

ALWAYS CHANGING, ALWAYS THE SAME: HOLINESS IN GREGORY OF NYSSA

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This paper begins with a brief outline of the Neoplatonist philosophical milieu of Gregory's time and how this influenced his theology. The place of "allegory" as a hermeneutical tool is also discussed. Both of these important introductory analyses are foundational to the primary purpose of this investigation; namely, how holiness is enunciated by Gregory. The investigation of holiness is then be divided into three components, with individual focus on the topics of participation in the divine nature, progress in perfection, and the proper use of the passions.

Introduction

Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 – c.395 C.E.) was an extremely important fourth century theologian.¹ One of the three "Cappadocian Fathers", alongside his brother Basil the Great and good friend Gregory Nazianzen, his influence has continued to have an impact on the church, particularly in regard to Trinitarian theology. The purpose of this essay is to investigate the way Gregory understood Christian holiness. Throughout his writings Gregory uses paradox as a rhetorical device to contrast and hold in tension two seeming opposites. For example, he contrasts the immutability of God with the changing nature of humanity, and the continuing progress of the Christian walk with the stability of standing on the rock which is Christ. The use of paradox will be highlighted throughout this essay within the three categories of participation in the divine nature, progress in perfection, and the proper use of the passions. The title for this essay, "Always changing, always the same" is an attempt to capture both the use of paradox in Gregory's writings as well as the idea that holiness is both a gift of grace, and a continuing progression requiring the effort of the believer throughout all of life and beyond.

¹ For the purpose of simplicity "Gregory of Nyssa" will be referred to simply as "Gregory" for the remainder of this essay, except in the circumstance where it is necessary to distinguish from Gregory Nazianzen.

Gregory and Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism is a term used to describe the adapted form of Platonic philosophy that was commenced by Plotinus (204-70 C.E.), lasting in its pagan form down to the sixth century.² Richard Tarnas suggests that Neoplatonism sought to bridge the “schism” that existed between the “rational philosophies” and the “mystery religions.” In the work of Plotinus, “Greek rational philosophy reached its end point and passed over into another, more thoroughly religious spirit, a suprarational mysticism.”³

In Neoplatonic thought the cosmos emanates from the Divine being, known as the One. The One is infinite and beyond all categories and descriptions, beyond all thought and all being, ineffable and incomprehensible. The One is the creator of the cosmos by a series of emanations; divine Intellect (*Nous*) comes from the One, and the Soul (*psyché*) comes from *Nous*. These three gradations within the “great chain of being,”⁴ known as *hypostases*, are not separate entities, but rather are timelessly present in all things.⁵

Tarnas indicates how Plotinus described in his writings the complex nature of the universe and its “participation in the divine”. This terminology is common in Gregory’s writings. In particular Gregory uses this in relation to his interpretation of *imago Dei*. Further, within Neoplatonic thought;

The entire universe exists in a continual outflow from the One into created multiplicity, which is then drawn back into the One—a process of emanation and return always moved by the One’s superfluity of perfection. The philosopher’s task is to overcome the human bondage to the physical realm by moral and intellectual self-discipline and purification, and to turn inward to a gradual ascent back to the Absolute.⁶ Similarly, this relates to Gregory’s doctrine of *epektasis*, the continual progress in perfection, which will be outlined in more detail later.

² R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London: Duckworth, 1972), 1.

³ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 84.

⁴ Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 13.

⁵ Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, 85. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 2. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (New York: Image Books, 2003), 464.

⁶ Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, 86.

These small examples show that Neoplatonic thought did have a profound impact on Gregory, however it should not be assumed that the use of common language and concepts equates with Gregory's theology being birthed out of this school of philosophy. Caution needs to be displayed before referring to Gregory as a "Christian Platonist" or "Christian Neoplatonist." It should be noted that the distinction that exists between "philosophy" and "theology" in the present post-Enlightenment period was not evident in Gregory's day. The Greek Fathers would not have objected to being called "philosophers", for they referred to Christianity as "the divine philosophy."⁷ Given the intertwining of philosophy and theology in Gregory's day it is therefore not unusual for him to adopt certain notions and terms from Plato, Plotinus or Aristotle. "That Gregory was a man of erudition, that his true intellectual interests had been with Greek philosophy and poetry, that he uses Platonic terminology in expounding his theological thought—all these are facts which no serious student of Gregory can dispute..."⁸ However this does not make him a Christian Platonist, Neoplatonist or Aristotelian. Such terms would be anachronistic to Gregory and his contemporaries. Rather, as Constantine Cavarnos asserts, the "*foundation* of [his] thought is neither Platonism nor Aristotelianism, nor some other secular system of thought, but is Christian revelation."⁹ Cavarnos continues with regard to the Church Fathers in general;

Although they did use many elements from Plato and Aristotle, they chose those elements that did not contradict revealed teaching, but were in harmony with it and helped express or illustrate its content. In other words, their use of pagan philosophy was not a wholesale, slavish one. It was a very selective or "eclectic" use, which left them quite free to criticise the errors of secular philosophy.¹⁰

George Bebis agrees when he suggests that:

Philosophical conceptions and philosophical categories have become a common property in the age of the great Fathers of the Church and were used extensively by Christian and non-Christian thinkers alike. The most

⁷ Constantine Cavarnos, *The Hellenic-Christian Philosophical Tradition* (Belmont: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1989), 19.

⁸ George Bebis, *The Mind of the Fathers* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), 68.

⁹ Cavarnos, 18.

¹⁰ Cavarnos, 19.

important point, however, which should be made here is that the use of philosophical language by Gregory of Nyssa (and the rest of the Fathers) is not a sign of spiritual indigence or improvisation, but on the contrary, it proves a deep sense of “historicity,” a profound respect for history in which the *magnalis Dei* (the mighty deeds of God) are intrinsically linked and united in the great design for the salvation of mankind.¹¹

Thus Gregory, in his *Life of Moses* (in which he puts forth Moses as the “example for life”)¹² suggests that one philosophical notion (the immortality of the soul) is a “pious offspring”, whilst another (the transference of the soul) is “a fleshy and alien foreskin.”¹³ This indicates his willingness to be critically selective with contemporary philosophy; willing to reject that which contradicts his understanding of Christian revelation, whilst at the same time adopting that which suited his purposes. Within his treatise on Moses, Gregory allegorises and thus subordinates philosophy to the higher pursuit of the Christian life, making philosophy the “handmaiden of faith.”¹⁴ He likens it to the treasures of Egypt that the Israelites took with them when they left captivity.

Our guide in virtue commands someone who “borrows” from wealthy Egyptians to receive such things as moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else is sought by those outside the Church, since these things will be useful when in time the divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of reason.¹⁵

Johannes Quasten suggests that Gregory has “thoroughly Christianized his Neo-Platonist borrowings”¹⁶ and even given them a “complete Christian metamorphosis.”¹⁷ Similarly, Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson recognise that Gregory’s “greatest debt is clearly to Plato,” however, “all has undergone a profound transformation into a Christian synthesis.”¹⁸ As a result, whilst

¹¹ Bebis, *The Mind of the Fathers*, 70. See also Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 3 (Allen: Christian Classics, n.d.), 285.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe, and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 33.

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 63.

¹⁴ Edward Rochie Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 236.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 81.

¹⁶ Quasten, *Patrology*, 268.

¹⁷ Quasten, *Patrology*, 285.

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 5.

contemporary Neoplatonic philosophical terminology and ideas are prevalent within Gregory's writings they are neither the guiding principal nor the undergirding purpose. "Although it was Plato who exercised the profoundest influence upon Gregory, upon his training, his outlook, his terminology and his approach to a problem, he by no means constitutes the sole basis for Gregory's system."¹⁹ Similarly, Martin Laird shows that "Gregory's concern for development and transformation as a result of union, in which the soul could never become identical with the One, distinguish him definitively from the...Neoplatonist."²⁰

Therefore it seems anachronistic to refer to Gregory as a "Christian Neoplatonist" (or similar). Instead, Gregory's use of the philosophical language of Neoplatonism suggests that he was an astute man of his times; educated in the philosophy of his day, willing to critique or adopt concepts as he saw appropriate, but primarily a minister of the Christian gospel. Gregory's ability to communicate the truths of his faith with the philosophical language of his day enabled him to engage with those educated and adept in Platonic thought as well as less educated Christians within his diaconate, and beyond. As a result his theology became both an apology and a pastoral tool.

Gregory's Use of Allegory

As a method of Scriptural interpretation allegory is one of the most controversial. Certainly in the modern era the preference to rely more on scientifically sustainable methodologies, such as the historical-critical method, has seen most scholars become sceptical of the place of allegory in biblical interpretation.

Many contemporary readers think patristic allegorical interpretations are little more than the pious fantasies of the precritical mind. For them, textual obscurity or discomfort ought to be illuminated by history, not schemes of spiritual discipline or anthropologies of spirit and body. A wayward text should challenge our assumptions rather than prompt a counterintuitive rereading, and a text should be allowed to say what it means and no more. For these critics, allegorical reading tends to spin out of control. In their view, attempts to discern the "other speak" of

¹⁹ Quasten, *Patrology*, 284.

²⁰ Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 128-29.

scripture must be resisted and, ultimately, rejected because they are dangerous and wrong.²¹

Allegorical interpretation of scripture is a method whereby the literal sense of the text becomes a kind of “map” for a deeper, more “spiritual” understanding. It focuses upon codes and figures that are used to find that deeper meaning and it seeks to interpret the scriptures “in terms of the divine economy.”²² It is a method that “transforms the historical essence of the Bible and its pedagogic message into a flowing stream of true and spiritual experience.”²³ So it could be said that the purpose of this method of interpretation is not so much the literal meaning of the specific text in hand, but rather how that text relates to the larger story of the economy of salvation. Therefore it tends to be a broad and canonical approach to scriptural interpretation.

Gregory was certainly well acquainted with this method and employed it in *The Life of Moses* a work that applies to this investigation of his understanding of holiness. In this work the literal meaning of the biblical text is the *historia*. For Gregory, the biblical account of Moses’ life is assumed to be historically accurate and reliable. “Moses was born a slave in Egypt, he was raised in Pharaoh’s house, he fled Egypt, married, saw the burning bush, returned to Egypt as God’s instrument of liberation, and died within sight of the promised land.”²⁴ This first level is the “surface of a mystery.” It supports a second, spiritual level called *theoria* that uses the *historia* as a “map for the journey of the soul to God.”²⁵ Anthony Meredith notes that Gregory defends the use of allegory in the prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, even though his brother, Basil, writes against it.²⁶ In that work Gregory states; “I hope that my commentary will be a guide for the more fleshly-minded, since the wisdom hidden [in the Song of Songs] leads to a spiritual state of the soul.”²⁷

²¹ John J. O’Keefe, and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 107.

²² O’Keefe, *Sanctified Vision*, 90.

²³ Bebis, *The Mind of the Fathers*, 76.

²⁴ O’Keefe, *Sanctified Vision*, 100.

²⁵ O’Keefe, *Sanctified Vision*, 100.

²⁶ Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, 54.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, tr. Casimir McCambly (Brookline, Mass: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 35 cited in Morwenna Ludlow,

Gregory's use of allegory, like his reinterpretation of Neoplatonic ideas and concepts, is evidence also of him being a man of his times. Malherbe and Ferguson show how Gregory uses an exegetical methodology that is comparable with Philo, Origen and Clement of Alexandria. "Gregory takes the 'moral' allegories of Philo and extends them in the direction of 'mysticism' by his application of them to the spiritual life. He goes beyond Origen, for whom the 'spiritual' interpretation is an interiorization of the sacraments."²⁸

It is also significant to consider *how* Gregory uses metaphor and allegory as "means of expression."

They enable him to speak of God as present, revealed and united with his creatures but at the same time incomprehensible and surpassing what words can express or define. In this open-ended poetic language, each image points beyond itself and evokes multiple levels of meaning. Thus, metaphor and allegory are excellent vehicles for conveying the theology and spirituality of eternal growth.²⁹

Gregory's understanding of "perfection as progress" will be discussed in more detail later in this essay. For now it is sufficient to say that allegorical interpretation is used by Gregory as a means of communicating this theological perspective on holiness, which Verna Harrison has referred to above as "eternal growth." As a result, both the language of Neoplatonism that he adopts and adapts, along with his use of allegory as a means of interpretation, aid Gregory in communicating his understanding of holiness in the Christian life. This is also done in such a way that speaks alike to both the philosophically educated elite and Christians within his pastoral concern.

Participation in the Divine Nature

Holiness as it relates to the Divine Nature in the human person is a key concept for Gregory.³⁰ It is a constant theme in his writings,

Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)Modern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 129.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 6-7.

²⁹ Verna E.F. Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa*, vol. 30, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 97.

³⁰ Lewis Ayres notes that Gregory avoids the basic terminology of deification. For example, while Gregory Nazianzen uses the term *theosis* a number of times, Gregory

and it can be seen that his understanding of holiness involves reclaiming, cleansing and improving the image of God that is in all persons through creation. Gregory's understanding of the image of God in the human person commences with expressing what the Divine Nature is like within God's self. A summary of his understanding of this is firstly expressed in *The Life of Moses*.

The Divine One is himself the Good...whose very nature is goodness. This he is and he is so named, and is known by this nature. Since, then, it has not been demonstrated that there is any limit to virtue except evil, and since the Divine does not admit of an opposite, we hold the divine nature to be unlimited and infinite.³¹

Secondly, in his *Homily on the Sixth Beatitude*, Gregory states;

[The] Divine Nature...surpasses every mental concept. For It is altogether inaccessible to reasoning and conjecture, nor has there been found any human faculty capable of perceiving the incomprehensible; for we cannot devise a means of understanding inconceivable things.³²

Likewise, in *On the Making of Man* he writes that "God is in His own nature all that which our mind can conceive of good; - rather, transcending all good that we can conceive or comprehend."³³ Thus Gregory's understanding of the Divine Nature could be summarised as *limitless good*; the only limit of this Divine Nature is that it has no limits.³⁴ As God is also "inconceivable" it would seem that humanity is completely incapable of knowing God. However, as people are created in the image of God, this privilege is made available to them; the *participation* in the Divine Nature.

In seeking to understand what Gregory means by participation in the Divine Nature it is necessary to start with how the image of God is present in human nature. For Gregory, humanity was created with the capacity to share in the goodness of God. The likeness of God

of Nyssa uses it sparingly. The same is true for the word *theopoiesis*. So I have chosen to use the more common term *participation* in this essay. See Lewis Ayres, "Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49:4 (2005): 377.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 31.

³² Gregory of Nyssa, "Sermon Six on the Beatitudes" in *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. Johannes Quasten, and Joseph Plumpe (New York: Newman Press, 1954), 146.

³³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1892), 64.

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 31.

that is present in humanity is seen in the good virtues of human nature, and the freedom that exists within those virtues.

Thus there is in us the principle of all excellence, all virtue and wisdom, and every higher thing that we conceive: but pre-eminent among all is the fact that we are free from necessity, and not in bondage to any natural power, but have decision in our own power as we please; for virtue is a voluntary thing, subject to no dominion: that which is the result of compulsion and force cannot be virtue.³⁵

The image of God in Christians is not their possession, but rather it is present as a result of “participation in all good;”³⁶ that is, participation in God. This is a “permanent condition that defines the human, yet also exists in a continuous process of eternal growth, by which the human becomes more and more like God.”³⁷ Harrison summarises this in the following way;

God’s purpose in creating us was to enable us to participate in his own goodness. The divine image is given to us as the foundation within our nature which makes this possible, the kinship between the divine and human natures through which they can come together by way of participation. The image is actually the participation itself as well as the capacity to participate. This is because it is not so much a static condition as a dynamic process of becoming more and more like God through ever increasing participation in him. Our present level of participation is the grace which enables us to move to a higher level.³⁸

The consequences of sin for Gregory are that the image of God in humanity is stained; hidden under “vile coverings”. In his *Homily on the Sixth Beatitude* he encourages his congregation not to despair at the seemingly impossible task set forth in the verse at hand (Matthew 5:8). Gregory sees the promise that the pure of heart will “see God”, but also takes into consideration other verses which state that no one has seen God (John 1:18, 6:46; 1 John 4:12) and attempts to resolve this paradox. The image of God, even though stained by sin, is still present in humanity and in this Gregory sees the “standard by which to apprehend the Divine;” since God “imprinted” on human nature “the likeness of the glories of His own Nature.” It is in their virtues that people see God and so in order to

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 64.

³⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 64.

³⁷ Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom*, 90.

³⁸ Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom*, 89.

once again see the image of God they must “wash off by a good life” those vile coverings that have been stuck on their hearts, and then “the Divine Beauty will again shine forth” in them.³⁹ Similarly, in *The Life of Moses*, Gregory exhorts his readers to “turn to the better, putting evil behind” them. As they do so, “the images and impressions of virtue... are imprinted on the purity of [their] soul.”⁴⁰

Harrison highlights that Gregory intrinsically links the image of God in humanity in terms of “participation.”

In this he is utilising an ontological concept that is derived from Plato and occurs in all forms of Platonism. The concept is that originals or archetypes on a higher level of reality have copies or images on a lower level of reality. This relationship between an archetype and its image is established through participation...Participation is what produces the copy's likeness to its original...This derived sharing in the being of another, higher reality is what Gregory sees as happening when the human image participates in the divine attributes.⁴¹

This concept of “participation” is at the very heart of Christianity for Gregory and influences his understanding of what a Christian in fact is; “by participating in Christ we are given the title ‘Christian,’ so also are we drawn into a share in the lofty ideas which it implies.” Further, Gregory argues that it is not possible to be a Christian without displaying the virtues of Christ. Christianity, for Gregory, is an “imitation of the divine nature,” and “brings man back to his original good fortune.” In a sense, then, the rebirth of Christianity for Gregory is being re-created in the image of God, through participation in the Divine Nature.⁴²

Holiness in Gregory's writings is expressed in similar terms; “This, therefore, is perfection in the Christian life...the participation of one's soul and speech and activities in all of the names by which Christ is signified so that the perfect holiness...is taken upon oneself in ‘the whole body and soul and spirit.’”⁴³ By the “Mediator”, that is Christ, the Christian is “given a share in the Godhead...having

³⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, “Sermon Six on the Beatitudes,” 149.

⁴⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 65.

⁴¹ Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom*, 90.

⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, “On What It Means to Call Oneself a Christian,” in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa - Ascetical Works* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 85.

⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa, “On Perfection,” in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa - Ascetical Works* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 121.

become pure through the reception of His purity.”⁴⁴ Here is an example of Gregory’s use of paradox. In one sense perfection involves the constant effort of the Christian in the imitation of Christ’s virtues, by participating in his Divine nature. However at the same time the Christian has already become pure through receiving Christ’s purity. This paradox is held together by Gregory’s definition of perfection, which is not a bounded, ideological and static condition made available at glorification but rather the continuous progress of a Christian’s participation within a limitless God. As a result, Gregory encourages his readers to continue to “exchange ‘glory for glory,’ becoming greater through daily increase, ever perfecting himself, and never arriving too quickly at the limit of perfection. For this is truly perfection: never to stop growing towards what is better and never placing any limit on perfection.”⁴⁵

Progress in Perfection

Gregory uses the word *epektasis* to describe constant progress in perfection within the Christian life. The key verse that leads Gregory to this doctrine is Philippians 3:13 in which Paul speaks of forgetting what is behind and “straining toward” (ἐτεκτεινόμενος) what is ahead. This continuous movement forward in the faith depicts, for Gregory, the progression that takes place in the life of the Christian.

Even after listening in secret to the mysteries of heaven, Paul does not let the graces he has obtained become the limit of his desire but he continues to go on and on, never ceasing his ascent. Thus he teaches us... that in our constant participation in the blessed nature of the Good, the graces that we receive at every point are indeed great, but the path that lies beyond our immediate grasp is infinite. This will constantly happen to those who thus share in the divine Goodness, and they will always enjoy a greater and greater participation in grace throughout all eternity.⁴⁶

Jean Danielou further summarises Gregory’s doctrine of *epektasis*;

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, “On Perfection,” 116.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, “On Perfection,” 122.

⁴⁶ *Commentary on Canticle of Canticles*, J.P. Migne, *Patrologia graeca* vol. 44.940D-941.A, cited in Jean Danielou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings*, ed. Herbert Musurillo, trans. Herbert Musurillo (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 58-59.

Perfection consists in this perpetual penetration into the interior, a perpetual discovery of God. This is essentially what Gregory is describing. Men always have the tendency to stabilize, to fix, the various stages of perfection which they have attained...For Gregory...the future is always better than the past. But to overcome this natural tendency of the soul, Gregory offers the support of faith.⁴⁷

One of Gregory's most unique metaphors for describing this progress in perfection is the paradox of "luminous darkness."⁴⁸ Using Moses as a guide for the spiritual life, Gregory states that "Moses' vision of God began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in the cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness."⁴⁹ So for Gregory, progress in perfection is, metaphorically, moving from light towards darkness. That is, in the early stages of the Christian life the light fills the life of the new believer and contrasts the darkness experienced in the life of sin. Gregory allegorises three theophanies in Moses' life commencing at the burning bush (Exodus 3) to illustrate this.

In the same way that Moses on that occasion attained to this knowledge, so now does everyone who, like him, divests himself of the earthly covering and looks to light shining from the bramble bush, that is, to the Radiance which shines upon us through this thorny flesh and which is... the true light and the truth itself.⁵⁰

The second metaphor of the Christian life is taken from Moses' theophany in the cloud on Mt Sinai (Exodus 24). This is the next stage of the progression into *luminous darkness* whereby the Christian begins to recognise the incomprehensibility of the Divine Nature. The final theophany in this progression is Moses' being shown the back of God as he passes by (Exodus 33). In this final theophany Moses is "covered" by God in the cleft of the rock, and is thus in darkness for that time. Gregory allegorises this in order to show that as Christians progress in perfection they become more and more aware of the impossibility of knowing in full the Divine Nature.

⁴⁷ Danielou, *From Glory to Glory*, 61.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 95.

⁴⁹ *Commentary on Canticle of Canticles*, J.P. Migne, *Patrologia graeca* vol. 44.1000C, cited in Danielou, *From Glory to Glory*, 23.

⁵⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 60.

This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, *No one has ever seen God*, thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature.⁵¹

The continuous progress in perfection that Gregory refers to “translates into action the ideal of ‘likeness to the infinite God.’”⁵² Morwenna Ludlow highlights that it is the “*eschatological* nature of *epektasis* which gives it its value,” since “it is not the case that human nature will go through a period of dynamic change (either in this life or the next) only to eventually reach a final state of atemporal, unchanging perfection.”⁵³

For Gregory, the soul reaches out into the divine darkness, losing its own power of vision only to enjoy a greater mode of sensing the presence of God. So on the one hand, God is satisfying to the soul. But Gregory’s eschatology is summed up in a paradox, that our satisfaction is never to be satisfied.⁵⁴

Further, Harrison states that “grace enlarges the soul’s capacity to receive grace and then fills it again and again in a process of eternal growth.”⁵⁵ Thus this progress in perfection is the Christian’s never ceasing growth, by grace, through participation in the Divine Nature; the depths of which can never be plumbed, its heights can never be scaled, and its width never spanned.

The Proper use of Passions

Gregory is again a man of his times in his employment of *apatheia* in his theology. This is a difficult term to translate, and indeed Gregory has a somewhat unique application of this term. It does, however, importantly relate to this discussion of holiness, as well as the two previous phrases - participation in the Divine Nature, and progress in perfection.

⁵¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 95.

⁵² Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, 77.

⁵³ Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)Modern*, 132.

⁵⁴ Kathryn Rombs, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Doctrine of Epektasis: Some Logical Implications,” *Studia Patristica* XXXVII (2001): 292.

⁵⁵ Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom*, 130.

It has been suggested that this term refers to the continuous “fight against the passions and entanglements of this world.”⁵⁶ In employing this definition Quasten suggests that *apatheia* is a state that can be reached. Some of Gregory’s writings seem to indicate that this is an adequate definition. For example, in discussing prayer Gregory suggests the following: “Whatever anyone may set out to do, if it is done with prayer the undertaking will prosper and he will be kept from sin, because there is nothing to oppose him and *drag the soul into passion*.”⁵⁷ Further, “Now the human soul cannot be alienated from God except through a mind enslaved by passions. For as the Divine Nature is altogether impassible, a man who is always entangled in passion is debarred from union with God.”⁵⁸

Similarly, in Gregory’s hagiography of his sister, *The Life of St Macrina*, he recounts sitting with his older sister sharing in grief following their brother Basil’s death. “As we spoke, we recalled the memory of the great Basil and my soul was afflicted and my face fell and tears poured from my eyes.” In contrast, Macrina’s reasoned discussion of “the divine plan hidden in misfortune” seems to lift Gregory’s soul “out of its human sphere.”⁵⁹ This could be interpreted as an example of *apatheia*; “fighting against the passions and entanglements of this world”, as previously defined by Quasten.

However, Quasten’s suggestion that *apatheia* is a state that can be reached seems to contradict Gregory’s understanding of progress in perfection as a continuous movement. As a result I suggest that the definition given above is inadequate. This can be seen in other selections of Gregory’s writings. For example, in *On Perfection*, Gregory states that the “marks of the true Christian are all those we know in connection with Christ.” So, the Christian is to “imitate” that in Christ which “we have room for” (for example in forgiving one another), and “reverence and worship” that which our nature does not approximate” (for example, his divinity). Later, he states that;

Whatever is done or thought or said through passion has no agreement with Christ, but bears the character of the adversary, who smears the

⁵⁶ Quasten, *Patrology*, 295.

⁵⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord’s Prayer*, ed. Johannes Quasten, and Joseph Plumpe, trans. Hilda C. Graef, vol. 18, *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York: Newman Press, 1954), 23. Emphasis added.

⁵⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 31.

⁵⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, “The Life of St Macrina,” in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa - Ascetical Works* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 175.

pearl of the soul with the mud of the passions and dims the lustre of the precious stone. What is free from every passionate inclination looks to the source of passionlessness, who is Christ...For the purity in Christ and the purity seen in the person who has a share in Him are the same.⁶⁰

Therefore, for Gregory, *apatheia* is exemplified by Christ as "passionlessness." However, he does recognise in other writings that passions such as "anger," "fear," and "desire for pleasure," are in fact present in the Christian life. As a result "virtue consists in the good employment of these movements, and vice in their bad employment, and in addition...through desire...we are brought nearer God, drawn up, by its chain as it were, from earth towards Him."⁶¹ So Gregory encourages the reader to "struggle...against this very unstable element of our nature, engaging in a close contest with our opponent...not becoming victors by destroying our nature, but by not allowing it to fall."⁶²

As a result, whilst Gregory does speak of *apatheia* as passionlessness, in the light of his preference for continuous progress in perfection, it seems appropriate, therefore, to define *apatheia* as the "proper use of passions." This comes about as the Christian progresses in perfection through participation in the Divine Nature.

Conclusion

Gregory of Nyssa has had a definitive and unique contribution to make to Christian theology. Having adopted and adapted terminology and concepts from his contemporary philosophy, Neoplatonism, and Christianising them he was able to communicate both to the educated elite and the Christians within his diaconate. His use of allegory saw him interpret the life of Moses in terms of the divine economy of salvation. As a result, Moses' life became the example of the Christian life of perfection. The Christian life in Gregory's writings have been shown to involve participation in the Divine Nature, continuous progress in perfection and the proper use of the passions. Christian holiness in Gregory of Nyssa is derivative of the holiness of God. God is limitless good and therefore there are no limits to his perfection. As a result, the Christian never ceases to

⁶⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, "On Perfection," 121.

⁶¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1892), 108.

⁶² Gregory of Nyssa, "On Perfection," 121-22.

progress in his or her participation in the Divine Nature, becoming more and more like Christ; always changing, always the same. This final exhortation for the Christian from Gregory himself summarises his doctrine of holiness well;

Let him exchange 'glory for glory', becoming greater through daily increase, ever perfecting himself, and never arriving too quickly at the limit of perfection. For this is truly perfection: never to stop growing towards what is better and never placing any limits on perfection.⁶³

⁶³ Gregory of Nyssa, "On Perfection," 122.