

Gregory Palamas and Our Knowledge of God

Richard Swinburne

Emeritus Nolloth Professor of
the Philosophy of the Christian Religion, University of Oxford
Emeritus Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford
Fellow of the British Academy
e-mail: richard.swinburne@oriel.ox.ac.uk

Although Gregory wrote very little about this, he acknowledged that natural reason can lead us from the orderliness of the physical world to the existence of God; in this, he followed the tradition of Athanasius and other Greek fathers. Unlike Aquinas, he did not seek to present the argument as deductive; in fact his argument is inductive, and of the same kind as—we now realise—scientists and historians use when they argue from phenomena to their explanatory cause. Gregory wrote hardly anything about how one could obtain knowledge of the truths of the Christian revelation by arguments from non-question-begging premises; but in his conversations with the Turks he showed that he believed that there are good arguments of this kind. Almost all of Gregory's writing about knowledge of God concerned how one could obtain this by direct access in prayer; this access, he held, is open especially to monks, but to a considerable degree also to all Christians who follow the divine commandments.¹

Christian tradition has normally held that we may acquire knowledge of God by three routes—natural reason, publicly available revelation (contained primarily in Scripture), and individual direct

¹ The paper was read at the International Conference on St Gregory Palamas (Thessaloniki March 7–15, 2012) and it is published with the permission of Dr. C. Athanasopoulos, Editor of the Proceedings of the Conference.

awareness of God. In this paper I shall assess the views of Gregory Palamas on the nature and value of each of these routes.

Since Gregory was writing almost entirely for those who already believed Christian doctrines, he did not have much to say about our access to God by natural reason, and for that reason he has been viewed as denying the existence or importance of such access. That view of Gregory, I shall now argue, is mistaken. *Romans* 1:20 claims that

ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

Gregory was highly critical of Greek philosophy because he saw it as leading to polytheism;² he did not, I think, realize how disconnected were the religious practices of ordinary pre-Christian Greek people from the reasonings of some Greek philosophers. Nevertheless, like most Christian theologians, Gregory saw *Romans* 1:20 as telling us that non-Christians can learn by the exercise of their natural reason that there is a God of great power, knowledge and goodness who created and sustains the world. He wrote:

knowledge of creation brought mankind to knowledge of God before the Law and the prophets; today also it is bringing men back; and almost the whole of the inhabited world ... now possesses by that means alone a knowledge of God who is none other than the creator of this universe;³

² 'By examining the nature of sensible things [Greek philosophers] have arrived at a certain concept of God, but not at a conception truly worthy of him and appropriate to his blessed nature... For if a worthy conception of God could be attained through the use of intellection, how could these people have taken the demons for gods, and how could they have believed the demons when they taught men polytheism'—[14], *Triads* 1.1.18. (All citations from *Triads* are from [14] unless otherwise stated.)

³ Ἐπέστρεφε τοίνυν ἡ τῶν κτισμάτων γνώσις πρὸς θεογνωσίαν τὸ γένος τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρὸ νόμου τε καὶ προφητῶν, καὶ νῦν αὖθις ἐπιστρέφει, καὶ σχεδὸν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς οἰκουμένης, ὅσοι μὴ τοῖς εὐαγγελικοῖς θεσπίσμασιν εἴκουσι, δι' αὐτῆς μόνης, οὐχ ἕτερον ἄρτίως ἔχουσι Θεόν, ὅτι μὴ τὸν ποιητὴν τοῦδε τοῦ παντός.—[13], *Triads* 2.3.44. The bold claim that

and he claimed that by attending to the λόγοι of beings one comes to knowledge (γνῶσις) of ‘the power, wisdom, and knowledge’ of God (*Triads* II 3.15–16).

Barlaam however had pointed out that the rules of reasoning understood as the rules of a deductive argument, that is an argument which is such that to assert the premises but to deny the conclusion would be to contradict yourself, a syllogism (in a wide sense), had been codified by Aristotle; and that these had the consequence that there could be no apodictic syllogism (i.e. one with evident premises and so indubitable conclusion) which would demonstrate the existence of God from non-Scriptural premises (see [15], pp. 188–190). Barlaam gave various reasons for this. In particular the premises would have to be general metaphysical principles, which he calls ‘common notions, hypotheses, and definitions,’ ones involving concepts abstracted from sensibles. But Aristotle held that

demonstrative knowledge must proceed from premises which are true, primary, immediate, better known than, prior to and causative of their conclusion (Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 71b, 20–25).

These are, I think, excessively demanding conditions for demonstrative knowledge; but clearly no inference is going to be of any value unless its premises are better known than its conclusion. And, Gregory acknowledged, humans could not know ‘common notions’ well enough to demonstrate the existence of God. ‘Common notions,’ he writes ‘depend on the intelligence of him who was last created,’ ([13], Ep. I Ak 10) that is on mere human intelligence.

All of Thomas Aquinas’s ‘five ways’ ([2], 1a. 2.3) to prove the existence of God invoke metaphysical principles of the kind which Barlaam must have had in mind, e.g. a premise of the first way is ‘everything in the process of change is being changed by something else,’ and a premise of the second way is ‘a series of causes must stop somewhere.’ These are not obvious truths, and that is why the five ways

theism is becoming universal seems to involve a favourable reference to the growth of Islam.

do not yield certainty. Nevertheless the subsequent Western medieval tradition from Scotus to Leibniz sought to give tight compelling deductive arguments which appealed to such general metaphysical principles, for the existence of God until it came in the nineteenth century to accept Kant's claim that this route would never yield certainty. It was not however characteristic of the patristic tradition to put natural theology into the form of a syllogism. Rather, the Fathers simply point to the facts of the existence of the universe or to its orderliness, and claim that these things are to be explained by the action of a benevolent creator. Although the Arabic philosophers (see the very thorough analysis of these arguments in [7]) discussed at length various versions of arguments from the mere existence of a physical universe, arguments which were later called 'cosmological arguments,' the brief discussions in the Greek Fathers concentrate more on arguments from the orderliness of the universe, producing versions of what were later called 'teleological arguments.'

The most sustained presentation of such an argument of which I know is that by Athanasius in sections 35 to 44 of *Against the Heathens*. He gives there many examples of the beneficent ordering of nature. Assuming that physical matter is of four kinds—earth, air, fire and water—he points out that, despite their contrary natures (earth and water move downwards, air and fire upwards), they are put together in such a way as to produce an environment in which humans can flourish. Thus:

Who that sees the clouds supported in air, and the weight of the waters bound up in the clouds, can but perceive Him that binds them up and has ordered these things so? Or who that sees the earth, heaviest of all things by nature fixed upon the waters, and remaining unmoved upon what is by nature mobile, will fail to understand that there is One that has made and ordered it, even God? Who that sees the earth bringing forth fruits in due season, and the rains from heaven, and the flow of rivers, and springing up of wells, and the birth of animals from unlike parents, and that these things take place not at all times but at determinate seasons,—and in general, among things mutually unlike and contrary, the balanced and uniform order to which they conform,—can resist the inference that there is one Power which orders and administers them ordaining things well as it thinks fit? For left to themselves they could not subsist or ever

be able to appear, on account of their mutual contrariety of nature ([5], *Against the Heathens* 36).

Similar but very brief arguments are to be found in Gregory of Nyssa,⁴ Maximus,⁵ and John of Damascus.⁶ Both the latter also give a cosmological argument, indeed the one which seems to be the source of Aquinas's first way, although not obviously in the form of a syllogism.

In the *Triads* Gregory also appeals to an argument of Athanasius's kind, though without any examples and in a passage which would be almost impossible to understand without any familiarity with simpler accounts of it:

What man of reason who sees the evident differences between the essences of things, both the oppositions of their powers and the compensating origins of their motions, their incessant successions from contrary properties and the unmingled attraction from inconceivable strife, the conjunctions of separate and unmixable things in a unity which are spirits, souls, bodies, this harmony of things so numerous, this stability in their relations and positions, this conformity of states and orders to their essence, the indissolubility in their cohesion, what man taking all this into his mind, would not think of who had positioned everything so well in its place and established this admirable harmony among all things, and recognise God in his image and in the beings which derive their origin from him?⁷

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa ch.1.

⁵ Maximus, 10.35–36.

⁶ John of Damascus, 1.3.

⁷ Τίς γὰρ νοῦν ἔχων καὶ ἰδὼν ἐμφανεῖς μὲν οὐσιῶν διαφορὰς τοσαύτας, ἀφανῶν τε δυνάμεων ἐναντιότητας καὶ ἀντιρρόπους κινήσεων ὁρμάς, ἔτι δὲ στάσιν τρόπον ἕτερον ἀντίρροπον, διαδοχὰς τε ἀνεκλείπτους ἐξ ἐναντιοπαθείας καὶ φιλίαν ἀσύγχυτον ἐξ ἀσυμβάτου νείκους, συνοχὰς τε τῶν διακεκριμένων καὶ ἀσυμμιξίας τῶν ἡνωμένων, νῶν, ψυχῶν, σωμάτων, τὴν διὰ τοσούτων ἁρμονίαν, τὰς μονίμους σχέσεις τε καὶ θέσεις, τὰς οὐσιωδεις ἑξεις τε καὶ τάξεις, τὸ ἀδιάλυτον τῆς συνοχῆς, τίς τὰ τοιαῦτα πάντα ἐπὶ νοῦν λαβὼν τὸν ἐν ἑαυτῇ ἕκαστον καλῶς ἰδρύσαντα καὶ πρὸς ἄλληλα θαυμασίως ἁρμοσάμενον οὐκ ἐννοήσειεν, ὥς ἀπ' εἰκόνος καὶ αἰτιατοῦ γινώσκειν τὸν Θεόν [13], *Triads* 2.3.44.

It was, I presume, an argument of this kind which he called in his letter to Akyndinos a method by which thinkers ascend (ἀναβαίνειν) from creation to the Creator:

For example, one can proceed from things which manifest goodness to goodness itself, and similarly with wisdom, providence, life, etc. In this manner one achieves a demonstration free from deceit (ἀφευδης ἀπόδειξις) that there exists one who is in all things and who is removed from and transcends all things, the many-named and unnameable super-essential essence ([13], vol 1, *First Letter to Gregory Akindynos*, p. 216).

As Sinkewicz comments,

there emerges from this letter a notion of demonstration quite distinct from that advocated by Barlaam and ultimately by Aristotle. It is a notion that seeks its justification not in the Greek philosophers but in the tradition of the Fathers ([15], p. 201).

Although Gregory hints that arguments to God may be *sui generis*, he and his predecessors are in fact giving an argument of a kind very familiar in science, history, and ordinary life, when we argue not—as concerned Aristotle—from cause to effect, but from effect to cause. Such arguments are not deductive, but (in a wide sense) inductive. They reach conclusions rendered probable by their premises, but not entailed by them.

Scientists argue from particular observations to some very wide theory which purports to explain the observations and also predicts much more; so the conclusion could be false even though the premises are true, but—if their inference satisfies certain criteria—the premises do make the conclusion probable. Neither Aristotle nor the medievals, East or West, had the slightest conception of the nature of inductive inference, and of the criteria which a cogent inductive inference needs to satisfy. My own account of these criteria is as follows.⁸ I suggest that an argument from observed phenomena *E* to an explanatory cause *H* is cogent (i.e. renders its conclusion that *H* is the cause probable) insofar as

⁸ I summarize here an account given fairly briefly in [19], ch 2, more fully in [17], chs 2 and 3, and yet more fully in [16], ch 4.

Scotus wrote some thirty years before Gregory's correspondence with Barlaam, but—as far as I know—there is no awareness of Scotus in the theological writings of Gregory Palamas. Gregory did however argue with Turks (as well as with Jews) during his captivity by the Turks. He resisted their suggestion that as they believe in his prophet, he ought to believe in theirs—on the ground that the Old Testament Scriptures which they also revered did not prophecy the advent of Mohammad, and that Mohammad's teaching, unlike that of Moses and Jesus, was not accompanied by miracles.¹⁶ So, he was in effect appealing to Scotus's first and eighth criteria; and he clearly did think that there are publicly available reasons in defence of at least some aspects of Christian doctrine.

Gregory thought however that only someone who had learnt to converse with God could discourse with any certainty about God. To do the latter one needs to study the Scriptures and apply them, above all by prayer. It was the experience through prayer of the Church, and especially of the monastic community, which provides full justification of Christian belief. He vigorously opposed the view which Barlaam seemed to be advocating that wise Greeks ([14], Ep 1 Bar 22. 237.9–13), meditating on the eternal Platonic ideas, had attained a similar knowledge.

And that brings me to the view for which Gregory is best known: that humans in this life can have personal detailed awareness of God, that is of God's energies, not his essence. Sometimes Gregory writes as though this vision is to some extent available to many Christians: 'This knowledge (γνῶσις) beyond reason is common (κοινή) to all who have believed in Christ' (*Triads* II. 36) Yet elsewhere he suggests that only some Christians can obtain the vision: 'Those who have obtained spiritual and supernatural grace ... becoming gods, in God they know God' (*Triads* II.iii. 68). But the fullness of this vision seems to be open only to monks, and indeed in writing to Balaam, Gregory denied that he himself had attained this vision; he had just smelled it from a distance

¹⁶ See the analysis of Palamas's own account of these controversies in [4], pp.104–18.

and not yet grasped it.¹⁷ But he adds that he has heard the testimony of fathers who have had this vision; the light of mount Tabor ‘shines even now in the hearts of the faithful and perfect’ (*Triads* II. iii. 18). Someone who ‘mysteriously possesses and sees this light ... knows and possesses God in himself, no longer by analogy,’ in contrast to one who ‘possesses knowledge of creatures and from this by means of analogy ... infers the existence of God’ (*Triads* II. iii. 16). And the light of contemplation differs even from the light that comes from the Holy Scriptures, whose light may be compared to ‘a lamp that shines in an obscure place;’ whereas the light of mystical contemplation is compared to the star of the morning which shines in full daylight, that is to say to the sun’ (*Triads* II.iii.18). Indeed this contemplation is not, ‘unless the term is employed in an improper and equivocal sense’ knowledge; but ‘superior to all knowledge’ (*Triads* II.iii.17). Although the way of impassibility is ‘most appropriate for those detached from the world’ (*Triads* II.ii. 20), those in the world must try to form themselves in accord with the divine commands, and that can change our ‘changeable disposition’ into a fixed and blessed state.

So in what sense is this contemplative vision ‘superior to knowledge?’ Since I have not myself had this ‘vision,’ and few others—according to Gregory—have had it in its fullness, I hesitate to try to make sense of the connection between this vision and knowledge proper, which—as he writes—must require ‘images and analogies’ (*Triads* I.iii.18). But there is a distinction very familiar to Anglo-American philosophers in a secular context between ‘knowledge that’ so-and-so, and knowing some person or thing, which may throw some light on what Gregory is saying. Gregory insists that the vision is available only to those who put Scripture into practice.¹⁸ The hesychasts who know God do read the Scriptures; whereas, he claims against Barlaam, pagan philosophers have not had any participation in a spiritual and divine

¹⁷ [14], Ep. 1. Bar. §10.230.6–11. Using the analogy of the vision to honey, Gregory writes that he is running towards the smell of honey but has not grasped it in his hands.

¹⁸ ‘Let us seek how to seek this glory and see it. How? By keeping the divine commandments’ (*Triads* II.iii.16).

light.¹⁹ Obviously, we can know a lot about someone, e.g. David Cameron, without knowing David Cameron personally. But I do not think we can know a person without knowing something about that person. I couldn't know David Cameron unless I could recognise him when I meet him; and that involves knowing something (indeed quite a lot) about him: that he looks like this, that I meet him often at a certain place, and that he thinks so-and-so. And plausibly the same goes for God. To know God, one has to know what one is looking for when one opens oneself to the spiritual world in prayer. Christian doctrine teaches one what God is like—for example loving (and the Scriptures tell us what God's love amounts to) and Trinitarian. That enables us to distinguish apparent awareness of other things (e.g. of oneness with nature, or of an evil demon) from awareness of God. It puts us in a position to recognise God, if he should show himself to us. And if one has practiced following the teaching of the Scriptures, one will be better aware of what God's commands mean; and perhaps also better suited to benefit from the vision of God, which otherwise might be overwhelming.

But why should we or even the monks themselves believe what Gregory says about this knowledge of God which the monks of Mount Athos believe that they have acquired? It is, I suggest, the most fundamental epistemic principle of all, which I call the Principle of Credulity, that it is rational to believe that things are as they seem to us to be—in the absence of counter-evidence (that is evidence suggesting that we are subject to an illusion.) If you believe that you are seeing an elephant in an English garden, you should believe that you are—in the absence of counter-evidence. In this case of course there will normally be some counter-evidence—other people tell you that elephants in England are always to be found in zoos or circuses. But nevertheless if things seem very strongly to be a certain way, it is rational to believe that things are that way, despite a significant amount of counter-evidence. If not merely do you seem to see the elephant, but see it from

¹⁹ 'The light that shines even now in the hearts of the faithful and perfect... has nothing to do with that which comes from Hellenic studies, which is not worthy to be called light' (*Triads* II.iii.18).

many angles, touch it and hear it, that experience will outweigh the contrary testimony; and it is then rational to believe that you are indeed seeing an elephant. So if you yourself are having overwhelming experiences apparently of God of the kind which Palamas describes, it is rational to believe that your experiences are veridical, whatever the counter-evidence, whatever the doubts expressed by others.

It is also a fundamental epistemic principle, the Principle of Memory, that it is rational to believe that we had the past experiences we seem to recall—in the absence of counter-evidence (for example evidence that the thing recalled is very unlikely to have happened). And it is a third fundamental epistemic principle, the Principle of Testimony, that we should believe what other people tell us about their experiences—in the absence of counter-evidence (for example evidence that they are unreliable witnesses). And whenever there is counter-evidence which is strong enough to show that it is not rational to believe some apparent experience, memory, or testimony, the force of that counter-evidence can itself be defeated by counter-counter-evidence in the form of evidence showing that the counter-evidence was unreliable or additional evidence in favour of the truth of the original claim. In the elephant example, counter-counter-evidence to the belief that you are seeing an elephant might be provided by reading in the newspaper that an elephant has escaped from a local zoo, which would make it again rational to believe that you are seeing an elephant in an English garden, despite the counter-evidence that people tell you that in England elephants are always to be found in zoos or circuses.

People write books and articles for which they feel there is a need. And Gregory rightly did not think that there was a great need either for natural theology or for an impartial justification of Christian doctrine among the fourteenth century Greeks to whom he ministered. And so it is understandable that he did not write much about these first two routes to knowledge of God. We however in twenty first century Europe are surrounded by people who need these things, and I have been justifying the view that Gregory would have been sympathetic to the approach to them to which I have devoted most of this paper and which I have been commending. But Gregory did of course think that there was a great

need in the fourteenth century for the direct awareness of God which comes through prayer; and who could doubt that the same applies today?

Acknowledgement

This paper will be published in the Volume of Proceedings from the International Conference on St Gregory Palamas, edited by Dr. C. Athanasopoulos; and is published in this volume by kind permission of Dr. Athanasopoulos.

References

[1] Aquinas, St. Thomas, 1955, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, translated by Anton C. Pegis, as *On The Truth of the Catholic Faith*, Doubleday, New York.

[2] Aquinas, St. Thomas, 1964, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. and trans. T. Gilby and others, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London.

[3] Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*.

[4] Arnakis, G. Georgiadis, 1951, 'Gregory Palamas among the Turks', *Speculum*, 26.

[5] Athanasius, St., *Against the Heathens*, 1978, translated in *A Select Library of Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A Robertson, vol. 4, *Athanasius*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.

[6] Basil of Caesarea, St. *Epistle 234*

[7] Davidson. Herbert A., 1987, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation, and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[8] Dionysius, Pseudo-, *Complete Works*, 1987, tr. C. Liubheid, Paulist Press, New York.

[9] Duns Scotus, *Complete Works*, 1950, vol 1 *Ordinatio*, Typis Vaticanis, Vatican City.

[10] Gregory of Nyssa, St., *On the Soul and the Ressurrection*.

[11] John of Damascus, St. *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*.

[12] Maximus, St., *Difficulties*.

[13] Palamas, Gregory St., 1962–, (ed.) P. Chrestou, *Gregory Palamas*, 3 vols, Thessalonica.

[14] Palamas, Gregory St, 1983, (ed.) J. Meyendorff and (tr.) N. Gendle, *The Triads*, Paulist Press, New York.

[15] Sinkewicz, Robert E., 1982, 'The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God in the early writings of Barlaam the Calabrian' *Medieval Studies*, vol.44, pp.181–242.

[16] Swinburne, Richard, 2001, *Epistemic Justification*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[17] Swinburne, Richard, 2004, *The Existence of God*, second edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[18] Swinburne, Richard, 2007, *Revelation*, second edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[19] Swinburne, Richard, 2010, *Is There a God?*, revised edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford.