How would Gregory of Nyssa have understood evolutionism?

Abstract

The three famous Cappadocians who formed a 'school' in the fourth century AD complement one another in the way they envisaged the evolution of creation. St. Basil of Caesarea explains in his writings how this 'mechanism' operates in nature and his view is the closest to those of contemporary evolutionists. Gregory of Nyssa completes his 'system' with details concerning human evolution and proposes the doctrine of *apokatastasis* (restoration) of humankind after the Fall. St. Gregory Nazianzus subscribes to the latter, but he does not do it overtly – the respective notion is implied in his work in a "cautious, undogmatic" way, in Hanson's qualification.[1] All three Fathers of the Church believe that God will bring all creation into harmony with the Kingdom of Heaven.[2]

This paper attempts to detect a conception of human evolution within the writings of Gregory of Nyssa; in order to do that, Basil's thoughts are used as an introduction. The universal restoration which Gregory of Nyssa believes shall take place would mean for humanity both the fulfillment of its goal of a perfect moral development and its biological end (i.e. the ceasing of the human race's progression); therefore it is difficult to treat the two ultimate 'scenarios' in separation. It seems that this Cappadocian father believes the number of the souls/humans to be limited in God's mind where they originate. As is known, he thinks that creation is in the process of becoming fulfilled and this state of affairs will cease when the Restoration has been accomplished.

[1] J. W. Hanson, *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years*, Universalist Publishing House, Boston and Chicago, 1899, Chapter XV: Gregory Nazianzen. See also "Basilians" in *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Aachen, vol. 1, p. 210.
[2] Christos Simelidis, *Selected Poems of Gregory of Naziansus. 1.2.17; ll 1.10, 19, 32: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary*,Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Hypomnemata, Band 177, 2009, p. 74.

How would Gregory of Nyssa have understood evolutionism?

There is evidence from the Cappadocian School (fourth century AD) that would support the idea of 'becoming by generations' in regard to both inanimate and living beings, with a special place reserved in its account for humankind. The representatives of this theological movement see evolution in general as a means through which God operates within Creation. They underline that humankind has been endowed by God not only with the dignity of creativity, but also with the potentiality to reach the maximum that can be achieved in this process: that of becoming co-creators of their own image to the point of attaining deification.

Even though the notion regarding such a purpose of human life is not exclusive to the Cappadocians (St. Athanasius, c. 295-373, also spoke about *theosis*[3]), in their writings they detail the progression of humanity and explain its role in relation to everything else God created or rather 'has so far created' since they believe that God's act of 'making' continue throughout history. They maintain that a universal Restoration (ἀποκατάστασις), which constitutes the aim of humanity's moral development, represents the end of human evolution as supersession of species as well.

This paper attempts to follow in particular Gregory of Nyssa's contribution to the respective theological movement and clarify his view on the development of the human race.

[3] St. Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, PG 25, 192B.

Creation.

Writing under the influence of divine revelation Moses characterises the Scripture as: "the book of the generation of heaven and earth" (Genesis 2.4). Gregory of Nyssa points out that Moses [inspired by God] describes the moment the Creation first came into being. It seems that this was in fact the instant when "all that is seen was finished, and each of the things that are betook itself to its own separate place" and also when "the Divine power and skill was implanted in the growth of things, guiding [them] with the reins of a double operation (for it was by rest and motion that it devised the genesis of the things that were not, and the continuance of the things that are)."[4] For St. Gregory of Nyssa – as for Basil – everything that is visible in creation was chronologically preceded by the Divine Word (Logos) or, to be more precise, by a thought in God's mind. All Cappadocians (as does Plato in *Timaeus* and also his followers) understand cosmology as the key for both responding to the question 'Why did humanity appear last, after the rest of creation came into being?' and fathoming "the manner of the generations of the souls".[5] Because cosmology is the background on which all other considerations find their meaning, the conception of St. Basil the Great, who wrote on this topic, will be touched upon. Nonetheless, since it was not him who developed a theory of (human) progress, *epektasis*, but Gregory of Nyssa, his younger brother, we shall focus on the works of the latter, after introducing two fundamental ideas of Basil (330-379 AD): one is that there is a Creator and that He established a beginning and the other is that the material and the spiritual worlds were created simultaneously by Him. Actually, St. Basil of Caesarea [the Great], who was the founder of the Cappadocian

[4] Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, PG 44. 205.*On the Making of Man*, in H. Wace and P. Schaff (eds.), A Selected Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF), vol. V, 1893, p. 388.
[5] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, p. 407.

theological school, commences his Homily 1 in the *Hexameron* by announcing: "I am about to speak of the creation of heaven and earth, **which was not spontaneous, as some have imagined, but drew its origin from God**."[6] And developing more on the first statement in the Scriptures, and also revisiting the topic in his Homily V entitled *The Germination of the Earth*, St. Basil expresses his understanding of creation as an on-going process; it is not finished but is still taking place [in God's thought]. His view is consistent with what the verb *bara'* denotes in Hebrew: "the action of God in bringing about his creative work" or the idea of 'setting into motion'; it regards not only the original creation of the world, but one finds it also "often referring to any new beginning in the normal everyday processes of life and death."[7] Therefore, in Hebrew thought "In the beginning God *bara'* " (Genesis 1.1) and He still continues to do so. In the language of the Psalms both meanings are evident. Denis Alexander gives a few examples, out of which I use two here. When referring to the first meaning, Psalm 89. 47 says: "Remember how short my time is/ For what futility have You created [*bara'*] all the children of men!" and in regard to the second sense of the verb, Psalm 51.10 asks "Create [*bara'*] in me a clean heart, O God![8]

Returning to Gregory of Nyssa (c. 332 - after 385), one can say that he felt compelled to write about the evolution of the human race in order to complete Basil's 'system'. Of course, in doing so he unavoidably operates with cosmological notions. He quotes Moses' above-mentioned 'indication' that heaven and earth were made by God "in the beginning".[9]

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[6] St Basil the Great, Homily 1 ("On how God created the Heaven and the Earth"), *Hexameron*, PG 29, 1:1; emphasis added.
[7] D. Alexander, *Creation or Evolution. Do we have to choose?*, Monarch Books, Oxford, Grand Rapids, 2008, p. 24.
[8] *The Orthodox Study Bible. New Testament and Psalms: Discovering Orthodox Christianity in the Pages of the New Testament* (Fr. Peter. Gillquist, Project Director), New King James Version, 1997, pp. 709, 677.
[9] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, p. 389.

Then he provides details on the interrelations existent within the outcome of the creative process: "the earth was made in such a way that is never shifted from its own base, nor does the heaven ever relax in its vehemence, or slacken its motion."[10] They [the earth and the heaven] are diametrically opposed to one another in their 'operations'. For Gregory, the remaining created elements are "the offspring of rest and motion, brought into being by the Divine will"[11] and were adorned with "their appropriate beauty"[12] from their inception. Because it lies between opposites, one can say that creation acts as a "mean between the extremes, so that there is manifestly a mutual contact of the opposites through the mean".[13] He believed in cosmic order, and as a consequence, that not even the position of heavenly bodies was fortuitous, but rather that they were set in a harmony prescribed by Divine wisdom before the Creation. He thought that their place in the sky was permanent and that they were immobile.[14]That can be viewed, for instance, in opposition to the belief of a representative of Greek philosophy – Plotinus (204/5-270) – who conceived of them as moving accordingly 'to their own souls'.[15]

Gregory believed, as did Basil, that the world was created by God out of love in a single act, in the form of seminal principles[16]which developed into the reality we know (he lists sky, air, stars, fire, waters, earth, animals, and plants) by means of the power God

[10]Ibid.
[11]Ibid.
[12]Ibid.
[13]Ibid.
[14] Gregory of Nyssa, PG 44. 117A.
[15] Plotinus, *Enn* ll and *Against the Gnostics*. See J-M Narbonne (ed.), *Plotinus in dialogue with the Gnostics*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, Ancient Mediterranean and medieval texts and contexts Series, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic tradition, v. 11, 2011, and Luc Brisson et J.-F. Pradeau Plotin et al. (eds., trans.), *Traités 51-54. Sur la vie de Plotin et la mise en ordre de ses livres par Porphyre*, Flammarion, Paris, 2010.
[16] Gregory of Nyssa, *Hexameron liber* [Apologia in Hexameron], PG 44. 77D.

provided them with.[17]He explains that the power inside the seed is also manifested in a certain natural order, even in the case of humans; it evolves "not by any means that another nature is infused into it – in the same way we suppose the human germ to possess the potentiality of its nature, sown with it at the very start of its existence, and that is unfolded and manifested by a natural sequence as it proceeds to its perfect state, not employing anything external to itself as a stepping-stone to perfection, but itself advancing its own self in due course to the perfect state."[18]

The 'mechanism' of the evolutionary process works in the same manner for all things: after the inferior comes into being, it follows a specific 'route' and gradually grows into perfection. The Cappadocian emphasizes that it is necessary for the evolution in nature to follow the aforementioned series of steps until everything reaches attainment. The purpose of this ascendance in nature is the human being; everything 'aspires towards it'; this is why it came after plants and animals – for them to be at its service.[19]But even humankind 'aligns' itself to the respective upward impetus and finds its perfection through spiritual life.

The Earth is the place where the world exists as "a school of rational souls and where the knowledge of God can be learnt, but [it is] also a guide [learning milieu?] for the mind to contemplate the invisible."[20] Human freedom can be exercised there. These views expressed here by Basil, with whom Gregory agreed, are consistent with those in the Holy Scripture referring to the universe as a work of God. In passages where it describes the creation of single elements, the Book invokes God's will, while presenting these elements as being at the

[17] Idem, PG 44. 71, 72B-C, 113B, 121D.
[18] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, chapt. 28, p. 421.
[19] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, p. 389.
[20] St. Basil the Great, Homily l, *Hexaemeron*, PG 29, l. 11D.

same time the product of natural causes brought about by natural conditions.[21] Humans are not an exception from this point of view; God's intentionality, love, and natural causes have also 'co-operated' in their case: they are created both in the image of God and in the likeness of the created world.

Image of God in people

When Gregory of Nyssa affirms – persistently – that people are made in God's image he also states that it [the image] is indestructible within them in spite of their condition after the fall. In the *Making of Man* he attempts to explain what this image is and how a human being can conform to it. He realises the difficulties of such a comprehension: "In what then the greatness of man consists, according to the doctrine of the Church? Not in his likeness to the created world, but in his being in the image of the nature of the Creator. What therefore, you will perhaps say, is the definition of the image? How is the incorporeal likened to the body? How is the temporal like the eternal? That which is mutable by chance like to the immutable? That is subject to passion and corruption to the impassible and incorruptible? That which constantly dwells with evil, and grows up with it, to that which is absolutely free from evil? There is a great difference between that which is conceived in the archetype, and a thing which has been made in its image: for the image is properly so called if it keeps its resemblance to the prototype; but if the imitation be perverted from its subject, the thing is something else, and no longer an image of the subject. How then is man, this mortal, passible, short-lived being, the image of that nature which is immortal, pure, and everlasting?"[22]

[21] Gen. 1:11.
[22] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Creation of Man*, p. 404.

As one can see, in all his musings Gregory does not mention any differences (whether sexual, or social, or of any kind) as existing in God's image present in His creatures; therefore to speak about them as if they were important would mean to attribute them to God, which would be totally wrong since they do not reflect Him as the prototype He is. It can be inferred from the text above and from the lack within it of any reference to inner divisions, that not only was human nature as a whole created in the image of God, but that of each individual as well. This ties in with the fact that Christ assumed not an individual human nature alone, but human nature as a whole, and in the writings of Gregory, as we shall see further, the idea is dependent on his concept of humanity as πλήρωμα or wholeness.

Gregory's position that the divisions, the passions, or any other 'accidents' which happen in the case of human nature, are non-essential from the divine perspective is accompanied by his conviction that they can be turned to a good use. We shall discuss latter some of these divisions, but for the moment Gregory's conclusion concerning the existence of God's image in people should be presented:

> [T]his is what we, tracing out the truth so far as we are capable by conjectures and inferences, apprehend concerning the matter. Neither does the word of God lie when it says that man was made in the image of God, nor is the pitiable suffering of man's nature like to the blessedness of the impassible Life; for if any one were to compare our nature with God, one of two things must need be allowed in order that the definition of the likeness may be apprehended in both cases in the same terms –either that the Deity is passible, or that humanity is impassible; but if neither the Deity is passible nor our nature free from passions, what other account remains whereby we may say that the word of God speaks truly, which says that man was made in the image of God.[23]

[23] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Creation of Man*, p. 404.

The answer to all questions regarding what God's image in people consists of is provided by Gregory in these terms: "The image, therefore, properly belongs to the better part of our attributes; but all in our life that is painful and miserable is far removed from the likeness to the Divine."[24]

Nevertheless, there are some scholars and Christians who would not agree with him on this. One of the authors who opposes such a point of view is Mark McIntosh for whom the climax of human suffering, the abandonment, and isolation Christ himself felt in the final stages of his life, were in fact proofs of "the unfathomable presence of God – drawing Jesus into an intimacy so infinite that our world can only experience it as absence, forsakenness, the ultimate decentring."[25]

People see God and his image in other individuals, i.e. in society. David Brown comments on Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses*, 1: 239: "Whether we think of God as inside or outside time, temporal progression and developing social relationships are integral to human identity, and so, however the relation between God and humanity in heaven is conceived, it must still be mediated within […] society, that is by a very rich environment; therefore far from that being something to regret, it demonstrates how seriously God takes the kind of creatures he has made us, with progression continuing to be integral to who we are."[26]

Gregory assures us that God did not create people in order to destroy them and the divine image within them. He said that in the same way in which "Benevolence […] had built a tower so that its remains could be rebuilt," God permits people to go back to the state of

[24] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Creation of Man*, p. 410.
[25] Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, p. 203.
[26] David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 122. Brown also gives a second reason for Gregory's preference for a dynamic model of the after-life over a static one: human identity is shaped in this dynamic manner by the context in which people live.

purity they had before the Fall. To put it in the Nyssen's terms, the soul is recovered from the rubble: there is a need to put the latter into a crucible in order to eliminate the slag of vice and to regain the original luminosity of the soul, which is consistent with the entire Greek tradition that affirms that the grace of baptism is a return of the human being to its original state.

Epektasis

The Cappadocian is certain that humankind evolves and he names the evolution that it undergoes *epektasis* (a constant progress). His view on this issue was in one sense Platonic in that it had the story of the fall and return of the human soul as central to it. However, in opposition to Plato and his followers, who supported the idea that stability is perfection and described change in negative terms, the Cappadocian Father affirms that human progress is a constant increase in virtue and godliness. And, as John Milbank rightly observed, for Gregory *epektasis* encapsulates the idea "that virtue requires a constant 'moving out' from passivity to activity and the idea that there is a 'transgenerational' movement as each generation imitates its own models."[27] Rowan Williams brings a new dimension to the discussion on the notion of *epektasis* by pointing out that it is about the trajectory of the soul, which is not only intellectual but loving as well; it is a movement that is both 'receptive and responsive".[28]

The ideas of both these authors refer to the reality that a human being undergoes a progressive transformation in the imitation of Christ; perhaps one could say that the manner in which a generation emulates Christ might differ – at least to some extent – from the manner in which another did, in spite of the fact that He Himself is eternal.

In Gregory's theology, only God himself has always been perfect, has never changed, and never will. God is, in his terminology, a 'beneficent Nature'[29], a 'Goodness without measure'[30], a "worthy object of love for all beings endowed with reason, the beauty the most

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[27] John Milbank, 'The force of identity', in Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, p. 198; this article has been also published as: 'Gregory of Nyssa: the force of identity', in Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (eds.), *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric, Community*, Routledge, London, 1998, 94-116.
[28] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1979, p. 67.
[29] Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione* [*On the Soul and the Resurrection]*, PG 46. 103B.
[30] Ibid.

to be desired, **the origin of all that exists, the source of life, intellectual light, and wisdom**.[31] Human beings fell from grace in the Garden of Eden, but rather than returning to an unchanging state, humanity's goal is to become increasingly perfect, more like God, even though a human being will never understand, much less attain, God's transcendence.

In Ware's reading, for St. Gregory of Nyssa the world's inhabitants have the consciousness of the beginning and of their Creator. People can be raised up only by the awareness that they are made in the image and likeness of God, i.e. they are spiritual beings, exalted over the natural and social world and summoned to transfigure it and to be Stewards of it.[32]Gregory explains that humanity rules over creation by virtue of sharing in the image of God, that is to say, by participating in certain divine qualities. All qualities that humans possess (goodness, benevolence, beauty, etc.) have their source in the divine goodness and beauty. God fashioned humanity to be the master of everything He made in a way analogous to the manner in which He acts as such Himself.

One can interpret Gregory's writings as speaking about two 'creations', as some authors have done, for example, Verna Nonna Harrison[33] and Sarah Coakley [34], but in his case this does not refer to the creation of the soul and of the body in stages, as in Origen's theology. For the Cappadocian, the first creation is rather an expression of a divine plan in which humanity received the dignity of being able to participate in God prior to its birth. The second is that made in six days and described by Moses; it is the creation which, according to

[31] St. Gregory of Nyssa, Idem, PG 46. 103B; emphasis added.
[32] Kallisos Ware, *The Beginning of the Day. The Orthodox Vision of Creation*, trans. from Greek by Niki Tsironis, Shrine of Neomartyr George of Ioannina, 2007.
[33] Verna (Nonna) E. F. Harrison, "Male and female in Cappadocian theology", *Journal of Theological Studies*, 41: 2 (October) 1990, 441-471; "Receptacle imagery in St. Gregory of Nyssa's anthropology", *Studia Patristica*, 22, Peeters, Leuven, 1989), pp. 23-27.
[34] Sarah Coakley, "Creaturehood before God: male and female", *Theology*, 1990, 63.

Jean Laplace, "is not only about Adam and Eve, but it is also about God's intimate life".[35] Gregory's claim that people undergo a continual process of being made suggests the fact that each person, as well as humankind as a whole, is being shaped and led towards what God wanted them to be from the moment He conceived them; actually this is more than a suggestion since such a notion is implied in almost all of Gregory's works. The history of this continual becoming of humans is the history of salvation and of the progression of humanity as a whole, spiritually and – since the two go in parallel for the Nyssen – in terms of succession of generations as well. From this perspective, the first two chapters in Genesis do not describe how the world was created, but God's plan, developed through Christ, to create a human being having Him incarnated as a prototype. This description was made in metaphoric and poetic terms suitable for communicating a mystery. Another way of interpreting Gregory's view is that human evolution unfolded from the first creation as a purely original state in God's mind [in which humankind is both asexual and immortal] to the first creation as an embodied original state [when humanity is both sexual and mortal], and to the first creation as a return to the Maker. Following this vein one can say that, for Gregory, humankind's evolution means its passing from a potentially in God's will to an actuality through coming into being by generations.

A paradox is present in the relationship between God and its creation, which can be captured in the question: How can He, as an indivisible Unity, manifest Himself in the multiplicity of created things? Philip Sherrard's opinion on this matter is that, "not only can nothing be outside God, but also everything must be directly related to, and reflect an aspect of, His divinity. This in turn means [...] that God's ultimate nature, or His Essence, cannot

[35] Jean Laplace, *Grégoire de Nysse. La création de l'homme*, (J. Laplace, introd. and trans. J. Daniélou notes), Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2002, pp. 49-50.

finally be identified with anything; it is beyond everything, totally transcendent of all manifestation and relationship, unqualified and undetermined."[36] But a communication with God is nevertheless possible in virtue of Him being a Person; therefore a continual dialogue person to Person takes place.

The existence of the world has a purpose, but one that is revealed gradually to humankind. If God had revealed Himself and His ways at once, the world of created things would have lacked its purpose. As shown above, for the Cappadocian Fathers the main purpose of human beings is to exercise their spiritual powers on the ascending path to God.[37] When considering Gregory of Nyssa's theology – and this is probably valid in general for the school he belongs to – one should notice that his ideas about the structure of the universe were inspired by the Platonic view, but the fundamentals of his doctrine were affirmed or reassessed in the light of Christian thought. Everything is from God and the world exists and functions through a free act of the spirit; it is a manifestation not only of the freedom of God who created people but also the freedom of each individual.

Body and soul. The finite number of human beings

Regarding the controversial problem of the relationship between body and soul, the Cappadocian countered any notion which asserted that a living body could exist without the soul and also any theory which maintained that the soul existed before the body. As implied above when discussing 'the two creations', he believed that there is one common and

[36] Philip Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West: A Study in the Christian Tradition*, Denise Harvey Publisher, Limni-Evia, 1995, p. 35.
[37] Ware, *The Beginning of the Day*, p. 209.

simultaneous beginning for both.[38] Not only are the soul and the body created together, but they develop in parallel. The potentiality for conception comes from a living and animate body, one which is "warm and operative and in motion" and the condition of death arises because of the withdrawal of the soul. Regarding the latter, all of its attributions, elements of rationality, desire, anger, and so on, are not yet visible, yet we assert that they have their place within it, and that the energies of the soul also grow with the subject in a manner similar to the formation and perfection of the body. For as a human being experiences a special activity of the soul when it is perfectly developed, so at the beginning of a person's existence he/she shows in himself/herself "that co-operation of the soul which is suitable and comfortable to his [her]existing need, in its preparing for itself of its proper dwelling-place by means of implanted matter."[39]

For the Nyssen, just as one cannot see the articulations of the parts in that which is implanted for the conception of the body before it begins to take form, neither can one perceive the properties of the soul before they begin to operate within the body. No one would doubt that the thing so implanted in an embryo is made into the different varieties of limbs and interior organs, and not by the importation of any other power from without, but by the power which resides in it and transforms it. Likewise, through similar reasoning, one can equally suppose in the case of the soul that even if it is not visibly recognized by any manifestation of activity in an embryo, it is nonetheless there; for even the form of the future human being is potentially there; this is, however, concealed because it is not possible that it should be made visible before the necessary sequence of events allows it. If such an analogy is allowed here, the situation is similar to that regarding the tree of knowledge: the problem

[38] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, chapts. 28-29, especially pp. 420-421.
[39] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, p. 404.

with it was not that people ate from it, but that they did so too early; God just wanted Adam and Eve to wait until they were ready to gain knowledge through experiences of acting in the world.[40]

For Gregory, the soul is 'simple and uncompounded' and as such, it survives the dissolution of the composite body, whose scattered elements it will continue to accompany as if watching over its property until the Resurrection, when it will 'clothe' itself in them again. Regarding the number of souls, since from the temporal perspective humanity is a thought of God which is not yet completed, additions to the number of souls continue. When this thought finally comes to an end, the "progress of humanity" (*epektasis*) and the supersession of species will cease; there will be no more births and consequently, after a short time, no deaths. Gregory writes to that effect because he believed that humanity in its fullness consists of a certain number of individuals (he uses the above mentioned term *plerōma*) and that: "Only when this number is fulfilled and humanity completed all things will be consummated and the humanity transformed." [41] In her book *Universal salvation: eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* , Morwenna Ludlow emphasizes the bishop's stance that the human race is made up of a specific number of souls.[42]

And, as John Milbank rightly observed, for Gregory *epektasis* encapsulates the idea "that virtue requires a constant 'moving out' from passivity to activity and the idea that there is a 'transgenerational' movement as each generation imitates its own models."[43]

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[40] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, chapt. 29, especially p. 410.
[41] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, p. 410 (*De hominis opificio*, 21.5, PG 44. 205 C).
[42] Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal salvation: eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 200), p. 47.
[43] John Milbank, 'The force of identity', in Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, p. 198; this article has been also published as: 'Gregory of Nyssa: the force of identity', in Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (eds.), *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric, Community*, Routledge, London, 1998, 94-116.

As mentioned earlier, in believing that the soul and the body were created simultaneously, the Cappadocian father rejects Origen's theory of two temporally successive stages of creation (one for the body and one for the soul; with the body created second) and Plato's view of two creations, i.e. his matter-soul dualism. For Gregory human beings will be restored in both of their aspects, material and immaterial (i.e. not only in spirit). The sense of human development vindicates for people the rightness of appropriately-lived corporeal life against the Platonists' flight to the world of Ideas.

But as one can notice, Gregory's interpretation – having the story of the fall and return of the human soul as central – is Platonic, and Gregory's familiarity with Plato's words – especially with those from the dialogue *Timaeus* – is evident. Both thinkers share the view that God created everything in an orderly fashion, according to his image, and with no evil within it. For Plato, God endowed the whole of creation with intelligence and soul:

> Let me tell you then why the Creator made this world of generation. He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be. This is in the truest sense the origin of creation and of the world, as we shall do well in believing the testimony of wise men: God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad […]. Wherefore also finding the whole visible sphere not at rest, but moving in an irregular and disorderly fashion, out of disorder he brought order, considering that this was in every way better than the other. Now the deeds of the best could never be or have been other than the fairest; and the Creator, reflecting on the things which are by nature visible, found that no unintelligent creature taken as a whole was fairer than the intelligent taken as a whole; and that intelligence could not be present in anything which was devoid of soul. For which reason, when he was framing the universe, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best. Wherefore, using the language of probability, we may say that the world became a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence by the providence of God.[44]

[44] Plato, *Timaeus* 27c-31b, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.), trans. B. Jowett, Bollingen Series LXXl, Pantheon Books, New York, 1961.(or 'The Internet Classic Archives/Timaeus by Plato', http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html)

The role of love in the process of deification

As mentioned, the Nyssen and the other Cappadocian thinkers, as Athanasius before, build on the Platonic tradition in the way they envisage the ultimate purpose of souls: to be united with the Divinity. Among other things, they share in the Platonist outlook which considers the Creator as making his work out of love. That becomes evident if one compares their positions with that expressed, for instance, in the Sixth Ennead, where Plotinus (204/5-270) states:

> There [in the intellectual realm] is the true object of love, with which one may coexist by apprehending it and possessing it truly […]. Now whoever knows this, knows what I am saying – that the soul has another life there, into which it enters after approaching and partaking of it, so as to be in a condition to know that the giver of true life is here and it has no need of anything. On the contrary, it must put aside all the rest, and abide in this alone, **becoming this alone** after having shed all our other encumbrances. Thus we shall strive to go hence with speed, resenting our attachments to other things, in order that we may be wholly enfolded within ourselves and have no part in which we do not touch god.[45]

As one can see, for Plotinus the soul unites through love with the One to the point of becoming the One. But that happens just in the intellectual realm; in this case *theosis* is the results of contemplation. For the early Christians thinkers discussed here this process of unification with God through love presupposes also a bodily involvement through ascesis, prayer, etc. But the main difference between Plotinus and the Cappadocians is the fact that for the latter, the process of deification of humans happens in an individual, personal manner; each human being has a personal relationship with God on the way to "the restoration of man to his original state" or "to that Divine grace in which God at the first created Man"[46], i.e. the

[45] Plotinus, *Enneads* Vl.9.45-56; emphasis added.
[46] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man,* pp. 411, 427.

restoration of the state of being in and with God. This is the 'definition' that Gregory gives also to the Resurrection, which for him comes from the very necessity of things.[47]

Sexual differentiation. Succession by generations

Concerning the sexual division – the basis for the multiplication of the human race and for its evolution – Gregory of Nyssa opines that people were created simultaneously as individuals, male and female ('male and female created he them"). As already shown, he does not conceive of the sexual difference as essential for human nature; therefore for him such a split does not reflect God. The sexual differentiation is a consequence of sin and it is an imposition on our nature; nevertheless sexuality does not belong to the providential order. God created it to enable reproduction by that means as a remedy to death after the Fall. (This is not to say that the Fall was inevitable. Rather, sexuality ensured that **in case** humanity did 'fall', there was the means ready to counter the effects of such a downward move.) When this event took place, the succession by generations was initiated to ensure humanity's perpetuation to the moment of *Apokatastasis* (restoration); without the fall, there would have been no need of generations.

When the Cappadician answers the question "Why are there male and female in the image, seeing that these are not in the Prototype?" and affirms that "In humanity there is no male, nor female" he wants to emphasise St. Paul's point of view that the significance of gender disappears as long as people are one in Christ and reject 'the old [i.e. fallen] man.'[48] Here one can detect a reference to the other state of matter: that which intervenes /takes place

[47] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, pp. 388, 410.
[48] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, p. 427.

after the physical death of the body, when it transforms itself (it is transfigured) into a spiritual 'substance' that is no longer subject to division.

Although Gregory's view is in agreement with Thomas Aquinas' theory of reproduction by matter as a consequence of sin, he does not regard it as an unmitigated misfortune. For him, the sexual multiplication of people due to the material functioning of their bodies at each generation is accidental because it is in the service of an inferior principle, one which operates at the animal level. Such a principle of division would not exist in the state of a perfect image, i.e. in freedom and independence of spirit. Our life in the flesh and the passions are explicable through our common animality. This 'translates' into instinctive movements that our will cannot control and which constitute what is opposed to the perfection of image within us. While the impulses are natural within an animal (and in humans to the extent they share in that animality) and serve to perpetuate the species, in the case of humans – who are able to rise beyond the biological – the passions can limit freedom and produce an imbalance. Due to intelligence, which can be put in the service of passions, humans could proliferate to the point of absurdity. But a positive outcome resulting from a good employment of the passions may also be attained.

As Gregory discussed in chapter 21 of his *The Making of Man*, if humanity had made the other choice – that of obedience – from the beginning of creation, neither time ('succession of generation') nor divisions (sexual or any other) would have been necessary, and people would have reached quickly their perfection due to the presence of the flawless image of God within them (that which will be there fully at the end of time, after they will complete their eschatological journey into God). Laplace phrases the situation thus: "People

were meant to be like angels, but instead they have developed as animals."[49] In his always optimistic tone, Gregory says that, however, in spite of the human choice to lapse, we go beyond our animality and serve God through the concrete acts of our lives. And also that when Christ took our flesh, he transfigured it and passed it into the state of resurrection. Gregory also states that people are not merely animals, even though sexuality and the passions are present in them, because people have the ability to – and should – make allowance for these drives in their present life; instead of trying to eliminate them people can deploy them for a good purpose [NB this bears on asceticism]. This is another point where Gregory differs from Plato, whose discontent with the bodily and sensible order is well known and has already been mentioned in this text. For the bishop, it is God's will and permission which allows us to use the passions properly in order to achieve our purpose in creation. Thus, St. Gregory says, they are not supposed to be treated with the radicalism of the stoics or the avoidance of the neo-Platonists. In the perspective of a real development even sexuality is an undeniable good for the spirit. He considers that, in addition to suffering and death, in the postlapsarian era, sexuality has a role not only in perpetuating life, but it can also become a condition of salvation and redemption.

He also explains that after the Fall, everything has become a mixture of bad and good, and the existent portion of bad may be put to a positive use – even anger, fear, "and any other such-like emotions" of the soul[50], without which human nature cannot be studied – all these are to be considered external additions, because in the Beauty which is man's prototype[51] no such characteristics are present. Gregory thinks that in general everything which is a

[49] Laplace, *Grégoire de Nysse*, p. 55.
[50] Gregory of Nyssa speaks at large about this topic in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.
[51] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, p. 391.

consequence of sin becomes a source of salvation and the better part of humanity uses their fleshly passions to 'recover their lives' and achieve freedom.

To conclude on this point, God – knowing that people might use their freedom to choose the Fall – created them in a state which is appropriate to aid them in dealing with the consequences of it. In creating human beings, he mixes in them his image with something of the irrational: he puts on them 'garments of skin' and adds sex to nature, and therefore, people, with the spark of divinity in them (with God's image), develop concretely as an animal species. Sexuality and the consequences it entails are, therefore, superimposed to God's eternal design and humanity must reach Jesus Christ in these terms, i.e. the terms of their own choice [to Fal].

Rosemary Rodford Ruether asserts that, for Gregory, human nature in the image of God must not only be without gender and without body, but must be totally without differentiation;[52]that because God is an undifferentiated monad. As Ludlow indicates, the idea of a simultaneous creation of both man and woman brings a more egalitarian perspective than that of the early Church, which emphasized the sequential and allegedly hierarchical creation account of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2; therefore it seems that Gregory's view is a departure from this. His teaching challenges some tenets of the early Church (and of some later fundamentalist Christians.)[53]

It is surprising that, in spite of Gregory's 'organic' stand on creation and his 'co-existential' view on body and soul, there are still interpretations of Gregory's reading of Genesis which do not perceive them as such, as that of Sarah Coakley, who affirms that there

[52] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Gender and Redemption in the Patristic Era", in *Women and Redemption. A Theological History*, Fortress Press, 2011, p. 58.
[53] Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa. Ancient and (Post)-Modern*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p.167.

is a double creation in the Nyssen's view: in the first instance a non sexual and purely spiritual creation (for it is assumed by Gregory that to be truly 'in the image of God' the creature must be angelic, non-physical); only in the second instance – and "with a view to the Fall' – is bodily nature added, both male and female.[54] But actually, as shown, for Gregory, true human nature, in addition to containing the image of God, includes within it also human physicality in order to ameliorate the consequences of the Fall.

Notions of theodicy in Gregory of Nyssa's view on human progress. Sin

In the process of evolution as understood by the Cappadocians, the existence of evil and sin as a form of it, have a role in the formation of a person and, therefore, in the evolution of humanity. In the *Making of Man*, Gregory of Nyssa gives a metaphysical explanation for the existence of evil in the world; partially in chapters 12, 16, 20, and 21. In the latter he refers to its disappearance at the *Apokatastasis*. Using a Platonic language, the Nyssen refers to the 'impetus' and 'desire' of people to act against each other. Since nature is characterised by equilibrium among its various elements, if something goes wrong with one of them, the others are affected. Gregory agrees with Plotinus that the evil comes about when such a situation occurs. But, more importantly, what differentiates Gregory from Plotinus on the issue of theodicy, and is noticeable if one goes into the essence of their ideas, is the fact that for the Greek philosopher and the tradition from which he comes, evil is 'an accident' within the universal creation, without any connection to the moral order, while for Gregory of Nyssa

[54] Coakley, "Creaturehood before God", 93.

all evil is associated with moral evil, i.e. with the idea of sin. Despite defending the concept of freedom, Plotinus is concerned not to renounce in his thought the rigidity and order sometimes associated with the explanation of evil which the ancient Greeks shared.[55]For them, the individual, aware of his responsibly, does not modify in any way the harmony around him/her, and his/her initiatives are limited by the preoccupation to maintain the existent order. From that point of view, the evil is necessary, even though people have to enforce the fulfilment of this necessity. As Jean Guitton states, the tendency of the Greeks was "to make sin an inevitable act, similar to the accidents of nature; for them the error is almost fatal."[56] Plato himself thinks that the evil comes from 'the periodical movements of the soul' which, he thinks, are a consequence of the latter's attachment to a material body.[57] The Cappadocian opines that matter in itself is indifferent, but the way in which it is used can lead either to a spiritual improvement or to a decline.

In chapter 20 of the *Making of Man* Gregory engages with the issue of the concrete presence of sin in people. There he proposes two approaches to it. One of them connects sin with freedom, and asserts that sin occurs as a consequence of a bad use of the latter. The second raises the question of sinning through 'inexperience', 'bewilderment', and especially 'lack of discernment' and 'ignorance'. Gregory opines that: 1. Sin is not a pure, conscious, and wilful revolt against God, but it often occurs under the appearance of good. 2. Psychologically, sin comes into being through pleasure. 3. The true fault of a human being is that it allows him or her to be attracted to and trapped within 'good mixtures' or/and 'does not pay sufficient attention.' Therefore sin is not committed because of error, as the Greeks

[55] Plotinus, *Ennead* (Enn.) lll 2, 17, pp. 45-48.
[56] Jean Guitton, *Temps and éternité chez Plotin and Augustin*, Bibliothèque d'Histoire de la Philosophie, Vrin 2004, p. 231.
[57] Plato, *Timaeus*, 47d.

believed, but is a lack of attention and/or a deficiency of the will; 4. The sinner can become aware of the mistake and accept responsibility for his/her act.[58]Whatever way the sin manifests itself among the individuals, according to Gregory's idea of *apokatastasis*, no trace of evil and sin will remain when that process will be accomplished (restoration means turning all things towards the good). Laplace says that in order to reconcile the two approaches to sin, one should remember that Gregory "sacrificed the Greek ideas on the issue of sin: he places himself in the domain of concrete human experience."[59]

As it is known, there are changes within the human individual and their existence made Gregory of Nyssa say that, since a person is physically different every day, it would be difficult to assess ('to judge') in which 'phase' of their 'progress' people are, whether they can rise again, etc. Gregory's view on the Resurrection discussed earlier, when dealt with the issue of soul and body, helps with understanding the idea of human evolution he proposed in the *Making of Man* and his general theology of creation. The fact that this Father of the Church sees the Resurrection as the restoration to the original state offers a solution to the issue of 'judgement' and of the 'hereafter'. All humanity – that is, all humans (*anthropoi*) – will restore within themselves the image of God with which they were created. They will have accomplished thus the role God 'saw' as necessary for them to attain an authentic image of themselves.

St. Gregory of Nyssa's concepts strongly influenced not only those of St. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662) for example – who shared in the idea of *theosis* or 'divinization of people' as being the highest point of evolution – but also the medieval and later thinking in

[58] Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, Xll, PG 44; *Cantica Canticorum*; *In Ecclisiastem* lV, PG 44, 676b, and *Eodem Loco*, 676 d.
[59] Laplace, *Grégoire de Nysse*, p. 62.

general. For example, in the fifteenth century (1463-1494), Pico della Mirandola's outlook on the creative vocation of man echoes notions from St. Gregory's *Sermones de Creatione Hominis*. He imagines the dialogue between God and Adam, with the Creator saying: "I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly, nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the molder and maker of thyself: thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou doest prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine."[60]

In my opinion Laplace's understanding of Gregory's ideas on evolution is the correct one. He provides also an explanation to the issue of human creation in the Cappadocian thought. For this scholar, the best way to understand the "reproduction of individuals, the life of the flesh and the passions" in the Nyssen's thought is by speaking in terms of an eternal and a temporal view, rather than adopting the Platonic notion of the two creations[61]. It means that Gregory's theory of *epektasis* becomes clearer if one tries to reconcile the eternal view of God on humanity and the latter's temporal development. In this "dual perspective", since it is both ideal and concrete, humanity can be described as having two distinct orders operating with different measures: one of eternity and one existing within historical time. Even though it is difficult to pin down the relation between the universal atemporal *anthropos* and particular historical *anthropoi* in Gregory's theology, it seems that he thinks each is as 'real'

[60] Picco della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. Ch. G. Wallis, Introd. Paul J. W. Miller, Hackett, Indianopolis, Cambridge, 1998, p. 5. He wrote it in 1486; the book was called the 'Manifesto of the Renaissance".
[61] Laplace, *Grégoire de Nysse*, p. 54.

as the other: they are two perspectives on the same reality. Throughout his theology Gregory is concerned equally with both the eternal and the temporal and the material and the spiritual. According to the Cappadocian, one can say that the fact that human nature was conceived in the image of God makes it atemporal (in addition to making it asexual); from this point of view humanity eternally exists in its definitive perfection[62], while from a temporal standpoint it does not yet exist [in its perfection], but it is still in the process of becoming. As mentioned earlier, for the Nyssen the fullness (*plerōma*) of humanity is only in the process of being fulfilled.

In summary, from the eternal viewpoint, the common cause that simultaneously determined the existence of both the soul and body of every human being lies in the original will of God at the outset of Creation. According to the temporal perspective, this cause comes into existence on the occasion of each generation. One could draw the conclusion that for these early thinkers creation was an evolutionary process. It was initiated by God out of love and in total freedom. As shown above, they repeatedly affirm that God did not need to create the world, but He chose to do so. A much later Orthodox theologian, George Florovsky (1893-1979), writes along the same lines confirming what the Cappadocians believed. He states: "The world exists. But it *began* to exist. And that means: the world could have not existed. There is no necessity whatsoever for the existence of the world".[63] The only reason for its having come into being is the divine love: "The sole foundation of the world consists in God's freedom, in the freedom of Love."[64]Because of this Love one can say that God has

[62] Laplace, *Grégoire de Nysse*, p. 56.
[63]; his emphasis.
[64] Ibid., p. 71.

not left his creation; he has not just created the universe and then withdrew from it, but is still creating and indwelling it. He is omnipresent within his own work.

The answer to the question asked at the onset of my paper concerning the reason for why humanity was the last to be created has become evident throughout the paper: it is the fulfilment of the original creation in the eschaton. The Cappadocian Fathers saw creation as the way through which God speaks to humanity, and through which He lifts humanity to the level of co-partner. Since humankind was meant to increase spiritually – i.e. to evolve – evolution is a way or a method used by God to create it and everything it needs.

The final conclusion with regard to the evolution of humanity, both spiritually and as a species, is that, since the two processes unfold in parallel, as suggested throughout Gregory of Nyssa's work, both will be completed simultaneously. To give him the last word: "the end is one, and one only; it is this: when the complete whole of our race shall have been perfected from the first man to the last" it will be possible "to offer to every one of us participation in the blessings which are in Him…"[65]

[65] Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima*, NPNF V, pp. 465, 459.

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