Introduction

The Council of Chalcedon bestowed the title ‘Blessed Gregory, the Theologian’ upon Saint Gregory of Nazianzus in AD 451.¹ Along with Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Symeon the ‘New Theologian’, Gregory is one of only three theologians on whom the title has been conferred in the Eastern Christian tradition. Born circa AD 329 to Gregory the Elder, Bishop of Nazianzus, Gregory’s extensive education equipped him with the philosophical and rhetorical skills to theologise in a vast array of Greek literary forms. This led Gregory to become the most quoted author in Byzantine ecclesiastical literature, after the Bible.² His neologism ‘theosis’ continues to be applied in contemporary theology as the chief term used to describe deification.

Our theologian espouses a complex approach to the image of God, vis-à-vis the imago Dei, which spans his vast corpus of orations, poems and letters. Recognising the mystery of being an imago Dei, Gregory asks, ‘Who was I at first? Moreover, who am I now? And, who shall I become? I don’t know clearly.’³ Despite Gregory’s ambivalent response to his

³ Carm. 1.2.14 (PG 37, 757, 17). In order to highlight the nuances in the texts, the translations are my own throughout the book, unless stated otherwise. See the Appendix for details of the editions and texts consulted.

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rhetorical questions, a close reading of the texts reveals a cohesive narrative concerning humankind. Gregory’s vision of the imago Dei differs from the predominant contemporary approach, which tends to view the imago Dei through a single lens, thereby reducing the imago to a single category of analysis. Traditionally, theologians have categorised the imago Dei as structural, relational, or functional, where ‘structural’ relates to the various capacities of the human person, for example, rationality or free will,4 ‘relational’ considers the imago Dei in light of the relationship within the Trinity,5 and ‘functional’ conveys how a human person achieves the task of being an imago Dei.6 These interpretations are not satisfactory in themselves, since independently they cannot encapsulate the summation of human persons as they image God. Moreover, they are subject to critiques of exclusion, theological abstraction, and biblical errancy. In light of this, vociferous discussions continue in contemporary systematic theology, theological anthropology, and biblical studies. Over the past few decades, a number of theologians have responded, quite rightly, by emphasising the importance of viewing the imago Dei through a christological lens.7 Added to this, those writing on the Christian doctrine of humanity have begun to attend to the need for a robust pneumatological account of the imago Dei.8

Gregory, on the other hand, not only incorporates all of these, but also describes the lived experience of being an imago Dei. His narrative offers contemporary theologians a fresh and comprehensive mode of discussing the imago Dei. Rather than viewing the imago Dei through a single lens,

Gregory offers a nuanced account, which resembles a richly coloured tapestry into which he has woven myriad threads. He establishes his vision by narrating the *imago Dei* as a dynamic existence, which encompasses both the human person’s life on earth and her telos. For Gregory, this relates to being and becoming a divine image (*eikon* θεοῦ). Moreover, Gregory situates the drama of human experience in the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and restoration, thus presenting a worldview where human persons inhabit a conceptual world consisting of good and evil spirits. He describes at length the numerous problems created by evil spirits, which result from the fallen angel Lucifer’s banishment from heaven. Journeying towards God entails the free will of the *imago Dei*, which renders the human person vulnerable to the world, the flesh, and the devil, with her divinity constantly at risk.

Forthwith, I will generally use the transliteration *eikon* in order to create space for an interpretation which incorporates visibility and relays Gregory’s broad interpretation as much as possible. The usual descriptions, ‘divine image’, ‘image of God’, or ‘imago Dei’, do not necessarily suggest physicality; consequently, they may be interpreted in abstract terms. In some instances, Gregory uses shorthand to describe the human person simply as ‘the *eikon*’, rather than the ‘*eikon* of God’. I follow his usage throughout the book in order to remain as faithful as possible to the texts. The final point regarding *ἡ ἑικὼν* is that it is a feminine noun. To reflect this, from herein, I use the feminine pronoun or possessive adjective throughout the book when referring to the human *eikon*. I also make this move because we may assume a ‘she’ as much as a ‘he’ when describing an individual human person.

On some occasions, Gregory explicitly describes the *eikon* quite literally as a physical, visible *eikon*. He achieves this by conflating the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2:

... a mortal human (βροτός) was made from earth (χοῦς) and breath (πνῆ), an *eikon* of the immortal One (ἀθανάτωτοι ἑικὼν). 11

We will explore the implications of this move through the course of the book. Observe how, on other occasions, Gregory likens the *eikon* to the soul (ψυχή) or spiritual intellect (νοῦς), as that which is invisible:

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9 For comment on Gregory’s use of genre and rhetoric, see the Appendix.
10 Carm. 2.1.50 (PG 37, 1389, 61–62).
11 Carm. 1.1.8 (PG 37, 452, 74–75); 1.1.10 (PG 37, 469, 58); Or. 3.7 (SC 247, 250); 40.10 (SC 358, 218); 40.14 (SC 358, 226).
Above, at first glance, the eikon equates to the spiritual intellect. In light of this, commentators generally conclude that Gregory understands the eikon as the soul or the spiritual intellect.¹³ On the one hand, this claim is correct since, following Origen,¹⁴ Gregory refers to the divine image as either the spiritual intellect (σώματος) or the soul (ψυχή) on numerous occasions.¹⁵ This is important to note, since I am not contending that the secondary literature has, hitherto, misinterpreted Gregory’s depiction of the human eikon; rather, scholars have not yet delineated the full breadth of Gregory’s vision and the implications of his account.¹⁶ Possibly this is

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¹² Or. 22.13 (SC 270, 248). Contemporary English translations often translate σώματος as ‘mind’, ‘intellect’, or ‘rationality’, all of which suggest ‘reason’. For Gregory, σώματος is that aspect of the soul through which human persons experience and perceive God; it relates to the spiritual realm. Thus, by translating σώματος as ‘spiritual intellect’, I mean to move away from a kind of intellectual exercise and towards the idea that human persons yearn for and apprehend God to varying degrees through σώματος.


¹⁵ Or. 14.2 (PG 35, 860B–861A); 22.14 (SC 270, 248–49); 28.17 (SC 250, 134); 32.27 (SC 318, 142–44); Carm. 1.2.1 (PG 37, 529, 97).

¹⁶ Gregory’s anthropology incorporates both di- and tri-chotomist ideas, where the human person is presented both as body (σώματος) and soul (ψυχή), and as dust (σκοτεία), spiritual
Introduction

because few full-length studies exist which consider in depth Gregory’s approach; analyses on Gregory’s account of the human eikon most often consist of a single chapter or paragraph in a study dedicated to broader aspects of Gregory’s thought. Exceptions to this are scholars such as Philippe Molac, who provides an extensive account of key words and concepts linked to the eikon. He demonstrates that Gregory’s description of the spiritual intellect (νοημ) is inseparably linked with flesh (σάρξ) through the soul (ψυχή). Molac develops this in light of Christology; here we aim to explore the breadth of what this may mean for the human person as an eikon of God.

An apparent discrepancy exists between the eikon described as the invisible soul within the human person and the visible eikon as the whole human person, creating a problem for interpreters. We shall see that Gregory weaves various interpretations into his overall account, in order to depict the complexity of human existence. Whilst it is customary amongst theologians to ask, ‘What Is the eikon?’ Gregory appears not to be so concerned with this particular question. Rather, he pays more attention to describing the mystery of human experience and what it is like to be an eikon. Added to this, if we consider the occasions on which Gregory speaks about the human person as a mixture (μίξις) of dust and eikon, we may observe that the eikon transforms the dust and renders it spiritual, following the mixture of Christ. Therefore, when Gregory speaks about the eikon as the soul or the spiritual intellect, it is possible

intellect (νοημ), and spirit (ψυχή). For example: body and soul: Or. 2.17 (SC 247, 112); 7.21 (SC 405, 232); 18.3 (PG 35, 988B–990A); flesh and spirit: Or. 7.23 (SC 405, 240); 40.2 (SC 358, 200); dust, spiritual intellect and spirit: Or. 32.9 (SC 318, 104). On the dual nature of Gregory’s anthropology, see Ellverson, The Dual Nature of Man, passim.

See for example, Børtnes, ‘Rhetoric and Mental Images in Gregory’, 56. The author comments on Gregory’s approach to the human eikon with respect to Origen’s anthropology, but does not develop the full breadth of Gregory’s thought on the human eikon.

that he has in mind the whole human person as a visible *eikon* because the *eikon* transforms the dust and the two form a unity.

Throughout the course of this book, I shall argue that Gregory’s vision is inspired to a great extent by biblical and extra-biblical literature, beginning with Gregory’s description of Christ as the ‘identical *Eikon*’.  

To ascertain this, we will compare heuristically the biblical and extra-biblical narratives from which Gregory draws inspiration. This is not to suggest that Gregory applies biblical concepts to the exclusivity of philosophical thought. I do not support a polarised approach, which posits early Christians as writing either biblically or philosophically. The trend, which posits Greek philosophy as the enemy of Christianity, stems from the late nineteenth century. Adolf Harnack made a vociferous attack on the early church fathers, accusing them of infiltrating the gospel with Hellenism. Harnack’s Western post-Enlightenment worldview meant that he believed Scripture and philosophy to be incompatible. Ayres has critiqued this, offering a corrective view. He argues that whilst biblical texts provide the ‘primary resource for the Christian imagination, [they] may be explicated through the use of whatever lies to hand and that may be persuasively adapted’. Gregory speaks for himself when he refers to the Platonists as ‘those who have thought best about God and are nearest to us’.

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19 Or. 38.13 (SC 358, 132).
21 A number of Western scholars have responded by attempting to distance Gregory from Greek philosophy; for example, Jean Plagnieux concludes that in Gregory, ‘we are far from Plato, Philo, Plotinus and Origen’; *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze théologien* (Paris: Éditions Franciscaines, 1951), 427.
24 Or. 31.5 (SC 250, 282–84).
between the Platonists and the Christians, whilst observing that the philosophers make an invaluable contribution to Christian theology.

Our theologian’s dynamic approach to the eikon, which emphasises both divinity and vulnerability, unfolds throughout the following chapters. The book shadows closely the sequence of Gregory’s own narrative in order to present his nuanced vision of the human eikon. Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of Gregory’s hermeneutics, arguing that Gregory interprets the whole biblical narrative in light of Christ and the salvation story. Therefore, if we are to present as faithfully as possible Gregory’s vision of the human eikon, we must begin with Christ, the ‘identical Eikon’. We move on to establish the predominant biblical themes which feed into Gregory’s multifaceted account of the human eikon. These include beliefs about the divine presence manifested through images and idols, ethics, and an interesting thread which concerns the spiritual warfare between the human eikon and the devil. The title ‘devil’ is used interchangeably with ‘Satan’ throughout the book; these are two of the many common epithets used by Gregory to denote the concept of ‘powers of opposition’ within the Christian tradition.

In Chapter 2, we will establish that Gregory considers anthropology within the theological framework of his doctrine of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and in particular the Son, who is the ‘identical Eikon’. Gregory speaks of Christ as the Eikon in a way that denotes Christ’s ontological imaging of the Father. Christ is a divine, living, and dynamic Eikon, which differentiates Christ from motionless images. Thus, for Gregory, eikon signifies ‘likeness to’ rather than ‘difference from’. Secondly, Gregory goes to great lengths to argue that Christ is unified, which has significant implications on the way in which Gregory considers the physicality of the human eikon. Thirdly, Christ’s kenosis makes possible the theosis of the human eikon. Finally, Christ battles with and defeats the devil, restoring the potential divinity of the eikon and securing the eikon’s victory over the devil.

Continuing the narrative of the existence of the eikon, Chapter 3 examines the creation of the human eikon, pointing to the significance of the materiality and visibility of the eikon when compared to the invisibility of angels. This relates to how Gregory depicts the eikon as divine. Due to his narration of how God mixes the spiritual eikon with the dust, and in light of the unity of the ‘identical Eikon’, I contend that Gregory portrays the eikon and the dust becoming a unity, thus a single, living human person. Drawing from Genesis 1, Gregory argues explicitly that God creates women and men equally as eikones. Moreover, he writes
about the female eikon in a manner which demonstrates further his view of the eikon quite literally as a physical, living, and divine eikon of God.

Chapter 4 moves on to explore Gregory’s re-telling of the fall against the backdrop of the ‘garments of glory’ tradition. After being persuaded by the devil to eat the fruit in paradise, the eikon is banished and clothed in garments of ‘thick, dull flesh’, which equates to the eikon being shrouded in sin. This renders the human person at greater risk from the devil. Here, we examine the way in which Gregory discusses the devil, arguing that Gregory attributes to the devil a diminishing existence. The battles with the spiritual powers of darkness form a primary strand in Gregory’s narrative of the eikon’s existence, in which the devil hovers behind conversations of sin, the flesh, the world, and the passions.

Having followed the wounding of the eikon through the fall, the closing chapter attends to the eikon’s restoration and theosis which, Gregory stipulates, begins at baptism. The argument proceeds as follows: if we consider together (a) Gregory’s theological anthropology in which God creates the human person specifically to be vulnerable or porous (borrowing these terms from Charles Taylor) to the spiritual realm, (b) Gregory’s high pneumatology, (c) his ideas about the sacrament of baptism, and (d) the interaction between the eikon of God and the devil, we can interpret the divinity of the eikon literally and in the broadest terms, since it incorporates the ontological, functional, ethical, relational, and experiential aspects of being a divine eikon.

Finally, I argue that Gregory’s narrative of the human person as an eikon of God is summarised best as ‘divine, yet vulnerable’. This reflects Gregory’s multifaceted approach, which relates to both human nature and experience. My use of ‘vulnerable’ is not intended to suggest that God might wound the human eikon in any way; rather, it is applied to indicate a kind of openness which may be positive or negative. The eikon is positively vulnerable (or porous) to God, having been created with the purpose of becoming ‘divine’, but at the same time negatively vulnerable to ‘the world, the flesh, and the devil’.

I apply ontological to denote the first order of things from which the epistemological and moral stem, and as a means of describing the reality of the divinity of the eikon. In later chapters, when I refer to the transformation of the human eikon as ontological, I do not imply that she has crossed the gap (διάπτυμον) between herself and God. My argument is that the manner in which the eikon increases in divinity applies quantitatively and not qualitatively, since God alone is ontologically divine.
This chapter argues that Scripture forms the basis of Gregory’s vision of the human eikon. As observed in the Introduction, the fourth century was a complex syncretism of philosophical trends and ideas; undoubtedly, Gregory absorbed a variety of beliefs. Gregory’s work has been read traditionally in light of Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Plotinus, Philo, and Origen. Towards the turn of the last century, scholars began to explore more fully the way in which Gregory uses Scripture in order to make his claims about doctrine. Frances Young, Ben Fulford, Brian Matz, Paul Gallay, and Kristoffel Demoen provide a sample of those who have...
brought to the fore different aspects of Gregory’s exegesis and made clear the extent to which Gregory draws on Scripture to form his arguments.

Beginning with a brief overview of Gregory’s hermeneutics, we shall see that Gregory approaches the Bible primarily in light of Jesus Christ as the ‘focal centre of God’s ordering of all of history’. Moving on from here, we explore the predominant biblical themes from which Gregory draws in order to form his vision of the human *eikon*. These entail Christ the visible *Eikon*, beliefs about images and idols in light of the creation narratives in Genesis, the ethical implications of being an *eikon*, and later pseudepigraphal interpretations which set the *eikon* in a cosmological battle with the devil. Like the church fathers before him, Gregory deploys *eikon* in a variety of ways, describing primarily the human person and Christ, but also referring to metaphors, paintings, and pagan statues.

Gregory’s broad application reflects the fact that *eikon* plays a substantial role in patristic theology, occupying over five pages in Lampe’s *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, compared with less than a page in Liddell, Scott, and Jones’ *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Deriving from *eikon*, which translates as ‘to be like, to seem’, *eikônos* can mean ‘likeness’ in the sense of that which is physical, such as a picture or a statue, or that which is immaterial, for example, a phantom or semblance. We shall see that this melting pot of interpretations feed into Gregory’s overall vision of the *eikon*. Although Christian iconography began to be discussed by Christians in the fourth century, we do not move on to discuss this since Gregory himself mentions only pagan images.


9 For *eikon* being used to depict paintings, see Or. 2.11 (SC 247, 104); 4.65 (SC 309, 172); 4.80 (SC 309, 202); 11.2 (SC 405, 332); 14.32 (PG 35, 900D); 21.22 (SC 270, 156); *eikon* as metaphor: Carm. 1.2.24 (PG 37, 793, 37); *eikon* as pagan statues: Or. 11.5 (SC 405, 338); Carm. 1.2.27 (PG 37, 854, 8).


10 The Image of God in the Theology of Gregory of Nazianzus