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Hellenism and Historiography: Gregory of Nazianzus and Julian in Dialogue

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Hellenism and Historiography:
Gregory of Nazianzus and Julian in Dialogue

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On 25 June 363, the emperor Julian met his death on the Persian battlefields near Ctesiphon after little more than two years as sole ruler. A few months earlier a young Cappadocian from Diocaesarea, Nazianzus in the native tongue, had announced his decision to lead "the true philosophical life," at first to his city, and then to friends in Constantinople and elsewhere. Though he had received advanced training in Athens, his decision came as a surprise to many, who had expected him to embark on the more customary as well as lucrative career of a provincial rhetor.

Nothing, at first glance, connects the emperor and his death on the battlefields of Persia with the decision of a member of the provincial elite to lead the philosophical life—were it not for the fact that the young man, Gregory, was to become one of the leading intellectuals of his day. Indeed, Gregory, later honored as "the Theologian," is one of the most widely read and most influential authors of Byzantium, one of the three "Hierarchs" of the Orthodox Churches (with Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom), and a quintessential "Father" of Christianity.

But why should this have anything to do with Julian? Julian the emperor and Gregory the Theologian are almost never mentioned in the same breath. If we are to trust the impression given by the scholarly literature, they might as well have inhabited different planets—even though they were contemporaries, spent much of their youth in relative proximity in Cappadocia, and overlapped for some time at Athens. The historiographic Julian and the historiographic Gregory have remained separated not so much because one was an emperor and the other merely one of his subjects. Rather, what crucially sets them apart is that one was a pagan and the other a Christian.

But, what happens if we suspend the "pagan" and "Christian" aspect of their respective personae for a while, and instead bring these two men **[End Page 493]** into dialogue? If we permit them to talk to each other, we might, I would like to propose, actually gain new insights and a new understanding of the emergence of Byzantine culture and society. This is because Gregory's oeuvre, with its "marriage between Christianity and classical culture," became fundamental for "Byzantine civilization."¹

But—and this is the most significant aspect for our present purpose—Gregory's oeuvre and the central themes he addressed and developed in all the literary genres of the time was a direct response to Julian and the characteristics of his reign. Julian was the catalyst that spurred Gregory into action. Julian's thoughts and actions significantly influenced Gregory's response, which in its turn became foundational for many aspects of later Byzantine thought and institutions.

What, then, were the themes and issues that Julian raised to which Gregory felt compelled to respond? If we listen to these two men talk, four interrelated topics, or questions, emerge most clearly. First, what was the nature of the true philosophical life? Second (and here both agreed), given that the true philosophical life is divinely inspired, in what language did the divine communicate? Further (and here, too, both agreed), given that the divine was one and universal, was that universality best embodied by the words of the ancient gods of the Greeks and the Romans, or by the Word of the Christian God? Fourth and finally, who could lay claim to the true, divinely created universality of Greekness within the Roman *oikoumene*? In other words, who was the true heir of Greekness within Rome, and who could claim to represent true Hellenism?

Barely a generation after Constantine made Christianity legal, it was not at all clear what "being Christian"

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