

GREGORY OF NYSSA'S THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND ITS VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL AXES

Introduction

The Cappadocian Fathers are perhaps best known for their handling of the Trinity since they lived, ministered, and wrote during the period of historical debate surrounding the Godhead and the nature of Christ, which demanded that much of their writing energy be spent on defending Christian orthodoxy. Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus are especially known for their writings in defense of Trinitarianism and Christology, but Basil's brother, Gregory of Nyssa, worked out a thoroughgoing anthropology, which went hand in hand with his Trinitarian theology and aesthetic spirituality.

The following study will survey various critical anthropological themes that occur in the writings of Nyssen, including the relationship between the Creator and the creature, the image of God in man, the relationships among the soul, the body and the resurrection, the fall and original sin, human sexuality, and the relationship between human nature and virtue. Though the paper will explore certain aspects of these anthropological themes to a greater or lesser degree, it will not proceed in a purely synthetic fashion, gathering, analyzing, and systematizing all of the data from the whole body of Gregory's extant writings, but instead, its methodological approach will be to examine a few of the treatises most relevant to the topic of theological anthropology.

The thesis is that a full understanding of Gregory of Nyssa's theological anthropology will include reference to both its vertical and horizontal axes. The vertical axis sheds appropriate light on how human nature relates to God and the rest of creation. This vertical axis is the theological axis of being. The horizontal axis opens the way to a clearer understanding of how human nature changes from its beginning at creation, through the fall and restoration, and ultimately to consummation. The horizontal axis is the eschatological axis, which accounts for the

effect of time on being.

Background

All of Gregory's writings are firmly rooted in his historical context.¹ He did not write as a systematic theologian, but as a theological respondent to specific occasions, problems, and questions that arose within the church during his lifetime. In this sense, he wrote as a pastor-theologian in service of the church to strengthen its life and practice in faithfulness to Christ. As a result, Nyssen's writings are not always obviously self-consistent, though some of the apparent inconsistencies may owe more to his inconsistent application of terminology than to actual contradictions; however, general patterns of unity do emerge amidst seeming tensions. Any real tensions in his work may be the result of ambiguous expressions of language, changes in Gregory's mind over time, or indecision on his part on certain aspects of his system. Nyssen writes as a theologian and a philosopher, but his principal concern is to explain Scripture, and to apply its correct meaning to the life of the church, not to fit his theology to any pre-existing philosophical system. Accordingly, his understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology is that the Christian theologian should take what is useful from whatever philosophy he has at his disposal, redefining terms and concepts when necessary, while discarding the rest. His chief allegiance was to the Word of God, not to any man-made system. That approach to philosophy makes Nyssen a philosophical eclectic. Language from the philosophies of Plato, Plotinus, Aristotle, and Origen are present throughout his theological works, but it would be a mistake to identify his philosophy with any of them.²

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See Jean Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, ed. and trans. Herbert Musurillo (London: John Murray, 1962), 3-10; Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 2004), 1-11.

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Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 6-15. Meredith writes, "In answer to the question often asked, 'How Platonic was Gregory?', the answer must be always, 'It all depends on what is meant by Platonism'. The Christian doctrine of creation is indeed quite unplatonic, in all its form. Yet the belief in the spirituality of the soul and existence of a supreme, changeless spirit is one that Gregory shares with his Platonic inheritance," *Ibid.*, 11.

On the Making of Man³

Gregory's work, *On the Making of Man*, is the most detailed and comprehensive account of his theological anthropology. At the beginning of the treatise, Nyssen discusses how man is created in the image of God, and he does so along the lines of the vertical axis of his anthropology. He outlines the manifold wonder and orderliness of God's creative acts during the first five days of creation in the Genesis account and says that God crowned his creation by making man, who was the king of creation, on the sixth day. Gregory wrote, "For this reason man was brought into the world last after the creation, not being rejected to the last as worthless, but as one whom it behooved to be king over his subjects at his very birth."⁴ God created human beings both to enjoy and to rule over the whole naturally created order. The worth and dignity of man is shown in that he is the only component of creation about whom God took counsel with himself before creating.⁵ Gregory has a positive understanding of both the human body and soul in the sense that God made them good⁶ and for a good reason, specifically designing and fitting them for their purpose in his created order. "For as in our own life artificers fashion a tool in the way suitable to its use, so the best Artificer made our nature . . . fit for the exercise of royalty, preparing it at once by superior advantages of soul, and by the very form of the body, to be such as to be adopted for royalty."⁷ Continuing his discussion of the theme of human sovereignty, Gregory says that God made man to be "swayed autocratically by its own will," exactly like a king, and this king's royal robe is "virtue," which is to govern all of his decisions.⁸ The bodies of men are created without natural weapons or clothing so that they might be led to make use of the other creatures in fashioning their clothing, tools, and weapons. In this way, men are to rule over the

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The Latin title is *De Hominis Opificio*.

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd series, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 2.2.

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Ibid., 3.

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Ibid., 16:10.

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Ibid., 4.1.

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Ibid., 4.

rest of creation by obtaining whatever they need for themselves.⁹ So, human beings are in this way created in the image and likeness of God, reflecting God’s own kingly freedom and virtue.

In subsequent parts of *The Making of Man*, Nyssen describes the composite nature of the soul (immaterial) and explains its relationship to the material body. He argues that the souls of human beings have three aspects corresponding to the three kinds of life created in the first chapter of Genesis: plant life, animal life, and human life. This trichotomous human soul therefore has a plant (vegetative) aspect, a sensitive (animal) aspect, and a rational (human) aspect.¹⁰ He wrote, “Man consists of these three: as we are taught the thing by the apostle in what he says to the Ephesians [*sic*], praying for them that the complete grace of their ‘body and soul and spirit’ may be preserved at the coming of the Lord; using the word ‘body’ for the nutritive part, and denoting the sensitive by the word ‘soul,’ and the intellectual by ‘spirit.’”¹¹ The first aspect of the soul pertains to the growth of the body and its desire and need for sustenance and maintenance, the second to animal instincts pertaining to reproduction, fight, and flight, and the third aspect has to do with the soul’s capacity for reason. These three aspects of the soul are not limited to their own spheres of operation; rather, the rational aspect of the soul is charged with the responsibility of governing the other two, bringing them into submission to virtue. This “reasonable” aspect of the soul is what sets human beings apart from plants and animals, making them unique in God’s created realm. The “reasonable” soul is what marks human beings alone as bearers of the image and likeness of God. Each of these three aspects of the soul contemplates, or looks upon, different objects. The vegetative aspect contemplates the material world and so is bent toward material appetites, passions, and desires. The intellectual aspect contemplates God and desires virtue and godliness, while the sensitive aspect stands between the other two and either contemplates the

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Ibid., 7, 8.

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In discussing why Nyssen sometimes speaks of the soul as intellect, and sensitive with desire and gumption being two aspects of the sensitive soul, and at other times speaks of it as vegetative, sensitive, and rational, Smith concludes that the latter trichotomous view is expressive of his most developed psychology. Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 65-74.

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Gregory of Nyssa, *Making of Man*, 8.5. Though Gregory cites “Ephesians” here, the text he references is actually 1 Thess 5:23.

aspect of the soul that is above it or below it, but never looks upon God or creation directly. Gregory explained, “Hence also the apostle recognizes three divisions of dispositions, calling one ‘carnal,’ which is busied with the belly and the pleasures connected with it, another ‘natural,’ which holds a middle position with regard to virtue and vice, rising above the one, but without pure participation in the other; and another ‘spiritual,’ which perceives the perfection of the godly life.”¹² The intellectual aspect of the soul is virtuous when it successfully rules the lower aspects of the soul and when it refuses to be ruled by them. So, the configuration of the soul rests on Gregory’s vertical anthropological axis. Men either rise toward God (vertically) because of the success of the rational soul in choosing to contemplate God, or they fall from God (vertically) because of the failure that results from the rational soul’s succumbing to the lower material appetites.

After providing a model of internal operations of the soul, Gregory turned to describe the relationship of the soul to the body, insisting on an essential unity and interdependence between the two. The soul needs the body to give expression to its contemplations and the body needs the soul to give it life and to animate it. Nyssen described the body as the “instrument” of the soul, “Now since man is a rational animal, the instrument of his body must be made suitable for the use of reason; as you may see musicians producing their music according to the form of their instruments . . . so it must needs be that the organization of these instruments of ours should be adapted for reason.”¹³ He then says that men stand upright, rather than on all four limbs so that they might have free and intelligent use of their hands. Human beings have mouths and vocal cords that are especially suited to speech in service of the soul, fitted to express the soul’s contemplations.¹⁴ The soul is not isolated within any particular part of the body, such as the head or heart, but exists throughout the body, which indicates the intimate connection between the

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Ibid., 8.6.

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Ibid., 8.8.

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Ibid., 9.

two.¹⁵ All of these ways the soul and the body are related show the psychosomatic wholeness of the human being, and point to the fact that there is a great distance between Nyssen anthropology and Platonic anthropology.

To explain the relationship among God, the human soul, and the human body, Gregory employed the analogy of a mirror:

We therefore say that the mind as being in the image of the most beautiful, itself also remains in beauty and goodness so long as it partakes as far as is possible in its likeness to the archetype; but if it were at all to depart from this it is deprived of that beauty in which it was. And as we said that the mind was adorned by the likeness of the archetypal beauty, being formed as though it were a mirror to receive the figure of that which it expresses, we consider that the nature which is governed by it is attached to the mind in the same relation, and that it too is adorned by the beauty that the mind gives, being, so to say, a mirror of the mirror; and that by it is swayed and sustained the material element of that existence in which the nature is contemplated.¹⁶

So, the soul mirrors God and the body mirrors the soul. The world is in order as long as the soul is turned toward the contemplation of God directly, but when the soul chooses to contemplate the world rather than God, creation goes into disarray.

Gregory conceives of the soul and body as uniquely created by God for virtuous communion with him. When functioning correctly as the sovereign ruler and apex of God's creation, the human being serves as the point of contact, between God and the rest of creation. Human beings are the only creatures who can contemplate God directly, and as long as they continue to contemplate God and resist the urge to succumb to the material appetites, they are enabled to subdue creation beneath them as God's viceroys. But if they cease contemplating God and begin to look toward earthly things, then they abdicate control over their material appetites and the order of control is inverted as the rest of creation begins to rule them to their sorrow and peril.¹⁷ Up to this point in *The Making of Man*, Gregory has been relating the structure of the

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Ibid., 12.8; 15.3.

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Ibid., 12.9

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Behr writes, "So long as each level keeps in touch with the other, true beauty is communicated through the whole series: creation becomes theophanic. The ascending direction of creation, which we have seen, has, as a corresponding movement, the descent of divine beauty. But if there is an interruption of this movement, or if the superior comes to follow the inferior, then matter, no longer adorned by the mind manifests its own misshapen

human being and its ideal way of relating to God, vertically. However, when he considers man created as male and female, he does so in light of the sinful disruption of creation, horizontally, as history moves forward to the fall, through redemption and to consummation.

Scholars disagree as to whether or not God created gendered procreation as a result of the fall in Gregory's writings. John Behr,¹⁸ assistant professor of Patristics at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, insists that God's original prelapsarian design for Adam and Eve in the garden was for them to engage in gendered procreation in a virtuous way, without succumbing to carnal appetites of passion.¹⁹ He writes, "Later in *HO* Gregory differentiates clearly between the movements natural to bodily existence and those 'passions' which are more properly vices."²⁰ In other words, the problem isn't the act of gendered procreation, *per se*, but the sinful and irrational practice of such procreation. Behr continues, "The latter [passions] are not caused by the mere presence of the 'irrational and bestial' aspects but by the mind becoming irrationally attached to these bodily realities."²¹ That is, the mere fact of physical gender differences, or the practice of procreation by means of them, does not cause the vice of passion; rather, the viciousness of the physical differences between males and females pertains only to an "irrational attachment" to them. Since human beings were created to elevate the animal nature and since sexuality is a vital part of the animal nature, human beings must have been conceived sexually from the very beginning.²² Thus, Behr denies that Gregory conceived of gendered procreation as a "sinful" mode of procreation *per se*, and affirms instead that Gregory says

character 'for in itself matter is a thing without form or structure,' and the ugliness of matter is then conveyed to the mind which has chosen to follow it, so that 'the image of God is no longer seen in the character of the creature.'" John Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De Hominis Opificio*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999): 231.

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Mark D. Hart's position is in agreement with that of Behr. See Mark Hart, "Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa's Deeper Theology of Marriage," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 450-478.

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Behr, "Rational Animal," 244-245.

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Ibid, 238.

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Ibid.

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Behr states, "Human beings are not and never were, nor were ever meant to be, solely intellectual beings, as the angels, but they embrace both dimensions of creation, the asexual rational part and the sexual non rational." Ibid., 235.

gendered procreation was God's original intention for humanity.

J. Warren Smith, assistant professor of historical theology at Duke Divinity School, takes issue with Behr's position. He writes, "I shall argue that Nyssen views the division of humanity into male and female, not as a part of God's original intention for humanity, but merely as the result of God's anticipation of the fall."²³ He goes on to explain, "In other words, had God foreseen that humanity would not fall, he would not have gendered human beings for a sexual mode of reproduction."²⁴ Because God foresaw that humanity would choose to turn away from the contemplation of God and toward the contemplation of things carnal, sexual reproduction was the only way to ensure that the fullness of humanity would come into existence.

The main thrust of Smith's argument is that according to Nyssen, humanity's original identity and consummate state are tied together. Smith writes of the final state, "Consequently no one will need to eat or to engage in sexual intercourse. This, Nyssen insists, constitutes humanity's eschatological destiny. Moreover, since the end shall resemble the beginning, the angelic life of the resurrection actualizes God's intention for humanity from the beginning."²⁵ In other words, because the end will be like the beginning and because the end has no place for eating or sex, then there must have been no place for those things in the garden either.

Though our resurrection bodies will retain organs of digestion and reproduction in the final state, those organs will simply not be used. According to Smith's reading of Nyssa, they remain in existence for two reasons. First, human beings who transcend their appetites and gender are virtuous.²⁶ Second, Nyssen wants to affirm a literal bodily resurrection, and to deny that the resurrection body has reproductive and digestive organs would be to deny that our bodies are truly raised.²⁷ Smith sees a contradiction in this second reason, arguing that the existence of such

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J. Warren Smith, "The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssa's *De Hominis Opificio*," *Harvard Theological Review* 92:2 (2006), 209.

²⁴

Ibid.

²⁵

Ibid., 226.

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Ibid., 226.

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Ibid., 227.

organs in the restored body makes no theological sense on Nyssen's system, since gender was not part of God's original creative plan and since what will sustain the body in the consummate state is the soul's pure contemplation of God, not reproduction or digestion.²⁸ Smith says that even though Gregory argues for a restoration of both the soul and body, he "places primary emphasis on the spiritual redemption of the soul, not the physical redemption of the body."²⁹

The most natural reading of Nyssa's *The Making of Man* supports Smith's thesis rather than Behr's on the question of gender. There are at least three reasons that Smith's thesis, which follows the classical reading of Nyssen, is to be preferred over Behr's. First, though the creation of man is itself a single act, it has a twofold dimension. Nyssen argues that the words of Moses in the creation account distinguish the creation of man as soul and body from the creation of man as male and female.³⁰ Man's creation as soul and body is like God because man reflects God's own virtue, but man is unlike God, and does not reflect God's virtue, in being created as male and female.³¹ So, the physical characteristics of male and female are not essential to being in the image of God, and are therefore secondary to God's purpose for humanity.

Second, Gregory explicitly states that God created man as male and female because he anticipated the fall by means of his perfect foreknowledge of the future. Gregory wrote:

He saw beforehand by His all-seeing power the failure of their [Adam's and Eve's] will to keep a direct course to do what is good, and its consequent declension from the angelic life, in order that the multitude of human souls might not be cut short by its fall from that mode by which the angels were increased and multiplied, - for this reason, I say, He formed for our nature that contrivance for increase which befits those who had fallen into sin, implanting in mankind, instead of the angelic majesty of nature, that animal and irrational mode by which they now succeed one another.³²

Here Gregory says that because God foresaw the fall, he created man with a "mode" of increase that is markedly unlike that of the angels. God gave man this gendered mode of procreation in

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

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Gregory of Nyssa, *Making of Man*, 16.5-7.

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Ibid., 16.8-18.

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Ibid., 17.4.

order to ensure that the population of men would grow to its full number,³³ even though human beings had fallen from the perfect image in which they were created. This desire to ensure that the full number of planned souls would be created in time was God's chief design and reason for creating gender differences in mankind.³⁴

But, most critically for the argument that Gregory saw gender as something made necessary because of the fall, Gregory says that the "contrivance for increase," or gendered reproduction, is something that "befits" the fallen order, and that mankind was created with the capacity for gendered reproduction "instead" of the "angelic majesty of nature," which reproduces in some other way. Therefore, had God not foreseen that man would choose to sin in the garden, it only stands to reason that he would not have given them a nature that would reproduce in a way specifically fitted to the fallen order.³⁵

Third, Gregory argues that the life of the resurrection body in Paradise will be like its first state. He says, "If then the life of those restored is closely related to that of the angels, it is clear that the life before the transgression was a kind of angelic life, and hence also our return to the ancient condition of our life is compared to the angels."³⁶ So, the angelic life of the future will be a return to the angelic life of the past. Nyssen goes on to say of the angels that "there is no marriage among them," and if man had not fallen then, "neither should we have needed marriage that we might multiply, but whatever the mode of increase in the angelic nature is (unspeakable and inconceivable . . . except it surely exists), it would have operated also in the case of men."³⁷ Therefore, since in the resurrection body, human beings will be restored to their angelic state, not engaging in gendered procreation, it stands to reason that had Adam and Eve not fallen in the

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The full number of souls is what Gregory refers to as the *pleroma*, or fullness, of humanity. It is important to note that by referring to the *pleroma*, Gregory is not implying the preexistence of souls, nor is he necessarily implying the essential oneness of all human souls. See Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 33-39.

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Smith, "Body of Paradise," 212-215.

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Ibid.

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Gregory of Nyssa, "Making of Man," 17.2.

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Ibid., 17.2.

garden, they would not have procreated as male and female, but after the manner of angels.³⁸

Therefore, while Gregory's vertical anthropological axis explains how the disruption of the relationship between God and man occurred, Gregory's horizontal anthropological axis, moving from the fall to restoration, gives us the greatest insight into why God created mankind as male and female, and what those differences will mean after the summing up of all things. Had the fall not happened in the course of history and had mankind chosen to continue to contemplate God, rather than the material world, then gender differences would never have existed. This becomes especially evident when Gregory's notion of the final state is examined. The chief problem with Behr's interpretation is that it is based almost entirely on Gregory's vertical anthropological axis, arguing that sexuality was simply one more element of creation that human beings could utilize virtuously, and does not give sufficient attention to his horizontal anthropological axis, which shows that God's ultimate purpose for mankind transcends sexuality.

In this same work, Gregory touches on the entry of sin into the world with a view to its ultimate eradication from the world. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil bore fruit that would excite man's passions, causing what is evil to appear good, pleasurable and attractive. Gregory makes it clear that when Adam and Eve freely chose to eat of the tree, their relationship with God was disrupted (vertically) and sin entered into the world.³⁹ However, because sin is finite and because God is infinitely virtuous, as creation moves toward the *eschaton* (horizontally), sin is eventually and inevitably overcome, unable to remain indefinitely in God's created realm. Gregory wrote, "Wickedness . . . is not so strong as to prevail over the power of good . . . for it is impossible that that which is always mutable and variable should be more firm and more abiding than that which always remains."⁴⁰ He continued, "Our course, then, will once more lie in what is good, by reason of the fact that the nature of evil is bounded by necessary limits . . . Paradise

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Smith, "Body of Paradise," 219-226.

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Gregory of Nyssa, *Making of Man*, 20.

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Ibid, 21.2.

therefore will be restored.”⁴¹ In other words, it is only a matter of time applied to the motion of the progress of being until the whole created realm will be restored to its original condition.⁴²

Finally, in the *Making of Man*, Gregory distinguishes his own position from those theologians who misunderstand the nature of human anthropology and God’s creation and assert the pre-existence and transmigration of souls.⁴³ Nyssen says that there are some who argue that souls first lived in a pre-existent state of glorious virtue in communities of their own,⁴⁴ but that when any of these souls sin by some act of passion, they are cast out of the heavens and implanted into bodies of birds, fish, human beings or some other creature. But if after being cast out of heaven, these same souls act virtuously, they may ascend along the order of being to inhabit the bodies of human beings, and ultimately they can make it back into the heavens from which they originally came.⁴⁵

Gregory’s critique of this scheme is that since the pre-existent soul is in a stronger state with more advantages against sinful passion than the embodied soul and if this pre-existent soul sinned in spite of all its advantages, then there is no reason to expect that soul to rise again to heaven; rather, it ought to sink further and further away from virtue, since its fleshly state and condition is more difficult than the first.⁴⁶ The error of theologies of pre-existence is that they do not place man as body and soul at the center of the vertical and horizontal axis, as the touch point between God and the rest of creation, but argue that bodiless souls are at the center of the axis, and that embodied souls are imprisoned and incapable of direct contemplation of God.

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Ibid., 21.3-4.

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For an elaboration on Nyssen’s concept of perpetual progress tied to God’s immutable infinitude and man’s mutable finitude, see Everett Ferguson, “God’s Infinity and Man’s Mutability: Perpetual Progress According to Gregory of Nyssa,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18 (1973): 59-78.

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Ibid., 28.

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Ibid., 28.1.

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Ibid., 28.3.

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Ibid., 28.4.

On the Soul and Resurrection⁴⁷

In this work, Gregory wrestles with questions relevant to the intellectual interplay between Christianity and Greek culture.⁴⁸ Nyssen wrote this piece in the form of a dialogue between him and his sister, Macrina, in a way that is highly reminiscent of the dialogical style of Plato in *Phaedo*.⁴⁹ Though the language and style of argument is similar to some Platonic and Neoplatonic writings, Nyssen does not so much accommodate Christianity to Platonism as establish Christianity as a distinct system using Platonic structures where they are useful.⁵⁰ In this account, Gregory plays the role of a skeptic or “devil’s advocate,” asking questions of Macrina, which she in turn answers from a Christian perspective. One cannot be certain as to whether this is an accurate account of an actual conversation that took place between Gregory and Macrina. However, since Macrina’s opinions ultimately convince Gregory in the dialogue, her thoughts should be taken as an expression of Gregory’s own views, since he would not likely have published them if he disagreed with them, because Macrina’s answers to Gregory’s questions are so strong and complete.

In opposition to Platonic modes of thought, which deny the value of the body, Gregory insisted on the necessary union of soul and body as essential to the imageness of mankind. *On the Soul and Resurrection* answers the critical question of how the union of the perfected soul with the resurrected body can be considered something better than what human beings have in the union of body and soul in their present condition.⁵¹ The answer is that even though in death the perfected soul contemplates God perfectly, the proper orientation and alignment of the vertical

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The Latin title is *De Anima et Resurrectione*.

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Catharine P. Roth, “Introduction” in *On the Making of Man*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 7.

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Ibid., 11.

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John Drury, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Dialogue with Macrina: The Compatibility of Resurrection of the Body and the Immortality of the Soul,” *Theology Today* 62 (2005): 211-213. See also Catharine Roth, “Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa’s Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992): 20-30, and Enrico Peroli, “Gregory of Nyssa and the Neoplatonic Doctrine of the Soul,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997): 117-139.

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Gregory of Nyssa, *The Soul and the Resurrection*, 108.

anthropological axis is not yet fully restored. The full restoration only occurs as redemptive history moves forward along the horizontal anthropological axis to the resurrection when the resurrected body is joined to the soul in such a way that the body is subjugated to the soul, thereby restoring humanity to its proper vertical relation to God.

The dialogue between Gregory and Macrina begins with a practical, pastoral problem: the fear of death. Gregory tells Macrina that he fears death because he is not entirely convinced that the soul will survive the destruction of his body.⁵² Macrina responds by saying that the soul is not made of a material substance; therefore, the fact that the body will be destroyed in death does not mean that the soul will be destroyed as well.⁵³ Macrina defines the soul in negative terms, saying, “It is not anything which is comprehended by perception, neither color, nor shape, nor hardness, nor weight, nor size nor tridimensionality, nor location in a place, nor any at all of the properties which we understand in reference to matter.”⁵⁴ But in all her conversations about the soul, Macrina never says what it actually is. This fact troubles Gregory somewhat, but he accepts it. Gregory and Macrina then begin briefly to discuss the relationship of emotions to human nature. Emotions actually arise from the animal nature over which God appointed mankind to rule. Still, emotions in themselves are not evil; rather, they become either good or bad depending upon how the rational soul chooses to use them. Passion, or desire for what one does not have, is evil.⁵⁵

Macrina explains the relationship between the body and soul after death. Even though the body dies, the soul never completely severs its bond with the body, but somehow it remains connected with the body’s disintegrated particles. Gregory writes, “It is not impossible for the soul to be in the elements after the body has been dissolved.”⁵⁶ In this way, Gregory articulates an

⁵²

Ibid., 27-30.

⁵³

Ibid., 31-32.

⁵⁴

Ibid., 44.

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Ibid., 49-60.

⁵⁶

Ibid., 61.

intense and inseparable intimacy between the body and the soul. Even the death of the body cannot completely tear the soul from the body.⁵⁷ Gregory wrote, “Consequently, also when the compound is dissolved and has returned again to its proper elements, it is quite plausible to suppose that the simple and uncompounded nature remains with each of the members even after the dissolution.”⁵⁸ Gregory goes on to show that the resurrection is needed because the soul and body need each other.⁵⁹ He also says that the resurrection body will be composed of exactly the same material, not merely the same kind of material, attempting to remain faithful to his understanding of the biblical revelation about the resurrection.⁶⁰

Macrina goes on to explain that the process of purification in virtue is painful because the passions, which are evil, must be eliminated and their elimination is a painful process. Eventually, evil will be abolished and all human beings will be restored to the state in which they found themselves at the beginning.⁶¹ Hell is a temporary time of purgation for the eradication of the evil passions that are present in the world.⁶²

As in *The Making of Man*, Gregory here again in *On the Soul and Resurrection* denounces the notions of the pre-existence and transmigration of the soul.⁶³ He then moves to

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Drury writes, “Gregory is adamant that the bond of unity between the soul and body persists even after the body’s dissolution.” Drury, “Dialogue with Macrina,” 216.

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Gregory of Nyssa, *The Soul and the Resurrection*, 46.

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Ibid., 47.

⁶⁰

Ibid., 67.

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Ibid., 83-88.

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Gregory does say that the especially wicked will go away to “the chastisement in the way of purgation [that] will be extended into *infinity*.” Gregory of Nyssa, *On Infants’ Early Deaths in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd Series, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 378, emphasis mine. However, McClear says, “Although Gregory does, on occasion, speak of an eternal hell, there is little doubt but that he was convinced of the ultimate annihilation of evil, and the eventual union of all men in God. For him, the punishment of hell is medicinal. Fire purges the sinful soul as gold is purged in the furnace, and once the evil is overcome the soul will return to God. That Gregory believed and taught this is too generally admitted to demand detailed proof.” Ernest McClear, “The Fall of Man and Original Sin in the Theology of Gregory of Nyssa,” *Theological Studies* 9 (1948): 206.

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Gregory of Nyssa, *The Soul and the Resurrection*, 89-96.

consider the actual origin of the soul and the body, saying that neither the body nor the soul was created first, but that they were created at the same time, again placing a strong emphasis on the unity and firm connection between soul and body.⁶⁴ Since the number of souls God plans to create is fixed and definite, there will come a time when no new souls are created, and when that time arrives, “inevitably there will be no corruption either.”⁶⁵

The final chapter of the work discusses the resurrection, in which Macrina explains that when the total number of planned souls is fulfilled, the end “of the flowing course which goes forward through the succession of descendants” will be realized and the resurrection will occur.⁶⁶ Gregory responds by asking whether the resurrection should even be hoped for or anticipated, if our resurrection bodies will grow old, decay, shrivel, and become mutilated, ugly and misshapen as our current bodies do.⁶⁷ Gregory argues that if it is said that our bodies will not be exactly the same in the resurrection, in order to avoid all the undesirable aspects of the present condition of our bodies, then there is no genuine resurrection of our bodies; rather, that would be the creation of a new and different body. But if it is said that our bodies will be the same in the resurrection, then there is no reason to anticipate the resurrection with gladness and hope since it is no escape from the miseries of this life. Either way, Gregory says that there is a problem.⁶⁸

Macrina responds to these objections by describing what the resurrection will be like. She says, “Therefore, to describe this doctrine and limit it with a certain definition, we shall say this, that resurrection is the *restoration of our nature to its original condition*. In the first life, of which God himself became the creator, there was presumably neither . . . the suffering caused by many diseases, or any other type of bodily misery.”⁶⁹ So, the resurrection restores the body to the

⁶⁴

Ibid., 100.

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Ibid., 101.

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Ibid., 103.

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Ibid., 108-109.

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Ibid., 110-112.

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Ibid., 113. Emphasis mine.

form it had when it was first created. That restored form is quite different from what the body had become after the fall, but it is not any different from the body's essential nature. Drury writes, "We are transformed, not into something utterly new, but back into what we once were (and always were intended by God to be). By this account, our earthly identity is not only preserved but enhanced."⁷⁰ In this way, Gregory's anthropology preserves both the concept of a glorified resurrection body and one that is substantively the same as the pre-resurrection body.

Like the other categories of Gregory's anthropology, his doctrines of the body and soul in the resurrection are best understood in a two dimensional schema. Drury approaches a description of these two dimensions when he says, "By combining both restorative and transformative soteriological themes, Gregory affirms both the continuity and change necessary for Christian hope."⁷¹ The "continuity" between the resurrection state and the state of creation is that both states are *vertically* aligned toward God in body and soul contemplating God's perfections, pointing upward to God, but the "change" between the creation state and the resurrection state has to do with the forward *horizontal* movement of time and being by which God's infinite goodness overcomes the limited sinful passions. Thus, Nyssen's doctrine of soul, body, and resurrection is most clear when viewed in light of his vertical and horizontal anthropological axes.

*On Virginity*⁷²

On Virginity is Gregory of Nyssa's earliest work, and it contains important data about Gregory's concept of original sin. In general terms, this work differentiates between the pleasures of the body and the pleasures of the soul, though each of these pleasures is manifest in varying degrees.⁷³ He argues that to give oneself to the carnal pleasures that come through the senses of

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Drury, "Dialogue with Macrina," 220.

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Ibid.

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The Latin title is *De Virginitate*.

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Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd Series, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 12-13.

the body is to settle for a small degree of temporary pleasure, and it is to invite pain, suffering, misery and death, which carnal pleasures inevitably bring.⁷⁴ However, if a person chooses to give himself to the contemplative pleasures of the soul by contemplating the divine and denying the pleasures of the body, then he will set himself toward the highest degree of pleasure possible, and he will please God. Particularly, Gregory argues that the marital relationship brings about pain and suffering through the death of wives in childbirth, the envy of others, and the premature death of children. Pain is inevitable for those who set themselves upon the pleasures of the body. The treatise also describes how these sufferings, related to sin, entered into the world through Adam.

A distinctive contribution of *On Virginit*y to Nyssen's anthropology is that it argues that passions entered into the human experience after our first parents exercised their free will choice to sin, which subsequently affected the rest of the human race. Augustine used the writings of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus to buttress his own arguments for original sin, but the doctrine is clearly present in Gregory of Nyssa as well, though he did not write on it as extensively as did the other two Cappadocians.⁷⁵ Gregory wrote:

Passion was introduced afterwards, subsequent to man's first organization; and it was in this way. Being the image and the likeness, as has been said, of the Power which rules all things, man kept also in the matter of a Free-Will this likeness to Him whose Will is over all. He was enslaved to no outward necessity whatever; his feeling towards that which pleased him depended only on his own private judgment; he was free to choose whatever he liked; and so he was a free agent. . . . The first man on the earth, or rather he who generated evil in man. . . . The habit of sinning entered as we have described. . . . and from that small beginning spread into this infinitude of evil. . . . We, then, who in our first ancestor were thus ejected, are allowed to return to our earliest state of blessedness by the very same stages by which we lost paradise.⁷⁶

So, according to Gregory, the sin of our first parents affected all of their posterity, who can only return to the first estate by specific steps. Therefore, Gregory held that infants are born in a state

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Ibid., 4-5.

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Ernest McClear, "The Fall of Man," 176.

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Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginit*y, 12. Since Gregory described wickedness, not as an "infinitude of evil," but as limited and finite in other later works, he appears to have changed his mind, or at least to have revised his language.

of “original sin” and that they must rise above their disposition to sin by the practice of virtue.⁷⁷ Adam’s sin was the result of his free choice⁷⁸ to disrupt and invert the vertical anthropological axis, and that sin produced changes on the horizontal anthropological axis, causing human beings to be born in sin. It is clear from the data that Nyssen believed that Adam was a representative of the human race in the sense that when he fell, the rest of humanity fell in him and as a result would inherit a corrupt nature from him. McClear remarks that it is not certain that Nyssen actually held to a “Platonic” or “ultra-realistic” concept of human nature, but “If such [Platonic realism] was his concept . . . the solidarity of all men with Adam and an ‘original guilt’ of nature is a relatively simple problem.”⁷⁹ So, if Gregory believed that all of humanity is realistically “one,” then it is easy to see how he could understand all of humanity falling with Adam in his first sin and inheriting a “passionate” disposition from him.

Conclusion

Gregory of Nyssa’s works on theological anthropology show that he conceived of human nature in terms of foreordination, creation, fall, progress, and restoration. Prior to creation, God planned for the existence of a specific number of human beings, which he would bring to be in the course of time. He also foresaw that Adam and Eve would fall, and that in so doing, they would introduce sin into the human race. God’s foreknowledge of the fall in turn affected his design of the human body in that he created it with gender in order to ensure that in the postlapsarian period, human beings would procreate, and so bring the total number of planned souls into existence. God created man in his image, providing him with a rational aspect of the soul, which was to freely and sovereignly choose to contemplate God alone and thereby subdue

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McCclear deals with the objection that Gregory’s *On Infants’ Early Deaths* opposes the idea that infants are born with the stain of original sin because it explicitly says that infants are born without having had the opportunity to merit either good or evil. See Gregory, *On Infants’ Early Deaths*. McCclear responds to this objection by saying that by denying that infants merit either good or evil, Gregory is not denying that they would have been inheritors of original sin and so liable to its corruption. McCclear, “The Fall of Man,” 207-209.

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For corroborating data on Nyssen’s concept of free will, see Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 2.3, 5-6, 14, 88, and Verna E.F Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa*, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity*, vol. 30 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1992), 135-208.

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McCclear, “The Fall of Man,” 199.

and rule over the animal and vegetative aspects of the soul. The rightly ordered soul, in turn, was to manifest God's image through the instrument of the body by ruling over the rest of creation. This hierarchy of being, beginning with God, moving through the rational, animal, and vegetative aspects of the soul to the body and the rest of creation is the vertical axis of Gregory's theological anthropology.

However, at the touch point between God and creation, the human rational soul, Adam and Eve used their sovereign freedom to turn away from the contemplation of God and toward the passionate contemplation of the material world. Thus, instead of looking upward and Godward, Adam and Eve used their free wills to look downward, and so brought misery into their lives and into the lives of their posterity through passion. There is, however, a way of restoration.

The proper alignment between God, man, and the rest of the created order can be achieved by contemplating God and denying the passions (sin). This is a painful and difficult process, which can take a long time, or can happen more quickly, depending on how cooperative the free human agent is with the process. Some human beings reach a state of perfection in this life, while others must first die and go through a period of purgation before their personal wickedness is eradicated.

Because of the order of being and because God is infinite and immutable while sin and passion are limited and mutable, as time moves forward, God's infinite being is like an irresistible force that inevitably pulls human souls into proper alignment with himself by turning them to contemplate him and by eliminating the downward passionate contemplation of the rest of creation from their lives. This is Gregory's horizontal anthropological axis, which pulls all things into right relationship with the Creator. However, as long as new souls and bodies of human beings are entering the world, the universe cannot arrive at its final resting state of still contemplation of God, because each must travel the horizontal road toward God until their souls are finally redirected toward him. Therefore, it is not until the full number of planned human beings are brought through this world, horizontally, that the final resurrection can happen, which restores the end to the beginning.

That, apparently, is Gregory's anthropological vision. However, it is not without its tensions. Two tensions are most obvious. First, in spite of his effort to make the two equally good and valuable, the soul seems to take priority over the body. The body craves nourishment and sex, which cravings must be subdued and eliminated. Gregory might argue that the cravings serve a good purpose because they must exist in order for God's sovereign image of rule and control to be displayed through human beings as those cravings are subdued. However, the cravings themselves pull downward, not upward; therefore, it is difficult to see how the soul and the body are truly equally good. Second, Gregory maintains that God gave human beings a genuinely free will, which is never forced or compelled against itself, but he also says that God's infinite nature ultimately and inevitably overcomes all passion in human beings. The idea that God sovereignly overcomes all evil in the end seems inconsistent with the idea that human beings have the sovereign right to choose whatever they want apart from any compulsion. Gregory wants to affirm the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of human beings, but the two cannot be equally affirmed.

Therefore, though there are inconsistencies in his thought, Gregory's theological anthropology is most thoroughly and harmoniously understood in light of the structure of the human being as well as the forward progress of history. This twofold perspective is expressed on the vertical and horizontal axes along which Gregory of Nyssa's theological anthropology is most clearly depicted.