
Defending the Faith: A Triumph of Illusion over Reality?

Introduction

On first encountering the ideas of Paul W. Pruyser on the psychology of religion I was struck by the similarities between his approach and that of the fourth century Cappadocian Father, St Gregory of Nazianzus, specifically as presented in his five *Theological Orations*.

Gregory's five *Theological Orations* were preached in Constantinople in the summer of 380 AD, shortly before the second Ecumenical Council in 381, and have since come to be seen as a classic exposition and defence of the doctrine of the Trinity. As the patristic scholar John McGuckin (2001) notes, "in the subsequent history of the ancient Church, these five Orations were never surpassed for their trinitarian doctrine... For centuries after him, this sheaf of Orations became the chief trinitarian curriculum of all the Eastern schools." (p.277).

Given the importance of these "doctrinal" texts, the task I wish to undertake in this paper is to examine Gregory's writings to discover to what extent Gregory might be understood as sharing Pruyser's understanding of doctrine as operating in an "illusionistic" world.

This paper is divided into three sections. To begin, we shall seek to set out Pruyser's distinctive psychological understanding of religion. Secondly, we shall look for areas of agreement in which Gregory and Pruyser can be seen to share the same perspective. Finally, we shall mention the fly in the ointment - "Gregory's incarnational objection".

Pruyser's Psychological Understanding of Religion

Pruyser's psychoanalytical approach to culture led him to criticise traditional psychoanalytic theory which recognises only two worlds "the inner and the outer, the subjective and the objective, the autistic and the realistic" (1985, p.358). Pruyser instead proposed the existence of an additional and separate third "illusionistic world" which exists *sui generis*. This is not the realm of either daydreaming or hard reality, but, according to Pruyser, an intermediate space in which illusionistic thinking comes to the fore.

Since the concept of "illusion" is fundamental to Pruyser's approach, it is essential to understand what he means by this, and especially how this differs from "delusion". Pruyser himself makes this distinction when quoting approvingly from Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) on religion as illusion. Freud states:

An illusion is not the same thing as an error; nor is it necessarily an error... In the case of delusions, we emphasize as essential their being in contradiction with reality. Illusions need not be necessarily false - that is to say, unrealizable or in contradiction to reality. (Freud, 1927, pp.30-31 quoted in Pruyser 1983, p.164)

Whilst Pruyser agrees with Freud on the distinction between illusion and delusion, he disagrees with Freud's dismissive approach to illusion. Indeed, the aim of much of Pruyser's writing is to rescue the sphere of illusion and illusionistic thinking as a positive (indeed necessary) part of healthy human experience and the bedrock of the arts, science and culture as well as the natural realm of religious thinking. Pruyser grants the imagination a perpetual (and positive) place in the human psyche by locating it in his illusionistic world. Imagination and illusion processing are not merely to be left behind as the child develops (1983, p.61), or merely tolerated, but rather "the ethic is that the imagination is to be tutored" (1979a, p.321).

Pruyser's illusionistic world is the sphere of play, creativity & tutored imagination and in his development of this concept he draws on Winnicott's insights (1971/2005) into children's play, the transitional realm and transitional objects. The "playing" involved in Pruyser's illusionistic world is not, however, to be understood as childish, but as "a serious kind of playing in which positivism or the flatfootedness of ordinary reality testing is temporarily kept at bay." (1979a, p.314) and is the location of "ideas and skills, of arts and sciences, of religion and ethics" (ibid.)

Pruyser provides a useful summary of his three worlds in the following table (1979a, p.318) - the distinctiveness of his intermediate illusionistic world is clearly apparent:

<i>Autistic World</i>	<i>Illusionistic World</i>	<i>Realistic World</i>
Untutored fantasy	Tutored fantasy	Sense perception
Omnipotent thinking	Adventurous thinking	Reality testing
Utter whimsicality	Orderly imagination	Hard, undeniable facts
Free associations	Inspired connections	Logical connections
Ineffable images	Verbalizable images	Look-and-see referents
Hallucinatory entities or events	Imaginative entities or events	Actual entities or events
Private needs	Cultural needs	Factual needs
Symptoms	Symbols	Signs, indices
Dreaming	Playing	Working
Sterility	Creativeness	Resourcefulness
Internal object (imago)	Transcendent object prefigured by the child's transitional object	External object

Table 1 - Pruyser's Three Worlds

Having outlined Pruyser's general approach, its origins and points of difference from classical psychoanalysis, we now turn to focus on some elements of Pruyser's formulation which have particular bearing on the psychology of religion, and the question underlying this paper.

Firstly, Pruyser suggests that the illusionistic world is not merely the location of "myths and theories" (1979a, p.319) but also hints that this is *the realm of theological propositions*:

Between utter whimsicality and the hard facts of reality there is room and opportunity for the orderly imagination that has produced novels, poetry, theological and philosophical propositions, musical compositions, choreographic works, and scientific models. Between free associations and logical connections there is room for inspired connections that have heuristic value or produce insight. (1983, p.66)

Might the doctrine of the Trinity be such an heuristic theological proposition, not to be understood as anything more than an illusionistic imaginative concept?

Secondly, Pruyser characterises the illusionistic world as *a place where the rules are different*. Pruyser indicates that the cognitive rules are different in the illusionistic world, involving "special thought patterns... and the delicate mental states of wonder, admiration, cognitive excitement, and curiosity" (1979a, p.317). In addition, Pruyser says that the three worlds each have their own distinctive and special language games which are appropriate for their own sphere - "There is a language of natural science, another language suitable for religion, still another one for the arts, etc." (1979b, p.166). Pruyser is adamant that these distinct languages must not be confused or inappropriately applied to the wrong world - "The language that refers to events in the external natural world is not the same as the language which deals with symbols, or certain class of symbols." (ibid.).

Thirdly, and most importantly for our subsequent investigation of Gregory's text, is Pruyser's concept of a *limit situation*:

Transcendence and mystery... are words designed to describe some essential features of *limit situations* (Jaspers, 1949; Tracy, 1975). It is the human lot to encounter certain personal or collective events that have great existential impact - birth, death, awesome natural threats or disasters, confrontations with exquisite goodness or evil, feelings of guilt or keen anguish, the feeling of being found wanting in some essential way, and thus in need of radical change - all of which drive one to the recognition of one's own limited power, courage, authority, knowledge, reason, radius of action, and perception. Such limit situations often render a person tongue-tied. They push linear reasoning over the brink and greatly tax denominative language. Hence, they promote a switch to symbols, which, like those of the poet, do a better job of evoking and rendering the felt meanings of these experiences than do conceptual thought, thing-language, and purely rational discourse. (1983, p.156)

Pruyser paints a powerful picture of limit situations and the deployment of the language of transcendence and mystery in response to what we might describe as a cognitive and/or experiential overload. Although only hinting at it in the above quotation, in a later paper (1985) Pruyser explicitly connects limit situations with religious experience, highlighting the work of Rudolf Otto (1923/1958) who he says "reconstructed the phenomenology of limit experiences in religion" (p.355). Pruyser is quick to point out, however, that limit situation experiences "need not be dramatic incidents" (ibid.).

To conclude this section we will highlight Pruyser's chief concern with respect to his construction of the illusionistic world and the negative outcomes which can arise in religious circles if this threat is not checked.

Whenever outlining his concept of the illusionistic world, Pruyser is careful to emphasise its finally balanced nature - suspended between the autistic inner world and the realistic external world. Pruyser issues frequent warnings against the pressure to consciously or unconsciously segue from his prized illusionistic manner of thinking into either of the others:

As creations of the imagination, both religion and art have to be distinguished on the one hand from reality in the ordinary sense and on the other hand from solipsistic subjectivity. If too natural, too realistic, art vanishes into mere representation and religion into mere rationality (or fundamentalistic double-talk about an unseen world, taken as literally as the sensory world). If too subjective, too autistic, art and religion will fail to get a hearing since they come too close to delusion and hallucination. (1985, p.359)

Of the two threats from the autistic & realistic worlds, Pruyser sees the greater threat to religion as emerging from the realistic side which co-exists sometimes uncomfortably alongside the illusionistic world with “an undeniable tension, sometimes strife” (1979a, p.321). If this tension cannot be maintained, one of two common outcomes is the result.

Firstly, in a *Dynamic Psychology of Religion* (1968) Pruyser argues that an inability to think in abstract, illusionistic terms can lead to concretism which “is marked by limited imagination” (p.93) and characteristically possesses a “fear of novelty” (p.94).

A second possible outcome, according to Pruyser, is the inappropriate translation of properly illusionistic religious concepts into the realistic world (1983, p.94). He sees the doctrine of the inerrancy of scripture as a classic example of this phenomena, since this is “properly an illusionistic proposition” (1985, p.361). However, the misplacing of this doctrine in the realistic world results in its being “literalized” and “concretized” with the bizarre result that “one is saddled with having to deny evidence for the theory of evolution” (ibid.).

Gregory & Pruyser - Areas of Agreement

Having surveyed Pruyser’s general psychological understanding of religion, and especially the distinctive quality of its characteristic illusionistic thought, we can now set about the task of attempting to place Gregory’s *Theological Orations* within this framework. Is the doctrine of the Trinity (for Gregory) a product of creative, imaginative thinking in the illusionistic world? Are his “heretical” opponents simply inappropriately attempting to deal too “realistically” with concepts that should rightly remain in Pruyser’s illusionistic world?

In this section of the paper I will argue that it is possible to read Gregory's classic text in this manner. My argument is based on three strands. Firstly, I will argue that Gregory portrays the very enterprise of theology as a "limit situation" activity. Secondly, I will show that Gregory's exegesis fits perfectly into the creative manner of thinking characteristic of Pruyser's illusionistic world. Thirdly, we shall see that Gregory portrays his opponents as falling into precisely the trap that Pruyser has warned us about with regard to blurring the realistic/ illusionistic boundaries.

Firstly, then, the enterprise of theology (the nature of the task, the right way to conduct the debate, and the nature of the theologian) is a major concern for Gregory and forms the prelude to his trinitarian argument (indeed this topic occupies the entire first two of the five *Theological Orations*). In these two Orations, Gregory clearly portrays theology as being a Pruyserian "limit situation" with the chief indicator of this being his adoption of an *apophatic* approach to theology - God is fundamentally unknowable, but this very "unknowing" is actually a kind of knowledge.

The importance of the apophatic approach to Gregory's argument can be seen in the way that he brackets the entire set of Orations with such statements. At the start, Gregory expends considerable effort (Orations 27 & 28) to set out the incomprehensibility and unknowability of the divine nature. Gregory states that "Of God himself, the knowledge we shall have in this life will be little" (Or. 27.10, p.34)¹ and is adamant concerning "the incomprehensibility of deity to the human mind and its totally unimaginable grandeur" (Or. 28.11, p.45). In short, "No one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in his nature and essence." (Or. 28.17, p.49).

Again, at the very end of the Orations, after he has set out his defence of the full divinity of the Son and Holy Spirit, Gregory ends his Orations, not on a confident, knowledgeable "high", but with an acknowledgement that he finds himself unable to devise a suitable analogy for the Trinity:

There is nothing to satisfy my mind when I try to illustrate the mental picture I have [of the Trinity], except gratefully taking part of the image and discarding the rest. So, in the end, I resolved that it was best to say "goodbye" to images and shadows, deceptive and utterly inadequate as they are to express the reality. I resolved to keep close to the more truly religious view and rest content with some few words, taking the Spirit as my guide and, in his company and in partnership with him, safeguarding to the end the genuine illumination I had received from him. (Or. 31.33, p.143).

¹ Page numbers for the Orations refer to the edition by Williams & Wickham (2002).

Gregory's "triumphant" climax is not an expression of certainty, but rather an expression of "cognitive overload" as Gregory continues to wrestle with the mystery of the Trinity. We might also see this passage - along with John McGuckin (2001, p.309) - as an allusion to Gregory's own personal mystical experience.

Gregory also relies on an apophatic approach in his defence of two key terms used to describe the mechanism of the generation of the Son ("begotten") and the Holy Spirit ("proceeds") from the Father. Although adamant that these two terms are to be used (since they're found in scripture), he is unwilling to clarify what they mean. With regard to the origin of the Son, Gregory says:

His begetting would be a triviality if it could be understood by you, who have no knowledge of your own genesis and are ashamed to explain in full the limited understanding you have. Do you really think you know it all? ... God's begetting ought to have the tribute of our reverent silence. (Or. 29.8, pp.75-6)

Whilst with regard to the origin of the Holy Spirit, Gregory says:

What, then, is "proceeding"? You explain the ingeneracy of the Father and I will give you a biological account of the Son's begetting and the Spirit's proceeding - and let us go mad the pair of us for prying into God's secrets. What competence have we here? We cannot understand what lies under our feet, cannot count the sand in the sea, "the drops of rain or the days of this world," much less enter into the "depths of God" and render a verbal account of a nature so mysterious, so much beyond words. (Or. 31.8, p.122)

In both cases, Gregory makes an apophatic defence - rejecting an attempt at analogies (especially from the created world). Since his opponents' cognition of even earthly phenomena are limited, the appropriate attitude to the mysteries of the inner life of the Trinity is "reverent silence".

The second, and rather shorter, strand to my argument is that Gregory's scriptural exegesis is what we might term characteristically illusionistic in many places, demonstrating a highly creative and playful approach. The prime example of his illusionistic exegetical approach comes in Or. 29.19-20 during which Gregory conducts a superb scriptural tour de force examining the way that scripture speaks of the two natures (divine and human) of Christ:

He was begotten - yet he was already begotten - of a woman. And yet she was a virgin. That it was from a woman makes it human, that she was a virgin makes it divine. On earth he has no father, but in heaven no mother... He was wrapped in swaddling bands, but at the Resurrection he unloosed the swaddling bands of the grave. He was laid in a manger, but was extolled by angels, disclosed by a star and adored by Magi. (Or. 29.19, pp.86-7)

The whole of Or. 29.19-20 is a prolonged creative burst replete with wonder & admiration and using balanced paradoxical pairs of scriptural quotes to hold the humanity and divinity of Christ together in paradoxical tension. Gregory's ability to deploy, indeed, positively revel in such paradoxical passages, is indicative of complex, creative & playful thinking and clearly a product of his grappling with cognitive overload as he struggles to express the mystery with which he is wrestling.

The third strand in my argument that Gregory adopts a Pruyserian illusionistic approach to theology is that he portrays his opponents as falling into the classic traps that Pruyser has warned us about with respect to religion, the illusionistic and the realistic worlds.

Firstly, and in contrast to his own subtle illusionistic exegesis, Gregory paints the approach of his opponents as simplistic and reductionistic - operating (inappropriately) in the realistic world. For example, in Or. 29.4, p.72, Gregory criticises his opponents for being so caught up in the literalness of language used to describe the origin of the Son from the Father ("begotten"). This is undoubtedly a scriptural term, but his opponents take this term so literally that they fail to understand that the divine nature is not simply like created nature. Gregory asks "I wonder why you do not go the full length of envisaging mating, periods of gestation and risks of miscarriage as necessarily involved [in the generation of the Son]". The simplistic and reductionistic approach of Gregory's opponents causes them to take what Gregory understands as an illusionistic world analogy, and inappropriately translate it to the realistic world.

Secondly, as we have seen, Pruyser believes that fear of novelty is also a characteristic marker for people who are unable to think in abstract, illusionistic terms (1968, p.94). In keeping with this, Gregory's opponents accuse him of novelty in his "introduction" of a (new) God - the Holy Spirit (Or. 31.3, p.118). In reply Gregory once again criticises their over-literal exegesis - their "love for the letter [of scripture] is a cloak for irreligion" (ibid.).

Thirdly, Gregory portrays his opponents as playing the wrong (overly rational) game, with, for them, the discipline of theology being merely an academic/ logical exercise. Gregory accuses his opponents of being experts in “chop-logic” (Or. 28.2, p.38) and challenges their fundamental approach to theology:

What can your conception of the divine be, if you rely on all the methods of deductive argument? To what conclusion will closely-scrutinized argument bring you, you most rational of theologians, who boast over infinity? (Or. 28.7, p.41)

Gregory’s opponents fail to understand that the “language game” of (illusionistic) theology differs from the language game of the realistic world - a point also made recently by Brian Daly (2006), who paraphrases Gregory thus:

One must bear in mind that Trinitarian speech is language with rules of signification that have been permanently altered, bent beyond the shape and contexts of its normal use, to point to the ineffable. (p.45)

In summary, it is possible to build a case for understanding Gregory’s approach to theology in the *Theological Orations* as properly operating in Pruyser’s illusionistic world. Theology can be understood as a “limit situation” activity, with Gregory’s constant affirmation of the incomprehensibility of God, his recourse to an apophatic approach and playful paradoxical exegesis all being seen as illusionistic indicators. In addition, Gregory charges his opponents with precisely some of the classic threats to illusionistic world thinking that Pruyser has warned us about.

Gregory’s Incarnational Objection

Up to this point, my comments have aligned well with what I had expected to find before starting work on this piece. However, the more I tried to apply Pruyser’s approach to Gregory’s text, the more uncomfortable I became, until it became clear to me that Gregory and Pruyser would strongly disagree on a fundamental point. It is to this region of conflict that we now turn.

For Pruyser, religious thought (in this instance specifically theology and doctrine) is properly confined and limited to his illusionistic world. Indeed, one might conjecture that the illusionistic world is actually a safe haven for religious thought in Pruyser’s view, making it immune from realistic world criticism.

For Gregory, however, theology & doctrine cannot be confined to Pruyser's illusionistic world but are clearly also concerned with the realistic world. Gregory's theology *does* make statements about Pruyser's realistic world - the world of "hard, undeniable facts", "actual entities or events" and "factual needs" (1979a, p.318).

At its root, I believe that this disagreement between Pruyser and Gregory stems from their different theological understanding, specifically, their understanding of atonement. We shall concentrate on Gregory's understanding of atonement first, before attending to Pruyser's view.

Essentially, Gregory possesses a *physical* understanding of the atonement, displaying a fascination with the incarnation as a key moment in the economy of salvation - for Gregory it is the very physicality of the incarnation which is the enabler of salvation, the union of the uncreated God the Son with created humanity. Salvation is physically grounded in the incarnation and both are "realistic world" events.

This pivotal event of the incarnation throughout Gregory's texts is understood with the aid of two key concepts - *kenosis* and *theosis*. God the Son voluntarily empties himself (*kenosis*) and becomes incarnate. A consequence, indeed a motivation, for this action is so that we may be "made God" (Or. 30.3, p.95) which is often how Gregory's startling term of *theosis* or deification is translated.² The following passage encapsulates this idea in Gregory's own words:

As the "form of a slave"³ [the Son] comes down to the same level as his fellow-slaves; receiving an alien "form" he bears the whole of me, along with all that is mine, in himself, so that he may consume within himself the meaner element, as fire consumes wax or the Sun ground mist, and so that I may share in what is his through the intermingling. (Or. 30.6, p.97)

² For an excellent survey of the concept of *theosis* in Gregory's thought, and its relation to his understanding of salvation, see Winslow (1979).

³ Philippians 2:7

For Gregory, the physical incarnation of God the Son is a “realistic world” fact. This fact lies at the heart of his theology - indeed, I would go so far as to say that Gregory conducts his theology and arrives at doctrine (e.g. the Trinity) by a kind of “reverse engineering” of the (realistically experienced) economy of salvation. The Son must be fully divine because he saves me (understood as “making me God”). The Spirit must be fully divine because he deifies me - “If [the Spirit] has the same rank as I have [i.e. is a creature], how can he make me God, how can he link me with deity?” (Or. 31.4, p.119) (see also Or. 31.28, p.139). Hence Gregory works backwards from the realistic world “fact” of *salvation understood as deification* to the (theo)logical conclusion that the Son and Spirit are both fully divine and hence deduces the doctrine of the Trinity.

To drive the point home even more forcefully, Gregory makes it clear to his Arian opponents in Oration 29 that the doctrine of the Trinity is not merely creative and playful wrestling with concepts in an illusionistic space but has “realistic world” consequences. He warns his opponents that their clever arguments are actually “vain attempts to nullify the Gospel” (Or. 29.21, p.88) since their less than fully divine Son cannot accomplish their deification (= salvation).

Having surveyed Gregory’s understanding of atonement, we must now turn briefly to Pruyser’s view of this topic in order to see how he is able to keep doctrine safely located in the illusionistic world. In short, I believe the key difference is simply that Pruyser had either never encountered, ignored, or simply saw no importance in the physical theory of the atonement. In a paper packed with acute psychological insights (*Anxiety, Guilt, and Shame in the Atonement*, 1964) Pruyser states:

[Theories of atonement] are roughly classifiable into three main groupings which have shown many permutations in the course of time: the Ransom theory, the Satisfaction theory, and the Moral Influence theory. (p.15)

Admittedly, there is much debate about how to slice and dice the various theories of the atonement, especially in the patristic era.⁴ Nevertheless, Pruyser seems completely unaware of the physical theory which was essential to Gregory’s understanding. From Gregory’s perspective, Pruyser’s understanding of the atonement is clearly deficient and lacking in a sufficient (any?) emphasis on the importance of the incarnation. It is precisely this aspect which also seems to enable Pruyser’s over-concentration on religious doctrine as operating (solely) in the illusionistic sphere.

⁴ See Turner (1952/2004) for an overview of this topic divided into four groups, including one entitled “Christ the Giver of Incorruption and Deification”.

Conclusion

This paper commenced by presenting a brief overview of Pruyser's understanding of the "location" of religious thinking as taking place in a separate illusionistic world. We then moved on to see how it is possible to partially understand Gregory's *Theological Orations* in Pruyserian illusionistic terms - many illusionistic indicators are present.

However, in the final section, and in the final analysis, we have seen that Gregory and Pruyser part company, with Gregory refusing to locate religious thinking and doctrine solely in the illusionistic world. For Gregory, doctrine is inextricably bound up with the real world and involves realistic world thinking - indeed the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology are fundamentally not abstract notions, but necessary (theo)logical positions reached as a resulting of wrestling with the mystery of the (realistic world) "facts" of salvation.

Thus I find that my examination of Gregory's classic *Theological Orations* raises serious questions about Pruyser's fundamental understanding of traditional Christianity. In his illusionistic defence of the reasonableness of his (liberal) religion, Pruyser appears to be sacrificing the very heart of Gregory's.

In closing, let us hear representative pleas from both parties. Pruyser appeals to the sophisticated, cultured person to continue to listen (*separately*) to all three of his distinct worlds:

None of these worlds can be kept at bay, all three storm at us with claims for our attention. Reality testing must proceed, the inner world must be listened to, and the illusionistic world must be practised with increasing sophistication. Faith and reason can only be separated at a high price. (1979b, p.167)

Although Pruyser's plea is for both faith and reason, his plea is for a continued parallelism - reality testing and illusion processing running side by side, with religious thought confined to the illusionistic world.

This approach is fatally flawed for Gregory, for whom matters of faith and doctrine directly impact upon, and indeed result from, events in the real world. Doctrine cannot be safely hidden away in an unassailable illusionistic world but must also be expressed in realistic world language since "Faith, in fact, is what gives *fullness* to our reasoning" (Or. 29.21, p.89) (*italics mine*).

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