

St. Gregory of Nyssa: His Contribution to Christian Philosophy

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Abstract

St. Gregory of Nyssa contributed enormously to the understanding of the ancillary role of philosophy in relation to Christian Theology. He understood that philosophy is at the behest of theology in the sense that philosophy serves as an instrument for explaining the mystery that constitutes the subject matter of theology and for rendering it understandable to the finite human intellect. He is one of several who elucidated the instrumental role of Platonism and Neoplatonism for expounding the Christian deposits of faith in such areas as the Holy Trinity, Christology, Creation and the Eschatological Universal Restoration of all human beings. This paper analyses his understanding of contemplation and its role in the process of attaining knowledge. It also critically analyses human freedom, the abuse of which, from his point of view, is the origin of evil. The paper shows the current relevance of philosophy and the timeliness of philosophy's service as an instrument in order to make faith in general and religious practices in particular not only understandable but also justifiable. The contemporary world is one that experiences the mushrooming of religions and of Christian denominations and so manifests itself as a world in dire need of critical thinking in order to bring to light the rationale of believing and concretely putting into practice what religions teach. The paper intends to provide a rational stability to the workings of faith by curbing and re-orienting the present day religion-induced fanaticism and radicalism that leave quite insecure human aspirations to peace, integrity and social cohesion.

1. Introductory Overview

In this paper I expound upon the contribution of Saint Gregory of Nyssa to the Christian treasures of philosophical thought. I summarize the insights of the Greek traditions of his time, namely Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Neoplatonism and the way these insights played a formative role in his thinking. I highlight the cognitive process to which he subscribed when he adopted these traditions so that they might play an instrumental role in his endeavours to understand the Christian mysteries, weave them together into one fabric of divinely revealed truth and hence make them intelligible.

In this paper, therefore, I bring to light how Saint Gregory of Nyssa contributed to harmonizing Greek philosophy with the entire deposit of the Christian faith and so helped establish the relevance of Greek philosophy to the Christian enterprise. Throughout the course of this paper I will show how Saint Gregory of Nyssa merged philosophy and theology in a way that was not forced or arbitrary but rather in a manner that preserved the integrity of both. In the process of explaining their relationship with each other, I intend to explain Gregory's conclusions about the origin, the nature and the destiny of the universe in general and of the human person in particular.

The paper ends with a critical evaluation with regards to the soundness, relevance and originality of Saint Gregory's philosophy and his contribution to the Christian thinking of his time and to that of our current era.

2. Life and Works of Saint Gregory of Nyssa

Saint Gregory of Nyssa was born around 335 AD in Caesarea of Cappadocia.¹ His father was Saint Basil the Elder, while his brothers were Saint Basil of Caesarea and Saint Peter of Sebaste. His sister was Saint Macrina.²

¹ Cf. F. COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy*, II/1. New York: Doubleday, 1993, 46.

² Cf. W.J. McDONALD – *al.*, ed., "Gregory of Nyssa", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, VI. Washington: Jack Heraty & Associates 1981, 794.

As a young man he pursued his father’s career, which was that of a rhetorician. After the death of his wife, Gregory turned to a monastic form of life at Portus.³ In the year 371 AD, he was consecrated bishop of Nyssa.⁴ In 376 AD, the Arian heretics removed him from his see, but he was able to resume the exercise of his episcopal office in 378 AD.⁵

Gregory played an active role in the Ecumenical Council of Antioch (379 AD) and in the Councils of Constantinople (381 AD), (382 AD) and (394 AD).⁶ As a bishop, he laboured tirelessly to maintain doctrinal orthodoxy against the Appollinarian Heresy which refused to acknowledge that Jesus was fully human and thus refused to accept that in Jesus a fully human and a fully divine nature were united in a single hypostasis.⁷ Gregory engaged, too, in an apologetic against the Arian Heresy, a teaching that denied the divinity of Jesus.⁸ Gregory died in 394 AD.

The works of Saint Gregory of Nyssa are intensive and voluminous. The works he wrote in defense of the orthodoxy of the Catholic faith against the heretics of his time namely *Arianism*, *Appollinarianism* and *Eunomanianism* include: *Contra Eunomium*, *Ad Simplicium de Fide* and *Sermo de Spiritu Sancto*, *Artirrheticus Adversus Apollinarem*, *Adversus Apollinaritas*, and so forth.⁹ The works that he wrote to explain the Catholic doctrine on the Holy Trinity include *Ad Adlabium* and *Ad Eustathium*.¹⁰ On the relation and harmony between philosophy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Holy Scripture and theology in general, he wrote *Explicatio Apologetica in Hexameron* (Christian Cosmology in light of the doctrine of creation), *De Opificio Hominis* (On the biblical understanding of the human person, i.e., biblical

³ Cf. W.J. McDONALD, “Gregory of Nyssa”, 794.

⁴ Cf. A. MERIDITH, *The Cappadocians*, London: Chapman 1995, 53.

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁶ Cf. W.J. McDONALD, “Gregory of Nyssa”, 794.

⁷ Cf. F.L. CROSS, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. London: Oxford University Press 1957, 71.

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 80.

⁹ Cf. W.J. McDONALD, “Gregory of Nyssa”, 794.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*

anthropology), and *De Vita Moysis*.¹¹ Concerning the ascetical life as an expression and climax of Christian perfection he wrote *De Virginitate*, *De Vita Macrinae*, *De Perfectione*, *De Instituto Christiano*, and *De Castigatione*.¹²

3. Some Philosophical Issues of the Patristic Era

Saint Gregory of Nyssa was a faithful child of his period in history. His works and doctrine show how he was involved in the philosophical issues of his time, that is, the Patristic era – the early centuries of Christianity.

The main issues of the period included an establishment of the relationship between philosophy and theology. A concise formulation of this relationship would reflect philosophy's instrumental role in the authentic explanation of the central doctrines of Christianity. It included explanations of the Christological and Trinitarian doctrines which at that time were exposed to the threats of some heretical movements such as *Apollinarianism*, *Arianism* and *Eunomianism*. As I indicated above, *Apollinarianism* denied the full humanity of Jesus.¹³ According to the Apollinarian heresy the humanity of Jesus is partial in the sense that He has the human body and the human sensitive soul, but lacks a rational soul as if he did not “need” it because the wisdom inherent in his divine nature would replace his human capacity to reason. The divine rational soul precludes the human rational soul from the moment of the Incarnation. Hence Jesus subsists with an incomplete human nature.¹⁴

With an influence from Platonism and Neoplatonism, Apollinaris suggested that Jesus as the Divine Logos would not have united to himself a human rational soul that, because of its intrinsic link to everything that is human would be contaminated by the human sensitive aspect which is base and impure.¹⁵

¹¹ Cf. W. J. McDONALD, “Gregory of Nyssa”, 795.

¹² Cf. *Ibid.*

¹³ Cf. L. CROSS, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 71.

¹⁴ Cf. R. ORTON (trans.), *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Anti-Apollinarian Writings*. Washington, DC: CUA Press 2015, 195.

¹⁵ Cf. C.E. RAVEN, *Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church*. Cambridge: CUP 2014, 184.

Arianism as well denied the divinity of Jesus.¹⁶ Arius could not bring himself to believe that the Son is eternal, i.e., He has no beginning. Perhaps too tied to the notion that if one has a parent, then one begins to exist because of that parent, he seemed to anthropomorphize the relationship between the Father and the Son and tried to support his argument with readings from Scripture that in fact were referring to the humanity of Jesus and not to his divinity. *Eunomianism* on the other hand taught that a human person can have a comprehensive knowledge of God.¹⁷

4. Contribution of Saint Gregory to Christian Philosophy

Saint Gregory of Nyssa contributed enormously to the effort to explain rationally the mystery of God and to articulate an entire array of theological truths, philosophical anthropology, the cosmological explanation of the nature and origin of the universe and the nature and origin of evil.

4.1 Theodicy: The Relationship between Philosophy and Theology

For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, philosophy is at the service of theology: this is what characterizes the relationship between Philosophy and Theology.¹⁸ Philosophy serves Theology in the sense of making its content intelligible, explainable and justifiable. He laboured with the conviction that by the use of philosophical disciplines and terminology, the mysteries of faith can be explained and rendered understandable.¹⁹ From the Platonic tradition – and fortified by St. John’s Gospel – Saint Gregory of Nyssa borrowed terms like *logos* to explain the mystery of God. In harmony with St. John’s Gospel, Gregory identified the Second Person of the Holy Trinity as the Logos (Jn. 1:1-4), the eternal Word of God the Father – coeternal with the Father. It is through the Word that all

¹⁶ Cf. C.E. RAVEN, *Apollinarianism*, 80.

¹⁷ Cf. A. MEREDITH, *The Cappadocians*, 63.

¹⁸ Cf. F. COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy*, 47.

¹⁹ Cf. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, III: *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature*. Washington: Christian Classics 1998, 677.

things have come into being.²⁰ The concentration on the word *Logos* and its creative role shows primarily the influence of St. John's Gospel, but it also neatly coincides with a Platonic emphasis on the role of the logos in the Demiurge's work of creation. Indeed the Demiurge creates the entire universe in conformity with the Pure Forms of Beauty, Truth and Goodness. Logos is the governing principle of this creation.²¹

As an example of how philosophy can be instrumental in making the mystery of faith understandable, one observes St. Gregory's choice to adapt the Platonic notion of ascent from darkness to light to an analogy of ascending steps in the form of a ladder to explain the mystery of conversion and the pursuit of holiness.²² By taking advantage of the Platonic usage of analogies, Saint Gregory of Nyssa contributed to Christian philosophy by adapting analogies or images subject to the senses to explain mysteries of the faith which transcend sense perception.

Philosophy is at the service of theology not only inasmuch as it helps explain its mysteries, but also inasmuch as it prepares human persons to receive what theology tries to articulate, that is, faith. Philosophy, in other words, exercises a catechetical function. For St. Gregory of Nyssa, a philosophy that contributes nothing to theology in explaining its mysteries or in preparing human souls to believe is pagan and barren. He likens it to the childless daughter of the Egyptian King (Ex. 2:1-10). In explaining this similarity he said "... the pagan philosophy is childless: always in pain of childbirth, it never engenders a living offspring..." (*De Vita Moysis, 2, 11*).²³

Gregory, on the other hand, gives voice to the conviction that pagan philosophy is not to be ignored. It is to be purified so that it may play its role in service to theology. It was for this reason that he recommended the study and use of Greek philosophy. His

²⁰ Cf. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 283.

²¹ Cf. PLATO, *Timaeus*, (transl. by B. Jowett), n. 30. Cf. also E. CRAIG, ed., "Cosmology", in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 1998, 677.

²² Cf. L. KARFÍKOVÁ – *al.*, eds., *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II*, Leiden, Leiden: Brill 2007, 229.

²³ Cf. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 283.

intention was to accept the valid insights of Greek philosophy in order to understand and render acceptable the deposit of faith. His approach rules out all forms of fanatical, radical, forceful or threatening styles of communication in the whole process of relaying religious messages.

Gregory was convinced, of course, that theology is a discipline that is by its very nature superior to that of philosophy, both in content and in role.²⁴ The content of theology is knowledge of the Supreme Being and faith in Him. Philosophy, on the other hand, elucidates this content by making it intelligible and communicable. For him, it is theology – with the Holy Bible holding a place of privilege – that serves as the criterion of every sort of truth including that of philosophy. It is theology that gauges the authenticity of the truth of philosophy and not vice versa (*Contra Eunomium 1, 114*).²⁵ This contention is relevant to the contemporary world with a diversity of faiths and religions. If the message of faith is to gauge the authenticity of philosophical conclusions, then it is logical to judge such conclusions with reference to what God is revealing through their respective religions about peace, love, mutual understanding, forgiveness, compassion, social cohesion, sense, honour for the common good, and so forth.

St. Gregory was certainly aware of the advantages to be enjoyed from the spiritual dynamics of asceticism and contemplation as understood and articulated in the schools of Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Neoplatonism when these dynamics were refashioned and rearticulated to help the souls of Christian believers to understand and live the mysteries of their faith. Within the context of these Greek philosophical traditions, the exercise of asceticism and contemplation could lead the soul to a more

²⁴ Cf. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 284.

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.* Editor’s Note: see also Edith Stein’s explanation of how St. Thomas held precisely the same position as St. Gregory on the issue of the role of faith as a criterion for gauging philosophical truths. Edith called this the “formal dependence of philosophy on faith”, E. STEIN, *Knowledge and Faith*, transl. by W. Redmond, Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies 2000, 18.

comprehensive grasp of the concept of the Good and purify the soul as a preparation for communion with the Good.²⁶

Saint Gregory of Nyssa adapted the Greek understanding of the nature and purpose of asceticism and contemplation to elucidate the capacity of the Christian faith to inspire and motivate believers towards knowledge of God and to enable them to undergo purification in order to unite with Him. According to Gregory, the philosophical methods of asceticism and contemplation fit the Christian calling since they are compatible with a process of detachment and conversion. Just as the two methods synchronize effectively in the philosophical journey away from self-preoccupation (detachment) and towards a knowledge of the Good and union with the Good (conversion), in the Christian mystery of salvation asceticism serves as a means towards the purgative cleansing required of the Christian that enables him or her for the contemplative journey of spiritual ascent towards comprehension and union with God.²⁷ In spite of the goodness that may be discernible in today's global network of cultures and subcultures, there is no doubt that materialist and consumerist tendencies call for an ascetical redress. John Paul II emphatically confronted the issue of how consumerism disorients humanity by bringing to the world's attention that to glorify *having* at the expense of *being* dissipates the human spirit (*Centesimus Annus*, 36). Consequently, the consumerist attitude and the institutions it engenders breed social injustice and so widens the gap between the poor and the rich.

4.2 Theodicy: The Nature of God – One and Triune God

Saint Gregory of Nyssa's personal creed is that of Christianity: God is eternal and necessarily perfect. His eternity and perfection reveal Him to be One, to be by nature Simple.²⁸ God is one in divinity but triune in personhood. He is one in the divine nature but

²⁶ Cf. PLATO, *Republic 511c*. See also G. STAMATELLOS, *Plotinus and the Presocratics*. Albany: State University of New York Press 2009, 79; V.L. WIMBUSH – R. VALANTASIS, eds., *Asceticism*. Oxford: OUP 1998, 86.

²⁷ Cf. L. FRANCISCO – *al.*, eds., *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, Leiden, Brill 2010, 738.

²⁸ Cf. F. COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy*, 46.

exists eternally as three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (*Oratio Catechetica*, PG 45).²⁹ The distinction between the divine persons is a distinction of relation in the sense that God the Son is the Word (*Logos*) of God the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.³⁰

Saint Gregory of Nyssa is a Catholic Christian. He acknowledges that God is a mystery. God is infinite in his Being, and therefore human beings cannot know Him exhaustively.³¹ Due to the fact that a human person is the image of God together with the divine element (grace) which he/she receives as a gift, he/she is enabled to know God to a certain degree because like is known by like. This accords with the Pythagoreanism and Platonism that influenced Saint Gregory.³² The doctrine that affirms the infinity of God and the impossibility of knowing God comprehensively was meant to counteract the heretical claim of Bishop Eunomius that human beings have the capacity to have a comprehensive knowledge of God.³³

Saint Gregory of Nyssa was not the pioneer of this doctrine. There are Church Fathers that preceded him, like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, and the Neo-Platonists, exemplified by Philo and Plotinus, who had already proposed the incomprehensibility of God when the knower in question is a human being. For Origen and Clement of Alexandria, God cannot be fully comprehended because of His transcendence.³⁴ Plotinus maintained the same but based his argument on His simplicity.³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, spotlighted the infinity of God and advanced his argument for denying the capacity to comprehend God absolutely by pointing to his infinity. For Gregory infinity is intrinsic to the notion of divine perfection. The contrast with the Greek conception of infinity is noticeable since

²⁹ Cf. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 287.

³⁰ Cf. *Ibid*, 283.

³¹ Cf. B. MONDIN, *A History of Medieval Philosophy*, Rome: PUU 1998, 131.

³² Cf. Cf. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 287.

³³ Cf. B. MONDIN, *A History of Medieval Philosophy*, 131.

³⁴ Cf. *Ibid*.

³⁵ Cf. *Ibid*.

for the Greeks something is infinite if it is indeterminate, chaotic and imperfect (*to apeiron*).³⁶ For Saint Gregory of Nyssa therefore, it is this unlimited perfection of God which renders a human person, finite as he/she is, not capable of having a comprehensive knowledge of Him.

4.3 Theodicy: Jesus, the Incarnate God – Two Natures in One Person

Saint Gregory of Nyssa conceived Jesus Christ as the *Logos*, that is, the Word of God the Father, in whom and through whom all things are.³⁷ Jesus is a divine Person, the being of all beings. Divine as He is, He introduces a divine element into all other beings. This doctrine is highly influenced by Neoplatonic pantheism in which all things bear a divine element, since in one way or another they are an outflow of a divine Being. Saint Gregory of Nyssa used this doctrine to interpret the Biblical text on Jesus as the *Emmanuel*, that is, “God among us” (Isa 7:14), not as an outflow of God, but as an Incarnate God. In his doctrine on the relationship between God and the universe, Saint Gregory of Nyssa advocated two levels of divine presence in the universe: presence by immanence and presence by incarnation.³⁸ Jesus is the divine presence in the universe in the second level, that is, the divine presence by incarnation.

In His state of incarnation, Jesus is of two natures (one divine and the other human) hypostatically united in one divine person.³⁹ This means that His two natures are so united that they form one subsisting being, one hypostasis, one person – He is fully God with a fully human nature.⁴⁰ The whole mystery of the Incarnation is to elevate and unite the whole of humanity into communion with the divinity. By so doing humanity, indeed the whole universe, is liberated by uniting it with God and by making it tend upward

³⁶ Cf. B. MONDIN, *A History of Medieval Philosophy*, 132.

³⁷ Cf. H. BETTENSON, ed., *The Later Christian Fathers*, London: OUP 1970, 134.

³⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁹ Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, V, New York: Eerdmans 1956, 476.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*

towards God its origin.⁴¹ Being inspired and influenced by the Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrine of tending towards the Good and to the One respectively as the liberation and restoration of the human soul, Saint Gregory of Nyssa used the philosophical doctrine as a springboard to explain the whole mystery of the Incarnation as a choice on the part of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity to assume humanity in order to elevate and to restore humanity and the whole universe back to God.⁴²

4.4 Philosophical Anthropology: The Origin and Nature of the Human Being

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa the origin of a human being is the creative action of God. Following the Biblical text, he maintained that a human being is created in the image and likeness of God. For him this means an expression and reflection of God. Saint Gregory of Nyssa conceived a human being as an image of God in so far as he/she has a soul, but mainly because he/she has the faculty of reason, has a free will and is endowed with grace.⁴³ Because God has endowed the human being in his/her faculties with understanding, reasoning and speech, one can say that the human person resembles God and gives expression to who God is as both Mind and Word.⁴⁴

His manner of conceiving a human person as an image of God differs from some of his predecessors among the Church Fathers. Origen and Saint Clement of Alexandria had the same conception of a human person as an image of God but emphasized the fact that a human person resembles God in as much as he/she is rational just as God is rational.⁴⁵ For Saint Irenaeus, a human person is an image of God in so far as he/she has a free will, just as God does.⁴⁶

The variety of tints in the human person’s complexion, according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, depicts the variety of the

⁴¹ Cf. H. BETTENSON, *The Later Christian Fathers*, 134.

⁴² Cf. *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴³ Cf. B. MONDIN, *A History of Medieval Philosophy*, 141.

⁴⁴ Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 391.

⁴⁵ Cf. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 292.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*

divine virtues by which a human person resembles God.⁴⁷ The nature of the human person, therefore, is an expression of God's beauty. A human person is also conceived as a *microcosm* prismatically showing forth the beauty of the universe in all its order, a universe that – in its turn – shines forth as a *macrocosm* resplendent with the beauty of God who is its author.⁴⁸ Conceiving a human person as a microcosm contributes to the uprightness of promoting human dignity and conserving nature both of which are challenges in the contemporary world as Pope Francis has noted (*Laudato si'*, 6, 11).

Saint Gregory of Nyssa conceived a human being as a composite being of body and soul. The body is inferior to the soul and thus is at the service of the soul acting as an instrument to render visible the treasures of the soul.⁴⁹ The body is essentially organic, sensitive, material and composed of qualities that correspond to organic, sensitive and material substances.

The soul, on the other hand, is spiritual and simple (not composed). The soul, spiritual as it is, is not confined to any part of the body.⁵⁰ It is the seat of the intellectual faculty and a life-giving principle for the human person.⁵¹ The two component features of the human person are connected in such a way that when one of them is affected the effect reaches the other as well. When for instance a human person is physically sick, the effect of this sickness also affects the soul.⁵² The body is in constant motion; that is, it undergoes a constant change until death.⁵³ This dynamism of the body is expressed by the acts of sleeping and waking. Because the human person is in a process of sleeping and waking up, his/her body relaxes and renews itself. According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa the meeting point of the body and the soul is in the senses. When the senses are at rest, that is, when a human person is asleep, the mind, too, is at rest. It is during this moment of rest that a human

⁴⁷ Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 391.

⁴⁸ Cf. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 292.

⁴⁹ Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 395.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Ibid*, 397.

⁵¹ Cf. F. COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy*, 48.

⁵² Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 397.

⁵³ Cf. *Ibid*, 396.

person dreams and by so doing the soul recalls what the senses fed it during the awake time.⁵⁴

For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, a human person exists on two levels: first, a human person is a being of experience, that is, a historical human being (an actual human being) and secondly, an ideal human being.⁵⁵ The latter is the being as he or she exists in the mind of God, free of gender categories (neither male nor female). The historical human being is here on earth as an expression of an ideal human being.⁵⁶ The ideal human being is the idea of humanity in the mind of God. He/she is more perfect than the actual human being who is determined, limited and made finite by particularizing features such as corporeality and gender.⁵⁷ An ideal human person in the mind of God is one that is actualized and comes to expression in a variety of individuals. This doctrine was inspired by Platonism for which all things in the universe are shadows of their corresponding real beings in the world of ideas. This Platonic notion came to be adopted by such Christian scholastic thinkers as Saint Bonaventure for whom the exemplar cause of all human beings on earth is in the mind of God.⁵⁸

For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, open in his doctrine to the influence exercised by Philo, the two Biblical narratives of the creation of the human person express the two levels of the human being.⁵⁹ The first narrative Gen 1:26-27 expresses the creation of the Ideal human being, while the second one, Gen 2:7ff narrates the creation of the historical human being of experience.⁶⁰ This anthropological doctrine was a result of Platonism in which all things on earth were regarded as inferior to, and shadows of the real beings in the ideal world, that is, the world of ideas.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 401.

⁵⁵ Cf. F. COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy*, 48.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Ibid*, 47.

⁵⁷ Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 10.

⁵⁸ Cf. P. EDWARD, "Saint Bonaventure", in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, I-II, New York: Macmillan 1967, 341.

⁵⁹ Cf. B. MONDIN, *A History of Medieval Philosophy*, 141.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Ibid*, 141.

⁶¹ Cf. E. CRAIG, "Cosmology", 677.

4.5 Philosophical Anthropology: Immortality of the Human Soul

Gregory of Nyssa is convinced that the human soul does not perish with death. His conviction on this matter coincides with those of the Pythagoreans, the Platonists, and even more so with those of Origen. In accord with Origen, Gregory seems to accept the idea of the *Apokatastasis*, that all souls will be restored to God even the damned ones.⁶² According to the Pythagorean theory of *metempsychosis* a soul undergoes transmigration in order to be purified. Origen and later Saint Gregory of Nyssa modified the theory on the immortality of the human soul by denying that the soul transmigrates. According to Origen and Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the soul returns to God because He cannot let His image be lost.⁶³ Adopting the Platonic doctrine, Saint Gregory of Nyssa based the immortality of the soul on its simplicity, and the resurrection of the body restores the soul to its original purity.⁶⁴

4.6 Philosophical Anthropology: The Human Being and Freedom

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, a human being is a creature endowed with a free will to make a choice between good and evil.⁶⁵ Due to his/her freedom of choice, human beings are responsible for all the choices they make. For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, human beings have a natural tendency to mount upwards to God because they were created by God in his image and likeness and indeed were created for God.⁶⁶ He adopted this doctrine from Plato's *Symposium*, in which Socrates offers a rather lengthy account of how Diotima explained to him the constant human craving to ascend to Pure Beauty, Truth and Goodness.⁶⁷

⁶² Cf. A. MEREDITH, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Early Fathers of the Church*. London: Routledge, 1999, 61; P. EDWARD, "Saint Gregory of Nyssa", in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, III. New York: Macmillan 1967, 389.

⁶³ Cf. A. MEREDITH, *The Cappadocians*, 56.

⁶⁴ Cf. B. MONDIN, *A History of Medieval Philosophy*, 131.

⁶⁵ Cf. F. COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy*, 48.

⁶⁶ Cf. A. MEREDITH, *The Cappadocians*, 56.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Ibid*, 55.

In His infinite knowledge, God knows what human beings will choose but He still allows them to make truly free choices. This divine infinite knowledge of what human beings choose is by no means a reason for human beings to be exonerated from responsibility of the choices they make. It is this freedom which makes human beings virtuous or not virtuous before God. When they use their freedom to opt for God and rise to Him, they become justifiably virtuous. For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, therefore, human beings cannot do meritorious acts without freedom.⁶⁸

4.7 Philosophical Anthropology: The Theory of Knowledge

Being influenced and inspired by Platonism and Neoplatonism, in his theory of knowledge Saint Gregory of Nyssa advocated contemplation as a method of attaining the knowledge of the transcendent. He adapted Platonic and Neoplatonic contemplation to Christian contemplative mysticism, a spirituality within which the human person transcends the material world and contemplates God who is a transcendent Being. His theory of knowledge influenced dramatically the mystical life of the Eastern Byzantine Church and the Catholic Church in general.

One observes that in the theory of contemplation as put forth in his work *De Vita Moysis*, the human soul passes through three levels in order to attain an intuitive knowledge of The Transcendent God. This theory exercised its own meaningful influence on medieval contemplative mysticism by which a true knowledge of God is attained through contemplation. According to his notion of contemplation, true knowledge of God means an intimate union with Him.⁶⁹

He taught of a dialectical relationship between knowledge and virtue.⁷⁰ As human beings contemplate, they ascend to God and thus become virtuous by being united with Him. This state of virtue makes human beings more knowledgeable of the truth precisely because they are intimately united with God. Knowledge therefore,

⁶⁸ Cf. A. MERIDITH, *The Cappadocians*, 57.

⁶⁹ Cf. J. WEINBERG, *A Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 46.

⁷⁰ Cf. A. MERIDITH, *The Cappadocians*, 61.

breeds virtue; and virtue increases knowledge. This dialectical relationship between knowledge and virtue has its origin in the Socratic way of thinking, which equated knowledge and virtue. Having paid attention to Gregory and other Christian thinkers, the scholastics conceived of the dialectical relationship between knowledge and virtue as a relationship between faith and reason. Saint Anselm synthesized these notions into his crisp phrase *credo ut intelligam* – I believe so that I may understand; Saint Thomas Aquinas gave emphasis to the inverse: *intelligo ut credam* – I understand that I may believe.

4.8 Philosophical Anthropology: Superiority of the Human Being over Other Creatures

Saint Gregory of Nyssa deems human beings the noblest of all visible creatures. The reasons for this claim include first of all, the fact that human beings are icons of God, that is, they are created in the image and likeness of God. Second, human beings were the last ones to be created. Third, the human stature of walking and moving upright signifies that they are the noblest.⁷¹ God created human beings last to show their superiority over the rest of the visible creatures and to show their power given them to rule all creation.⁷² In their stature, human beings alone walk upright to symbolize their royal dignity and sovereignty over the rest of creation.⁷³

4.9 Cosmology: The Doctrine of Creation

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, God created the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).⁷⁴ Like other Fathers, his advocacy of the *ex nihilo* doctrine distinguishes his cosmology radically from what the Greeks were believing and teaching.⁷⁵ God created the universe freely. Love motivated Him; nothing compelled Him to create it.⁷⁶ Saint Gregory believed that all creatures were created at once and

⁷¹ Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 390.

⁷² Cf. *Ibid.*

⁷³ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Cf. F. COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy*, 49.

⁷⁵ Cf. A. MARMODORO, “Gregory of Nyssa on the Creation of the World”, in *Divine Powers in Antiquity*, Oxford: OUP 2017, 94.

⁷⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 47.

not in a series. For him, the heavens and the earth together with their content were created at once. This is how he interpreted the Biblical verse ‘*In the beginning God created heaven and earth ...*’ (Gen. 1:1).⁷⁷

His doctrine of creation provokes some ontological questions. The doctrine itself was in direct contradiction to the traditional Greek principle of causality for which the like produces the like.⁷⁸ How could the material world be an effect of a non-material cause? How could a divine cause effect something which is non-divine?

These ontological queries find responses from his understanding of creation. For him, some creatures are spiritual while others are material. God, spiritual as He is, created all things in a spiritual form. He maintains that matter is the result of a combination of various spiritual qualities such as colour, solidity, weight, and so forth. When these spiritual qualities unite, they constitute material substances. Matter, therefore, is not a product of God who is spiritual for He could not give what He is not. Matter is the result of combinations of spiritual qualities.

4.10 Cosmology: The Nature of the Universe

Walking in the footsteps of Plato and of some other Patristic thinkers, Saint Gregory of Nyssa made a sharp distinction between material and spiritual substances. As explained above, for Saint Gregory the universe is material but its components are immaterial qualities which united to produce it. Due to its materiality, the universe is inferior to spiritual beings. This notion reveals the Platonic idea that matter deserves a ranking inferior to spiritual beings because the whole material universe is but a shadow of the immaterial world of ideas. Saint Gregory used this theory together with the mystical influence from Plotinus to explain and justify the ascetical and mystical life style as the means of ascending from matter towards God.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 11.

⁷⁸ Cf. A. MARMODORO, “Gregory of Nyssa”, 94; ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, 1070b.

⁷⁹ Cf. T. V. GAMKRELIDZE, “St. Gregory of Nyssa’s Ascetic Treatise ‘On Virginité’ and the Publication of the Georgian Translation”, *Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences*. 7/1 (2013) 127.

Conceiving the universe as material and as an effect of the combination of spiritual qualities, what place does he give the universe in his ontology? In other words, does the universe have some dimensions which transcend its materiality? In the thinking of Gregory of Nyssa, although the universe is material it has some immaterial aspects which transcend its materiality. As I have already indicated, its materiality is a product of an integration of immaterial qualities.⁸⁰ The immaterial dimension of the universe gives it a transcendental aspect that calls for contemporary societies to protect it. The universe not only nourishes the human body but also nourishes the human soul with the Truth, Beauty and Goodness with which God invested it. Contemporary economic and technological advancements take into account that the universe nourishes humanity by supplying it with the necessary natural resources and pathways to transcendental values. Hence technology must not leave the natural world in a state of serious degradation.⁸¹ The philosophy of Saint Gregory of Nyssa contributes to the call to approach the universe with a transcendental attitude of seeing it not only in its materiality but also in the lasting values of Order, Beauty, and Goodness, values that identify the universe as divine love-in-blossom.

4.11 Cosmology: The Problem of Evil

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, evil is a spontaneous inclination of the soul towards matter.⁸² Evil occasions the loss of the divine image and likeness which the soul has before committing evil.⁸³ Different from the Manichean mentality of his time, for him matter is neither evil nor is it the principle of evil.

One remembers that in his anthropology the human soul is united with the body through the senses. The soul which is spiritual gets united with the whole of matter through the body, that is, through the senses. As long as the soul keeps on tending towards

⁸⁰ Cf. A. MARMODORO, "Gregory of Nyssa", 101.

⁸¹ Cf. K. SINGH, "Environmental Degradation and Measures for Its Mitigation with Special Reference to India's Agricultural Sector", *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics* 46/1 (2009), 40-60.

⁸² Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 9.

⁸³ Cf. *Ibid.*

God, then human beings remain in the state of virtue and holiness. When the soul abuses its freedom and so divert its attention from God, it *ipso facto* tends towards the body and towards matter in general, and that way it commits what is evil.⁸⁴ The source of evil therefore is not matter, but rather the human beings’ misuse of freedom by shifting their attention from God towards matter. It is this misuse of freedom which makes human beings lose the likeness and image of God whom they were reflecting before getting ruptured from Him.⁸⁵

Human beings in the contemporary world enjoy various forms of freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of movement and interaction, freedom of worship, and so forth. As Saint Gregory of Nyssa suggests, an abuse of freedom is the root of evil. The contemporary world is not free from such abuses which occasion the dissemination of the seeds of wickedness. An abuse of the freedom to express one’s opinion and to express oneself, for instance, breeds the evil of defamation, calumny and detraction which are evils against human dignity. An abuse of freedom of conscience and the right to privacy has been a root cause of claiming abortion as a human right which in itself is an evil against humanity.⁸⁶ St. Gregory’s philosophy concerning the abuse of freedom as the seed from which many evils sprout is relevant to our time. It helps those with authority and responsibility, i.e., legislators, executives, judges and policy makers, to set proper parameters for the concept of freedom in all of its forms.

Human beings in their actual nature are weaker than ideal human beings. It is this weakness which makes them prone to fall, that is to tend towards matter.⁸⁷ It was this line of thought that has seemed to pinpoint Gregory as a person who regarded the fall of human beings not as their fault but as an inevitable result of their actuality, that is, as an outcome of the union between body and soul.⁸⁸ Such a way of thinking seems to obviate freedom. We have

⁸⁴ Cf. P. SCHAFF – H. WACE, *A Select Library*, 9.

⁸⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Cf. D. SHAW, “Abortion and Human Rights”, *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 24 (2010) 640.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*

consistently demonstrated, however, that Gregory considers the human beings to be essentially endowed with freedom: a human being's fall, therefore, is indeed his or her fault because the fall reflects the person's choice to abuse his or her freedom.

5. Evaluation and Conclusion

Saint Gregory of Nyssa contributed much to the effort to Christianize the Hellenic world and to Hellenize the Christian world. Thinking and writing under the influence of three schools of Greek philosophy, that is to say, Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Neoplatonism, he helped to familiarize the intellectuals of his era to the notion that philosophy can be an instrument by which thinkers can explain the Christian mystery and render it intelligible. Among the 4th Century Fathers of the Church, Saint Gregory is deemed the most commendable for advocating the use of philosophical reason to explain the deposit of Christian faith.⁸⁹

The Platonic doctrine of asceticism and contemplation as the means of attaining knowledge and union with the Good made its way into Christianity partly through the philosophy of Saint Gregory of Nyssa. He applied the Platonic notions to the practice of asceticism and contemplative mysticism in the Church as principal means for attaining intimate union with God. In tandem with the Platonic doctrine, he elucidated the biblical meaning of the folly of material wealth. Just as in the platonic teaching true happiness is to be found in the world of ideas, Saint Gregory polished this doctrine and used it to justify the Christian practice of asceticism and contemplation of the divine mysteries.

Interpretations of some biblical texts were made possible through the inspiration and influence of platonic and neoplatonic ways of thinking and terminology. Because they expressed Christian doctrine with accuracy and precision, Platonic and Neoplatonic terms such as *Logos* and *hypostasis* found their way into Christian texts and played an important role in explaining the nature, personhood and mission of Jesus, who is Lord, God, the universal Savior.

⁸⁹ Cf. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 283.

We cannot minimize his contribution to the solution of the theological and philosophical problems of his time. People noteworthy for their understanding of God, the world, and the human person were finding it difficult to establish the relationship between philosophy and theology, or rather between reason and faith. This essay has repeatedly underlined Gregory's insistence that philosophy is at the service of theology and can make theological mysteries more understandable even though, as mysteries, they remain transcendent to natural cognitive processes. Christian thinkers of the scholastic era accepted Gregory's insights; they are still of inestimable value in the contemporary Christian world. His insights have also proven fertile in the process of finding a resolution to the origin and nature of the universe, to the origin of evil, to the nature and scope of human knowledge and to the nature of the human being.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa was not without shortcomings in his thinking: perhaps his enthusiasm to utilize platonic and Neoplatonic insights even in cases where a transition from those modes of Greek thinking to the faith intrinsic to the Gospel was not feasible should be considered a shortcoming. Some would say that his efforts were tantamount to a legitimizing of the pagan platonic way of thinking by making it look Christian. His thought regarding the origin and nature of matter leaves much to be desired if one considers that for him the universe is material as a result of the combination of some spiritual qualities. He put forward this doctrine in order to avoid an apparent contradiction of conceiving God, spiritual as He is, to be the origin of something material. For him, God could not produce in a manner that is "ungodly"... and to produce matter is an ungodly enterprise. One can argue against Gregory that even the spiritual qualities could not be able to produce matter since spiritual qualities by definition do not contain any matter.

His adherence to platonic and Neoplatonic insights makes some aspects of his Christian thinking look too idealistic. Contemplative mysticism as a recommended way of attaining a true knowledge and intimate union with God would render God and salvation to be for the few just as contemplation of Truth, Beauty and Goodness in the platonic manner of thinking is reserved for the few endowed

with the ability to not let their rational soul become entangled with the sensitive soul or the appetitive soul.

For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, at the *eschaton*, there will be restoration of all mankind even the damned ones. He advocated this doctrine to avoid the contradiction that seems to ensue if human beings who are created in the image and likeness of God suffer damnation. In other words, he did not have a real sense of sin as inherently irrational. Gregory intended to create a harmony between the omniscience of God and the fall of humankind. If God knew that human beings would misuse their freedom and be damned, then why did He create them? In order to resolve this contradiction, Saint Gregory of Nyssa subscribed to the doctrine of universal restoration which contradicts some biblical texts that speak of some people to be condemned on the Last Day (Matt 25:1-13; Mark 13:14-23).⁹⁰ All the same, in spite of the criticism and shortcomings of his rational approach to Christianity, his thoughts still remain a treasure not only for the ancient church but also for contemporary Christian philosophers and believers in general.

In the world of our time in which we experience the mushrooming of Christian denominations and an increase of preachers with various and diverse backgrounds and understandings, the position that faith must mesh with reason without any contradiction or conflict seems inalienable. Faith devoid of proper reasoning breeds fundamentalism and religious fanaticism which are a threat to peace and human coexistence. Conversely, reason devoid of proper theology ends in secularism, which carries with it various forms of relativism. In short, the instrumentality of philosophy for faith is always of vital importance in order to make faith understandable, communicable and justifiable. Faith, on the other hand, continues to be the gauge by which philosophy can discern the truthfulness of its claims. The one who holds the key to philosophical and theological truth is: God.

⁹⁰ Perhaps more importantly to place everyone in heaven with no one in hell or even to place some people in hell seems to be an inclination to anticipate how God is going to judge human beings. The only one who knows whether someone is going to hell or not is: God. (Editor's Note)