

The human icon: Gregory of Nazianzus on being an *imago Dei*

Gabrielle Thomas

Durham University, Abbey House, Palace Green, Durham DH1 3RS

gabrielle.r.thomas@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

Theologians have long recognised the significance of the *imago Dei* in Christian theological anthropology, yet the question of how to construe the *imago* is not straightforward. This essay offers a fresh reading of Gregory Nazianzen's vision of the *imago Dei*. Hitherto, historical theologians have attributed to Gregory an essentialist interpretation of the *imago*, in which it is identified only with the rational soul. I argue that Gregory depicts the *imago Dei* quite literally as a visible icon of God by weaving together christology, pneumatology and beliefs about images and idols. If interpreted properly, Gregory's vision contributes significantly to contemporary interpretations of the *imago Dei*, which aim to account for christology, pneumatology and the inclusion of each human person in the *imago*.

Keywords: Gregory of Nazianzus, icon, image, *imago Dei*, theological anthropology

Well-known by Eastern Christians as 'the Theologian', Gregory of Nazianzus wrote innovatively about God and the Christian life in virtually every Greek literary form. Whilst Gregory covers a vast breadth of subjects, he is known best for his trinitarian doctrine and his christology. For example, his soteriological dictum, which occurs in his first theological letter to Cledonius, is often cited: 'That which is unassumed is unhealed, but that which has been united to God is also being saved.'¹ Theologians have not given the same degree of attention to Gregory's theological anthropology; if interpreted properly, I argue, his ideas contribute significantly to contemporary discussions regarding the *imago Dei*. Recognising the complexities of being a divine image, Gregory asks, 'Who was I at first? And who am I now? And who shall I become?' His response is,

¹ Ep. 101.5 (*Sources Chrétiennes* (hereafter SC) 208, p. 50. In order to highlight the nuances in the texts, translations are my own, unless stated otherwise. I am grateful for the insightful feedback received from those attending the Research Seminars at the University of St Andrews and Durham University, at which I presented earlier versions of this paper.

'I don't know clearly'.² Despite living in the fourth century, his reflections resonate with contemporary discussions concerned with how the human being is a divine image, namely: What is the divine image? Does it exist within us? If so, how? If not, how else might we understand it? More importantly, how do we speak about the divine image in such a way that our conversations hold together christology and pneumatology, and emphasise the inclusion of each human person?

Traditionally, theologians have categorised the *imago Dei* either as structural, relational or functional, where 'structural' relates to the various capacities of the human person (for example, rationality or free will),³ 'relational' considers the *imago Dei* in light of the relationship between the three persons in the Trinity,⁴ and 'functional' refers to the understanding of the *imago Dei* as a task.⁵ These interpretations are not satisfactory in themselves, since independently they cannot encapsulate the summation of human persons as they image God; moreover they have been critiqued in relation to anthropological exclusivity, theological abstraction and biblical interpretation.⁶ For example, it has long been recognised that those who do not have certain intellectual competencies are excluded from the divine image, if the image is interpreted as the intellect or rationality.⁷ The functional interpretation of the divine image is also subject to critiques of exclusivity, since it is related customarily to ruling and subduing the earth, and certain disabilities preclude persons from performing this role. Furthermore, feminist theologians have argued that this view draws on models of kingship from which women are excluded.⁸ Contemporary

² Carm. 1.2.14 (PG 37: 757, l. 17). Throughout I use the phrases '*imago Dei*' and 'divine image' synonymously.

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Nature*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), pp. 198–200. Following convention, I use 'structural' and 'substantive' synonymously.

⁴ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p. 15.

⁵ J. Richard Middleton, 'The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context', *Christian Scholars Review* 24/1 (1994), p. 12.

⁶ For critiques of the relational, functional and substantive views respectively, see Harriet A. Harris, 'Should we Say that Personhood is Relational?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51/2 (1998), pp. 214–34; G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, *Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1962), p. 71; Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), p. 31.

⁷ Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008).

⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The Liberation of Christology', in Ann Loades (ed.), *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 138–48.

theologians offer various responses to how to interpret the divine image in such a way as to include each human person: some point to Jesus Christ as the image of the invisible God (Ian McFarland and Kathryn Tanner); some turn to phenomenology as a means of approaching the divine image (Susan Windley-Daoust); others argue that we should not attempt an interpretation and instead should continue to search for the divine image (Alastair McFadyen).⁹ Whilst I support the call for christological approaches to the divine image, this paper aims to extend the search by also calling attention to pneumatology.

Gregory Nazianzen's account of the divine image, I argue, contributes significantly to these discussions. Traditionally, commentators have attributed to Gregory an essentialist interpretation, which locates the divine image in the soul or intellect thereby identifying it with a capacity that resides within the human being.¹⁰ Some commentators observe that Gregory includes the body when speaking of the divine image, although they do not move on to explore how this affects the broader interpretation of the divine image in Gregory's thought.¹¹

Scholars stating that Gregory depicts the divine image as the intellect are correct since Gregory, following Origen, does refer to the divine image as either the intellect ($\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$) or the soul ($\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$) on numerous occasions.¹²

⁹ Ian A. McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2005); Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010); Susan Windley-Daoust, *The Redeemed Image of God: Embodied Relations to the Unknown Divine* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002); Alistair I. McFadyen, 'Imaging God: Not So Much Defining as Seeking Humanity?' presented at Society for the Study of Theology Postgraduate Conference, Manchester, 8 Jan. 2015.

¹⁰ E.g. Manfred Kertsch, *Gregorio Nazianzeno: Sulla virtù, Carme giambico [I, 2, 10]* (Pisa: Edizioni Ets, 1995), p. 195; Heinz Althaus, *Die Heilslehre des heiligen Gregor von Nazianz* (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1972), pp. 72–4; Ben Fulford, *Divine Eloquence and Human Transformation: Rethinking Scripture and History through Gregory of Nazianus and Hans Frei* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2013), pp. 80–1; Hilarion Alfeyev, *La chantre de la Lumière: Introduction à la spiritualité de saint Grégoire de Nazianze* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2006); Kirsten Koonce, 'Agalma and Eikon', *American Journal of Philology* 109/1 (1988), pp. 108–10; Joseph Barbel, *Gregor von Nazianz: Die fünf theologischen Reden* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1963), p. 284.

¹¹ Anne Richard, *Cosmologie et théologie chez Grégoire de Nazianze* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2003), p. 265; Andreas Knecht, *Gregor von Nazianz: Gegen die Putzsucht der Frauen. Verbesserter griechischer Text mit Übersetzung, motivgeschichtlichem Überblick und Kommentar* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1972); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 129.

¹² *Oration 14.2* (PG 35: 860B–861A); *22.14* (SC 270, pp. 248–9); *28.17* (SC 250, p. 134); *32.27* (SC 318, pp. 142–4); *Carm. 1.2.1* (PG 37: 529, l. 97). Cf. Origen,

Observe, for example, Gregory's second oration *On Peace*: 'the greatest feature in the nature of the human person is that she is [created] according to the image (*εἰκῶν*) and [possesses] the capacity of intellect (*νοῦς*)'.¹³ This is important to note, since I am not contending that the secondary literature has hitherto misinterpreted Gregory's depiction of the divine image; rather, I suggest that when writing on Gregory's understanding of the divine image, scholars have not yet delineated the full breadth of his vision and the implications of his account. This is possibly because few full-length studies exist which consider Gregory's approach in depth; analyses of Gregory's account of the divine image most often consist of a single chapter or paragraph in a study dedicated to broader studies of Gregory's thought.¹⁴ Exceptions to this are scholars such as Philippe Molac, who provides an extensive account of key words and concepts linked to the divine image. He demonstrates that Gregory's description of the intellect (*νοῦς*) is inseparably linked with flesh (*σάρξ*) through the soul (*ψυχή*). Whilst Molac develops this in light of christology, he does not move on to discuss the full breadth of what this may mean for the human person as created in the divine image.¹⁵

I contend that within Gregory's vast corpus of orations and poems lies a vision of the divine image that resembles a brightly coloured tapestry, into which he has woven myriad threads. Gregory does not reduce the divine image to a single category, whether of substance or function. Rather, he locates the divine image within the contexts of christology and pneumatology, and weaves in themes which pertain to experience, relationality, ontology, function, embodiment, ethics, sacraments, affliction and even spiritual warfare. If we were to explore each of these threads, they would fill several volumes. Therefore here I shall expound upon one thread, which, I argue, is christologically and pneumatologically robust in addition to accounting for each human person's participation in the divine image. The particular aspect of Gregory's approach that I shall examine treats the category of 'image of God' quite literally as a visible icon who

Homilies on Genesis and Exodus 1.13, trans. Ronald Heine, *The Fathers of the Church V 71* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), p. 63.

¹³ Oration 22.13 (SC 270, p. 248).

¹⁴ See e.g. Jostein Børtnes, 'Rhetoric and Mental Images in Gregory', in Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg (eds), *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections* (Chicago: Museum Tusulanum, 2006), p. 56. The author comments on Gregory's approach to the divine image with respect to Origen's anthropology, but does not develop the full breadth of Gregory's thought on the divine image.

¹⁵ Philippe Molac, *Douleur et transfiguration: Une lecture du cheminement spirituel de saint Grégoire de Nazianze* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2006).

bears God's presence and offers glory to God. In order to establish how Gregory communicates this, I shall survey how he depicts the divine image in dialogue with the creation chapters in Genesis on the one hand, and contemporary beliefs about statuary (i.e. images and idols) on the other. I argue that these beliefs form a key backdrop to understanding Gregory's depiction of the human icon.

Before continuing, I must pause to note that 'icon' does not convey fully Gregory's overall vision of the human being as she is created according to the image of God, since he offers a multifaceted and complex account. I vary between translating *εἰκὼν* as 'image' and as 'icon' in order to highlight the nuances in the texts. On numerous occasions 'icon' is preferable because it conveys a sense of visibility. The drawback with the convention of employing 'divine image', 'image of God' or '*imago Dei*' is that these phrases do not necessarily suggest physicality and thus may be interpreted in abstract terms. Thus, by using 'human icon' intermittently in place of the customary 'divine image', I aim to bring to the fore ideas of visibility rather than identifying the image with an invisible component of the human person. Let us turn next to explore the backdrop to Gregory's account of the visible human icon, beginning first with the creation narratives in Genesis.

Images and idols in Genesis and beyond

In a poem titled 'Rough Boundaries', in which Gregory discusses God and spiritual beings, such as the devil and demons, he states, 'I am a human being, a model, and an icon of God'.¹⁶ By making this claim, Gregory recalls the creation accounts in Genesis. The first chapter depicts the human being created as an image of God, whereas the second chapter offers a complementary account of the first human being as moulded from the dust of the earth and enlivened through the breath of God:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind according to our image and according to likeness, and let them rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and the cattle and all the earth and all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.' And God made humankind; according to divine image he made it; male and female he made them. (Gen 1:26–27)

And God formed man, dust from the earth, and breathed into his face a breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Gen 2:7)¹⁷

¹⁶ *Carm.* 1.2.34 (PG 37: 947, l. 20).

¹⁷ Since Gregory used Greek translations of the Hebrew texts, the citations here are from *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

Along with a growing number of Hebrew Bible scholars, Stephen Herring has attended to the way in which מַצֵּלֶת/εἰκὼν is employed throughout the Hebrew Bible in order to interpret Genesis 1:26–28.¹⁸ On several occasions מַצֵּלֶת / εἰκὼν describes a physical object, such as a statue or an idol (Wis 2:23, Num 33:52, Ezek 7:20, 2 Kings 11:18, Dan 3:1). This, alongside recent archaeological discoveries, has led Hebrew Bible scholars to re-examine ideas of the image in light of ancient Near Eastern cultures, which believed that fashioning an image (מַצֵּלֶת) involved a ritual process of transformation.¹⁹ Once the ritual was completed, the image of the god was believed to embody the god so fully that the image became the god itself. Egyptian texts make clear that the craftsmen were not concerned primarily with representing what a god looked like; instead, the image was the place where the god manifested him- or herself, ‘thus the presence of the god and the blessing that accompanied that presence were effected through the image’.²⁰ The images were considered to be living images embodying the divine presence, rather than being merely lifeless wood or bronze statues. In effect, through ritual the images became the gods themselves and were considered to be ‘divine’. This research sheds light not only on aspects of Genesis 1:26–28, but also Genesis 2:7, in which the author depicts the human being formed from a mixture of earth and breath, akin to the formation of an image of a god. Interpreted thus, the human being does not ‘possess’ the image within herself, but rather the human being herself is the image, manifesting the presence of her Creator.²¹ Since this ancient Near Eastern background is vastly different from Gregory’s immediate context, I shall establish an overlap within Graeco-Roman beliefs about images (whether statues or portraits) of gods and emperors.

Traditionally, scholars have been sceptical of the belief that the Graeco-Roman gods were understood to be present in their statues. This is due to the lack of evidence for any ritual of animation in ancient Greece, unlike in ancient Mesopotamia. Furthermore, a negative reading of Platonic mimesis has led scholars to argue that the educated elite understood the image as

¹⁸ Stephen L. Herring, *Divine Substitution: Humanity as the Manifestation of Deity in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

¹⁹ Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 121–48.

²⁰ Edward M. Curtis, ‘Image of God’, in David N. Freeman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, H–J (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 389.

²¹ This relates to the New Testament claim that Christ is ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15; cf. Heb 1:3), who manifests God’s presence fully (cf. Col 2:9).

merely a copy.²² However, in his *Symposium* Plato speaks about an icon as possessing great power; for example, Alcibiades declares that the icon of Socrates is capable of making him feel ashamed.²³ Furthermore, studies on the 'popular' Graeco-Roman view have challenged successfully a purely mimetic understanding of cultic images by demonstrating an acceptance of the presence of deities in images.²⁴ For example, Robin Fox appeals to Augustus, who banished Poseidon's statue because of bad weather and was thereby believed to have insulted Poseidon himself.²⁵ Similarly, in his *Amores* 15–16 Pseudo-Lucian highlights why so much care had to be taken when handling statues, since the deity embodied within the statue could be offended through incorrect treatment of the statue. This implies that the line between the god and its statue is blurred.²⁶ This notion of representation extends to ancient dream theory, where it makes no difference whether the dreamer sees the statue of a god or the god itself.

Images of Roman emperors are also pertinent to this discussion. For instance, Theodosius made Maximus an emperor by erecting the latter's image, which he commanded the people to worship in place of their Alexandrian gods. Furthermore, in Gregory's own lifetime, the images of the emperor Theodosius were smashed to pieces in the tax rebellion of 387, and the emperor was angry precisely because his imperial image 'embodied his own actual presence within the city'.²⁷ Thus, even as a statue of a god embodied the divine presence of the god, so images of emperors were perceived to embody the emperor's presence, functioning as a substitute for the emperor.

Ideas such as these, suggesting that pagan images and idols bear the presence of the god or emperor which they embody, appear to have contributed to the interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27 in the work of theologians preceding Gregory. For example, in the second century Clement of Alexandria asserted that human beings are rational sculptures of the

²² Verity J. Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Greco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 204.

²³ Plato, *Symposium* 216b.

²⁴ Christopher A. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardians and Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual* (Oxford: OUP, 1992); Jaś Elsner, 'Iconoclasm as Discourse: From Antiquity to Byzantium', *Art Bulletin* 94/3 (2012), p. 370.

²⁵ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1986), p. 133.

²⁶ Along similar lines, an ambiguity in the Greek language means that 'Artemis can imply either the goddess herself or an image of her'. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 3.16.9; Matthew Dillon and Lynda Garland, *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Alexander* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 240.

²⁷ Frederick G. McLeod, *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 236.

Logos of God.²⁸ As Laura Nasrallah argues, Clement ‘engages and reverses the theological statements of statuary and images that repeated across the cityscapes of the Greek East’.²⁹ She goes so far as to suggest that Clement’s ideas about the image of God cannot be understood apart from the context of second-century Alexandria, which was a landscape full of ideas about statues and idols.³⁰ Clement does not stand alone in his physical interpretation of the divine image, since Irenaeus too speaks of the image of God as visible. Inspired by Colossians 1:15, Irenaeus speaks of Christ as the image according to whose image human beings are made. He explains that the incarnate Christ revealed the kind of image the human being was meant to be.³¹ Later theologians such as Methodius in the fourth century also adopted a view of the divine image which emphasised the importance of the visibility of the image.³² This differs radically from interpretations by Philo of Alexandria and, later, Origen, who wrote, ‘The soul, not only for the first man, but of all men arose according to the image’.³³ Generally, it is assumed that the approaches of Philo and Origen form the basis for interpretations of the divine image in Christian thought; however, the evidence of writers like Clement, Irenaeus and Methodius show that the embodied approach was also a predominant stream of interpretation.

Thus far, I have argued that Graeco-Roman statues were understood as likenesses which have the potential to carry some presence or power of the figure represented, whether it is an emperor or a god. Pagan and Christian ideas about the power of certain portraits are also pertinent to this discussion. For evidence of this we may turn to Gregory himself. In his second poem *On Virtue*, Gregory recounts the experience of a woman engaged in prostitution, who comes across a painting of Polemon in the home of a dissolute youth. First, Gregory informs his reader that Polemon was a man who was known for ‘getting the better of the passions’. From this comment the reader should understand that whoever encounters the portrait of Polemon meets with the image of a man who is virtuous. Gregory

²⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptikos*, 1.5.4, 1.6.4.

²⁹ Laura Nasrallah, ‘The Earthen Human, the Breathing Statue: The Sculptor God, Greco-Roman Statuary, and Clement of Alexandria’, in Konrad Schmid and Christopher Riedweg (eds), *Beyond Eden: The Biblical Story of Paradise [Genesis 2–3] and its Reception History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), p. 110.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 22.

³² Sophie Cartwright, *The Theological Anthropology of Eustathius of Antioch* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), p. 161.

³³ Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah; Homily on 1 Kings 28*, trans. John Clark Smith (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), p. 23.

then describes the immense power of Polemon's gaze staring out from the portrait; it is so powerful that the woman was put to shame 'as if he [Polemon] were alive ($\zeta\tilde{\omega}\nu$)'.³⁴ We assume that Gregory is drawing upon the belief that pagan portraits possessed the potential to gaze at their onlookers in a way that suggests 'magical powers'.³⁵ This relates, albeit indirectly, to the beliefs about images and idols manifesting the presence of the god or figure they depict, which filter through a variety of ancient cultures. Gregory reinterprets a contemporary belief to serve a specific purpose in his corpus of poems, which relates to the practice of the Christian faith.

Let us turn now from these beliefs about images and idols and move to the human icon, who in a similar manner manifests the glory of God. In order to demonstrate the extent to which Gregory interprets the divine image quite literally as a visible human icon, I shall examine a breadth of themes in order to highlight the pervasiveness of this idea in Gregory's thought. In light of this, we shall survey Gregory's discussions of the divine image as they relate to: Christ, the creation of the first human being, women and Basil presiding at the eucharist. Through these, we observe that Gregory speaks of the divine image repeatedly as visible. If we attend to the texts in light of the beliefs about pagan images and idols, we shall see how Gregory plays on the various ideas in order to highlight the uniqueness of the human icon against other kinds of images and idols. Most importantly, we shall observe that Gregory weaves together a vision of the human person as an icon of God, which is both theologically holistic and inclusive.

Christ

We begin with Christ as the image of God since Gregory consistently locates the human icon in writings concerned primarily with Christ or the Christian lifestyle in, for example, *On the Theophany*,³⁶ *On the Lights*,³⁷ *On New Sunday*³⁸ and *On Sacred Pascha*.³⁹ Drawing on the New Testament witness which describes Christ as the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), Gregory writes in detail about how Christ images God. Gregory stipulates that Christ is different from all other kinds of images, since Christ is 'consubstantial' with the Father. Christ possesses 'a more precise similarity than that of Seth to Adam and

³⁴ *Carm.* 1.2.10 (PG 37: 793–807).

³⁵ For further discussion on the identity of Polemon; see Børtnes, 'Rhetoric and Mental Images in Gregory', p. 39.

³⁶ *Oration* 38 (SC 358, pp. 104–38).

³⁷ *Oration* 39 (SC 358, pp. 150–97).

³⁸ *Oration* 44 (PG 36: 608A–622A).

³⁹ *Oration* 45 (PG 36: 623A–664C).

all those born from parents ... the whole impression of the whole, and the same rather than similar'.⁴⁰ The way in which Gregory understands the importance of the likeness between Christ and the Father leads him to speak of Christ as the 'identical image' on over twenty occasions throughout his corpus.⁴¹ Since Christ and the human person are both described as the 'image of God', we are able to discern how Gregory applies the concept of the divine image positively to denote 'likeness to' rather than 'difference from'. Gregory presents a description of εἰκῶν which is radically different from the one offered by anti-Nicene theologian Eunomius, who argues that likeness does not refer to likeness in substance but only in operation.⁴²

When speaking of Christ as the image of God, Gregory incorporates explicitly Christ's flesh, thus emphasising the physicality of the incarnate Christ as the visible image of the invisible God. For example, in his poem, 'Against Apollinarius, On the Incarnation', Gregory writes about Christ,

Flesh is God's shared dwelling place and is also God's icon
God's nature mingles with its kin,
And from there it has communion with the dull, thick flesh.⁴³

Here we may see that icon does not refer to the soul, but rather to Christ's physicality. The inclusion of Christ's flesh paves the way for a similar interpretation of the human icon, since the human icon is an icon of Christ. A key feature of the similarity between Christ and his human icon relates to Gregory's description of them both as living images (ζῶντες). He makes this move in order to determine how they differ from other kinds of images and idols. Gregory's description of the human icon as living relates to his interpretation of the creation narratives. As we shall see, the human icon is brought to life through the Spirit of God.

Creation of the human icon

Gregory conflates Genesis 1 and 2 in order to describe the creation of the first human being. He begins by embellishing the description found in Genesis 2:7. There God is said to have formed the first human being from the dust of the earth and to have breathed life into it. For Gregory, the breath

⁴⁰ Oration 30.20 (SC 250, p. 268).

⁴¹ See e.g. Oration 38.13 (SC 358, p. 132).

⁴² οὐ πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν φέροι ἄν ἡ εἰκὼν τὴν ὁμοιότητα, πρὸς δὲ τὴν ἐνέργειαν. Eunomius, *Apology* 24. Eunomius refused to acknowledge the likeness of the Logos to the Father and denounced the Spirit's deity.

⁴³ *Carm.* 1.1.10 (PG 37: 469, ll. 56–60).

of life refers to the Holy Spirit. Rather than following Genesis 2:7 precisely, Gregory weaves in the theme of the divine image from Genesis 1:

As [God] spoke, taking a portion of freshly made earth,
with immortal hands God established my form and gave to it a share of God's
own life.
For into it [God] infused Spirit, a fragment of the hidden Godhead.
From clay and breath a mortal icon of the immortal One was established.⁴⁴

In this text Gregory plays on ideas about the formation of divine images and idols. The outcome of the clay infused with Spirit is a 'mortal icon' of the 'immortal One'. In a poem titled 'Hymn to Christ after the Silence at Pascha', Gregory refers to Christ as the 'icon of the immortal Father, and seal of eternity', therefore we assume that Gregory intends his readers to understand that the human is an icon of Christ, who is immortal.⁴⁵ There are two key points we must observe from Gregory's description here. The first relates to the way in which Gregory situates the human icon in light of Christ. For Gregory it is impossible to speak of the human icon outside of the belief that Christ is the true and identical icon of God. This means that we cannot begin to understand what it means to be a human icon if we do not first look to Christ and explore how he images God.

The second point relates to Gregory's description of the human icon being brought to life by the Spirit. By invoking the Spirit in this context, Gregory locates the involvement of the Holy Spirit at the creation of the human icon. For Gregory, the Spirit gives life to the icon and therefore gives meaning and purpose to the icon. For by being infused with Spirit, the icon is able to manifest the presence of God in a way unlike any other kind of image or idol. By depicting the Spirit as active in the creation of the icon, Gregory avoids a common oversight in theological anthropology. Mark Cortez identifies this oversight when he notes that theologians, in their discussion of the *imago Dei*, depict the Spirit as an 'eschatological addendum'.⁴⁶ That is, the Holy Spirit is discussed only in relation to the renewal and transformation of the human person, but is not viewed as present at the creation of the human person.⁴⁷ Understood in this way, the Spirit makes an appearance halfway through the salvation story, but

⁴⁴ *Carm.* 1.1.8 (PG 37: 452, ll. 70–5).

⁴⁵ *Carm.* 1.2.38 (PG 37:1325, l. 12–1326, l. 2).

⁴⁶ Marc Cortez, 'Idols, Images and a Spirit-ed Anthropology', in Myk Habets (ed.), *A Pneumatological Account of the Imago Dei* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), pp. 267–82.

⁴⁷ E.g. see Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 225–8.

not until after the fall and consequent need for renewal and healing. The Spirit, when depicted in terms of transforming or renewing the human icon, is thus absent from consideration of the human being's initial meaning and purpose. In positioning the Spirit quite explicitly at the creation of the human icon, Gregory does not fall into this trap. Thus, Gregory creates the space for understanding the meaning and purpose given to the life of the human icon by the Spirit. The icon's purpose is to image God by manifesting the divine life.

Having established the significance of Christ and the Spirit to the formation of the human icon, let us turn to examine Gregory's depiction of the female human icon in particular. Again, we shall see that Gregory describes consistently the female icon as 'living', which differentiates her from other kinds of images and idols.

The female icon

Gregory and his fellow Cappadocians supported the view that women image God in the same way as men. Other bishops in the fourth century, such as Diodore of Tarsus, refuse to allow this. Drawing his argument from 1 Corinthians 11:7, Diodore writes, 'Therefore the blessed Paul said rightly that the man alone is the image of God and his glory, but the woman is the glory of the man'.⁴⁸ Gregory, on the other hand, is a proponent of women's equality. He writes on numerous occasions about the qualities of his mother and sister, and often in a manner which honours them as much, if not more than his father and brother.⁴⁹ When speaking about divorce laws that are unfair to women, Gregory argues that he cannot support them as women are icons of God in the same way as men: 'There is one maker of man and woman, one sod of clay for both, one icon, one law, one death, one resurrection ...'⁵⁰

The extracts we shall consider differ from Gregory's usually positive stance, nevertheless they reveal much about the way in which Gregory plays on ideas about icons and idols. In the poems, Gregory offers advice to Christian women which concerns their application of cosmetics. The first extract occurs in 'Exhortation to Virgins', in which Gregory observes that the human icon is different from other forms of art, since the human icon

⁴⁸ Diodore of Tarsus, *Fragments on Genesis* 1.26 (PG 33: 1564C–1565A); the translation is from Nonna Verna Harrison, 'Women, Humanity and the Image of God: Antiochene Interpretations', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9/2 (2001), p. 209.

⁴⁹ *Oration* 8.10 (SC 405, p. 266).

⁵⁰ *Oration* 37.6 (SC 318, p. 284). Further comment in John A. McGuckin, *St Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), p. 334.

breathes. However, being enlivened by God's Spirit means that the human icon has a responsibility not to diminish herself through the application of cosmetics:

Let another adulterate the icon of God with coloured complexions,
A breathing work of art ...⁵¹

Similarly, in 'Against Women Wearing Ornaments' Gregory draws on the Genesis creation narratives to imagine God's response to a woman who wears make-up as a means of enhancing her beauty. In a section of his poem, employing the rhetorical device of *ethopoia*, Gregory assumes God's voice and explicates what God would say to a woman who wears make-up:

Who is and whence came the creator? Be gone, one who belongs to another!
I did not inscribe you, dog! But I moulded an icon of myself.
How is it that I have an idol in place of a dear form?⁵²

Although Gregory's use of 'dog' (*κύων*) to describe a woman who wears make-up will be offensive to the Western twenty-first-century reader, I observe two significant points about Gregory's approach to the female icon in this passage. First, the defacement of the human icon occurs through the body, which lends itself to a reading in which the icon functions as a term for the whole human person. Secondly, Gregory's play on words around the idea of icons and idols shows that he considers the human icon to be moulded by God; as such, she differs from a pagan idol. The addition of cosmetics to a woman's body means that she is no longer able to function as God's visible and living icon, but rather becomes an idol, a term which Gregory generally uses negatively to describe that which is dead.⁵³ As far as Gregory is concerned, the human icon is alive through God's Spirit and thus is unique. He alludes to this point in his second poem on 'Ignoble Ways of Nobility':

For indeed a painted icon is not greater than
the breathing man (*τῆς τοῦ πνεύματος ἀνδρὸς*), even though it shines.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Carm.* 1.2.3 (PG 37: 637, ll. 57–8).

⁵² *Carm.* 1.2.29 (PG 37: 884–908, ll. 46–8).

⁵³ *Oration* 5.28 (SC 309, p. 348); 8.10 (SC 405, p. 266); 39.6 (SC 358, p. 160); 40.38 (SC 358, p. 284); *Carm.* 1.2.1 (PG 37: 532); 1.2.29 (PG 37, 883); 2.1.1 (PG 37: 979).

⁵⁴ *Carm.* 1.2.27 (PG 37: 854, ll. 8–9).

Thus far I have argued that Gregory plays on beliefs about images and idols in order to shed light on the uniqueness of the human person as she is created according to the image of God. We have observed that Gregory locates the human icon within the context of Christ, the identical icon. Gregory describes both Christ and human icons as living and breathing in order to establish how they are different from other kinds of images and idols. Thus, they are able to manifest the presence of the divine. Let us move now to a further thread in which ideas about images are present; namely, Gregory's treatment of Basil as he presides at the eucharist.

Veneration of the human icon

Gregory treats Basil akin to a statue in his role as priest. In 'A Funeral Oration on the Great Basil' Gregory describes an Epiphany eucharist at which the emperor attended unannounced. Basil was not on good terms with the emperor, and consequently the latter's attendance causes him consternation. However, Basil remains calm and focused on the task at hand. Gregory likens him to a statue, to the extent that those around Basil revere him:

With body and eyes and mind unswerving, as though nothing new had occurred, but rather being fixed like a statue so to speak, for God and the altar, while those around him stood in fear and reverence.⁵⁵

Like a stone or wooden image, Basil is perfectly still. In the same way that we would expect pagans to respond to an idol reverently, those around Basil respond likewise with 'fear and reverence'. In effect, Gregory treats Basil here as though he were a 'divine' icon or idol. If we bear in mind that images were often seen as being related directly to their prototypes, it is logical that those around Basil would revere him, for in revering Basil as God's icon, they revere God.

This leads to Gregory's concern about to whom, or to what, the human icon directs her worship. Gregory's rationale indicates that worship is a principal vocation of the human icon. He is clear about explaining that worship must be directed to God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Consequently, Gregory argues that it is not fitting for mortals to commit idolatry, precisely because they are icons of God:

It is not right, it is not proper for a mortal to be born from God
A beautiful and imperishable icon of the Heavenly Word ...

⁵⁵ Oration 43.52 (SC 384, p. 234).

To give way unlawfully to empty idols
Of things which live in the sea, the earth and which fly in the air ...⁵⁶

Here Gregory correlates once more mortal icon with the icon of Christ, whom he refers to as the 'Heavenly Word'. The mortal icon is imperishable because she is filled with the Spirit. In contrast, Gregory refers to idols as 'empty'. They are not filled with the Spirit and cannot manifest the divine presence. Gregory's logic follows that if the human is an icon of God, she should not worship idols, since she herself is the image of the one, true God.

Conclusion

This paper has challenged the traditional reading according to which Gregory identifies the divine image only with the rational soul. Rather, I have argued that Gregory's interpretation is more complex than an interpretation of the divine image according to one category. The particular focus here has been how Gregory depicts the divine image, quite literally, as a kind of visible icon. This was established by surveying the divine image in relation to Christ, the creation of the first human being, the female icon and Basil at the eucharist. Through his depiction of the visible human icon, Gregory moves away from an essentialist interpretation and towards one which is inclusive. By 'inclusive', I refer not only to the importance of an interpretation which signifies that each human being has been created according to the divine image, but also to the importance of an account which is christologically and pneumatologically inclusive. For example, theologians as wide ranging as Kathryn Tanner, John Behr, David Kelsey and Ian McFarland have critiqued the way in which myriad interpretations of the divine image do not account for the New Testament witness which points to Christ as the image of the invisible God.⁵⁷ Gregory does not fall prey to this error, since he associates the human icon consistently with Christ, the 'identical Icon'. In addition, however, Gregory's account is pneumatologically inclusive. As we have observed throughout, when speaking of both Christ and the human icon, Gregory describes them frequently as 'living'. When Gregory describes the creation of the 'mortal icon', the human icon lives precisely because she is enlivened by the Spirit. This explains an essential difference between the human icon and other kinds of images and idols, for God's Spirit gives life to the human icon. As we have observed, by locating the presence of the Spirit

⁵⁶ *Carm.* 2.2.7 (PG 37: 1555, ll. 51–5).

⁵⁷ See note 9 above, and John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006); David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

at the creation of the human icon, Gregory avoids a common error which occurs in accounts of the divine image, in which the Holy Spirit is depicted as transforming the divine image, but not present in the image's creation. This results in a theologically errant account in which Christ is involved from the beginning, but the Spirit appears only later on in the story. Contrastingly, for Gregory, the Spirit manifests its presence at the beginning of the life of the human icon, resulting in a pneumatologically inclusive account.

I suggest that Gregory's account also contributes to discussions relating to how we speak about the divine image inclusively with respect to each human person. By playing on beliefs about images and idols, Gregory offers a vision of the human icon in which each person's vocation is to image God, regardless of gender, ability or race. Whilst Gregory was not engaged in arguments pertaining to ethnicity, he stipulates that women and those with physical disabilities are icons of God.⁵⁸ Rather than relating to gender or ability, Gregory's depiction relates directly to the way in which the human icon is created as an icon who bears God's Spirit. Unlike the modern concern over how the divine image serves to distinguish human persons from other animals, Gregory is concerned to distinguish human persons from other kinds of images and idols. Whilst space does not allow for the exploration of the implications of this, I suggest that Gregory's approach is compelling because it lifts discussion of the divine image out of the deep hole dug by debates which insist on asserting human uniqueness over and against other animals on the basis of rationality.

I close by observing that, despite his extensive treatment of the human icon, Gregory does not aim to provide the definitive word on this enquiry; rather he recognises the complexity of being an image of God. Gregory asked, 'Who was I at first? And who am I now? And who shall I become? I don't know clearly'.⁵⁹ We should heed this caution as we continue to wrestle with how to speak about the human icon.

⁵⁸ Oration 14.1.4 (PG 35: 876, l. 9).

⁵⁹ Carm. 1.2.14 (PG 37: 757, l. 17).