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Aristotle: *His* Categories *and the Mystery of God*

We shall divide our coverage of Aristotle into two parts. Here we shall cover Aristotle's *Categories* because it, along with another work in logic, *On Interpretation*, are his only works known from ancient times right through the Dark Ages (after the fall of Rome). It was not until the middle of the twelfth century that the rest of Aristotle's works started to become available in the Latin West. Before that the Greek Fathers had used him only sparingly within their Platonism; Basil of Caesarea (ca. 300–379) was an exception. We shall then consider a brief selection on the Trinity from the writings of one of the greatest interpreters and defenders of the Council of Nicaea (325). By putting this and the other philosophical material we have covered into action, so to speak, we shall illustrate its value for understanding theology.

Although Aristotle's *Categories* is far-reaching in its implications, its basic ideas can be stated rather simply. First, there are individuals, such as a particular person, a particular horse, a particular cabbage. We often refer to them by proper names, such as "Bill" or "Dobbin," or we point to them and say, "That cabbage!" Aristotle calls such individuals "primary substances."

Second, individuals such as people, horses, and cabbages have qualities, such as colors. Qualities are said to be "present in" primary substances, that is they cannot exist independently or apart from individuals. (For example, green cannot exist independently of

individuals which are green.) To *predicate* a quality of an individual (to say, "That cabbage is green") requires words that are general. A word used exclusively to speak of one individual is not a predicate. It is a proper name, like "Bill" or "Dobbin." The word "green" is a predicate because it is used to speak of the color of anything which is green and not to speak of the color of a single object only. This is possible because colors such as the various shades of green are similar to one another. So we may use a word such as "green" to speak of all of them; and we may say, "That cabbage is green," predicating "greenness" of that cabbage because its color is similar to the color of other particular cabbages and indeed, to the color of other particular things. Thus we have a distinction between primary substances and accidents (substances, and qualities "present in" substances). It is also a distinction between subjects and predicates, things we say of subjects. Now we may make another important distinction. Individuals or particular substances not only have qualities but they can also be grouped into *kinds* of substances. Particular men are similar to each other and so, because they are alike, we can speak of all of them as "men." So too of horses and cabbages. We may say, "Bill is a man," "Dobbin is a horse," and "That is a cabbage." "Man," "horse," and "cabbage" can be predicated of individual substances then. They will tell us the *kind* of individual substance a particular substance is. We can consider the likeness between kinds of individuals–species–such as the likeness between men and horses, and so form the idea of the genus, "animal." These too may be predicated of individuals: "Bill is an animal," and "Dobbin is an animal." Or we may even make the combination, "Bill is a man, and man is an animal," "Dobbin is a horse, and a horse is an animal." Genera (the way species are alike) and species are called "secondary substances" in contrast to individual substances or primary substances. (Aristotle does not use the expressions "primary substance" and "secondary substance" in his other writings, but he retains the distinction. He speaks of substances and genera and species. But regardless of his terminology, the idea of *kinds* of substances is absolutely vital to his philosophy. It is worth remembering when thinking about "kinds" or "sorts" of individuals that "genus" comes from the Greek word *genesis* meaning "birth," so that the notion of secondary sub-

stance is closely related to *natural* kinds of things which are propagated by birth, in contrast to artificial things. But he applies the terms genus and species to both natural and artificial kinds of things.

The most important things we predicate of an individual (for philosophical purposes, as we shall see) are its genus and species. They give us its essence; they tell us *what* the individual is; they tell us the *kind* of being it is. (It is a man; it is a horse; it is a cabbage. The "it" in each instance refers to a primary substance; "man," "horse," "cabbage" refer to the kind of thing each "it" is.) The other things we predicate of a primary substance do *not* tell us the kind of thing it is. So there are two types of predicates: those which tell us the kind of thing each individual thing is and those which do not. Secondary substances tell us what a substance is *essentially*; the other predicates tell us what it is *accidentally*. (For example, Bill is five-feet tall and white. But a man may be six-feet tall and yellow. So in order to be a man Bill does not need to be as tall as he is or white.)

We may put the distinction in another way. We have a major division between substances and accidents (between individuals and what is present in them). We have a distinction between substances themselves: individual substances (primary substances) and *kinds* of substances (secondary substances). Genera and species, which group individual substances into various kinds of substance, and accidents are predicated of primary substances. But only genera and species give us what is essential to a primary substance, that is, tell us what a primary substance *must* have in order to be that particular kind of reality.

Altogether there are ten categories (the number varies in other works). Primary and secondary substances make up the first of the ten categories. Those attributes which are "present in" primary substances are grouped into nine categories, according to their similarities. The nine types of attributes present in substances are quantity, quality, relation, place, time, posture, having (for example, a coat on), action, and being acted on. These nine categories are the most general *kinds* of predicate terms (or classes of predicates). We may illustrate these nine categories by the following. "Bill is six-feet tall, white, across the market place, in Athens, in the morning, standing up, with a coat on, talking to someone, and feeling hot." None of

these attributes is *essential* to "being a man" (species) or to "being an animal" (genus). They are ways a man, who is an animal, *may* be. But only the genus and species tell us what the individual Bill must be in order to be the kind of individual he is (a man, who is an animal). We do not, however, *define* an individual (Bill). We *identify* individuals, and define *species* (man). We define a species (man) by giving its genus and difference (animal, rational).

In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle says that the categories are the senses in which a thing may be said "to be." In one sense "being" (*ousia*) means an individual substance; in another sense, "being" means "what a thing is"; in still another sense it means "a thing is of such and such a quantity, quality, relation, etc." But to be an individual (primary) substance is the fundamental sense of being. There are kinds of substances only because there are individual substances; and "good" or "sitting" must be said of that which is good or sitting. Therefore, that which "is" *primarily and simply* (not "is something") is primary substance.

Now let us assume a person has this information about Aristotle's *Categories* and that he or she reads Gregory of Nyssa's Letter 38, written about 380, in which he seeks to inform his correspondents of the proper way to speak of the unity of the Trinity. It is my claim that he or she will be able to avoid an *incorrect* interpretation of Gregory and also be able to form a basically sound understanding of what Gregory is saying about the unity of God. We shall quote only the opening part of Gregory's letter, which was for many centuries incorrectly attributed to his older brother, Basil the Great. These two brothers, along with their friend Gregory of Nazianzus, referred to as the Cappadocian Fathers, are responsible for fixing the language and meaning of the Trinity as *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis*, the Greek equivalent of "one substance, three persons," which is a translation from Latin. Gregory writes:

> 1. Many persons, in their study of the sacred dogmas, failing to distinguish between what is common in the essence or substance, and the meaning of the hypostases, arrive at the same notions, and think that it makes no difference whether οὐσία or hypostasis be spoken of. The result is that some of those who accept statements on these subjects without any enquiry, are pleased to speak of "one hypostasis," just as they do of

one "essence" or "substance;" while on the other hand those who accept three hypostases are under the idea that they are bound in accordance with this confession, to assert also, by numerical analogy, three essences or substances. Under these circumstances, lest you fall into similar error, I have composed a short treatise for you by way of memorandum. The meaning of the words, to put it shortly, is as follows:

2. Of all nouns the sense of some, which are predicated of subjects plural and numerically various, is more general; as for instance *man*. When we so say, we employ the noun to indicate the common nature, and do not confine our meaning to any one man in particular who is known by that name. Peter, for instance is no more *man*, than Andrew, John, or James. The predicate therefore being common, and extending to all the individuals ranked under the same name, requires some note of distinction whereby we may understand not man in general, but Peter or John in particular.

Of some nouns on the other hand the denotation is more limited; and by the aid of the limitation we have before our minds not the common nature, but a limitation of anything, having, so far as the peculiarity extends, nothing in common with what is of the same kind; as for instance, Paul or Timothy. For, in a word, of this kind there is no extension to what is common in the nature; there is a separation of certain circumscribed conceptions from the general idea, and expression of them by means of their names. Suppose then that two or more are set together, as, for instance, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, and that an enquiry is made into the essence or substance of humanity;[1] no one will give one definition of essence or substance in the case of Paul, a second in that of Silvanus, and a third in that of Timothy; but the same words which have been employed in setting forth the essence or substance of Paul will apply to the others also. Those who are described by the same definition of essence or substance are of the same essence or substance when the enquirer has learned what is common, and turns his attention to the differentiating properties whereby one is distinguished from another, the definition by which each is known will no longer tally in all particulars with the definition of another, even though in some points it be found to agree.

3. My statement, then, is this. That which is spoken of in a special and peculiar manner is indicated by the name of the hypostasis. Suppose we say "a man." The indefinite meaning of the word strikes a certain vague sense upon the ears. The nature is indicated, but what subsists and is specially and peculiarly indicated by the name is not made plain. Suppose we say "Paul." We set forth, by what is indicated by the name, the nature subsisting.

This then is the hypostasis, or "*understanding*;" not the indefinite conception of the essence or substance, which, because what is signified

is general, finds no "*standing*," but the conception which by means of the expressed peculiarities gives *standing* and circumscription to the general and uncircumscribed.*

Gregory writes this letter, he tells us to keep people from using *ousia* and *hypostasis* interchangeably. If one fails to distinguish the two terms, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are one *ousia* are also one *hypostasis*. As one hypostasis, they would be one individual, and this would fail to acknowledge that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are irreducibly distinct. On the other hand, one who accepts three *hypostaseis* (that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct and irreducible to one another) would think that they are three *ousioi*, and thus destroy the unity of God. Gregory draws a distinction between *hypostasis* and *ousia*, between individuals and their common nature, so that *hypostasis* and *ousia* are not to be used interchangeably.

Some nouns, he writes, are predicated of more than one subject, such as the noun "man." The noun refers to a common nature (humanity), and it is not confined to any one man in particular. Peter is no more man than is Andrew. Gregory refers to the common nature as "essence or substance" (as this translation renders *ousia*). "Man" corresponds to Aristotle's secondary substance (*deutra ousia*); "man" for Aristotle refers to a species.

Other nouns which are names, Gregory continues, denote individuals, such as Peter, Andrew, Paul. Gregory refers to an individual as *hypostasis*. His use parallels Aristotle's primary substance (*protê ousia*) or individual beings. Should anyone ask for the essence or substance of "humanity," Gregory points out, he or she will not be given one definition for Paul, a second for Sylvanus, and a third for Timothy. The same definition will be used to give the essence or substance of all men. They are of the same essence or substance (*homoousioi*). So Gregory claims that *ousia* and *hypostasis* are not to be used interchangeably: *ousia* refers to essence or substance; *hypostasis* refers to individuals, who may have a common *ousia* or a common nature.

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* From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2d ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Blomfield Jackson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 8:137–38. Volume contains the works of Basil.

This much of Gregory we can follow easily because it runs parallel to Aristotle's distinction between primary substance and secondary substance. But Gregory does not apply the words *ousia* and *hypostasis* to God in precisely the same way as he does to individuals such as Peter, Andrew, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct and yet united. This is similar to but not identical with saying that Peter, Andrew, and Paul are individuals yet they are united because they have a common nature. Gregory makes the distinction between individuals and the nature they share in the case of people and ordinary things to keep us from using *hypostasis* and *ousia* interchangeably in speaking of God. But when it comes to speaking of the *unity* of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *ousia* does not mean the same as it does when it refers to the common nature of Peter, Andrew, and Paul. Peter, Andrew, and Paul share a common nature as men—they are of the same *ousia*—but they are not so united that they are *one man*. They are *three men*. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have a common nature as God—the same *ousia*—but they are not *three Gods*. They are *one God*. So the *ousia* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not a secondary substance, that is, a genus or species.

We thus see that Gregory transcends Aristotle's *Categories*. It is a mistake to think that he believes God's unity is identical with the unity between individuals (e.g., men) who have the same *ousia*. But it is only by a knowledge of Aristotle's *Categories* that we can understand the charge commonly made that Gregory tries to account for the Trinity along Aristotelian lines (and thus so emphasize the distinctiveness of individuals as to fail adequately to preserve the unity of God). Gregory knows that the unity of individuals sharing a common nature is at best only analogous to the distinctiveness and unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even if one interprets him with a Platonic understanding of common natures in which particulars participate in a single Form (so that the unity between individuals is greater than that to be found in Aristotle), Gregory clearly believes that the unity of individuals is only a reflection of the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He writes,

> Yet receive what I say as at best a token and reflection of the truth; not as the actual truth itself. For it is not possible that there should be complete correspondence between what is seen in the tokens and the objects in reference to which the use of tokens is adopted.*

His stress on the distinction between *hypostasis* and *ousia* when we are dealing with people is intended to keep us from using the terms interchangeably; for if the terms are used interchangeably, we are either led to deny the distinctions between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or led to affirm three gods. On the other hand, the way we use *hypostasis* and *ousia* for people is only an analogy for their proper use for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *ousia* of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not a secondary substance; for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not *have* the same *ousia*, they *are* the same *ousia*. They are one *ousia* because they are one God. Neither of the two kinds of unity—that of an individual (a *hypostasis*) and that of a common nature (having the same *ousia*)—is the unity God has. There is only a similarity between the unity of several individuals that have a common nature and the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We shall not seek here to give an extended account of Gregory of Nyssa's views on the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for our purpose is merely to give an example of how the philosophical material in this book can enable us better to understand a major doctrine and a major theologian. The text we selected is particularly suited for our purpose and such a rich return cannot be expected with every doctrine and theologian that one examines. On the other hand, the text we have examined is a famous one by a theologian whose work on a central doctrine of Christianity was critical in establishing its meaning.

An understanding of Aristotle's *Categories* also makes the questions raised about the Council of Nicaea more intelligible. Did the Council understand the oneness in substance (*ousia*) to mean a generic unity, so that it is the *likeness* or *coequality* of substance (*homoiousia*) that is affirmed? Or was oneness in substance intended to mean a *unity* of substance (*homoousia*)? These issues are also raised about Athanasius' understanding of the nature of the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as about the understanding of all three of the Cappadocian Fathers.

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* Ibid., p. 139.

There is one other very important point which the brief text from Gregory of Nyssa enables us to make about the nature of theology. The hiddenness of God, or the mystery of the divine being, which must permeate all theological reflection, is not to be called on *arbitrarily*. It is rather at specific junctures when we recognize that we have reached a point where the truth is beyond our capacity to comprehend that we may ascribe our ignorance to mystery. One of these junctures is well illustrated by Gregory's reflections on the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Their unity is beyond the concepts we use to characterize the unity of people and things. Our understanding of God arises from our reflections on God's operations or actions (*energeia*) by which God relates to us.* Some conception of the divine nature is available to us from divine operations, and God's works are believed to be faithful to God's essence. But our conceptions do not exhaust God's being nor enable us fully to comprehend it. From our apprehension of the divine operations—and not from some philosophical notions or some mystical ideas about the absolute transcendence of God—we recognize that God is Creator and Redeemer. We can understand that our redemption is achieved by God's incarnation. We also understand from an examination of revelation that the Creator and Redeemer (God the Father and Jesus Christ) are not reducible to each other. It is also clear in the Bible that God is One. It is the *way* these things are connected that is beyond our comprehension. Mystery arises then, not because we cannot understand various things about God's nature, such as that God is Creator and Redeemer, but that God is One in all the diversity of divine actions. It is rather that we have no concepts or models which enable us to understand the *way* God is united in all the diversity of divine actions, or the way God is One. So it is by means of God's operations which reveal God's nature to us as Creator and Redeemer that we also know that God's being is a mystery to us.

* Christian theologians changed the terminology that Plotinus used. He has the pattern of One (*mone*)–emanation (prodos)–return (*epistrophe*). In its place they put Being (*ousia*)–power (*dunamis*)–act (*energeia*). Since God's thoughts are never frustrated but achieve actualization, power or the capacity to act and its achievement or act are frequently coalesced and referred to together as *energeia*. We are thus left with *ousia*, the divine essence or nature, and the divine *energeia*, divine operation or act.

Even though the divine unity is unique and cannot be reduced either to the relations between various creatures (like a genus that unites various individuals) or to the type of unity exhibited by an individual (so that the diversity of God's operations as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is collapsed into one individual), some understanding of that unity is possible by means of analogies. That God has acted and that some of the relations between those actions have been revealed are not at issue in such reflection. So its tentative and even speculative nature casts no doubt upon the truth of what has been revealed. Although it is speculative, it is sometimes religiously rewarding. Since God is the object of our thought, the better God is apprehended, the greater is our joy.

This kind of theological inquiry will be illustrated by a brief examination of Augustine's reflections on the unity of the divine Trinity. It is indeed "faith seeking understanding." Engaging in this kind of reflection on the mystery of God does not in itself commit a person to the Platonist's tendency to associate an increase in knowledge with an advance in spiritual condition. Nor does it commit us to the Platonist's goal of passing beyond conceptual knowledge to a vision of the Good, as in Plato, or to union with the One, as in Plotinus. It is rather that we can get some knowledge—conceptual knowledge—of God by reflecting on the revelation of God by means of some analogies. And we can also come to see that God is beyond such analogies, and so recognize that God transcends our conceptual knowledge and the creatures which we use in our analogies in order to gain some understanding.

In the selection we examined, Gregory of Nyssa started with three individuals and worked from diversity toward unity; we shall see that Augustine begins his reflection with the consciousness of a single mind and works toward diversity. These starting points are said to be quite typical of the Greek Fathers and of the Latin Church which follows Augustine, the greatest western theologian of ancient times.

Augustine, no more than Gregory of Nyssa, thought that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are One because they are primary substance (an individual as you and I are individuals) or a secondary substance (united by sharing a genus or species). Gregory looked to

secondary substances–to the way things share a common nature–to find an analogy for the unity of God. Augustine, however, looked to primary substance, in particular to the mind of human beings, for an analogy for the diversity and unity of God. Augustine used the human mind as his analogue because human beings are created in God's image. Physical nature reflects the greatness and goodness of God, but only human beings are said to be made in God's *image*. So a human being is the best creature to examine in our thoughts on the Trinity; we should be able to find in ourselves "trinities" which are images of the Trinity.

Augustine distinguishes three things: (1) the human mind, (2) its power to know and love, and (3) ourselves as the object of our knowledge and love. Each of these is distinct and irreducible to the others. There must be a subject to exhibit its powers of knowing and loving; there must be an object to know and love. When we know and love ourselves, we are both the subject of knowing and loving and the object of knowing and loving, and it is our knowledge and love by which we are related to ourselves as subject and object. All three–(1) knower and lover, (2) object of knowledge and love, and (3) knowing and loving–are *relations*. That is they do not exist without each other. If there is a knower and lover, there is knowing and loving, and there is also an object known and loved.

The three are substantive and not properties of a subject, as are color and shape. Color and shape are in a body; they cannot be transferred and belong to another body. But the mind can know and love not only itself but also objects outside itself. So knowledge and love do not belong to the mind like a property does to a body. Knowing and loving are as substantive as the mind itself.

Although distinct, the relations of subject, object, and knowing and loving are inseparable and wholly involved in each other. They are thus a substance. Its oneness is not the *subject* to the exclusion of being the object or to the exclusion of being its powers; nor is the oneness the object to the exclusion of being the subject and powers; nor powers to the exclusion of being subject and object. What is the substance? It is subject, object, and powers.

This forms an analogy for the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is not that one is subject, another object, and the third

powers which relate subject to object. Each is a power (acts); each is an object (of the other's acts); each is a subject (with the others as objects of its acts). They are thus one *God*, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our material on the Platonic tradition enables us to realize how seriously the notion of an *image* is taken by Augustine as a way to increase our knowledge. Analogies are not mere chance similarities. Since every creature is a limited version of a greater perfection, similarities are guides to genuine knowledge or realities beyond the material world. In Christianity human beings alone bear God's image; all other creatures are only reflections of the divine. Thus for Augustine as a Christian Platonist, limited human trinities yield genuine knowledge of the divine Trinity. The Platonic tradition reinforces the conviction that our knowledge is always limited since any representation is always less than its exemplar. In Augustine in particular, the "trinities" to be found in us, who alone are made in the divine image, are not enough like God's Trinity to enable us to comprehend the unity and diversity of God. The agents we are give us some idea of the unity to be found in God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the agents we are do not enable us to comprehend a unity that can include such an act as the incarnation. Or put in another way, God's unity in diversity so exceeds ours that we do not even have an image of the most important feature of that unity, namely the unity which includes the capacity to become incarnate.

Augustine's predilection for looking to the inner relations of the mind as the main guide for understanding is natural for one influenced by Platonism. For although nature is the handiwork of mind, and so reflects the divine mind, human beings because they have minds are more like it than its other handiworks are. So the unity and diversity of the human mind is a better guide than the unity and diversity of ordered objects in the world. Such a stress on the *individual mind* (or rational soul) in isolation from others neglects the way Genesis describes the image of God. The text reads, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). This suggests that a better image for the Trinity may be that of the relationship *between* man and woman, rather than the diversity and unity to be found *within*

the individual soul. It may well be that the doctrine of the Trinity, though expressed accurately enough in terms of the Platonic tradition, ought also to be expressed in other ways as a corrective. People in a different historical era, facing different issues, may find theological illumination from different analogies. Our search for community today may receive guidance concerning what true community is, and what prevents it and what enhances it, from an examination of the relations between man and woman as the divine image, rather than from the isolated individual.

Another place where the mystery of God is encountered is the unity of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ. It is maintained that Jesus is the mediator between God and humankind. We cannot reach God, so God must come to us if we are to be redeemed and to share in the divine life. But we do not know how divine and human natures can be united in one person. We can become a different *kind of person*, but we cannot become a different *kind of being*. We cannot become a tiger—not just have a tiger's body, but become one—and still retain our own identity. But the second person of the Trinity can become another kind of being, a human being, and yet retain identity as God. How the Word of God remains unchanged in the union of the divine and human natures was one of the issues in the Christological controversies in the early centuries of the Christian era.

One tendency was to speak of the Word of God as though human nature were external, as though God were making *use* of a body. But this was immediately challenged by many theologians as utterly inadequate because God can raise us to the level of the divine (be a mediator) only by genuinely becoming what we are, human beings. So it is stressed in the final formulation of the Council of Chalcedon (451) that the Word of God is fully united to human nature. Jesus is still the same Word through which and with which God created the heavens and the earth. The Word retains the same personal identity in the change. But the Word now has besides a divine nature, a human one. Our existence as creatures is derived, terminable, and must be sustained; the existence of the Word of God is not derived from, nor terminable by, nor in need of sustenance from any creature. Both remain true when the Word of God becomes human. The

existence of the union itself requires Mary's cooperation; and the union of God and humankind can be terminated by the actions of creatures (Jesus can be killed); and it must be sustained by creatures (air, food, and drink). Thus, human nature is not changed by the divine nature. The Word of God is "impassible," but the *union* of the Word of God with human nature is subject to passions (can be affected, or be passive), threatened with termination, and in need of sustenance, just as we are. How we are to conceive of these two natures both fully present in a union is not known. We do not know the divine nature or the being who can so act as to unite divine nature with human nature.

Theological reflection on the ways God has related to us thus encounters matters which are beyond the intellect. The notion of mystery is not invoked haphazardly. It is rather the being of God, full and complete in itself, which leads us to invoke mystery at specific junctures in our reflections. It is by means of the intellect that we understand where it is impossible for us fully to understand. Such mystery does not lead to unbelief or agnosticism. As Gregory of Nyssa said, it leads to awe and silence in the presence of the divine *ousia*.