distribution (diaklhrósev6) of dignity (ǎjjiómato6), says Gregory.³⁶ Only by being different from creation does Christ have the right to rule. Creation cannot ultimately rule itself (though human beings have some right to rule over irrational natures). What is true of creation in general is also true of human nature in particular. Gregory continues his argument, and says that:

[...] human governments (ǎnurópinai dynasteíai) experience such quickly repeated revolutions for this very reason, that it is impracticable that those who have equal value by nature (katà tḗn wúsin ómotímon) should not have a similar share (mḗ isomoirēin) in what is mightier ([én] tῶ kreíttoni), but her impulse is instinct in all to make themselves equal with the dominant party

³⁴ *Con. Eun.* 1.1.525.

³⁵ *Con. Eun.* 1.1.526. Author's translation.

³⁶ *Con. Eun.* 1.1.527

(τὸ ἐπικρατοῦν), when all are of the same blood (ὅταν ὁμόωυλον ᾷ).³⁷

Human beings instinctively attempt to make themselves equal with the dominant party, resulting in governments being overthrown. They do this because human beings share a common nature.

Gregory's argument, that Christ cannot be created since that would make his rule over creation illegitimate, might not seem waterproof, since Gregory admits that human beings were created to rule over other created things. But this does not change the fact that Gregory in the passage assumes that it is unnatural for some human beings to have power over others, since human beings share a common nature. Gregory identifies such things as the dominant party (τὸ ἐπικρατοῦν), the part in command/power (ἄρχειν), lordship (κυριόθτα) and contrasts these with slavery (δοyleían) and subjection (ὑποxeírion). Such divisions occur in human governments (ἀνυρώpinai dynasteíai), since the authority (τὸ κράτο6) of one part of human nature over another is based on an arbitrary division. This, says Gregory, amounts to tyranny.

Now, one may argue that given a Christology of the union of divine and human natures in Christ, Christ's rule must in the incarnation be regarded as a human rule, and that since Christ's rule is just, his human rule must also be so (which means that at least some human ruling is just). But this misses a central point, that in the incarnation Christ humbled himself and became a servant, rather than a ruler (Matt 20:25 –28). As he became human, Christ acted as human beings are supposed to act, serving rather than ruling. For Gregory, this seems to mean that, given the incarnation, not even ontological difference can legitimize domination, since God has once and for all, by himself becoming a servant, set human beings free from

³⁷ *Con. Eun.* 1.1.527–528.

tyranny (in a sense Christ's ruling consists paradoxically in serving).

A good example of how this line of reasoning is combined with his anthropological argument, is Gregory's attack on slavery. In his sermons on Ecclesiastes, Gregory discusses the Ecclesiast's statement "I bought male and female slaves."³⁸ Gregory argues that turning the property of God (humankind) into one's own property and to arrogate dominion to one's own kind implies overstepping one's "own nature through pride."³⁹ Again Gregory points at the inordinate passions (pride) behind political power. But Gregory's primary point is that by dividing humankind in two, it has become "enslaved to itself" and "the owner of itself." Gregory says that:

...] by dividing the human species in two with "slavery" and "ownership" you have caused it to be enslaved to itself, and to be the owner of itself. "I got me slave-girls and slaves." For what price, tell me? What did you find in existence worth as much as this human nature? [...] God said, Let us make man in our own image and likeness (Gen. 1,26). If he is in the likeness of God, and rules the whole earth, and has been granted authority over everything on earth from God, who is his buyer, tell me? Who is his seller? To God alone belongs this power; or, rather, not even to God himself. For his gracious gifts, it says, are irrevocable. God would not therefore reduce the human race to slavery, since he himself, when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom. But if

³⁸ Eccl 2:7, NIV.

³⁹ Hall, editor, International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, p. 73 GNO 336.