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Tim Anderson
Bethel University

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Recommended Citation

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ON A KNIFE'S EDGE:
IMAGINATION AND *ἐπίνοια* IN THE EUNOMIAN CONTROVERSY

Tim Anderson

Introduction

According to Paul Avis, the imagination has gone through the ringer in both modernity and post modernity. Modernity “assumes a dichotomy between rational discourse, on the one hand, and imagistic thinking, on the other. It privileges *logos* over against *eidōs*. The former is hailed as the vehicle of knowledge, mastery and progress; the latter dismissed as the source of ignorance, superstition and illusion.”¹ Post modernity, on the other hand, has attacked narrative and “An attack on narrative is an attack on metaphor, symbol and myth...Post modernity is clearly as inhospitable to a realist (reality-referring, truth-bearing) concept of imaginative truth as is the modernity deriving from the Enlightenment.”² In other words, the imagination has been largely devalued as a cognitive device. Throughout my life, I have felt most prevalently the modern attitude toward the imagination. It has seemed to me that conceptions of the imagination have stopped short of all that the imagination is truly capable of. Authors such as Paul Avis have helped me to begin to articulate what those capabilities are. My interest in the imagination has prompted many further questions particularly in the realm of epistemology. And it is these questions that have lead to this paper, and to considering the Eunomian controversy. It is my belief that the imagination and epistemology are deeply tied together and the Eunomian controversy will allow for an exploration of the way in which the two are connected.

Within the Trinitarian debates of the 4th century, perhaps one of the most hotly contested topics was epistemology, and more specifically theological epistemology. How can a theologian know God? How much of God can the theologian know? What aspects of God can be known? Can God’s essence be known by humanity? What does the process of knowing God look like? No-where were these questions more central than in the debate between the Cappadocian Fathers

¹ Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 199), 22.

² *Ibid.*, 28.

and Eunomius of Cyzicus that occurred from 361-383 known as the Eunomian Controversy. The debate centered on the understanding of the term *epinoia* and what power, if any, *epinoetic* thinking had to say something about God. In this paper, I will argue that *epinoia* or *epinoetic* thinking can be understood as the imagination or as imaginative thinking. Furthermore, the main case which will be made in this paper is that the Cappadocian Fathers based on their understanding of creation, believe the imagination (*epinoia*) is the greatest tool of the human intellect and the best and only way for human beings to speak positively of God.

In order to show this to be the case, we will begin by examining the term *epinoia*. We will consider the history of the use of the word, the implications of those uses for the meaning of the term, and the connection of *epinoia* with the imagination. Then, we will briefly place the Eunomian controversy in its context by discussing the Council of Nicaea and the events which ensued. It is from this discussion where we can launch into the use of *epinoia* by Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Cappadocian Fathers. Having analyzed the understanding of the term which both sides held, we will conclude with some thoughts regarding the Cappadocians conception of *epinoia* and the imagination for today.

Epinoia: A History

The word *epinoia* is translated into English as the word conception, or conceptualization, yet like most words, there is more to understanding the term than simply translating it. The use of *epinoia* has its origins in Neo-Aristotelian thought; the term gained popularity in commentaries made on Aristotle's thought.³ In this context, an *epinoia* was that which captured the mental existence of an object. It was cultivation of a mental image of an object into a mental abstraction of that object. Demetracopoulos emphasizes that *epinoetic* thinking does not just

³ Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence II: The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986) 151-152.

break down into mental abstractions that which is observed, but also takes into account the temporal aspect of *epinoia*. As being located in time, epinoetic thinking determines the past, present and future aspects of a thing perceived.⁴ Thus it is a cognitive, epistemological moment after the initial perception of an object that refines an object into aspects as they exist in time. Mortley speaks of the term as, “a neo-Aristotelian technical term, and it means thinking about things in the abstract, as a response to the fact of things (a response which is inevitably subsequent to the existence of things). It is an after-thought, as opposed to a prior notion.”⁵ According to Vaggione, *epinoia* spoke of something that did not exist in the concrete sense, so it was not fully real.⁶ That is not to say it was completely and utterly fictitious, but that it had an immaterial, inside the mind existence that was less real than something concrete and actual.⁷

Finally, the process of epinoetic thinking or *epinoia* is necessarily tied up with the concept of naming, especially in the category of theology. Conceptualizations result in the use of language to speak of something. *Epinoetic* thinking is the process of conceptualizing something and an *epinoia* is the result of that conceptualizing. The *epinoia* which is the product of the human mind results in speaking that product. The product which is spoken is the name given to an object. For example, if we are to say that Christ is the vine, vine would be the *epinoia*. Vine is also a name of Christ, but it began with conceptualizing. The name necessarily started with *epinoetic* thinking and then moved to be something stated. Hence, Eunomius makes a distinction between calling the Father unbegotten “in name alone,” and in speaking of it as His essence. The *epinoia* is the name of that object which was perceived and then conceptualized.

⁴ John A. Demetracopoulos, “Glossogony or Epistemology? Eunomius of Cyzicus’ and Basil of Caesarea’s Stoic Concept of Epinoia and its Misrepresentation by Gregory of Nyssa,” *Contra Eunomium II: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Lenka Karfikova, Scot Douglass, and Johannes Zachuber (Boston: Brill, 2007), 390.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶ Richard Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and The Nicene Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 241-242.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 242.

Theologian's Use of *Epinoia*

Origen is one of the first theologians documented using the term and his use seems to support both Vaggione and Mortley's analysis of its historical uses and origins. Origen (185-254 CE) used the term *epinoia* in order to speak of the multitude of descriptions for Christ in the Bible, such as "door," "way," etc.⁸ Along with that, he also used the term to condemn those who believed and spoke of the distinction between Father and Son as existing only epinoetically.⁹ The use in the *Commentary on John* especially exemplifies the understanding that *epinoia* only exist secondarily as opposed to concretely. Ayres also cites Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE) as a theologian who used the term to define divine knowing.¹⁰ Perhaps the most relevant use of *epinoia* prior to the Eunomian controversy was in the epistemology of Basil of Ancyra (362 CE), the great Homoiousian theologian. Basil holds that concepts (ἐννοιαί or *epinoiai*) are the realm in which we know God. For Basil, correct concepts are formed when we grasp these concepts apart from any material, corporeal or temporal undertones.¹¹ Basil advocates a type of knowing which uses *epinoia* in order to indirectly describe the generation of the Son from the Father. Given *epinoia*'s placement as secondarily real, he does not have far to go from his epistemology to form his belief that the best way to describe the Son's essence is that it is like essence (*homoiousios*), a term that is by nature ambiguous. *Homoiousios* seems to be this middle ground which leaves some room for interpretation as to the way in which the Son is similar to the Father. *Epinoia* is the key; it gives Basil a way to speak in a way that is less real than a concrete physical reality.

⁸ Ibid., 243.

⁹ Origen, *Commentary on John*, 10.37. 246.

¹⁰ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 193.

¹¹ Ibid., 151.

Epinoia as “Fiction” and “Science”

In terms of its etymology, the word is fairly straightforward. *Epinoia* is that which follows the first perception of an object, which would be known as *noesis*.¹² It is the conceptual thinking done after the fact of an initial intuition or perception of an object. The abstractions or conceptions formed by the process of thinking epinoetically were still considered real, yet on a secondary sense to that which is concrete. It was used by theologians and philosophers alike prior to Eunomius in such a fashion. The term is problematic by nature. As a mode of thought which is after the fact, it can produce what Mortley refers to a “fiction.”¹³ That is, it is not the object itself, there is space or distance between the actual moment of perception and the abstraction created. At the same moment, *epinoia* can rightly be considered what Mortley calls “science.”¹⁴ That is despite its potential for creating fiction, conceptualization after the fact does have some positive epistemological power. Something can be known by way of epinoetic thinking. It is secondarily real, but it is real nonetheless. It has productive power, yet its product is always distanced from the object which it seeks to know. E.C.E. Owen’s definition of *epinoia* is a good summation of what we have considered to be the meaning of the term thus far.

Conception is the method by which we discover things that are unknown, going on to further discoveries by means of what adjoins to and follows from our first perception. For when we have formed some idea of what we seek to know, harmonising what follows to the first result of our discoveries, we gradually conduct our inquiry to the end of our proposed research.¹⁵

This definition highlights the in between nature of conception, as well as its ability to incorporate and synthesize all it is that we know. In this way, *epinoia* is resting on a knife’s edge, always

¹² Mikhail G. Neamțu, “Language and Theology in St. Gregory of Nyssa” (master’s these, Durham University, 2002), 91.

¹³ Mortley, *From Word*, 153.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁵ E.C.E. Owen, “Epinoeo, Epinoia and Allied Words,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, 35 (1934): 373.

threatening to fall into the realm of fiction at any time; to remain in the realm of reality (or “science”) is what is at stake.

Epinoia and the Imagination

The imagination is not a concept that is easily defined either. It is perhaps most commonly thought of as a tool which produces fiction alone. It has connotations of poetry, the theatre and fantasy fiction novels. Yet it is undoubtedly more than these things. The expanse of its power stretches far wider than producing beautiful prose or great stories. Kevin Vanhoozer’s definition provides an excellent starting point for the discussion. The definition gives a satisfying explanation of what it is the imagination does in the process of knowing. From there, we can begin to draw the connection between the imagination and the concept of *epinoia*.

Vanhoozer defines the imagination as, “that cognitive faculty that allows us to see as a whole what those who lack imagination see only as unrelated parts.”¹⁶ The imagination is thus the great synthesizer of information. It is that which sees and forms connections between concepts. In that sense, it functions within creation, in the “vortex of possibilities.”¹⁷ It can conceive of things past and present. Rather than being simply a creator of images, which results in simple reproduction or complete fiction, the imagination has the capacity to produce something real. It has a power to produce and conceive of more than what is immediately perceived. The imagination is massively important in arriving at correct knowledge of the world, for, “perception is paradoxical: in our knowledge of the physical world, we are receptive but not passive, constructive but not inventive.”¹⁸ When we perceive objects all the time with our senses, our imagination is constantly making connections, and also constructing or producing

¹⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 281.

¹⁷ Scot Douglass, “Gregory of Nyssa and Theological Imagination,” *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Lenka Karfikova, Scot Douglass, and Johannes Zachuber (Boston: Brill, 2007), 461.

¹⁸ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 32.

connections to come to a greater understanding of the world. The imagination is thus vital for life and an immense gift which we have received.

The connections between *epinoia* and the imagination begin with their location in the middle of perception and production, or between receiving and construction. They work after the fact, and thus have distance from the event or object about which they are conceiving and making connections. Both terms have the ability to produce fiction or science, that is, there is an ethical element to the imagination and to *epinoia*.¹⁹ That is to say, there is an element of danger in using *epinoia* or the imagination because both walk the line between fiction and science. We are required to think wisely about what we say when using this faculty because of the potential that exists in uttering falsities; this danger will be elaborated on more by the Cappadocian Fathers later. Along with that and most importantly, the two terms result in the creation of metaphor. They use the vortex of possibilities in which they are enmeshed in order to understand that which is perceived. As the faculty which conceptualizes, the imagination requires the use of previously lived experiences, previously perceived objects in order to understand further that which is perceived. This is where the metaphor is created. Conceptualization always results in relating one thing to another. Imagination and *epinoia* share this process.

Epinoia makes mental abstractions after the fact and then speaks them in language. Imagination does the same thing. Thus *epinoia* can be understood as a type of intelligent imagination. Referring back to the definition given by Vanhoozer, *epinoia* and thus the imagination are that fundamental human cognitive tool, for above all else they allow us to function in the world in which we live, they allow for some organization of the vast and seemingly infinite number of possibilities.

¹⁹ Douglass, "Gregory of Nyssa," 461.

Historical Background of the Eunomian Controversy

The Cappadocian Fathers are made up of three men from the region of Cappadocia in Eastern Asia Minor. Basil of Caesarea (329/330-379 CE) is the eldest of the trio and is the older brother of Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389/390 CE) is the second oldest of the three. He and Basil of Caesarea became great friends while growing up attending school together and remained friends until Basil's death. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395 CE) is the youngest and is the younger brother of Basil of Caesarea. All three men are historically located in the time between two major Councils, the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and the Council of Constantinople (381 CE). Eunomius of Cyzicus (333-393 CE) lived during the same time period. Theologians were very busy in the fourth century, and there is an inexhaustible fount of theology which can be examined from this time period. We will briefly track the major theological arguments being made for the nature of God running throughout the debates in order to arrive at Eunomius' entrance onto the scene.

The Trinitarian debates at their core were about the nature of God; theologians had questions regarding how Jesus Christ related to God the Father. Most simply put, if God is one, how can we also say that Jesus Christ is God? When the debates began with Arius of Alexandria (260-336 CE) and Alexander of Alexandria (d. 328 CE) in 318 CE there were at least four distinct ways of answering that question. Lewis Ayres calls these four ways of answering that question the four "trajectories."²⁰ These four trajectories will be vital in tracking the theological themes of the Trinitarian debates as Eunomius of Cyzicus will emerge from one of these four trajectories later in the debates.

²⁰ Lewis Ayres identifies four themes present and latent before the Arian Controversy which began in 318 CE. He calls these themes trajectories because of the way we can track them throughout the Trinitarian debates. As a result, we will use the same language, borrowing from his work. For further discussion of these trajectories see, Ayres, *Nicaea*, 31-76.

The Four Trajectories

The first of Ayres' trajectories is the party of Alexander, Athanasius and their supporters. Ayres places this trajectory within the trend of theology that emphasizes the Son's likeness to the Father as opposed to emphasizing the difference between the two.²¹ The Son is begotten in a way that is natural to the Father, and thus they share a nature in some way. While this trajectory shares much in common with what will be known as Nicene, the Alexandrians do not use much *ousia* language and the idea of three members of the Trinity as distinct, individual *hypostases* is noticeably absent from their thought.

The second trajectory identified is the Eusebian trajectory or the trajectory of the "One Unbegotten." This is the trajectory in which Arius would fall along with Eusebius of Nicomedia (d. 341 CE), Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339/40 CE) and Asterius (d. 341 CE), notably. This is the trajectory in the most direct contrast to the Alexandrian position. For these theologians, the Son is not begotten naturally of the Father, but by his will. This faction does not hesitate to use *hypostasis* language and Arius' in particular speaks of the Father and Son as being two distinct, individual and hierarchical *hypostases*.²² It is important to note that while this party would later be labeled Arian by Athanasius of Alexandria (303-373 CE), a more fair assessment would be that they are not Arian by definition, but that their theology allowed for the rise of an Arian position in Arius.

The third trajectory is called the Marcellan or the "Undivided Monad" trajectory. As the name betrays, this trajectory sought to ensure that the unity of God was upheld. Thus, *hypostasis* language was used only to declare the unity of God. Eustathius of Antioch (c. 300 CE) and Marcellus of Ancyra (d. 374 CE) would declare that God is only one, unified *hypostasis*. The

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²² R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 10.

Son is described mostly as the Word, or reason of God. As a result, he is also eternally present with the Father as an individual's reason is always with him or her. This trajectory differs from the Alexandrian position in that Marcellus is not comfortable with talk of generation when speaking of the Son, which would breach the unity of God.²³

The final trajectory which Ayres identifies is the only trajectory which comes distinctly from the Western half of the Roman Empire. It is known as the "Anti-adoptionism" trajectory. This party of theologians seems most interested in affirming and upholding the divinity of Jesus, as opposed to the use of Jesus by the divine power to work salvation.²⁴ Novation and Lactantius are cited as major proponents of this trajectory, having inherited terminology from Tertullian.

These four trajectories were awoken by the conflict between Arius and Alexander which was sparked by the preaching of Arius (part of the Eusebian trajectory), a presbyter in Alexander's (part of the Alexandrian trajectory) see regarding the nature of Christ. While Alexander believed the Son to be equal to the Father, Arius taught a radical subordination of the Son to the Father.²⁵ What incited such outrage from Alexander was Arius' spreading of the idea that there was a time when the Son did not exist.²⁶ This radical subordination and creaturely status given to Jesus Christ is what defines the Arian position. The Council of Nicaea was called in direct response to the debate between Arius and Alexander. We can see the Creed which was produced at Nicaea as a stimulus, awakening the two other trajectories who believed they could answer the question of God's nature. Nicaea became the official statement of the Church but was first and foremost a response to the Arian controversy directly,²⁷ as a result two schools of

²³ Ayres, *Nicaea*, 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁵ Arius, "Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia" in Theodoret, Gennadius, Rufinus, Jerome, Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, and Jerome, *Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, Rufinus: Historical Writings, Etc.* Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1969.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Hanson, *The Search*, 153.

thought were necessarily cut out of the decision making process. The result was more debate with all four schools of thought now involved. The years following Nicaea became a battleground regarding the Trinity characterized by the use of polemical writing and political undercutting.²⁸

Most important for our discussion however is the defeat of the Arian position. Arius appears to have been an isolated figure theologically.²⁹ He had contact with Eusebius and Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea, especially following the banishment from Alexandria. While the Eusebian trajectory was certainly closer theologically to Arius, they ultimately do not go as far as he does in the subordination of Christ to the Father. Therefore, despite the polemics of Athanasius, which labeled the Eusebian trajectory as Arian,³⁰ the radical Arian position was ended at Nicaea. Such a radical position would not resurface and gain the sort of attention Arius received until the late 350s CE. It is to this position that we now turn.

The Homian and Heterousian Positions

In the late 350s, two positions emerged which have come to be labeled as Neo-Arian.³¹ While the name is up for debate,³² the two undoubtedly are the return of something as radical as the Arian position as articulated by Arius himself. The two positions can be called Homian and Heterousian.

The first party to emerge clearly was the Homoian party. Their coming out party was the second Sirmium Council held in 357.³³ The first Sirmium Council in 351 could perhaps be the

²⁸ For more on the history of the years following Nicaea, see Hanson, *The Search*; Ayres, *Nicaea*.

²⁹ Hanson, *The Search*, 123-128.

³⁰ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of the Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 20.

³¹ Graham A. Keith, "Our Knowledge of God: the Relevance of the Debate Between Eunomius and the Cappadocians," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 1: 60.

³² Some authors would like these positions to be labeled as Anomean. Either way, the point stands that these two hold something along the lines of a subordination of the son which is like that of Arianism.

³³ Ayres, *Nicaea*, 138.

very roots of the party's emergence, but the product of the second Sirmium Council holds the incontrovertible evidence of its debut. The creed produced by this council avoids *ousia* language which provides a good starting point for discussing the theology of the Homoian party. The center around which Homoian theology turns is the incomparability of God the Father.³⁴ The Father in Homoian theology is above the Son and Spirit and thus the two cannot share an essence. The Homoians stress little to no commonality between the Father and Son.³⁵ The Sirmium creed and thus the Homoian party is characterized as Arian because of the drastic subordination of the Son. The lack of commonality between the Son and the Father, the incomparability of the Father and the lack of biblical usage of the term lead to the Homoian condemnation of the *ousia*. The leading figures of the Homoian party can be identified as Eudoxius of Antioch (d. 370 CE) and Akakius (also, Acacius) of Caesarea (d. 366 CE).

The second party to emerge was the Heterousian party. The Heterousian party can be considered a more radical offshoot of the Homoian party with a few major differences. In fact, the Heterousian party originated within the Homoian party. Eudoxius of Antioch promoted and hosted Aetius of Antioch (d. 366 CE), the main proponent of this party's ideas, making him a presbyter in his church.³⁶ It should also be noted, this is the party to which Eunomius belonged. We will simply place him here for now, and return to a greater focus on his particular theology following the conclusion of the historical background. Unlike the Homoians, Heterousians were unabashed in their use of the term *ousia* and supported the use of the term as a way to explain the ontological and essential difference between the Father and the Son.³⁷ And in classical Arian

³⁴ Hanson, *The Search*, 563.

³⁵ Ayres, *Nicaea*, 138.

³⁶ Hanson, *The Search*, 583.

³⁷ Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 21.

terminology, they also would have held to the three *hypostases* of the Father, Son and Spirit. As a result, Heterousians held to a much more radical form of subordinationism than the Homoians.

The most identifiable characteristic of the Heterousian party is their conception of the term *agennetos* (translated unbegotten) as the essence of God. This was the lynchpin in their radically Arian theology. Aetius and Eunomius claimed every creature had access to God's essence, and his essence was unbegotten.³⁸ Such a claim made the Son, one who was begotten, a categorically different and separate from God's essence. Therefore the most vital point in the Heterousian position is that God is fundamentally and essentially unbegotten.

The Council of Seleucia (359-360 CE) along with the politics of the church brought these two parties to the forefront of the debate.³⁹ The Council of Seleucia, called by the Emperor Constantius was largely a failed attempt at organic unity. However, Akakius of Caesarea, along with Constantius made sure that unity would be achieved inorganically. Together, they crafted a creed known as the Creed of Nice (also, Niké) and forced those involved in the Council to sign it. The results of the Creed of Nice bring us to Eunomius' entrance into the story. Following Nice, a council was held in Constantinople which was supervised by Akakius of Caesarea.⁴⁰ The council was essentially the Homoian victory celebration, in which everyone who was against the party was punished. Basil of Ancyra was deposed and banished along with his allies and supporters while Eudoxius was made bishop of Constantinople. Aetius was banished as well, for his outspoken use of *ousia* language and possibly as an outgoing request of Eustathius of Antioch. Yet, Aetius' disciple Eunomius was not banished at the council. Instead he was made bishop of Cyzicus within a year of the council being adjourned. It is likely that Eunomius gave his *Apologia* as a defense of his position. The *Apologia* may have been at least partially

³⁸ Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 21.

³⁹ Hanson, *The Search*, 362.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 380.

responsible for his ordination.⁴¹ Whether or not it was given at Constantinople in 360, the *Apologia* was likely published in 361 or 362.

Thus, we have arrived at Eunomius, a member of the newest expression of radical Arianism. He has been placed as bishop over the see at Cyzicus, and is now free to disperse and teach his ideas on the nature of God. His thoughts come down the long line of thought in the fourth-century regarding the questions of God's nature. Therefore, we conclude our historical background section and move into Eunomius' theology and attempt to explain how he understood the relation of the Son to the Father.

Eunomius' Theology

Eunomius' theology is essentially an articulation of the previously discussed Heterousian theology. A few quotes from his *Apologia* will be considered now in order to explicate Eunomius' theology in more detail. While discussing the quotes, it will be vital to keep in mind two things. First his epistemology and second, the major thrust of Eunomius' theology. First, Eunomius believes that it is possible for human beings to know something's essence, including God.⁴² Second, Eunomius believes that God's essence is known in the word *agennetos* (unbegotten/ingenerate). That is the centerpiece of his theology. The unbegottenness of God is the presupposition that holds together his theory of knowledge, and his understanding of God. It is what he holds to most tightly. The first quote articulates Eunomius' conception of what it means to be unbegotten:

Therefore it is in accordance with both the natural notion and the teaching of the fathers that we have confessed that God is one and that he did not come into existence either from himself or from another. Each of these alternatives, you see, is equally impossible, since according to truth the maker must pre-exist what comes into existence, and what is made must be secondary to the maker. A thing cannot be prior or posterior to itself, and

⁴¹ Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 226-227.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 630.

no other thing can be prior to God. If there were such a thing, it, rather than the second, would surely have the dignity of divinity.⁴³

Eunomius explanation of why God is unbegotten is grounded in his pre-existence. God not only pre-exists all things, but also his own being. This argument appeals to “truth” which seems to be something like logical argument. If there is a something which caused the creation of God, that something would have the “dignity of divinity” rather than the Father. God’s essence according to Eunomius lies here in his unbegottenness. Eunomius must clarify that God does indeed pre-exist his own being in order to be able to say the Son did not exist before himself. He was formed at this begetting.⁴⁴ That is, Christ was created; he did not exist before the Father created him. He is begotten and because he was caused by something which pre-existed himself, the Son cannot be God. Therefore, Christ is fundamentally and ontologically different than the Father.

Thus he is able to say with confidence:

But if God is unbegotten as in the preceding demonstration, he could never admit a begetting which would result in his giving a share of his own proper nature to the one who is begotten, and he would escape all comparison or fellowship with the one who is begotten.⁴⁵

In this quote, one can see Eunomius’ clear distinction of the unbegotten nature of the Father and what that means for the Son. Not only can the Father and Son share nothing in essence, but they are totally unequal to the point of the Son being excluded from any conversation regarding the Father.

Less central in the quote is the concept of the divine simplicity. Eunomius does not believe that God has any composition within him. God does not bestow a share of himself or his

⁴³ Eunomius, *Apologia*, 7.1-7 as translated by Vaggione in Richard Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 40.

⁴⁴ Eunomius, *Apologia*, 12.10-12, in Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works*, 48.

⁴⁵ Eunomius, *Apologia*, 9.1-3 in Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works*, 42.

nature because he does not have composition, which would imply conflict within God.⁴⁶ Divine simplicity is one of the reasons Origen employed the term *epinoia* to speak of the names of Christ. It kept Christ from becoming composite. Origen could then affirm the reality of Christ's names in the Bible and also maintain the simplicity of God. This further supports Eunomius' argument. Not only does the Son's essence as begotten preclude any commonality with the Father, but the Father's essence precludes any begetting happening in it.⁴⁷ Thus Christ in no way can share in essence with the Father.

Eunomius' Understanding of *Epinoia*

That is Eunomius' doctrine of God. Having established that, we can now begin to discuss the role of *epinoia* in his expression of the Trinity. The term is not used by Eunomius at great length. In fact, the term only has a negative role in Eunomius' theology, that is, Eunomius uses *epinoia* to say what he does not mean. Here is the quote which we will focus on as the epicenter of Eunomius' usage and conception of the term *epinoia*:

When we say 'unbegotten,' we do not intend to honor God in name alone by human conceptualization (*epinoia*); rather, we intend to repay him the most necessary debt of all, namely, confessing that he is what he is. Things said by way of conceptualization (*epinoia*), you see, have an existence in name alone and when they are being pronounced, and by nature, are dissolved together with the sounds used to say them.⁴⁸

Including the passage quoted above, Eunomius only uses the term *epinoia* three times in the *Apologia* and never defines it explicitly. To understand Eunomius' thoughts on epinoetic thinking and the imagination, we will begin with the above quote and make some general observations. Following that, we will consider the backdrop to Eunomius' understanding: his theology of names. As stated earlier, names are necessarily tied up in *epinoia* and thus,

⁴⁶ Christopher Stead, "Divine Simplicity as a Problem for Orthodoxy," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honor of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 256.

⁴⁷ Eunomius, *Apologia*, 15.3-7, in Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works*, 50-52.

⁴⁸ Eunomius, *Apologia*, 8.1-5 in Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works*, 40-42.

understanding how Eunomius conceives of the reality of names will allow us to precisely point to the role of epinoetic thinking in his doctrine of God. So to begin, we will again quote

Eunomius in the *Apologia*:

When we say ‘unbegotten,’ we do not intend to honor God in name alone by human conceptualization (*epinoia*); rather, we intend to repay him the most necessary debt of all, namely, confessing that he is what he is. Things said by way of conceptualization (*epinoia*), you see, have an existence in name alone and when they are being pronounced, and by nature, are dissolved together with the sounds used to say them.⁴⁹

Eunomius is unmistakably critiquing the power or ability of imagination to speak constructively of God. He is very careful to say the way in which he is speaking of God is not in human conceptualizations. The most obvious critique present in this passage is of the correspondence of human conceptualizations to reality. Eunomius believes human conceptualizations can only produce that which is false. Human conceptualizations are seen as vain grasping that miss the true way of knowing. As discussed above, the ability of epinoetic thinking to produce “fiction” is expressed and emphasized by Eunomius. The only truly valuable way of knowing God is in knowing his essence.

In discussing Eunomius’ conception of the term *epinoia*, Vaggione writes that for Eunomius if, “we say that there is a word which applies uniquely to God (‘Unbegotten,’ say, or ‘Only true God’), but we also say that this word is an *epinoia* (a product of only human thought), we are in effect saying that ‘God’ is an idea we construct, rather than a reality we apprehend.”⁵⁰ If Eunomius did indeed first give his *Apologia* at the Council of Constantinople in 361, this would have been a wise maneuver, as this seems to be critiquing the Marcellan, or *Homoousian* position. He would have truly distinguished between the Father and Son in more than just mode. As a result of the Homian victory at Seleucia, the Marcellan position which named God as only

⁴⁹ Eunomius, *Apologia*, 8.1-5 in Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works*, 40-42.

⁵⁰ Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 246.

having one *hypostases* resulted in deposition and exile. By emphasizing the *real* and *factual* distinction of the persons of the Trinity, Eunomius would have been avoiding the Marcellan position. Perhaps this is part of what got him appointed bishop of Cyzicus.

Eunomius' Theory of Names

We have now laid out Eunomius' critique of *epinoia* and thus, the imagination, but behind the critique sits a framework of naming which will further elucidate the role *epinoia* plays in Eunomius' theology. Eunomius believes in a simple straight line from the doctrine of divine simplicity to the definition of God's essence.⁵¹ This comes in the form of a name of God, unbegotten. According to Eunomius, names have been in existence prior to man being in existence and they communicate essence.⁵² The names are given by God.⁵³ Thus, the type of name which Eunomius is speaking of when he speaks the name "unbegotten" refers to God's essence directly. In addition Eunomius is communicating that "unbegotten" was the given name for God in the cosmos prior to the creation of humanity. God is who he is, unbegotten is the expression of that.

By distinction, *epinoia* are after-thoughts. They are that type of name which are not given directly by God, but are invented by humankind. In such case, conceptualizations do not apply to God's essence and are seen by Eunomius as inferior to that type of knowing which is given by God through names prior to the creation of humanity. In that sense, Eunomius can be seen as attempting to construct an objective theory of language. However, rather than the arrogant, self-assuming theologian who claims complete and utter knowledge of God as painted by the polemical writings of the Cappadocians, a more accurate picture of Eunomius may be of a man

⁵¹ Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 159.

⁵² Mortley, *From Word*, 154.

⁵³ Hanson, *The Search*, 630.

searching for some non-symbolic way of knowing God.⁵⁴ He did not deny conceptualizations all together but relegated them to a lesser place. He wanted to safeguard against the idea that God could be a human invention if conceptualization is the only way of speaking of him.⁵⁵

I believe this to be a fairer characterization of Eunomius. His estimation of the imagination is not so completely disparaging and withering so as to conjoin him with those who would do away with the imagination (such as those today who understand it to be nothing but idle fancy). For, while he speaks harshly of *epinoia* in the above polemic, by all accounts, he still had a place for *epinoia* in his epistemology. Yet, when talking about God, he wanted to affirm that there exists at least one way to know God that is not symbolic by nature.⁵⁶ Therefore, we can speak of Eunomius' conception of the imagination and its role in theology as secondary to the type of knowing he would define as certain. That is, the knowledge given directly from God in the names assigned to his various creations is seen as the strongest and most useful tool of the theologian as opposed to human and thus created conceptions. His position can be summed up as follows: some concepts strike directly at an object's essence and are uncreated and given by God, while other concepts are created by mankind and have no power to say anything of an object's essence.

The Cappadocian Fathers

Having finished analyzing Eunomius' ideas regarding the imagination and the term *epinoia* and its use in theology, we can now move to the other side of the debate. Basil of Caesarea, his friend Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil's brother Gregory of Nyssa comprise the group known as the Cappadocian Fathers. Before moving to discuss their use of *epinoia* in

⁵⁴ Maurice Wiles, "Eunomius: Hair-splitting Dialectician or Defender of the Accessibility of Salvation?" *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honor of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 163-164.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵⁶ Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 278.

theology, we will briefly give the background of each man, placing them in the context of the history previously discussed in this paper. All three men were from the region of Cappadocia. Basil was the elder brother of Gregory of Nyssa. He studied rhetoric along with Gregory of Nazianzus and that was largely the focus of his younger life. However, as he grew, he took an interest in asceticism which brought him into contact with Eustathius of Sebaste and Basil of Ancyra. It is believed Basil of Caesarea attended the council of Constantinople in 361 where he encountered the arguments of the Heterousians as well as the Homoians.⁵⁷ His associations would place him in the Homoiousian party and it is likely that is where he resided until becoming pro-Nicene and even supporting the term *homousios*.⁵⁸

Gregory of Nyssa was the younger brother of Basil of Caesarea. It is likely that he was a good deal younger than Basil given the manner in which he spoke of him and the fact that he seems to have studied under Basil when he was teaching rhetoric.⁵⁹ Gregory became bishop of Nyssa in 372. As far as his role in the larger Nicene event, Gregory obviously was a player much later in the game, but he became a theologian who was in favor of the language and would later affirm Nicaea at the Council of Constantinople. It is likely that he joined the debate with Eunomius by writing *Contra Eunomium* in 380 or 381 in response to Eunomius' *Apologia Apologiae*.⁶⁰

The third father was Gregory of Nazianzus. As stated earlier, he was good friends with Basil of Caesarea and the two studied together as they grew up. Gregory's father was bishop of Nazianzus. Gregory never seems to have been interested in ecclesial matters, but under the pressure of Basil, he became bishop of Sasima in 372. He would also serve as bishop of

⁵⁷ Hanson, *The Search*, 680.

⁵⁸ Ayres, *Nicaea*, 195.

⁵⁹ Hanson, *The Search*, 715.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 717.

Nazianzus after his father's death and later at Constantinople for a very short time.⁶¹ Gregory never participated directly in the debate with Eunomius, but we will consider a poem of his which displays the ways in which the Cappadocians would have constructed theological language in light of their thoughts on *epinoia* and the imagination.⁶²

Cappadocian Understanding of *Epinoia*

Underlying Understanding of the World

As was the case with Eunomius, the role of *epinoia* in theology depends on a framework of creation which undergirds and grounds the way the Cappadocians use the term. In other words, the way the Cappadocians understand the world is fundamental to understanding their thoughts on the imagination. Whereas Eunomius held to a view of the world and language which gave some direct and simple path to the essence of the Creator, the Cappadocians held to no such view. Hans Urs Von Balthasar opens his famous essay on Gregory of Nyssa, "Presence and Thought," with the line, "Every time he undertakes a development of the fundamentals of his metaphysics, Gregory begins from the irreducible opposition between God and creature."⁶³

Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium* contains the clearest articulation of the Cappadocian conception of creation and language as unable to access the essence of God. He writes:

For the gap is great and impassable by which the uncreated nature is hindered from the created essence. The one is limited, the other has no limit; the one is circumscribed by its own proper limitations according to the decision of the wise creator, the other has infinity

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 702.

⁶² In the coming analysis of *epinoia*, we will consider the Cappadocians as a larger group of theologians. That is not to say the three men did not disagree on theological issues or held to one perfectly consistent set of thoughts on the imagination. Instead, we will consider the three together and in so doing will construct what amounts to the compiled effort against Eunomius. So while Basil was the first to respond chronologically to Eunomius, we will not necessarily begin with his *Adversus Eunomius* but instead incorporate works from all three Fathers throughout the analysis, speaking of the larger themes consistent throughout the three theologians' thoughts.

⁶³ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 27.

as its measurement; the one is stretched out by a certain dimensional extension, being enclosed by space and time, the other transcends every notion of dimension.⁶⁴

Gregory sees the creation as hindered from the essence of the Creator on account of the created nature of the creation. The creation on account of being the creation which is enclosed in space and time, cannot know the essence of the creator who is outside space and time, outside creation or dimensionality. The two terms Gregory uses to describe the creation are διάστημα (*diastema*) and κίνησις (*kinesis*). *Diastema* refers to the spatial and temporal dimension of creation. All of creation is in the dimension of space and time, and as a result, it cannot be escaped. All thinking and speaking occur within the *diastema*. *Kinesis* refers to the constant movement of creation. This does not refer to the literal spinning and moving of the earth, but rather the constant tension in which creation rests between its beginning and its end. As a result of having a beginning, creation is always moving, if it were to stop moving, it would cease to exist.⁶⁵ A beginning is going from non-being to being, which is an act of movement, creation is always in this movement. God on the other hand, is not only outside the *diastema*, but he is *adiastemic*. There is no part of him which is *diastemic*. The division is ontological. God is free in his constitution of *diastema* whereas humanity is trapped within the *diastema* and is constituted entirely of that which is *diastemic* and *kinetic*.

As a result of this understanding of the world, the Cappadocians do not simply regard the essence of God as incomprehensible, but they also believe that to speak of God's essence, to claim that we can name it is dangerous. Gregory writes,

Thus the whole created order is unable to get out of itself through a comprehensive vision, but remains continually enclosed within itself, and whatever it beholds, it is looking at itself. And even if it somehow thinks it is looking at something beyond itself, that which it sees

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, I, 246, 14-21, as cited in Scot Douglass, *Theology of the Gap: Cappadocian Language Theory and the Trinitarian Controversy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Company, 2005), 33.

⁶⁵ Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*, 46.

outside itself has no being...For every object it conceptually discovers, it always comprehends the *diastema* inherent in the being of the apprehended object, for *diastema* is nothing other than creation itself.⁶⁶

Thus the danger in espousing that language can get at God's essence is that when we speak we are really only speaking of ourselves! The danger lies in creating an essence of God which is not his true essence, but rather an essence which is built of "createdness." That "god" has no being at all, but is simply the fiction that Eunomius so deeply desires to avoid. To say that language can define and enclose the essence of God, to speak of something outside the *diastema* as being defined in total by language, is idolatry at its root. The question is vital because it has everything to do with whom we pray to when we pray, whom we worship and whom we share with others. The Cappadocians understand this danger and thus are very quick and poised in their response to Eunomius.

***Epinoia* and the Imagination as Theological Tool**

For Gregory then, humanity exists in the middle of a day that is guarded on both ends by the darkness of night.⁶⁷ In other words, humanity is in this place of constant motion in which no direct knowledge of God is possible. The nature of creation restricts it from a direct knowledge of God's essence. It is at this point, where the Cappadocian conception of *epinoia* plays a vital role. In Basil's *Adversus Eunomius*, the first response of a Cappadocian Father to the thoughts of Eunomius, Basil defends conceptualizations as follows:

The term 'conceptualization,' however, is far from being restricted only to vain and non-existent imaginations. After an initial concept has arisen for us from sense perception, the more subtle and precise reflection on what we have conceived is called conceptualization. For example, the concept of grain exists in everybody as something simple, by means of which we recognize grain as soon as we see it. But when we examine grain in detail we come to consider more things about it and use different designations to indicate the different things that we have conceived. For the same grain can be called at one time 'fruit,' at another time 'seed,' and again at another time 'nourishment' It is 'fruit' as the

⁶⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *In Ecclesiastien*, GNO V, 412, 6-14 as cited in Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*, 90.

⁶⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, II, 232, 16f as cited in Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*, 37.

result of farming that has been completed, ‘seed’ as the beginning of farming to come, and ‘nourishment’ as what is suitable for the development of the body of one who eats it. Now each one of these things mentioned is considered by way of conceptualization; each of these is not dissolved together with the noise of the tongue, but rather the concepts remain settled in the soul of the one who has conceived them.⁶⁸

Basil does not relegate *epinoia* to the backburner of knowledge. The difference between the Cappadocians and Eunomius lies in the ability or inability to know God’s essence. By denying the role of *epinoia* in theology, Eunomius gives the imagination no place in the realm of theology because he believes the essence of God can be known objectively. And when it is known, the essence of God is simple which further strengthens the case in his mind against *epinoia* which results in a God who seems composite. However, the Cappadocians acknowledge man’s inability to know God’s essence. Therefore, *epinoia* and the imagination become the only way to know God. God remains simple in essence, but his names are all humanity has to speak of, and even these are symbolic and distanced from God for they are always made in relation to creation which is *diastemic*. Douglass provides an excellent summation of the conscious move to *epinoia* in light of *diastema* and *kinesis* and its subsequent costs:

At first glance, the corn seems simple and uncomplicated. Upon further *epinoetic* reflection, though, all the different aspects of the corn—size, shape, color, hardness, etc., as well as the various potential uses of corn—come into view. What had initially seemed simple is now understood to be both physically composite and implicated in a whole matrix of complex agricultural, social and economic relationships. Even though the essence of corn was never the object of this *epinoetic* process, the resultant thoughts, embedding corn in its manifestation-in-the-world, in its *Lebenswelt*, did overcome a certain type of alienation that had existed between Basil and the corn. The price, though, of this movement was a different type of alienation, the acknowledgement that one could not approach the corn’s essence.⁶⁹

The Cappadocians are not shy in stating the limitations of the imagination. The background of *epinoia* places it in the less real than material concrete existences. However, their conception of

⁶⁸ Basil of Caesarea: *Against Eunomius*, I.6, trans. Mark DelCogliano and Andrew Ridde-Gallwitz (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press: 2011), 98.

⁶⁹ Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*, 52.

the state of humankind as creation leaves them with no choice but to walk forward championing the imagination as the only way in which God can be thought of and spoken of. His essence cannot be known, only his activity.⁷⁰ And his activity can only be reflected on using the imagination. At each point of reflection there is further distance created, and upon the creation of language about God, even more distance is created as he is spoken of and conceived of in the *diasteme*. The imagination and *epinoia* as stated above,⁷¹ is thus always working in the world of metaphor, as it makes connections between what it knows in the *diasteme*.

***Epinoia* and the Imagination at Work**

Thus, the Cappadocians take a measured step back to the weak speech and conceptualizations of the *epinoia* away from the supposedly strong place of uncreated, God-given concepts. They understand the weakness of the imagination in apprehending timeless truths, yet speak of God using *epinoia* in spite of that. We characterized Eunomius above as the thinker who was looking for a way to a non-symbolic way of talking about God, something to ground his theology. In comparison, we might characterize the Cappadocians as those who believe no such stable ground exists. A ground does indeed exist, but one that is shaky at best. To use *epinoia* in theology is a calculated risk. Yet, it is the only way of speaking about God. So, rather than be completely silent, the Cappadocians make use of the imagination to speak about God.⁷² Gregory of Nazianzus provides a unique example of the way the Cappadocians balance the imaginative conception and speaking of God with the reverence of apophaticism, or the acceptance that *epinoia* can only take the human so far. The following quote is a poem:

For he stripped off none of his Godhead in bringing my salvation,

⁷⁰ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 21-25.

⁷¹ See above section on *epinoia* as the imagination, pg. 22-23.

⁷² For further discussion of how the Cappadocians actually use the imagination to create silence, see Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 159-163; Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

a physician who descended to the world of the evil-smelling passions.
 He was mortal, yet God, of the seed of David, but still the moulder of Adam's form.
 He bore flesh, yet existed outside the body.
 He is son of a mother, yet she is a virgin. He was subject to limitations, yet beyond measure.
 A manger received him, while the Magi were lead by a star, as they came bringing gifts and bending their knees in worship.
 As a mortal man he came to the struggle, yet unconquered he prevailed over the tempter in the threefold conflict.⁷³

This poem is fraught with antitheses, or two concepts which appear opposite. Jesus' humanity is always counterbalanced with a statement about his divinity. This poem takes us further into the Cappadocian understanding of *epinoia* and the imagination. *Epinoia* and *epinoetic*, imaginative thinking creates metaphors within the *diasteme*. These are created by way of oscillation. According to Douglass, "any knowledge of God can only emerge within a constant oscillation, within an overlapping of names, images and concepts whose relationship with each other is one of balance—not synthesis."⁷⁴ This oscillation creates a surplus of meaning. That is, by using a multitude of overlapping images, names and concepts a greater amount of meaning is created than what is needed.⁷⁵ In this way, we can say that Cappadocian thought is analogical. Language is neither univocal nor equivocal. It rests somewhere in between in a balance between the two. As a result, stabilization from outside the metaphor itself is needed.⁷⁶ This stabilization comes from the apophatic assertions which are made by the theologian. Douglass again provides a very illustrative and helpful quote. He writes,

The apophatic in the Cappadocians primarily served *epinoetically* to protect spaces of meaning, spaces created by paradoxical assertions, from being understood in heretical fashions. That is, there are gaps between apophatic negations and the metaphorical

⁷³ Gregory of Nazianzus, "ΠΕΡΙ ΥΙΟΥ," lines 57-68, *Poemata Arcana*, trans. D. A. Sykes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

⁷⁴ Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*, 150.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

constructions they “protect.” This is protection against the *kineticism* of language—the natural expansion of *kinetic* discourse beyond its delimited area of applicability.⁷⁷

In other words, what stabilizes the *epinoetic* thinking and *epinoia* from falling off the knife’s edge into fiction, are apophatic assertions. The Cappadocians, rather than using apophaticism to speak of God, use apophaticism to protect positive speech about God. This is what differentiates them from authors such as Pseudo-Dionysius who would later champion apophatic assertions as the only way to speak of God. Rather than asserting that we can only say what God is not, the Cappadocian Fathers claim that we can use statements of what God is not to structure statements about who God is.

Therefore, we see to a greater extent the cautious optimism the Cappadocian Fathers have with *epinoia* and the imagination. They are cautious because with Eunomius, they understand the “fictive” power of *epinoetic* thinking. Yet they are optimistic because they also understand the multitude of positive achievements which have been discovered and created as a result of it.⁷⁸ It is the only way forward, but the way forward must be walked carefully.

We thus conclude our discussion of the Cappadocian understanding of the imagination and thus, their understanding of *epinoia* as well. They see the imagination as the only way forward for theology. Such an understanding is what put them at odds with Eunomius in their doctrine of God as well. The Cappadocians could uphold a homoiousian or even homoousian position (which they did) because God’s essence was not known. Unbegotten became another *epinoiai* of God. It was not his essence, but rather a conceptualization of him based on the conclusions that can be drawn from God’s activity in the world. The Cappadocian Fathers were vital not only in the refutation of Eunomius’ doctrine of God, but also in the success and

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

⁷⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, II, 277, 16-278, 4, as translated in Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*, 55.

widespread adoption of a pro-Nicene position as it was accomplished at the Council of Constantinople.

Concluding Thoughts

We now turn to the application of the thoughts of Gregory, Gregory and Basil on the imagination for today. Does their conception of the imagination as vital for theology teach us anything in our current context? I believe we can learn three lessons from the Cappadocian understanding of the imagination. The first is that a reverence is necessary when doing theology and speaking about God. The Cappadocian conception of the imagination places the speaking about God done through *epinoia* in the category of risk because of the transcendence of God. The Cappadocians unmistakably have a lofty view of God, and their reverence is refreshing to behold. While all theology is done from an assumption that God is transcendent, that presupposition does not unfailingly project into all theology. Their reverence is thus a reminder that in God's transcendence is not an attribute which can be given lip service alone. Even in a high view of human language and thought, God is far and above what we can conceive and articulate. As a result we can learn from the Cappadocians to be carefully optimistic in our speaking about God.

Second, we can learn something about ecumenism and theological dialogue from the Cappadocians and honestly, from the entire Nicene debates. Polemicism ran rampant during the fourth century debates regarding the Trinitarian controversy. Athanasius managed to paint a diverse, less radical position as Arian, resulting in the unnecessary showdown between east and west. In the more immediate context of the Eunomian Controversy, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Eunomius of Cyzicus certainly created characterizations of each other which were inaccurate and the result of anger and polemic tactics. The language which is especially used by

Gregory and Basil is harsh and meant to create an image of Eunomius which is arrogant and self-assuming.

Third, and most importantly, I believe the Cappadocians can help to restore a corrected view of the imagination and its use in theology to the contemporary theological forum. Paul Avis in his discussion of the current state of the imagination in theology, places the contemporary situation as somewhere between modern conceptions of the imagination and post modern conceptions of the imagination. That is, the imagination is either seen as an inaccurate and irrational tool of pre-modern civilizations which was used to create silly stories to explain what rational, scientific thinking can explain with certainty, or as the genesis of narratives and metanarratives which are looked on with scorn and contempt.⁷⁹ There has been a considerable attempt to restore the imagination to its proper place and I believe the Cappadocians understanding of the imagination can aid that cause because it restores the imagination as the creator of metaphor, and then takes one step further to support the cognitive value of metaphors.

The Cappadocian understanding of the world makes *epinoia* and the imagination the only way forward from our place within the *diastema* and *kinesis* of creation. The concepts or conceptualizations which are the result of imaginative thinking about an object are by nature of their location within the *diasteme* metaphorical. That is they are understood by way of their connection with other creations in the *diasteme*. The Cappadocians do not see this as the ideal way of knowing, they long at times to know the essence of God, yet metaphors are a way of knowing. It does do something to remove the alienation between the knower and the object which it desires to know while stopping short of saying anything about that object's essence. In the words of Vanhoozer, "Metaphors thus, have explanatory power, if not quite explanatory

⁷⁹ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 14-30.

power.”⁸⁰ The choice to use the imagination in theology is an intentional step to know something, while also relinquishing the desire to know everything. The Cappadocian conception of the imagination places it as that cognitive tool which allows for something between a certainty of knowing and complete and utter silence towards God. It calls us to return again to the metaphors, myths and symbols which make up the form and character of God’s revelation to humanity in the Bible and Jesus and allowing them to speak as such. They call us to embrace our creaturely nature instead of setting out to shed it as soon as possible. In the face of modernity’s attempt at certainty, and postmodernity’s attempt at complete and utter uncertainty, the Cappadocians seem to call us to some middle ground. Positive knowledge is possible given a corrected understanding of the imagination, and yet that positive knowledge will always be enmeshed in humanness in “createdness” thereby selling it short of that type of knowledge which is God’s alone to possess.

⁸⁰ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 280.

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