This thesis highlights the theme of desire in the work of the fourth-century bishop and theologian Gregory of Nyssa. In light of four of Gregory’s most important works (*On Virginity, Homilies on the Song of Songs, The Life of Moses*, and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*), this thesis notes the numerous ways in which desire is both a critical theological analogy and a spiritual practice. Using a wide range of analogies and images, Gregory describes desire as an integral dimension of the spiritual life. Furthermore, the ultimate human desire is for the Triune God. Gregory’s treatise on celibacy, *On Virginity*, is a detailed description of the spiritual meaning of this way of life. Gregory’s knowledge of celibacy came in part from his brother Basil’s establishment of a monastic community in Asia Minor. However, this treatise does not dismiss marriage (and hence erotic desire) as a spiritual practice. Perhaps writing with his own marriage in mind, Gregory describes the tragedies and joys of married life. Both celibacy and marriage find their meaning, Gregory argues, in relation to God. *Homilies on the Song of Songs* is a rich, fast-paced commentary upon the biblical Song of Songs. The *Homilies* are highly kataphatic, providing numerous examples of the prominence of analogy for Gregory. Erotic desire is analogous to spiritual desire. Gregory of Nyssa also reminds his audience that erotic desire mirrors spiritual desire only in part; spiritual desire – and ultimately the divine nature – cannot be limited to erotic desire. Thus, Gregory of Nyssa highlights both God’s imminence and God’s transcendence. *The Life of Moses* is the *locus classicus*
for Gregory’s description of divine transcendence. Here Gregory develops the Pauline concept *epektasis*. Humanity’s desire for God continually expands throughout life and into eternity. This dramatic expansion of desire is made possible by the fact that the transcendent God is the ultimate human desire. Therefore, human desire for God never reaches a limit or an end. The expansion of human desire, however, is not synonymous with the expansion of human knowledge. The soul’s journey into God’s presence is a journey into darkness, not light. The darkness is Gregory’s ‘image’ for both the limitations of the human mind and the transcendence of the divine nature. *The Life of Moses* is, then, an important source for the apophatic within spiritual theology. In his *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Gregory develops this theme of the soul’s eternal progression into God’s presence, and yet even here he emphasizes the apophatic dimension of human knowledge. Because God’s nature and hence eternal life are transcendent realities, speculation about the exact nature of the resurrection needs to be restrained. Gregory warns against the assumption that eternal life is a simple continuation of bodily life, specifically questioning in a subtle way the permanence of gender and certain aspects of material life. Gregory’s use of analogy here (and in the other three books) also informs his method of scriptural interpretation by which he highlights the connection and the distinction between the literal and the spiritual. Gregory’s theological vision is, paradoxically, a vision of a human nature rooted within the material world and within time. This is one reason why Gregory of Nyssa becomes an important resource for an Anglican spiritual theology in dialogue with a world questioning the meaning of desire, beauty, bodies, and gender.
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"A Guide for the More-Fleshly Minded":
Gregory of Nyssa on Erotic and Spiritual Desire

by

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Introduction

Theology and Practice, Literal and Spiritual, God and Humanity

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 394) was the youngest of three “Cappadocian Fathers,” a group that included his older brother Basil and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus. Richard Norris writes in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* that these three theologians and bishops, although “temperamentally very different from each other, to say the least – are remembered as the principal architects of the victory of Nicene orthodoxy over the various forms and decrees of Arianism at the ‘ecumenical’ Council of Constantinople (381).”1 As such, these Cappadocians are important figures in the Patristic era, when the Church made critical decisions regarding the nature of God as well as the structure of the Church and her sacramental practices. It is during this time that the Church’s rule of faith becomes summarized and focused in the catholic creeds. In this sense, Gregory of Nyssa and the Cappadocians are synonymous with the creedal foundations of theology.2

However, Norris continues, “At the same time, they were in their different manners leaders of the ascetic or ‘monastic’ movement in Asia Minor, organizing its communities, popularizing its ideals, and evolving the ‘theory’ that guided its practice.”3 Norris’ summary highlights a crucial connection that emerged in Patristic theology and Gregory of Nyssa: theology and spiritual practice belong together. A thorough, precise reflection

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2 Norris in his *Gregory* also notes helpfully that these three should be remembered in relation to a larger group: “To be sure, they did not stand alone in these enterprises. If one is to speak of ‘the Cappadocians,’ one must think not only of these three men but also, at the very least, of the larger familial circle to which they belonged: Basil and Gregory’s sister Macrina the Younger, who presided over a ‘double’ monastery on their ancestral estate; their younger brother Peter, bishop of Sébaste; and Gregory Nazianzen’s cousin Amphiloctius, the bishop of Iconium” (ix).
3 Norris, *Gregory*, ix.
upon the nature of God was inseparable from the actual life of prayer and community. Gregory’s treatise *On Virginity* is one of his richest, most detailed descriptions of this connection. Here Gregory writes not only on celibacy but on marriage (as well as spiritual ‘vision’ in general), all of which are fulfilled in relation to union with the Triune God. For Gregory, ‘seeing’ God in doctrine relates to ‘seeing’ in and through spiritual practices.

Gregory of Nyssa is above all a theologian who makes connections: between theology and practice and between the spiritual and the physical. God interacts with the whole person (and indeed with the entire cosmos). For example, in his *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Gregory describes the universal human experience of fear and confusion when a loved one dies. Indeed, the setting of *On the Soul and the Resurrection* is in part the death of Gregory’s and Macrina’s brother, Basil. Yet the climax for God’s interaction with humanity may be seen in Gregory’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, where he describes the way in which the physical and the spiritual are connected via basic human desire. Gregory acknowledges that in spite of the inconsistencies associated with human desire, physical desire is analogous to spiritual desire. God both creates and fulfills *eros*. Therefore, physical desire provides for Gregory a significant analogy for spiritual desire.

Gregory’s use of desire as an analogy for the spiritual life also relates to his distinction between the literal and the spiritual dimensions of the scriptures. Gregory’s approach to the scriptures throughout his works is to highlight the ‘spiritual meaning’ as the most important dimension of the literal details. For example, because Gregory acknowledges the decisive role of history, he notes in *The Life of Moses* that it is impossible to repeat
the literal events of Moses' life. In this way, Gregory of Nyssa's method of scriptural interpretation is derived from an earlier Patristic theologian, Origen, who emphasizes in his _On Principles_ that the purpose of the scriptures is to enlighten the Church regarding the nature of God and the mysteries of the spiritual life. This method is also consistent with Gregory's appreciation of the role of history: time and context do change, thereby affecting the spiritual life.

What emerges, then, within Gregory's spiritual theology is a vision of God who interacts with actual humanity in time. In what is a summary of Gregory's understanding of God's interaction with the whole person within history, Rowan Williams writes in _The Wound of Knowledge_, "The movement of history and of biography is made possible and meaningful by its reference to God who meets us in history, yet extends beyond it – is always, so to speak, ahead of it." Williams' summary highlights one of the great paradoxes of Patristic theology in general and Gregory in particular. The doctrinal (or creedal) vision of God does not annihilate or diminish humanity. Instead, the 'vision' of the divine nature leads, paradoxically, to a renewed vision of human nature and creation. Rather than diminishing the soul and creation, God restores their meaning, dignity, and purpose. Robert Hughes writes in _Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life_ that in the Eastern Church this restoration is historically termed "the restoration of the

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5 Gregory of Nyssa, _Life_, II, 320.
6 Norris, _Gregory_, xl.
royal image.” Gregory describes this restoration with a wide range of analogies and images, and in this way his spiritual theology is highly kataphatic.

Nevertheless, Gregory’s ‘image’ of darkness in *The Life of Moses* offers a profound warning that the kataphatic is only one dimension of the spiritual life. God is transcendent, according to Gregory, and this transcendence means that there is no image that can capture God’s nature. Recalling Moses’ journey upon Mt. Sinai, Gregory describes the ultimate setting for the soul’s encounter with God as darkness. As is often the case with Gregory, he deliberately emphasizes the paradoxical nature of his subject: the cloud is a “luminous darkness.”

In this sense, the darkness is a particular form of knowledge and an indicator of spiritual growth. Mark McIntosh in *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* highlights the way that apophatic knowledge is a life-giving dimension of human knowledge and being, writing, “What is crucial to note here is that in this apophatic tradition there is absolutely no sense in which a full divine presence diminishes or subverts the fully authentic humanity of the individual. Quite the reverse.” Indeed, as humanity discovers the hidden, eternal depths of God, humanity simultaneously discovers itself and its future. In a passage that is consistent with the entirety of his *Life*, Gregory writes, “This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more.

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10 However, it would a mistake to assume that darkness in the apophatic tradition is a sign of the soul’s spiritual progress or even “experience” of God. See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3-5.
Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God... Again, Gregory’s spiritual ‘vision’ of God (including his analogy of darkness) does not annihilate or diminish human nature.

In summary, Gregory of Nyssa is a theologian with profound balance. Theology and practice are, for him, inseparable. The literal and the spiritual of the physical world and of the scriptures belong together as well, mutually illuminating and informing one another. His spiritual theology is at once highly kataphatic and profoundly apophatic. This balance makes possible a rich, detailed vision of reality in God. What emerges in Gregory’s literature is a vision of God that includes a vision of restored human nature whose desire is fulfilled by God’s transcendent presence.

In the chapters that follow, Gregory’s vision of God and humanity will be highlighted by a close reading of these four books. *On Virginity* introduces the virtue of discernment within spiritual practice. Discernment of the connection and distinction between literal and spiritual is a critical aspect of Gregory’s theological method and his method of scriptural interpretation. The literal and the spiritual are connected via analogy. Although *Homilies on the Song of Songs* is highly kataphatic, Gregory in the *Homilies* also clarifies his use of analogy and emphasizes the way in which analogies are limited in their ability to describe God’s nature. *The Life of Moses* is one of Gregory’s most significant descriptions of divine transcendence. Here Gregory develops the Pauline concept *epektasis*. Humanity’s desire for God continually expands throughout life and into eternity. Gregory notes, however, that the growth of desire is not the same things as growth in knowledge.

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In his *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Gregory also develops this theme of the soul’s eternal progression into God’s presence, emphasizing the apophatic dimension of human knowledge. Because God’s nature and hence eternal life are transcendent realities, speculation about the exact nature of the resurrection is limited. Gregory warns against the assumption that eternal life is a simple continuation of bodily life. In this way, Gregory emphasizes that apophatic ‘knowledge’ is a dimension of the central mysteries of the Christian faith. This emphasis upon the apophatic is a major reason why Gregory’s theology is characterized by humility and wonder. Gregory is deeply aware that the Christian mysteries cannot be grasped completely by the human mind and language. This awareness also lends a critical edge to Gregory’s theology in general and his *On the Soul and the Resurrection* in particular. Eternal life is a mystery, and so, too, is earthly life. Thus, Gregory shows a remarkable willingness to question the permanency of certain aspects of human life and knowledge. Gregory specifically questions the continuity of certain aspects of bodily life (including gender) with eternal life. In this way, there is a profound circularity between Gregory’s ‘vision’ of God and his vision of humanity. Each vision informs the other. It is for this reason (among others) that Gregory of Nyssa becomes an important resource for an Anglican spiritual theology in dialogue with a world questioning the meaning of desire, beauty, bodies, and gender.
Chapter One

Gregory of Nyssa’s On Virginity: Desire for Divine Beauty

Rowan Williams writes in The Wound of Knowledge, “Basil of Ceasarea (c.330-379) and his brother Gregory of Nyssa (c.330-395), the authors of the major replies to Eunomius, were both deeply involved with the monastic movement, and in their work we may see again the close connection between theological positions and forms of Christian life.” 13 Gregory’s book On Virginity is an example of this close connection between theology, especially a theology of human desire for God, and one particular form of spiritual life, namely, celibacy or virginity.

However, Gregory’s title is misleading. The book is much more than a theological reflection upon virginity. In addition to being a theological examination of the place of all human desires, the book contains detailed reflections upon marriage.

As becomes clear at the beginning of On Virginity, Gregory has his own life or biography in mind when he considers the subject of virginity. Unlike his brother Basil, Gregory was married. Literal virginity for him, then, is an impossibility, which he acknowledges. Nonetheless, it is perhaps the fact of his marriage that makes possible his detailed description of both the joys and the sorrows of marriage. The sorrows of marriage are caused primarily not by sins, but by the awareness of death: the eventual death of the spouse and of children.

Gregory’s description of virginity is not based, then, on personal experience, but rather is based upon his observance of other lives, both his brother’s (one presumes) and the lives of the saints. Gregory’s significant contribution to the spiritual life of virginity is his emphasis that true virginity comes from the contemplation of God as the spouse (or

13 Williams, Wound, 62.
Bridegroom) of the soul. True virginity, then, is the contemplation of God. Physical
virginity, Gregory writes, means very little without this spiritual virginity. Spiritual
virginity, then, is possible for those who are married. Just as the monastic life of
virginity is a form of life made possible by the contemplation of God, so, too, the married
life can be characterized by spiritual virginity and hence rooted in the contemplation of
God.

Furthermore, the contemplation of God is actually the culmination of all human
desires. That God is both the source and the telos of all human desire is one of Gregory’s
most significant contributions to spiritual theology. *On Virginity* is in part about the right
ordering of all human desire. All desire comes from God the creator, with the result that
human desire is fulfilled only by God. Gregory writes that “a character will feel as a
passionate lover only towards that Beauty which has no source but Itself...” (356).
Here human love – even the erotic – is analogous to love for the divine beauty, which is
the source of all beauty. Ironically, such a statement and theology are developed within
his treatise on virginity. Again, this is evidence that the treatise does not advocate a
simple dichotomy between those who live a celibate life and those who are married and
hence active in a sexual relationship.

Contemplation is understood as the desire for God, which in turn leads Gregory to
reevaluate the idea of beauty in general and human beauty in particular. Specifically,
Gregory counsels that outward and visible beauty of a human person is not discovered in
appearance alone; not only does the soul matter because it is united to God, but the
spiritual qualities of a person are potentially beautiful, too. This emphasis upon the
relationship between physical and spiritual is also an example of Gregory’s subtlety: the
soul and the senses are related just as true beauty is related to spiritual reality. The reality of God leads Gregory to reevaluate what is thought of as reality in general.

Gregory's Biography

At the beginning of On Virginity, Gregory acknowledges the importance of "saints who have already gained their glory in celibacy" (343). However, Gregory notes that biographies "cannot stimulate to the attainment of excellence so much as a living voice and an example which is still working for good; and so we have alluded to that most godly bishop, our father in God, who himself could be the master in such instructions" (343). Gregory emphasizes that a person truly known potentially has a greater effect than someone simply known through words.

The translators write in a footnote to this sentence that the bishop in question is Basil "rather than Gregory Thaumaturgus, as some have conjectured" (343). If Gregory is writing about Basil, Gregory is commemorating Basil not only as a good example of the idea of celibacy, but as a living voice who was known personally by Gregory and perhaps some of Gregory's readers. This passage is a good example of how important the connection was for Gregory between theology and the lived, spiritual life. Theology and practice are inseparable. In one sense, Gregory's theology of the spiritual life is a reflection upon actual lives of both the married and the celibate who have sought purity of heart.

Jean Danielou writes in From Glory to Glory about Basil, "After journeying through Palestine and Egypt to visit the settlements of monks and hermits, Basil had settled down in 358 to live at the family estate in Annesis, Pontus, with the idea of leading a monastic
life. He was joined there by Gregory of Nazianzus."\textsuperscript{14} Rowan Williams notes that Basil of Ceasarea, following Pachomius who established an order in Egypt between 320 and 346, “performed the same service for monasticism in Asia Minor, with two collections of rules rather misleadingly called the ‘Longer Rules’ and ‘Shorter Rules’ (they are not ‘rules’ in the later sense of a systematic program for monastic life).”\textsuperscript{15}

Thus, through his brother Basil and his monastic community on their family estate, Gregory knows about monasticism. Did Gregory consider, then, joining his brother’s community? Jean Danielou writes in \textit{From Glory to Glory}, “Basil tried to draw him to Annesis, as we know from one of his letters, but there is no proof that he ever succeeded. Gregory was married and it would mean leaving his wife.”\textsuperscript{16}

Gregory apparently acknowledges his married life (or at least his former sexual activity) when he writes, “Happy they who have still the power of choosing the better way, and have not debarred themselves from it by engagements of the secular life, as we have, whom a gulf now divides from glorious virginity . . .”\textsuperscript{17} Danielou comments about Gregory’s statement here, “Years afterward, in extolling the ideal of celibacy, he was to confess he never attained to it himself. There is thus no evidence that he ever lived a monastic life.”\textsuperscript{18}

Although he did not join the monastic community, presumably he knew it well. Indeed, Annesis is located on the grounds of his family’s estate. It is perhaps this personal knowledge that makes possible such detailed, possibly humorous observations

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Jean Danielou, and Herbert Musurillo, \textit{From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writing} (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Williams, \textit{Wound}, 109.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Danielou and Musurillo, \textit{From Glory}, 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{On Virginity}, 345.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Danielou and Musurillo, \textit{From Glory}, 3.
\end{itemize}
of the celibate in *On Virginity*, such as his statement that it “is monstrous to seem like creatures without expression and without feeling; and we must choose (if we are silent) one of two things; either to appear never to have felt the special beauty of virginity, or to exhibit ourselves as obstinately blind to all beauty . . .”\(^{19}\)

In places, Gregory appears to rate the celibate life as a life holier or closer to God’s presence than the married life. For example, he writes about the prophet Elias and John the Baptist, “It is my belief that they would not have reached to this loftiness of spirit, if marriage had softened them.”\(^{20}\) In another example, Gregory contrasts marriage with the “better” state of virginity.\(^{21}\)

Related to this diminution of marriage in comparison with celibacy, Rowan Williams recalls that the Synod of Gangra (in 340 A.D.) dealt with this subject. Williams writes that the Synod reveals that monastic superiority had become a problem, concluding, “Gangra particularly condemns those who claim that the monastic state is superior to the married, and those who hold aloof from the Eucharist, preferring private piety to the activity of the whole Body of Christ.”\(^{22}\) Gregory’s *On Virginity* could perhaps be read against the backdrop of this Synod and such debates about the relationship between these two styles of spiritual life. *On Virginity* is in part Gregory’s attempt to reconcile these two styles of life.

Even though the particular gifts of celibacy are extolled in *On Virginity*, Gregory’s description of marriage is characterized by a flowering of language and a use of visual, moving imagery. For the sake of argument, Gregory writes of a “happy” marriage in

\(^{19}\) Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 345.
\(^{22}\) Williams, *Wound*, 110.
order to compare it to the state of celibacy or virginity (345). Although he is in one sense comparing the lesser to the greater, Gregory's description of marriage bears the marks of one who knows it well and appreciates its potential. He imagines "a marriage in every way most happy; illustrious birth, competent means, suitable ages, the very flower of prime of life, deep affection, the very best that each can think of the other, that sweet rivalry of each wishing to surpass the other in loving . . . ." (345). Gregory extols not only the gifts of the relationship that make a marriage happy; he also extols some of the glories of the human body: "the bright eyes beneath the lids, the arching eyebrows, the cheek with its sweet and dimpling smile, the natural red that blooms upon the lips, the gold-bound hair shining in many twisted masses on the head, and all that transient grace . . . ." (346). Thus, Gregory notes as happy both the physical and the relational aspects of marriage.

Yet it is precisely the love of the physical that reveals the sorrow and pain of the married life. The beauty of the beloved will come to an end. Gregory writes that the married person who reflects upon the body's beauty "must have this thought also in his inmost soul, that some day all this beauty will melt away and become as nothing, turned after all this show into noisome and unsightly bones, which wear no trace, no memorial, no remnant of that living bloom" (346). Gregory's imagery here remains fixed upon the physical; he moves, for example, from the image of "bright eyes beneath the lids" to the image of now visible bones of the deceased (346). The physical imagery is highlighted, too, in Gregory's description of a bride whose groom dies before the wedding; Gregory writes, "Death comes in an instant and changes that bright creature in her white and rich
attire into a black-robed mourner. He takes off the bridal ornaments and clothes her with the colours of bereavement” (347).

The pain is intensified for married persons who have children. Gregory asks rhetorically if parents’ grief is lessened at the birth of a child? He answers, “Rather they are increased; for the parents retain all their former fears, and feel in addition those on behalf of the child, lest anything should happen to it in its bringing up; for instance a bad accident, or by some misfortune a sickness, a fever, any dangerous disease” (347). Gregory also emphasizes that each parent shares equally in such fears (347).

Furthermore, there is the misery caused, not by death’s presence, but by its absence. Gregory writes, “Those whose lot is contrary to that which passes as prosperous receive their sorrows as well from causes contrary to that. Prosperous lives are marred by the expectancy, or the presence of death; but the misery of these is that death delays his coming” (348). One of the themes, then, of Gregory’s rhetorical description of a happy marriage is that marriage actually intensifies fear and grief because love (for spouse and potentially children) is so affected by the reality of pain and death. Therefore, Gregory’s comparison of marriage and virginity is not a simplistic comparison of the greater and the lesser. Instead, Gregory has offered a profoundly detailed description of the many emotions – even conflicting emotions – experienced within a marriage. Gregory has written with such great, subtle detail perhaps because of his own biography as a married person.

Sarah Coakley in “Pleasure Principles: Toward a Contemporary Theology of Desire” notes the tension found in the fact that Gregory of Nyssa, almost certainly married, wrote a treatise on virginity. She notes that this tension poses a difficult question for
interpreters, writing, “Is his high praise of virginity – a lifestyle embraced by his admired elder brother, Basil – merely rhetorical, even ironic?”23 The tension is heightened by the range of detailed imagery with which Gregory describes both marriage and celibacy. Although there are a few exceptions, on the whole Gregory’s *On Virginity* does not place marriage and celibacy in opposition to one another. Gregory has a deep knowledge and appreciation of both styles of the spiritual life.

Coakley notes other potentially puzzling questions: “Does his insight about the particular values of married life, too, succumb to an inflated rhetoric? Does marriage simply pale, finally, alongside what he perceives as the infinitely higher vocation of celibacy? Or is the message something more subtle?”24 Coakley’s interpretation rests upon subtlety, not irony or mere rhetoric. She writes, in what is a succinct summary of her interpretation, “Rather, his vision entertains the thought that the godly ordering of desire is what conjoins the ascetic aims of marriage and celibacy at their best, and equally what judges both of them at their worst.”25

The subtlety, then, of Gregory’s *On Virginity* is found in his theology of desire which makes possible the potential similarity between marriage and celibacy in relation to their ordering of desire toward God, not mere flesh or appearances. Gregory writes, “This simile, then, of the torrent holds; none of the objects sought for in it last till the seekers are satisfied . . . .” (350). God alone completely fulfills human desire, and the divine fulfillment is available for both styles of spiritual life.

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In terms of the place of sexuality within Patristic theology and practice, Coakley compares Gregory of Nyssa with Augustine, writing,

It is not that sexual pleasure holds any intrinsic fear for him (unlike his near-contemporary in the West, Augustine of Hippo, whose epic and tortured struggle for sexual continence we know in detail from the Confessions), that it is all a matter of due balance or ‘proportion’ (de virginitate, chapter VIII).

In light of Coakley’s observation, it is possible that Gregory’s own biography was a significant reason why he was capable of writing about virginity and marriage with such subtlety and rich detail. The creative tension between marriage and celibacy was something he knew personally within his own family in general and within his relationship with Basil in particular.

A Description of Celibacy

For all his appreciation of the spiritual and the non-literal, Gregory emphasizes that virginity is in part a lifestyle that literally avoids the flesh in terms of sexuality. For example, Gregory writes, “One way of escape is open: it is, to be attached to none of these things, and to get as far away as possible from the society of this emotional and sensual world; or rather, for a man to go outside the feelings which his own body give rise to” (350-351). It is significant to note that Gregory retains the similar kind of physical imagery in describing celibacy that he used in describing marriage: the celibate is aware of a way around physical feelings and the emotions that are attached to such feelings and experiences. Although the monk’s body is not described with the level of detail with which Gregory describes the spouse’s physical features, he does note the important question of the body for the celibate lifestyle.

26 Coakley, “Pleasure,” 1.
Virginity brings with it its own peculiar pleasures. Significantly, celibacy allows the body to avoid the kind of physical grief and pain that characterizes a person who is married and potentially a parent and thus who knows the coming separation caused by death. Gregory writes of the celibate, “He has raised his own life above the world, prizing virtue as his only possession he will pass his days in painless peace and quiet” (348). Whether or not the language is idealistic is not so important here as the fact that Gregory is using physical imagery to describe the pleasure of celibacy: the celibate is painless and quiet. Thus, as with marriage and sexuality, there is a physical goal for the celibate to reach.

Nonetheless, for Gregory, the physical and the spiritual are inseparable; virginity has as its goal the soul’s union with God. Gregory writes, “In other sciences men have devised certain practical methods for cultivating the particular subject; and so, I take it, virginity is the practical method in the science of the Divine life, furnishing men with the power of assimilating themselves with spiritual natures” (351). The practice of virginity is in part a spiritual practice. Indeed, Gregory notes that virginity is so much more than a mere physical prohibition against sexuality: “Let no one suppose that the prize of virginity is so insignificant and easily won as that; as if one little observance of the flesh could settle so vital a matter” (364). Urban Holmes in *A History of Christian Spirituality* comments about this (and other such passages) in *On Virginity*, “Physical virginity is only the shell for an inner virginity, which purifies the soul, makes it like the Spirit, and therefore open for a bond (syndesmos) with God.”

Thus, the physical posture of the celibate allows for a particular spiritual posture or openness to God. Gregory emphasizes this with recourse to more physical imagery; the

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celibate is described as discovering “the way by which a man could be again caught up into Paradise out of this world which lieth in the Evil, into that Paradise where Paul was when he saw the unspeakable sights which it is not lawful for a man to talk of” (359). Celibacy, then, does not make sense if it is viewed only as an absence of sexual activity; no, celibacy involves an intense, unspeakable (or apophatic) relationship between the soul (and the senses) and God. In other words, the outward sign of celibacy is the absence of sexuality, but the inner reality of celibacy is a particular union of the soul with God. In light of Gregory’s citation of Paul’s vision of Paradise, this union of the soul with God is indescribable (at least in part).

Furthermore, the soul’s union with God raises questions about the gender of the soul and the body. In light of Gregory’s theological language, the gender of a person is not simply identified as a static category. Gender categories are in a sense transcended in On Virginity by nature of the soul’s marriage with the God. In an important passage with regard to gender, Gregory writes,

'There is neither male nor female,’ the Apostle says; ‘Christ is all, and in all’; and so it is equally reasonable that he who is enamoured of wisdom should hold the Object of his passionate desire, Who is the true Wisdom; and that the soul which cleaves to the undying Bridegroom should have the fruition of her love for the true Wisdom, which is God. We have now sufficiently revealed the nature of the spiritual union, and the Object of the pure and heavenly Love (366).

In summary, the celibate or virgin does have a spouse: the divine Bridegroom. This bridegroom who comes is capable of spiritual marriage with both genders, thus reversing or transforming what is the traditional pairing of male and female in a physical union. What Rowan Williams has written about gender in Gregory’s On the Soul and the Resurrection is also applicable to his On Virginity; Williams writes, “Beyond the otherness of gender, or even of embodiedness itself, is the wholly inexhaustible otherness
of God, never to be fully assimilated or resolved into identity.”28 The relationship with
God, then, calls into question the identity and permanence of all human relationships, as
well as rigid distinctions between physical and spiritual.

Marriage: A Reasonable Option

Gregory acknowledges the possibility that an interpreter of his treatise may suppose
he is denigrating marriage, writing, “Let no one think however that herein we depreciate
marriage as an institution. We are well aware that it is not a stranger to God’s blessing”
(352). Indeed, Gregory reserves strict criticism for those who teach that marriage is
“abominable,” writing that such persons are “like branded criminals already; their
conscience is covered with the stripes of this unnatural teaching” (353).

Contrasting such a view of marriage with his own, Gregory writes, “But our view of
marriage is this; that, while the pursuit of heavenly things should be a man’s first care,
yet if he can use the advantages of marriage with sobriety and moderation, he need not
despise this way of serving the state” (353). With regard to marriage, the mediation is a
balance between the human and the divine, that is, a balance of attention to the desires of
the body and the desires of the soul for God. Perhaps this balance here could be termed
theological moderation. What is the moderation that Gregory intends for marriage? He
writes, “That in the cases where it is possible at once to be true to the diviner love, and to
embrace wedlock, there is no reason for setting aside this dispensation of nature and
misrepresenting as abominable that which is honorable” (353). The extremes, then, that

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28 Rowan Williams, “Macrina’s Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion,” in Christian
Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity, ed. Lionel Wickham and Caroline Bammel (Leiden: E.J.
Brill, 1993), 244.
marriage avoids are on the one hand overindulgence in the flesh and (perhaps) on the other hand overindulgence in matters of the spirit.29

Gregory’s emphasis upon moderation also reflects the value he places in the same chapter upon reason: “Reason, in all of them, has established virtue to be a middle state between two extremes” (352). In this latter sense, moderation is not a balance of attention between the human and the divine; it is a simple balance of different bodily needs.

The potential for moderation becomes clearer when Gregory recalls the place of sexuality in the marriage, writing that if the married person should “give spiritual things the first thought, and because of the shortness of the time indulges but sparingly the sexual passion and keeps it under restraint, that man would realize the character of the prudent husband man to which the Apostle exhorts us” (353). Gregory counsels moderate sexual activity, then, after time for the spiritual. It is significant that the two - the spiritual and the sexual - are not opposed to one another but in some sense are mutually illuminating and related within a marriage.30

29 The virtue of moderation is an important theme in On Virginity. Gregory also advises the use of moderation in light of the knowledge he has gained from an acquaintance who is a physician and who explains to Gregory that the body is made up of four elements: hot and cold; wet and dry. Thus, Gregory counsels a diet that includes all four elements in moderation, but not excess (367). Gregory concludes, “That is temperance’s highest aim; it looks not to the afflicting of the body, but to the peaceful action of the soul’s functions” (368).
30 Urban Holmes provides a helpful summary of the context within which Gregory’s writes about marriage. Holmes writes in A History of Christian Spirituality, “But a caution is in order about too simple an interpretation of Gregory’s attitude toward marriage and that of others of the ancient church Fathers. We need to keep in mind that ancient man – and the word ‘man’ is used advisedly – viewed romantic love as a disease. This was true of Christian and pagan alike. It is not until the twelfth-century ‘courts of love’ that a contrary understanding arises. Furthermore, marriage and mating were not considered the same thing. Marriage was a social institution that existed to rear citizens of the state. There was little, if any, romantic glow around marriage, and mating was often viewed as irrational indulgence. Women could, however, be highly admired and respected. Certainly Gregory held his mother and sister in high esteem, and there were some very powerful women in the early church. The very different corporate reality of the fourth-century person must not allow us to come to simplistic conclusions about what they thought or believed” (32).
The danger remains, however, that at some point within the marriage physical pleasure alone will be chosen without regard for the spiritual. To return to Sarah Coakley’s interpretation of *On Virginity*, the divine ordering of desire is what both marriage and celibacy hold in common, and “equally what judges both of them at their worst.”

Gregory specifically acknowledges this danger, writing,

There is no small danger for him lest, cajoled in the valuation of pleasure, he should think that there exists no other good but that which is enjoyed along with some sensual emotion, and, turning altogether from the love of immaterial delights, should become entirely of the flesh, seeking always his pleasure only there, so that his character will be a Pleasure-lover, not a God-lover" (353).

What Gregory has written about celibacy is also true for marriage: the Bridegroom of the soul is God, and not merely a literal spouse in the case of marriage.

The *Telos* of Human Desire and Vision

Chapter eleven of *On Virginity* is Gregory’s most detailed description of the role of human desires in the spiritual life: God is the ultimate human desire. However, desire for God is also the foundation of human vision in general. Gregory begins the chapter by criticizing those who merely view the physical body of a person and therefore assume that they know everything from the physical alone. Gregory then counsels another way of seeing; he writes, “But the penetrating and scientific mind will not trust to the eyes alone the task of taking the measure of reality; it will not stop at appearances, not count that which is not seen amongst unrealities” (355). Appearances alone do not reveal being and meaning. In light of the whole treatise, Gregory apparently has in mind that both human beings and material reality need to be seen with this kind of spiritual vision. In other words, the mystery of creation is not confined to the anthropological.

31 Coakley, “Pleasure,” 1.
Gregory does acknowledge, however, that the majority of people do not exhibit this kind of vision (355). He then goes on to list some of the reasons why people's desires and imagination are so limited. Some people limit “their desires to dead metallic coin” (355). “Others limit their imagination of the beautiful to worldly honours, fame, and power” (355). The problem for such people is that their vision is limited to the sensual (355). Furthermore, this kind of limited vision not only obscures the view of reality; it also obscures the view of the greater beauty, which is “true Beauty” (355). This invisible beauty Gregory describes as “simple, immaterial, formless . . .” (355).

It is in chapter eleven of On Virginity that Gregory writes briefly about the Holy Spirit. Gregory notes that the allegory for the Holy Spirit in scripture is the dove (356). The Holy Spirit makes it possible for a person to arise to the divine beauty, “that which is alone worth loving, and to become himself as beautiful as the Beauty which he has touched and entered, and to be made bright and luminous himself in the communion of the real Light” (356). It is very important to locate Gregory’s description of and emphasis upon the Holy Spirit within the context the Patristic theological, creedal development of belief that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. Indeed, it is in large part the Cappadocians – Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzen – who help develop the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in response to Arianism.

Several significant implications emerge from this brief description of the Holy Spirit, especially in light of the overall treatise. First, the Holy Spirit both raises a person to the divine beauty and makes possible the transformation of the person into an image of this light. Second, there is the sense, then, that the Holy Spirit transforms – rather than
annihilates or even overwhelms – the humanity of the spiritual person. Finally, the Holy Spirit is active in both spiritual and physical reality, crossing the boundaries between the two. Therefore, Gregory understands that humanity can be transformed, becoming “as beautiful as the Beauty” (356). In conclusion, On Virginity is characterized by a theme that is typical of Gregory’s spiritual theology as a whole: the human is transformed throughout time and physical history into a beautiful image of the divine.
Chapter Two

Gregory of Nyssa’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*: Is the Erotic Left Behind?

Gregory of Nyssa’s spiritual theology exhibits a complex interaction between the divine nature and creation. Specifically, the divine nature both creates and interacts with creation. Paradoxically, Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘vision’ of the divine nature does not lead to the diminishment or annihilation of creation; rather, Gregory’s spiritual vision actually crystallizes his unique vision of creation and human nature. In light of God’s presence, the reality and purpose (or *telos*) of creation in general and human nature in particular are revealed. Therefore, the role of history and the reality of the physical are significant themes for Gregory of Nyssa.

Gregory’s spiritual theology is analogous to a map. Gregory locates human nature on this map in relationship both to time and matter as well as to God. God is in a relationship with the whole person within time. This emphasis upon God’s interacting with the whole person means that Gregory takes seriously the physical nature of humanity. Gregory recognizes humanity in its fullness as an important step in describing the divine transformation of humanity. What emerges, then, within history is a new *eikon* of Christ: the whole person transformed by the Trinity via light and darkness.

Gregory is especially aware that humanity is driven by desire (even conflicting desires). This awareness leads him to emphasize both the connection and the distinction between erotic desire and spiritual desire in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Erotic desire and union are analogous to spiritual desire and union. In what is a succinct summary of this relationship between erotic desire and spiritual desire in Gregory of Nyssa’s spiritual theology, Holmes concludes in *A History of Christian Spirituality*, “The
erōs of humanity is, in this concept, redirected by the agape of God and drawn into union with him. It is not a concept which argues that humanity reaches God by its own power, but that humankind has a natural longing for God that is fulfilled by God’s presence.”

Spiritual grace transforms or perfects nature. Erotic desire, then, is analogous to spiritual desire. Furthermore, erotic desire remains a necessary symbol within human nature because it signifies the spiritual desire for union with God. Although Gregory acknowledges in no uncertain terms that the nature of erotic desire is limited in terms of signifying spiritual desire, the significance of erōs remains crucial for Gregory’s spiritual theology in general and his Homilies on the Song of Songs in particular.

Gregory’s presentation of the connection and distinction between erotic and spiritual desire also relates to his distinction between the literal and the spiritual within the scriptures. Gregory follows within the tradition of scriptural interpretation as developed by Origen in book four of his De principiis. In particular, Gregory views the purpose of the Song of Songs as directing the soul toward the spiritual marriage with God.

Therefore, as the created nature is located on Gregory’s ‘map’ in relationship with divine nature, so, too, the literal words of the scriptures are interpreted only in relationship with their spiritual meaning and purpose.

Gregory’s Homilies on the Song of Songs includes fifteen homilies. The range of imagery in the Homilies is rich, and the pace is staggering. Gregory moves quickly from one image to another and then returns to former images throughout the book. Martin Laird in “The Fountain of His Lips: Desire and Divine Union in Gregory of Nyssa’s Homilies on the Song of Songs” observes that one characteristic of scriptural

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32 Holmes, History, 33.  
33 Norris, Gregory, xl.  
34 Norris, Gregory, xxxii.
commentaries in Late Antiquity is that their prologues often described the purpose of the whole work that follows. Laird concludes, “While Gregory of Nyssa’s fifteen homilies do not, strictly speaking, constitute a commentary, Homily One functions as such a prologue by revealing to the reader the purpose of the Song of Songs.” For this reason, Homily One will be one of two homilies interpreted throughout this chapter. The second homily will be Homily Six, chosen because Richard Norris has noted that it is one of the clearest in terms of Gregory’s understanding of “the way in which reality is structured.” As such, Homily Six is significant for the purpose of highlighting Gregory’s presentation of both the connection and distinction between the erotic and the spiritual within human nature as well as the literal and the spiritual within the scriptures.

The Created and the Spiritual: Distinguishable yet Connected

Norris writes in Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs, “More than once in the course of the Homilies Gregory argues that the Song intimates a certain manner of envisaging the way in which reality is structured.” Norris notes that the beginning of Homily Six is a clear example of Gregory’s argument. Homily Six is based upon the Song of Songs 3:1-8. In this passage, the bride of the Song is alone on her bed at night where she cries out for her beloved, who does not answer her. Near the beginning of Homily Six, Gregory writes, interpreting the passage, “If I may put it in a few words, the

37 Norris, Gregory, xx.
38 Norris, Gregory, xx.
39 Norris, Gregory, xx.
40 Norris in Gregory notes in a footnote (number 27) regarding the bride, “Gregory follows the established tradition that the female figure of the Song, when the text is read in its literal sense, is a bride of King Solomon, commonly thought to be the daughter of Pharaoh (cf. 1 Kgs 3:1; 11:1). In the Song, she is neither bride nor soul nor church but simply a woman” (xx).
teaching presented to us says that creation is divided into two distinct classes, one sensible and material, the other being intelligible and spiritual." Gregory’s division is clear, and the rest of the Homilies are consistent with this division: there is the material realm and there is the spiritual realm. Gregory elaborates upon this distinction, writing, “The sensible is grasped by sense, while the intelligible transcends sensible comprehension. The intelligible is infinite and unbounded, while the material is limited, for everything material is determined by quantity and quality” (VI: 69).

Gregory of Nyssa clearly distinguishes the material world from the intelligible world. He describes the material world as a kind of world in and of itself, writing, “Anything with mass, form, appearance and shape limits our understanding so that the person who examines material creation can perceive nothing beyond these bounds through his imagination” (VI: 69). There is a limit, then, to human perception when the object of perception is the material world. On the other hand, the spiritual world has an unlimited quality about it; Gregory writes, “The intelligible and spiritual is free from constraint; it escapes limitation and is circumscribed by nothing” (VI: 69). Unlike the material world, the spiritual world is not characterized by any kind of limitation. In this one sense (at least), the material world is not analogous to the spiritual world.

Norris notes that Gregory goes even further in describing the structure of the spiritual reality, writing, “This, to put it bluntly, is the distinction between God the Creator (‘the uncreated’) and that segment or division of the intelligible realm that comes to be, that is

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41 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Works of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Casimir McCambley (Greenwich: Great American Publishing Society, 1999), 69. CD-ROM. All references to the Homilies on the Song of Songs will be made in the following manner within the text: the homily number as a Roman numeral followed by the page number of McCambley’s translation.
created." Norris is referring to the passage where Gregory writes, "First, the uncreated or Creator of beings always remains what it is, and always being itself, it does not admit an increase or diminution with respect to the good." (VI: 69). The first distinction here is Gregory's category for the Creator, that is, God. Norris writes about this category for God that Gregory "may seem to conceive of God in the first instance as a 'sector' of the realm of the intelligible, but in the end he acknowledges that God, who contains or encompasses all things but cannot be contained, is no part, aspect, or dimension of the cosmic order." Norris' point here serves to emphasize that Gregory's vision of the divine nature is in part based upon a clear distinction between the divine and the created. Norris also writes that Gregory's emphasis upon God's transcendence fits within the context of the orthodox defense against Neo-Arianism.

Furthermore, Gregory emphasizes that God's transcendence cannot be fully described in human language. The only option, then, is for human language to be developed into the form of analogy in order to describe some (but not all) aspects of the divine or spiritual nature. Gregory writes in Homily One, "But starting from certain traces and sparks, as it were, our words aim at the unknown, and from what we can grasp we make conjectures by a kind of analogy about the ungraspable" (I:35). Furthermore, Gregory emphasizes that although God transcends every name and thought, the range of images in the material world does remain helpful and necessary as a source of analogies for God (I: 35). He writes, "However, the wonders visible in the universe give material for the

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42 Norris, *Gregory*, xxi.
43 Norris, *Gregory*, xxiii.
44 Norris in his *Gregory* compares Gregory and Plato on this point, writing, "Gregory's Platonism, then, is a strictly Christian Platonism in the sense that the difference between perceptible reality and intelligible reality is in practice subordinated to the further, biblical distinction between Creator and creature, and within the terms of that distinction the intelligible and perceptible realms as Plato knew them fall together into the category of the creaturely: of that-which-comes-to-be" (xxii).
45 Norris, *Gregory*, xxiii.
theological terms by which we call God wise, powerful, good, holy, blessed, eternal, judge, savior and so forth” (I: 35). In summary, for Gregory of Nyssa the use of analogical language for the spiritual is the only option, although it is a limited option.

The second ‘aspect’ of the intelligible or spiritual realm is inhabited by the parts of the created world that exhibit a potential for relationship with God the Creator. Gregory writes about this potential,

The second aspect comes into existence through creation and always looks back to its first cause. By participation in the transcendent it continually remains stable in the good; in a certain sense, it is always being created while ever changing for the better in its growth in perfection (VI: 69).

The created here potentially grows in knowledge and unity with God the Creator. Thus, Gregory is demonstrating the belief that the second aspect of the intelligible realm is marked by teleological change; that is, creation finds its fulfillment in relationship with God who both creates and fulfills nature over time.

This theological belief that the intelligible realm is understood in light of its future with God reflects the theme in Gregory of Nyssa that nature is not diminished or destroyed by God. Gregory also emphasizes that the intelligible world – unlike God the Creator – makes sense only in light of the transcendent: “By participation in the transcendent it continually remains stable in the good . . .” (VI:69). Therefore, the creation (even the intelligible or spiritual creation) exhibits meaning and purpose only in relation to God and the spiritual realm. Norris writes about this intelligible realm, “The ‘intelligible’ realm, then, is that dimension of reality in which knower and known, intellect and intelligible, subject and object, approximate a unity.”

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46 Norris, Gregory, xxii.
In light of Norris' words, the intelligible demonstrates the capacity to become one with God the Creator over time. Presumably, Gregory intends for his readers to reach the conclusion that the intelligible realm in this sense is distinct from aspects of the created order that do not exhibit such a capacity. Regarding the intelligible realm, Norris summarizes, "Naturally enough, then, for Gregory this realm is the home of the angelic host – and, at least intermittently and eschatologically, of human beings in their capacity as rational, intellectual objects." 47 The second aspect of the intelligible realm, then, is the home for angels and human beings, although human beings need more time – especially eschatological time – in order to reach unity with God.

Is the Erotic Left Behind?

Coakley writes in *Powers and Submissions* that Gregory’s emphasis upon apophatic ‘knowledge’ in his *Life of Moses* is analogous to his emphasis to erotic union in the *Homilies*. 48 Coakley surmises,

Gregory says as much in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* – that the passage from the physical to the spiritual is not effected by repression of the memory of physical love: ‘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.’ 49

Coakley’s statement here raises a critical question regarding erotic desire for the *Homilies*. Is erotic desire for physical union left behind in the spiritual marriage with God?

Throughout the *Homilies*, Gregory uses a range of erotic and physical imagery to describe the bride’s relationship with the beloved. Homily Six provides many examples

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of this imagery. For example, Gregory writes of the bride, "She desired to touch the good with the very tip of her lips and touched the beauty only as much as the power of her prayer could reach. (She prayed to become worthy of a kiss through the illumination of the Word.)" (I: 36). A kiss here is Gregory's chosen image for the soul's desire for God. Even the Word is portrayed visually rather than orally: "Because you love the Word's breasts more than wine, we shall imitate you and love your breasts more than human wine, for through them you feed those who are infants in Christ" (I:36). The Word is also portrayed visually in Homily Six when Gregory writes, "The bride goes even further; her vision is clearer, and she carefully considers the Word's beauty; she marvels how he descended in a shadowy form upon the bed of this life here below, and has been shaded over by the material nature of a human body" (VI: 70). Of course, Gregory is alluding to the Incarnation. Nevertheless, Gregory is also describing the Incarnation with the erotic imagery of the Song as the context: the Word becomes a human body "upon the bed of this life." The soul, then, contemplates and desires the beauty of the Word.50

Gregory even uses erotic crying as an image for spiritual desire, writing, "Now, through what she has already achieved, she has passed to a more interior part of the mysteries with her mind, and she cries out that her passage has brought her only to the vestibule of goodness" (I: 36). Erotic cries mark a new stage in passage to union with God. Therefore, as the search for God continues or 'progresses,' the soul does not leave

50 It is perhaps due to the importance of human desire that Gregory questions the image of hell. Specifically, hell is undesirable, and therefore it does not inspire transformation. Gregory writes in Homily One, "For some there is salvation by fear: we contemplate the threat of punishment in hell and so avoid evil. Further, there are those who, because of the hope of the reward held out for a life piously lived, conduct themselves virtuously. They do not possess the good out of love but by the expectation of recompense. On the other hand, the person who is hastening to spiritual perfection rejects fear" (I: 30).
behind or “repress” the erotic imagery. Indeed, Gregory returns again and again throughout his *Homilies* to sensuous imagery, presenting erotic desire as analogous to spiritual desire.

However, Gregory is also critical about the analogy of erotic desire. Gregory’s *Homilies* contain warnings about the limitations and potential dangers of erotic desire. For example, Homily Six clearly states that divine beauty should not be reduced to physical beauty: “Perhaps the loveliness of the divine beauty has something fearful about it as characterized by elements contrary to corporal beauty” (VI: 73). Divine beauty is one of the characteristics of the divine nature, which remains transcendent. Gregory continues, “Hence, what attracts our desire is pleasant to the sight, soft to the touch and not associated with anything fearful or terrifying. On the other hand, that incorruptible beauty is fearful, terrifying and not easily frightened” (VI: 73). The characteristics of divine beauty are not exactly the same as those of physical beauty. Indeed, divine beauty inspires awe (or fear) in a way that physical beauty does not. For all the similarities between physical and spiritual beauty, Gregory here emphasizes their radical differences.

Homily One also emphasizes the differences between erotic desire and spiritual desire. At the beginning of Homily One, Gregory notes the difference between the physical and the spiritual, writing, “Let no one bring passionate, fleshly thoughts or a garment of conscience unsuitable for divine nuptials. Let no one be bound up in his own thoughts or drag the pure words of the bridegroom and the bride down into earthly, irrational passions” (I: 30). The language emphasizes not only the difference of physical and spiritual, but emphasizes that the fleshly is “unsuitable” for the divine marriage.

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Gregory continues, “I issue this warning before entering upon the mystical contemplation of the Song of Songs. Through the words of the Song the soul is escorted to an incorporeal, spiritual, and pure union with God” (I: 30). Here Gregory describes a journey beyond the erotic into the spiritual. This language of journeying beyond the erotic is reinforced later in Homily One when Gregory writes,

I will take up again what I said at the start of this homily: let no one who is passionate, fleshly and still smelling of the foul odor of the old man drag down the significance of the divine thoughts and words to beastly, irrational thoughts. Rather, let each person go out of himself and out of the material world (I: 32).

Gregory, then, is clear that there is a difference between the erotic and the spiritual, yet he is very aware of the potential for confusion.

Gregory continually emphasizes in his Homilies one particular difference between erotic union and spiritual union with God: spiritual union is never complete. For example, Gregory writes of Moses, “He sought God as if he had never seen him. So it is with all others in whom the desire for God is deeply embedded: they never cease to desire, but every enjoyment of God they turn into the kindling of a still more intense desire” (I: 34). Desire is unlimited when the object of desire is the divine nature. Laird comments upon the unlimited nature of human desire, “Union with God does not bring an end to desire, but, freeing desire from its compulsion to grasp, it allows it to expand perpetually in self-forgetful love.”52 Homily Six also highlights the theme of unlimited desire for God. Gregory develops this theme through the use of the term ‘vision,’ writing, “Neither is the bridegroom within our vision, nor does he appear in the same place, but he leaps upon the mountains, bounding from the high summits to little hills” (VI: 70). Furthermore, the bride becomes “perplexed and distressed because she does not

52 Laird, “Fountain,” 53.
have the object of her desire" (VI: 70). The bride can only continue searching, becoming more and more aware that she will never stop desiring more of the bridegroom’s presence.

Gregory’s emphasis upon the expansion of desire is derived from his interpretation of Paul’s words in Philippians 3:13. Although Gregory does not literally refer to the term *epektasis* in Homily One, the concept is found there and throughout the *Homilies*.

For example, Gregory writes,

> The Apostle’s words are thus verified: stretching out to what lies before is related to forgetfulness of earlier accomplishments (Phil 3.13). The good which is superior to the one already attained holds the attention of those participating in it while not allowing them to look at the past; by enjoying what is more worthy, their memory of inferior things is blotted out (I: 69).

Williams notes that Danielou’s *Platonisme et theologie* views the concept of *epektasis* (the noun derived from the verb in Phil. 3:13) as one of the centerpieces of Gregory’s spiritual theology. Danielou writes about the meaning of the term, “But God at the same time remains constantly beyond, and the soul must always go out of itself (Greek *ek*: ‘out of’) – or, rather, it must continually go beyond the stage it has reached to make a further discovery.” Williams also highlights this notion of expansion and advancement, writing,

> What matters is the *epektasis* of love and longing, permeating the whole of life. The substance of God is not to be touched or known; it is an abstraction and, in a sense, a fantasy; there is no core of the divine being to be grasped as the final, ‘essential’ quality of God, only the divine works; God willing to relate to the world in love.\(^{56}\)

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54 Williams, *Wound*, 62.


56 Williams, *Wound*, 70.
Williams' words shed light on Gregory's use of the concept: instead of focusing upon the memory of God's presence, the soul advances in hope for 'more' of God.

Gregory's development of the concept *epektasis* in the *Homilies* is also consistent with his emphasis in *Life of Moses* upon the twin themes of apophatic 'knowledge' and darkness. In Homily One, Gregory alludes to the darkness of God: "This sound comes from the dark obscurity where God is and who burns with fire every material thing upon this mountain" (I: 32). Norris also notes the similarity between unending desire in Gregory's *Life* and *Homilies*, writing, "In the Homilies -- as earlier in the *Vita Mosis* and *In inscriptions Psalmorum* -- Gregory is opposed to the very notion of a final, static perfection. Perfection consists in unending transformations that lead to a goal that is reached in never being fully attained." Thus, spiritual desire is paradoxical: spiritual desire longs for union with God, yet humanity is incapable of a complete union with God. In this sense, spiritual desire is very different than erotic desire, which is limited by the bounds of physical union.

Therefore, this difference relates to the limitation of all analogies for the divine nature: language cannot capture the divine nature. Language is able to describe the divine nature only in limited ways via analogy. Norris clarifies Gregory's awareness of analogy's limitations when he writes,

"Literal, corporeal language may be "transposed" to the level of intelligible reality -- presumably because there is some stable analogy between them -- but the language of the human intellect cannot be transposed in such wise as to conceptualize the things of God, who is known only indirectly, in darkness (Exod 20:21 LXX), and from behind (Exod 33:21-23), that is, through her effects." Analogy is limited, then, because of the nature of God.

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Norris, *Gregory*, xxxiii.

Norris, *Gregory*, I.
In summary, Gregory views *eros* as a significant element of both natural and spiritual life. Indeed, erotic desire is one of Gregory’s favorite analogies for spiritual desire, especially in light of his reading of the Song of Songs. Erotic desire for physical union foreshadows the potential spiritual union with God, although Gregory emphasizes that the soul never achieves perfect union with God (see VI: 69-70). Gregory is painstakingly aware of the difference between erotic desire and spiritual desire. Thus, Gregory understands that erotic desire should be categorized as an analogy for spiritual desire.

Analogies, according to Gregory, are limited in their scope; that is, there is a point when analogies can no longer describe the spiritual realm. Gregory emphasizes this limitation of analogies and all human language for God when he writes about the divine beauty: “The human mind is unable to find any description, example or adequate expression of that beauty” (I: 35). Erotic desire is not unique among other analogies for the spiritual life. Analogies are capable to a limited degree of revealing spiritual meaning. Erotic desire, then, is not left behind or forgotten once the soul enters into the spiritual union with God. Although erotic desire is not coterminous with spiritual desire, Gregory highlights in rich imagery the ways in which erotic desire reflects some characteristics of spiritual desire.

In addition to the use of the term ‘analogy,’ Gregory also categorizes erotic desire as a symbol, writing, “The most acute physical pleasure (I mean erotic passion) is used as a symbol in the exposition of this doctrine on love” (I: 33). In this sense, *eros* does not fulfill *agape* (or divine love); rather, *agape* fulfills or makes sense of *eros*. God’s desire for union with humanity is the starting point, and this divine desire will be fulfilled
throughout time and eternity as the soul progresses in the unending union with God’s mysterious presence.\textsuperscript{59}

The Literal and the Spiritual: Discerning the ‘Intent’ of the Scriptures\textsuperscript{60}

Gregory’s description of the similarities and the differences of erotic desire and spiritual desire also relates to his distinction between the literal and the spiritual in the scriptures in his Homilies. Gregory’s method of scriptural interpretation makes a clear distinction between what the literal ‘meaning’ and the spiritual ‘meaning’ of scripture in general and the Song of Songs in particular. Laird writes in what is a succinct summary of Gregory’s method, “For Gregory of Nyssa, the human spiritual journey into God is a journey into the hidden depths of Scripture. In all of this, desire remains fundamental for Gregory and continues to be trained to long ever more deeply for God.”\textsuperscript{61} The literal, then, is only one element or stage in the interpretation of the scriptures.

Norris understands that Gregory’s method of interpretation is derived from Origen.\textsuperscript{62} Specifically, Norris notes that Gregory would have been familiar with Origen’s method because Basil and Gregory Nazianzen had included Origen’s essay on the interpretation of scripture (book four of his De principiis) as the first excerpt from Origen’s writings in their Philokalia. Norris writes,

There, as we have seen, Origen had asserted that the ‘intent (σκοπεῖν) of the Spirit

\textsuperscript{59} Gregory’s On Virginity is his treatise upon the differences and the similarities of celibacy and marriage. In the treatise, Gregory displays both a vivid awareness of the differences between these two ways of life and a great respect for the way in which both are ultimately dependent upon spiritual union with God.
\textsuperscript{60} Norris, Gregory, xl.
\textsuperscript{61} Laird, “Fountain,” 42.
\textsuperscript{62} Norris writes in Gregory in the conclusion of his “Introduction: Gregory of Nyssa and His Fifteen Homilies on the Song of Songs” that Gregory’s scriptural method points not only backward to Origen but forward to Augustine. Norris concludes, “Furthermore, its use is governed at once by the σκοπεῖν of the Scriptures generally and by that of particular works within the Scriptures – a condition that is not inconsistent with Augustine’s opinion that exegesis must be ruled by the church’s faith (i.e., its baptismal faith, summed up in what is now called ‘creed’) and by the double love commandment.” (I).
who in the providence of God illumined those ministers of Truth, the prophets and apostles, was primarily to provide instruction regarding the ineffable mysteries that have to do with human affairs, so that anyone who is capable of receiving this instruction…might become a participant in all the teachings of his counsel.’ The ‘mysteries’ in questions, Origen goes on to say, are things like the Trinity, the incarnation, and the truths about the human condition intimated in the story of the creation and fall. This definition of the Spirit’s ‘intent’ is, of course, then, a hermeneutical principle: it specifies what there is to look for in the Scriptures, or at any rate what the church seeks in them.63

Laird also concurs that Gregory’s interpretation of the Song is dependent upon Origen’s interpretation of the wisdom literature in general and the Song in particular.64 Norris recognizes that Gregory’s words about the overall purpose of the Song in Homily One are derived specifically from Origen. Norris writes, “He does not speak explicitly of the σύνοπτικός of the Song, but it is clear enough that he remains firmly in the tradition of Origen in this regard. For one thing, he adopts Origen’s view that the Song has love (ἐρωτά) as its fundamental subject matter.”65 Norris refers here to the passage in which Gregory writes that through the “words of the Song the soul is escorted to an incorporeal, spiritual, and pure union with God. For God, who ‘wishes all to be saved and to come to the recognition of the truth, shows the most perfect and blessed way of salvation here – I mean the way of love.’ (I: 30). Thus, Gregory understands that the intent of scripture in general and the Song in particular is to describe the divine nature. Therefore, the details of the Song should be viewed as a whole in the same way that a picture is (I: 33). Gregory writes, “Thus it is with the present scripture: we should not look at the material of the colors (i.e. the words); rather, we should consider the image of the king expressed by them in the chaste concepts” (I: 33).

63 Norris, Gregory, xl.
64 Laird, “Fountain,” 41.
65 Norris, Gregory, xxxii.
Gregory’s focus upon the ‘intent’ of the Song is also reflected in the way in which he understands that images have both a literal content and a spiritual meaning. Gregory writes about this method,

For white, yellow, black, red, blue or any other color, are these words in their obvious meanings – mouth, kiss, myrrh, wire, bodily limbs, bed, maidens and so forth. The form constituted by these terms is blessedness, detachment, union with God, alienation from evil and likeness to what is truly beautiful and good (I: 33).

One of the most important examples for Gregory is the bride’s breasts, which are “the activities of God’s power for us by which he nourishes” (I: 34). This is one example of many in which Gregory grants spiritual significance to the literal details of the Song. Gregory summarizes his method, writing, “How, then, can we find here the text’s spiritual sense as we had done with regard to other passages?” (VI: 69).

This method of interpretation is also consistent with Gregory’s understanding that reality is divided between the natural realm and the spiritual realm. Just as the physical world needs the spiritual world to stabilize it in transcendent meaning, so, too, the literal words of scripture need to be interpreted in light of spiritual meaning. Coakley highlights this distinction between the literal and the spiritual, writing that in the Homilies “(the ‘spiritual senses’) take over from the nous (intellect) in this heightened state of intimacy with the divine. What has occurred is a profound transformation of the physical senses (sight, however, is significantly omitted) into a deep receptive sensitivity.”66 The development of “spiritual sense,” then, relates to Gregory’s overall theological project. Gregory consistently notes the distinction between the literal and the spiritual, at the same time emphasizing their potential connection via analogical language.

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66 Coakley, Powers, 127.
Chapter Three

Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses*: Virtue as the Transformation of Desire

Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-395) writes *The Life of Moses* as a response to a letter requesting “some counsel concerning the perfect life” (I, 2). Such a request leads Gregory to start with God’s nature (I, 7). Virtue or perfection cannot be considered apart from God. Not only is God a “guide” in this task (I, 3), God “is himself absolute virtue” (I, 7). From the beginning to the end of *The Life of Moses*, the life of virtue is seen to be intimately, inseparably linked to theology or the vision of the divine nature. Indeed, the pursuit of virtue is clearly defined as participation “in nothing other than God” (I, 7).

Therefore, *The Life of Moses* can be categorized as an immensely creative example of spiritual theology. This theological vision comes to a climax as Moses ascends the apex of the mountain where communion with God is encountered within the context of “luminous darkness” (II, 163). Gregory’s language here is paradoxical, especially his description of darkness as the context of communion. Furthermore, the ascent into God’s presence is an eternal ascent: “the participant’s desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless” (I, 7). The teleological nature of the soul is discovered in communion with God.

Here is where Gregory of Nyssa’s anthropology is so creative and subtle. Desire is not only the key to understanding the soul’s relationship with God; it is also the key to understanding the nature of the soul. Gregory understands that there are different kinds of desires. Some desires are contrary to human nature (II, 125). Some desires are consistent with nature, such as the desire for God and even mundane desires such as the desire for manna in the wilderness (II, 137). The pursuit of virtue, then, is an exercise in
the re-ordering or transformation of human desire toward its proper end. Discernment is essential. Gregory represents discernment in the form of two opposites: God gives both the angel and the demon to each soul (II, 45).

Overall, it is the “vision” of the divine nature that leads paradoxically to a renewed vision of human nature throughout The Life of Moses. This point, of course, is consistent with the Incarnation (II, 20). Indeed, God “gives to our nature” the help it needs in order to live virtuously (II, 44). Grace transforms nature. The life of virtue, then, is a truly human life in communion with God. Rather than annihilating or reducing the soul, God restores its meaning, beauty, and infinite purpose. Human desires are transformed, too. The Life of Moses is a description of what self-fulfillment and self-transcendence look like. This is another paradox: it is the vision of God beyond the soul that gives the soul its being.

Darkness and God, the Soul and Communion: Some Paradoxes

The Life of Moses is Gregory’s response to a request for guidance in virtue, but the chief virtue is “reverence and having the proper notions about the divine nature...” (I, 47). This is the heart of Gregory’s spiritual theology: virtue and theology belong together. So, too, do prayer and theology.

Urban Holmes writes in A History of Christian Spirituality about the way Gregory of Nyssa connects the image of God and the image of humanity: “It pertains to the soul; but it is not just the mind (nous), as in the Alexandrians, or free will (autezousin), as in Irenaeus. It is the goodness or virtue (arete) of God that finds a place in the goodness of man.”

Holmes’ overall point is correct; Gregory’s imagery emphasizes that every

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67 Holmes, History, 32.
aspect of the soul participates in God, even going so far as to state that the “appetite” elevates the soul to the participation in the Good (II, 96). Free will, too, is a very important term for Gregory (see II, 86) and a key reason why Gregory believes the soul is potentially virtuous and that human desires can be transformed.

However, it is critical to note that the mind is limited in a way that the free will (and hence the potential virtue goodness of the soul) is not. For example, the mind reaches its limit on top of the mountain as it discovers “that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature” (II, 163). Martin Laird summarizes Gregory’s point when he writes that “mind is capable of nothing in this realm (whether it is the sanctuary or the darkness where God is) . . . .”68 It is only the free will enabled by virtuous desire that in turn enables the soul to continue on the journey into the infinite presence of God (II, 238-239). Gregory writes, “The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind” (II, 157). Virtue, then, rather than the mind or sense perception, is what makes possible the soul’s progression. Gregory continues, “He who would approach the knowledge of things sublime must first purify his manner of life from all sensual and irrational emotion . . . .” (II, 157).

Recalling the whole of The Life of Moses, the purification of “manner of life” here is the purification of desires. Although Gregory is dependent upon theology and to some degree philosophy, he does not give the mind priority over the will. Indeed, it is the opposite. Gregory of Nyssa’s counsel seems to be that the mind is incapable of leading the soul up the mountain into dark communion with God. At another point he goes so far as to describe the mountain as “the mountains of desire” (II, 232).

Therefore, darkness is an apt metaphor for what happens in the ascent because it depicts the mind’s limitation. Furthermore, the darkness here is not only due to the limitations of natural or pagan knowledge; the darkness engulfs theology, too. Commenting on *The Life of Moses* (section II, 162-163), Jean Danielou notes, “After learning all that can be known of God, the soul discovers the limits of knowledge; and this discovery is an advance, because now there is an awareness of the divine transcendence and incomprehensibility.”  

Theology is ultimately paradoxical because its subject – God – is beyond its reach. Thus, as the mind is blinded, the will inspires the soul to keep going. Danielou emphasizes “the positive character of this experience” of darkness. In other words, the darkness is the beginning of something new and necessary for the soul, a boundary that needs to be crossed.

The darkness, however, is not only an advance because it is the soul’s encounter with transcendence (and thus one of the “proper notions” (I, 47) about God); it is also an advance because of the ways in which the soul is transformed. Gregory writes that the soul ascends “the mountain through purity and sanctity; and when you arrive there, you are instructed in the divine mystery by the sound of the trumpets, and in the impenetrable darkness draw near to God by your faith . . . .” (II, 315). As Gregory describes it, holiness and faith are not obliterated or diminished in the darkness (II, 315).

This darkness also relates to the theme of self-fulfillment (or soul-fulfillment): the soul is transformed in communion with God, not diminished or annihilated. Indeed, by the end of *The Life of Moses* the soul is restored to beauty (II, 318), friendship with God

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69 Danielou and Musurillo, *From Glory*, 30.
70 Danielou and Musurillo, *From Glory*, 46-47.
(II, 320), and perfection (II, 320). Self-fulfillment is also seen especially by the fact that darkness is synonymous with God’s holiness and mystery, not fear or even reward. Gregory comments at the end of his text on Moses, “This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because like slaves we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some business-like and contractual arrangement” (II, 320). No, desire for friendship with God is the motivation (II, 320).

Martin Laird comments on the way in which faith is critical during this advance into the darkness: “The apophatic ascent at II.164 is completed really at II.315. The mind enters the darkness where God is and sees in not seeing, but by means of faith one nevertheless draws near God.” This is yet another paradox in The Life of Moses. Laird writes, “It would seem then that Gregory establishes a certain parallel between this seeing that consists in not seeing and faith. The paradoxical expression presents a block to reason, but faith can move beyond this obstacle and approach God.” Rowan Williams also comments insightfully about the role of faith in The Life of Moses: “Faith is always, not only in this life, a longing and trust directed away from itself towards an object to which it will never be adequate, which it will never comprehend.” Two elements of Williams’ statement need to be highlighted. First, Williams understands that faith is related to “longing and trust,” and therefore is related to desire. Second, Williams connects faith with human longing for the transcendent and infinite God. In other words,

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71 This is comparable to Gregory’s words in On Virginity about the Restoration of God’s image in humanity (see Danielou and Musurillo, 112-117).
72 Laird, Gregory, 85.
73 Laird, Gregory, 85.
74 Williams, Wound, 65-66.
faith is related to Gregory's counsel for the soul "never to be satisfied in the desire to see him" (II, 238).

Both faith and desire connect the soul with the eternal nature of God and are therefore related to what Everett Ferguson and Abraham Malherbe describe in their "Introduction" as "the most distinctive teaching of the Life of Moses, and the theme that holds the whole work together, the idea of eternal progress."75 Gregory of Nyssa entitles one section "Eternal Progress" (II, 219-255). Here he writes that Moses "at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course" (II, 227). Gregory emphasizes that Moses' desire is never satisfied: "He still thirsts for that which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being" (II, 230).

Jean Danielou's work suggests that this notion of eternal progress is Gregory's major new contribution to spiritual theology. Danielou uses the Greek word ἐπεκτάσις to describe the soul's eternal progress into the presence of God.76 This Greek noun derives from the verb used by Paul in Philippians 3:13: "ἀδελφοί, ἐγώ ἐμαυτόν οὐ λογίζομαι κατελήφθηναι ἐν δὲ, τὰ μὲν ὄπισω ἐπιλαμβανόμενος τοῖς δὲ ἐμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος." Gregory quotes this verse two times (I, 5 and II, 225), acknowledging the Apostle both times and yet reinterpreting this verse in light of God's infinite desirability. Urban Holmes connects Philippians 3:13 with the restoration of the divine image in humanity: "Gregory teaches that man has a proclivity for God (called after Paul in Phil. 3:13, epectasy), just as Philo and many of the Church Fathers such as Origen. This proclivity

75 Gregory of Nyssa, Life, 12.
(what Karl Rahner calls ‘obediential potency’) is what he understands to be the image of God in humanity.”

Gregory’s theme of ἐπεκτεινότος also relates to another important Pauline subject: hope. Gregory writes that “the good angel by rational demonstration shows the benefits of virtue which are seen in hope by those who live aright . . .” (I, 46). Presumably, Gregory has in mind the connection between hope and the eternal progress of the soul in communion with God. In contrast to the good angel, “his opponent shows the material pleasures in which there is no hope of future benefits, but which are present, visible, can be partaken of, and enslave the senses of those who do not exercise their intellect” (I, 46). The opponent of the angel reduces sense to the present and visible. This is problematic on every level for Gregory, who writes, “Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived” (II, 231). In order for them to have meaning, the visible and the present need the invisible and the eternal. Rowan Williams notes that Gregory’s conception of time is “markedly ‘eschatological.’”

Sarah Coakley also draws attention to “the ‘eschatologically-oriented’ feature of Gregory’s complex theory of personal (and gendered) transformation into the divine life . . .”

Rowan Williams also makes a crucial point about the content of hope and the specificity of the soul’s journey: “it is a journey into infinity – not an abstract ‘absoluteness’ but an infinity of what Gregory simply calls ‘goodness,’ an infinite resource of mercy, help and delight.” Infinite goodness here recalls the whole of The

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77 Holmes, History, 32.
78 Williams, Wound, 66.
79 Coakley, Powers, 164.
80 Williams, Wound, 65.
Life of Moses and its overall purpose: the soul’s desire for virtue and ultimately for God, who is “absolute virtue” (I, 7). There is a specific content to Gregory’s notions of God and infinity; indeed, Gregory’s is a Trinitarian vision. Christ himself (like God) is “absolute virtue” (II, 244). The Holy Spirit (what Gregory calls the “finger of God” in II, 216) restores both the flesh of the Virgin Mary and human flesh in general to its “original beauty” (II, 216-217). This emphasis on the Incarnation fits well with the theme of virtue. Gregory from beginning to end is focused upon the transformation of persons, not ideas alone or even God alone.

But what is happening to the soul as it constantly progresses into the darkness of God’s presence? What shape does it take?

Martin Laird makes the insightful comment about the soul’s journey into God in The Life of Moses: “There is no mention of union of any sort.” 81 Rowan Williams also notes the continuation of the soul in communion with God: “Gregory leaves no room for any ‘absorption mysticism.’” 82 In other words, the soul – though transformed – retains its identity in communion with God; it does not disappear. Gregory summarizes this point near the end of The Life of Moses,

For he who has truly come to be in the image of God and who has in no way turned aside from the divine character bears in himself its distinguishing marks and shows in all things his conformity to the archetype; he beautifies his own soul with what is incorruptible, unchangeable, and shares in no evil at all (II, 318).

The soul is simultaneously transcended by God’s presence and virtue, and yet the soul is fulfilled, maintaining a discernable biography in communion with God. Mark McIntosh makes a similar point in Mystical Theology when he comments on The Life of Moses, “the soul comes to define its own existence more and more in terms of its yearning for

81 Laird, Gregory, 84.
82 Williams, Wound, 63.
the absent One and its desire to fulfill the wishes of this One.” This is yet another one of Gregory’s paradoxes.

Thus, the soul is not annihilated or diminished, but rather fulfilled in communion with God. Sarah Coakley goes even further. In Powers and Submissions she suggests that for Gregory of Nyssa there is a sexual dimension to the soul’s relationship with God:

Indeed, one might argue on the contrary that his spirituality of progressive ascent and increasing loss of noetic control (as set out in the Life of Moses) is figured precisely by analogy with the procreative act; Gregory says as much in the introduction to his Commentary on the Song of Songs – that the passage from the physical to the spiritual is not effected by repression of the memory of physical love: ‘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 more spiritual state of the soul.”

Coakley has a valid, insightful point, but this is the case only if Gregory’s Commentary on the Song of Songs is recalled (as she does). Specifically, Gregory does not in Life of Moses refer to the sexual dimension of the soul’s communion with God. The closest he comes to describing what Coakley calls “the procreative act” is in his description of the “finger of God” and the virgin Mary (II, 216-217), but this connection is tenuous at best, of course. Thus, Coakley’s point is at best an analogy (as she states). Again, Martin Laird’s observation about Life of Moses is worth recalling: “There is no mention of union of any sort.” The soul is fulfilled by God, but the relationship is not consummated. Indeed, the emphasis in Life of Moses falls on friendship (philia) with God and neighbor, not eros (see II, 320).

Coakley is correct, however, that in Commentary on the Song of Songs the sexual or erotic dimension is a major theme. When this text is read alongside Life of Moses,

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83 McIntosh, Mystical, 158.
84 Coakley, Powers, 162.
85 Laird, Gregory, 84.
Coakley’s analogy holds. Coakley’s analogy is also a reminder that Gregory’s overall works maintain an astonishing range of imagery for the soul’s fulfillment in communion with God, a range that may be alluded to in subtle ways when a specific image is used by him.

Finally, Gregory’s emphasis on eternal progressiveness of communion—rather than absorption—needs to be highlighted alongside Gregory’s subtle teaching that the soul does not transcend history (or what might be called context). Gregory writes, “Everyone knows that anything placed in a world of change never remains the same but is always passing from one state to another, the alteration always bringing about something better or worse” (II, 2). Humanity is “constantly experiencing change . . . .” (II, 3). Change can lead to “something better or worse” (II, 3); indeed, it can lead to virtue or vice (II, 74). Rowan Williams notes the originality of Gregory’s recognition of history and context: “Here if anywhere are the foundations for a Christian account both of history and of human individuality. This is Christianity’s major revision of the philosophical assumptions of Greek antiquity.”

Furthermore, Gregory’s acknowledgement of history and context is a critical influence upon his method of scriptural interpretation. Because history is constantly changing, the “literal” events of Moses’ life cannot be repeated identically (II, 49). What can be imitated is Moses’ virtue: “one might substitute a moral teaching for the literal sequence in those things which admit of such an approach” (II, 49). Gregory continually highlights this method of scriptural interpretation; he writes of the meeting with Aaron, “If this historical incident is taken in a more figurative sense, it will be found useful for our purpose” (II, 43). Gregory also recognizes that scripture (what he calls here “the divine

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86 Williams, Wound, 66.
commands”) does not answer all questions (II, 110-111), concluding, “Why do things which happen happen? And other such things as are sought out by inquiring minds – these things we concede to know only by the Holy Spirit, who reaches the depths of God, as the Apostle says” (II, 110). As scripture points to the Holy Spirit, it points beyond itself and hence beyond the literal to the spiritual. In addition to the Holy Spirit, reason has a place as well. Gregory’s method is at work when he interprets the wealth of Egypt to be “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 by the riches of reason” (II, 115). Gregory also realizes that his approach to scripture could be controversial (II, 51) and that someone else could “discover something in the account which does not coincide with our understanding” (II, 48).

Gregory might be said, then, to have a realistic, pastoral appraisal of the soul’s location. Because the soul does not transcend its own history and context, so, too, it does not transcend its battle with the demonic. Gregory makes the shrewd observation, “For many of those who have accepted the word as liberator from tyranny and have identified themselves with the Gospel are today still threatened by the Adversary with onslaughts of temptations” (II, 56). Furthermore, temptation remains even as one makes progress in virtue (II, 291). This pastoral observation is due to the fact that Gregory takes seriously the reality of the soul’s history and context.

The Reality and Range of Human Desires

Gregory of Nyssa uses the term “desire” throughout The Life of Moses. God is the ultimate desire; thus, the pursuit of virtue is not reduced to better behavior or the mind’s
accumulation of knowledge. As has been highlighted earlier, Gregory of Nyssa goes so far as to state that human desire for God does not stop because God is not limited (I, 7). Building upon his point that desire for the Good "constantly expands" (II, 238), Gregory concludes: "Thus, no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied" (II, 239). This leads to the paradox of darkness and God, the soul and communion.

Nonetheless, Gregory does not limit desire to communion with God. For example, beauty is desirable so long as it is not reduced to the visible and immediate: "Therefore, the ardent lover of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype" (II, 231). Furthermore, "For even if the understanding looks upon any other existing things, reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without participating in true Being" (II, 25). Graham Ward summarizes, "An object's identity, its intelligibility, only consists in its being an object of God's activity. It has no identity outside of these divine energies."87 Desire, then, is never satisfied until it "looks" beyond any object of the mind or the senses. Nature alone is not determinative of meaning and purpose.

Gregory's understanding of the role of desire in humanity in part derives from his view that the soul is divided into "the rational, the appetitive, and the spirited" (II, 96); these terms in Greek are λογιστικόν, ἐπιθυμητικόν θυμοειδές. Everett Ferguson and Abraham Mahlerbe comment upon their translation of these Greek terms:

The latter word especially is difficult to render in English; in these psychological contexts "spirited" translates it and is not to be confused with "spirit." The appetitive part of the soul refers to the bodily passions or sensuous desire; the

spired part refers to the ardent, spirited will or the nonphysical passions which in their negative aspect are irascible and are included in the Pauline “flesh.” This threefold classification comes from Plato, Repub. 439d, 588b; Phaedrus 246b.88

Most importantly here, the translators note that the appetitive includes both passions and desire. Therefore, desire is not limited to knowledge or the spiritual.

Gregory understands that the three elements of the soul are interconnected, even if distinct:

Of these parts we are told that the spirit and the appetite are placed below, supporting on each side the intellectual part of the soul, while the rational aspect is joined to both so as to keep them together and to be held up by them, being trained for courage by the spirit and elevated to the participation in the Good by the appetite (II, 96).

It is significant that the appetitive elevates the rational to participation in the Good.

The importance of the appetitive for Gregory recalls Sarah Coakley’s point that the soul’s ascent in The Life of Moses is analogous to the sexual or erotic.89 Indeed, Gregory’s description of the appetitive and the translators’ description of the Greek term provide Coakley with an important source for her suggestion. Gregory’s description of the appetitive also recalls the importance for him of history and context; here again is subtle, pastoral realism: neither the spiritual nor the rational can ascend without “the bodily passions and sensuous desire.”90

Thus, virtue is needed, and ultimately virtue is the transformation or re-ordering of desire. Desire is re-oriented toward God or the spiritual, of course; but it is also re-oriented toward what is good physically or materially. It is in this sense that Gregory mentions the virtues of moderation (I, 64) and self-control (II, 274), which shape and limit desire. Furthermore, these virtues do not elevate the soul above others. Gregory

88 Gregory of Nyssa, Life, 169. See their footnote #116.
89 Coakley, Powers, 162.
90 Gregory of Nyssa, Life, 169.
emphasizes that these and other virtues lead to love for the neighbor (I, 48), to desire “to deliver to freedom everyone held in evil servitude” (II, 26), and to respect for the needs of everyone in the community for food (I, 37). Virtue, then, leads to unity with the neighbor: “it is a friendly and peaceful encounter that takes place when his brother is brought by God to meet him” (II, 43). Even at the end of The Life of Moses, friendship with God is paralleled by friendship with Caesarius (the one who requested the guidance), whom Gregory calls a “noble friend” (II, 320).

On the other hand, it is “lustful desire” that leads to the “disease of arrogance” (II, 280) and then the fall (II, 281). Even the fall, then, is reinterpreted in light of the absence of virtuous relationships. Gregory writes that after the fall God did not abandon humanity but “he appointed an angel with an incorporeal nature to help in the life of each person and, on the other hand, he also appointed the corruptor who, by an evil and maleficent demon, afflicts the life of man and contrives against his nature” (II, 45). The demon seeks to “enslave the senses of those who do not exercise their intellect” (II, 46). In other words, at any moment the desires may get out of hand, arrogantly disregarding the neighbor and God. Again, Gregory observes pastorally that the Adversary still tempts those who know the Gospel and are familiar with its virtues (II, 56; II, 291).

As desire is transformed, what happens to the soul? What shape does it take? In relation to this question, Sarah Coakley raises the subject of the soul’s gender as it is transformed. She notes that there are gender stereotypes (what she calls “gender binaries”) in The Life of Moses (see especially II, 1-8).  

91 Coakley, Powers, 164.
92 Coakley, Powers, 164.
Life of Moses: “We are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be, whether male or female, moulding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice” (II, 3). Furthermore, Coakley notes that Gregory suggests gender binaries are points of reference for “those who wander outside virtue” (I, 11). 93 Coakley concludes with characteristic suggestiveness:

…it is not that either ‘body’ or gender are disposed of in this progressive transformation to neo-angelic status. Rather, as advances are made in the states of virtue and contemplation, eros finds its truer meaning in God, and gender switches and reversals attend the stages of ascent: the increasingly close relation to Christ marks, in the Commentary on the Song of Songs, a shift from active courting of Christ as “Sophia” to passive reception of embraces of Christ as the bridegroom. 94

Coakley’s point about the fluidity of gender in The Life of Moses is to some degree supported by her reading of Gregory’s Commentary on the Song of Songs. Nonetheless, Coakley raises a critical question about The Life of Moses: to what degree is the soul’s gender fluid and volitional in the encounter with God? Most importantly, Coakley observes that gender is not a static category for Gregory, which in turn means that “desire” should not be imagined according to gender stereotypes.

It is possible that this fluidity of gender also relates to Gregory’s observation that the fulfilling and emptying of desire is constant: “And we never stop doing this, until we depart from this material life” (II, 61). The soul’s identity, then, is an ongoing project. The only stopping point is death, but even here Gregory’s language is paradoxical: “History speaks of ‘death,’ a living death, which is not followed by the grave, or fills the tomb, or brings dimness to the eyes and aging to the person” (II, 314). Just as the full range of Gregory of Nyssa’s work – and specifically his Commentary on the Song of Songs – is important for the discovery of the range of meanings involved in the soul’s

93 Coakley, Powers, 164.
94 Coakley, Powers, 165.
ascent into God, so, too, Gregory’s mention of death here in *The Life of Moses* needs to be compared with his fuller discussion of death elsewhere, especially his *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Death is an important boundary – and perhaps another example of darkness – on the soul’s journey into the presence of God.
Chapter Four

Gregory’s Map of the Soul’s Journey: Vision and Apophatic ‘Knowledge’

By the end of The Life of Moses, Gregory of Nyssa has presented a rich description of the soul’s ongoing journey into God’s presence, a journey that takes the soul into a mysterious darkness that is a paradoxical sign of the presence of God. Significantly, the soul’s journey reaches a high point in darkness: the higher Moses (and hence the human soul) ascends, the darker it gets. The ability of reason is limited in the darkness; vision, too, is limited, if not impossible.

However limited, the soul is able to continue the journey into the dark presence of God. Gregory even suggests in a section entitled “Eternal Progress” (II, 219-255) that this journey of the soul, as an image of the desire for God, is unlimited because of God’s nature. Gregory writes, “Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied” (II, 239). The soul’s unceasing desire for God, then, is analogous to eternity, which is presumably the reason Gregory entitles this section what he does.

Nevertheless, death is real. Gregory writes of the end of Moses’ life, “This for him is the end of the virtuous life, an end wrought by the word of God. History speaks of ‘death,’ a living death, which is not followed by the grave, or fills the tomb, or brings dimness to the eyes and aging to the person” (II, 314). Furthermore, death is not the end of the soul’s journey. Specifically, Gregory writes that the soul reaches a point in which it is “drawing no moisture at all from the earth . . . ; when you destroy everything which opposes your worth, as Dathan was swallowed in the earth and Core was consumed by
the fire – then you will draw near the goal” (II, 316). Gregory’s anthropology here (and elsewhere) is complex and difficult; it is too simplistic to categorize Gregory’s anthropology as dualistic, but clearly for him the soul and the body are neither coterminous nor identical. Nevertheless, death is a real and even necessary point in the soul’s journey into eternal life. Perhaps death should be thought of as one more example of the darkness in which the soul finds itself in God’s presence. Again, as so often the case with Gregory, the language is nuanced and at times paradoxical; the nature of the spiritual life in general is that it can only be expressed in such language.

The “Index to Texts” cites one example of the term “resurrection” in The Life of Moses.95 This term occurs only in Gregory’s discussion of the wood placed in the water to make it drinkable for the thirsty Israelites; Gregory writes, “But if the wood be thrown into the water, that is, if one receives the mystery of the resurrection which had its beginning with the wood (you of course understand the “cross” when you hear “wood”), then the virtuous life . . . becomes sweeter and more pleasant . . .” (II, 132). In part, resurrection is basically a non-existent category in the book because the subject is Moses. The notion of eternal progress, however, is a crucial theme. The relationship between the resurrection and eternal progress is not described by Gregory in The Life of Moses.

A fuller, developed understanding of resurrection and its relationship with the eternal progress of the soul is found in Gregory’s On the Soul and the Resurrection. The format of the book is that of a dialogue between Gregory and his sister Macrina. Gregory first approaches Macrina at the beginning of the book in order to share with her the news of Basil’s (their brother’s) death, only to find that Macrina herself is at the point of “mortal

95 Gregory of Nyssa, Life, 207.
illness." Gregory writes, "My heart was still overflowing with grief" (27). The context of the book, then, is in part Gregory’s grief as related to the death of his brother and the mortal illness of his sister.

The pastoral reality of grief, however, is only in the background. The conversation becomes a theological and philosophical discussion on the nature of the soul in light of death. In a sentence that summarizes the subjects of much of the book, Macrina states, "I say that the powers of contemplation, judgment, and vision of reality are proper and natural to our soul, and that the soul keeps in itself through these powers the image of the divine Grace" (54). The vision of reality here is in part both the awareness of the grief of death and the understanding of death’s meaning (especially as it relates to evil). The reality of death also raises the question of the metaphysical reality of Hades, which becomes an important topic for dialogue between Gregory and Macrina. Nonetheless, there is more to the soul’s life than this vision of reality. There is contemplation. Contemplation relates to Gregory’s theme of the soul’s erotic desire for God’s beauty. By the end of the book, contemplation is understood to include the apophatic “knowledge” of eternal reality. The soul’s knowledge of eternal reality is an apophatic knowledge; that is, eternal reality is contemplated but not fully possessed or known before death. Eternal reality is sharply distinguished by Gregory from earthly, animalistic reality, just as it is distinguished from death and Hades.

The Reality of Death

Gregory’s grief from the death of Basil and the mortal illness of Macrina is the setting of On the Soul and the Resurrection (27-29). Gregory reminds his readers of this context.

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at the beginning of the final chapter, writing that he is afraid that Macrina might soon die
(“as indeed it happened”) and that she would be unable to respond to some person’s
objections to the resurrection (103). For Gregory, then, this grief reveals the importance
for him of the familial bond; although both Basil and Macrina are members of the
household of God, they remain his siblings, too. The death of a sibling is particularly
painful. Gregory also emphasizes that both grief and fear appear to be universal within
human nature (27-28).

Gregory points out that so much of human activity is directed toward both remaining
alive and protecting the body (28). This observation leads Macrina to ask Gregory what
aspect of death is “most grievous” (28). Gregory responds that “the principle of life”
becomes invisible upon death: “It does not go to another place, but altogether disappears.
So when we see such changes how could we endure them without grief, since we have
nothing visible to rely on?” (28). Even the divine command that the soul is not lost
eternally is difficult for Gregory in his grief (29).

Furthermore, as much as Gregory is influenced by grief and fear, he is also influenced
by philosophical questions (29). These questions reach a climax when Gregory
apparently summarizes pagan philosophy and common assumptions about the
interconnectedness of material reality and the soul. Gregory writes, “But no one would
deny that the elements come together with each other and separate from each other, and
that this is the creation and dissolution of the body” (46). This observation leads to one
of his major questions for Macrina regarding the status of the soul after death, “But if
these elements are separated from each other and depart each to that place where its
nature leads it, what will happen to the soul, when its vehicle is scattered in many
directions?” (47). Thus, Gregory’s challenge to Macrina is in large part the challenge of philosophical and ordinary assumptions about the material creation and the soul’s inseparability from matter.

On the one hand, the soul is “recognized” only in and through the material; and yet there is more to the soul than the material, which is, of course, a theological statement. Gregory’s theology of resurrection is most fully developed in the final chapter, “The Doctrine of the Resurrection.” Two aspects of his theology need to be noted. The soul is first of all more than material alone because it is “the image of God” (121). Furthermore, on an even deeper level, the soul is more than the material alone because the material is not fully comprehended at the moment. It will take time – even eternity – for the shape of the soul within matter to be comprehended or grasped.97 Macrina states that after death the soul “no longer has its life ordered by its natural properties, but goes over into spiritual and immutable state (for it is characteristic of the physical body to be continuously altered from what it is and to be always changing into something different)” (118). Therefore, the physical body of the soul cannot be comprehended in the present condition alone. This becomes an important theme in On the Soul and the Resurrection: knowledge is limited, earth-bound, and in need of eternal life in order for it to reach completion.

This importance of the relationship between the soul and the material world is highlighted by Rowan Williams’ summary of Gregory’s distinction between ousia and

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97 Gregory also notes in On the Soul and the Resurrection that the length of “time” it takes to perfect a person’s soul varies according to the soul’s participation in evil: “…when the whole fullness of our nature has been perfected in each man, some straightway even in this life purified from evil, others healed hereafter through fire for the appropriate length of time, and others ignorant of the experience equally of good and of evil in the life here, God intends to set before everyone the participation of the good things in Him, which the Scripture says eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor thought attained” (115-116).
phusis in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Williams writes, “It would be rash to ascribe to Gregory a wholly precise and consistent terminology, but it is noteworthy that he will generally use *ousia* for the soul as distinctively active and intelligent, and *phusis* for the more complex lived reality of soul as animating a body.”98 However, Williams notes that “Gregory’s vocabulary overall does not support a simple identity of reference between *ousia* and *phusis*. . . .”99

Williams’ summary of Gregory’s use of the term *ousia* in one sense relates to Gregory’s theological assertions that the soul’s material is comprehended only in eternity as the image of God. Death can be filed under the category of *phusis*; resurrection should be filed under the category of *ousia*. In other words, *phusis* – though fundamental – does not by itself determine the soul’s *ousia*. The soul’s actual being is not completely known without the divine perspective and without the perspective of ‘time’ that is everlasting life.

Martin Laird’s description of the term *nous* or *dianoia* in his *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith* complements Williams’ interpretation of *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.100 Laird summarizes, “Whether Gregory speaks of the mind as *nous* or *dianoia*, we see it (1) involved in passionate struggle; (2) performing tasks of ratiocination and contemplation of the intelligibles; (3) ascending on high; (4) in the sanctuary or in the darkness of divine presence.”101 Laird, then, highlights how the mind is both involved in material struggle and yet simultaneously can transcend the material.

98 Williams, “Macrina’s Deathbed,” 233-234.
99 Williams, “Macrina’s Deathbed,” 234. Williams does note in his footnote #22 that Gregory occasionally uses the terms as functionally equivalent in describing the Trinity (234).
Interestingly, even though Macrina is dismissive of “the futile talk of unbelievers” (29), her defense and description of the resurrection does incorporate the pagan insight of the interconnectedness of soul and matter. Possibly referencing the Greek analogy between the person as the microcosm and the universe as the macrocosm, Macrina affirms that the whole universe is observed by the senses, noting that when a person observes “the cosmos in ourselves, we have found a good place to start conjecturing about what is hidden from what appears. By ‘hidden’ I mean that which escapes the observation of the senses because in itself it can be known only by the intellect and not by sight” (35). The theme running throughout Macrina’s defense of the resurrection is that the material world in general and death in particular are real, but they are not the only factors that determine the soul’s shape and future.

In addition to his intellectual questions (and his intense grief), Gregory notes that death is a divinely instituted boundary. Specifically, death is a punishment for transgressions (70-71). The context of this understanding of death as divine punishment is Macrina’s interpretation of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke’s Gospel (16:19-31). Macrina speaks of the origin of human life which existed according to “God’s first law, which gave to mankind unstinting participation in every one of the good things of paradise, excluding only that which had as its nature a mixture of opposites, evil combined with good. Death was set as a penalty for the violator of this law” (70-71). Furthermore, this transgression and the reality of death affect human nature, according to Gregory. Macrina states, “When those who had transgressed the law inevitably received the death which had been decreed for the transgression, that death divided human life into two parts, this part in the body and the part hereafter outside the body” (71). Macrina’s
statement reflects her belief that it is death that causes a kind of dualism of body and soul. This belief also reflects a particular distinction between time and eternity: “The two parts do not have an equal measure of duration: the one is circumscribed by a very short limit of time, while the other extends into eternity” (71).

As is the case throughout *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, it is difficult to categorize Gregory’s anthropology with finality; the dualism of body and soul is not a simple dualism, as evidenced by the fact that time and eternity (and thus body and soul) are linked and affected by each other. This connection between time and eternity is especially evident in Macrina’s description of the complex interplay of senses and the soul while on earth and the consequences of this interplay for eternity. Specifically, the senses can mislead the soul in a way that has consequences for the soul’s eternal condition: “Those who have not trained their reasoning and have not examined what is better spend gluttonously in the fleshly life the share of good which is owed to their nature, saving up nothing for the life hereafter” (71). On the other hand, for those who manage their senses with “critical reasoning and self-control, although in this short life they are distressed by those misfortunes which trouble the senses, yet store up good for the subsequent age, so that the better portion is extended for them throughout their eternal life” (71). The relationship of senses and soul is complex, then. If the soul is overwhelmed by the gluttonous senses, so, too, eternity will become hollow or misunderstood. Indeed, Macrina interprets the gulf that separates the rich man and Lazarus to be the result of decision making rather than a divinely created physical location. Macrina summarizes this point, “So this is the gulf, in my opinion, which does not come from the opening of the earth but is made by the decisions of human lives.
divided towards opposite choices” (71). If the soul can restrain the senses via virtue in general and the Pauline virtue of self-control in particular, then eternity takes shape in the soul for good.

Nonetheless, death remains a real boundary on the map of the soul’s journey into God. It is a boundary that limits the senses (or the body) more than the soul (“which extends into eternity”), but a boundary that is nevertheless real and critical (71). The reality of death is in part related to another important boundary that the soul faces: Hades. Gregory describes, however, how Hades actually begins on earth well before the soul and the senses perish.

Hades as State of the Soul

One of Gregory’s most important themes in On the Soul and the Resurrection is that Hades is a description of the quality of the soul rather than a post-mortem location. This theme has major implications for both Gregory’s anthropology and his emphasis upon the limitless beauty of God. Hades, though interpreted as spiritual, remains an important concept for Gregory. Just as both time and eternity influence one another, so, too, Hades influences (and is influenced by) the soul’s earthly life.

One of the most important passages in On the Soul and the Resurrection is the interpretation of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man from Luke’s Gospel because in general it includes most of the major themes of the book and in particular it reveals Gregory’s method of scriptural interpretation. In this dialogue with Macrina, the character Gregory emphasizes the difficult question of the nature of the fire or Hades in the parable, asking, “'Then what would the fire be,' I asked, 'or the gulf, or the rest of the

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102 Please see below for the section entitled “Hades as State of the Soul” for a description of Gregory’s description of Hades as a spiritual reality rather than a physical location.
things which have been mentioned, if they are not what their names imply?” (70).

Macrina’s initial answer is grounded in the importance of and the effects of Hades upon the soul: “The Gospel seems to me,’ she said, ‘to signify by each of these things certain doctrines relevant to our inquiry about the soul’” (70). Specifically, the gulf that separates Lazarus and the rich man is not literal but is rather the result of, again, “the decisions of human lives divided towards opposite choices” (71). Furthermore, all the literal details included in the parable’s description of the afterlife are spiritual; that is, they relate to the state of the soul. For example, Macrina states that “the Scripture is referring to these in saying that the finger is with the soul, as well as the eye and the tongue and all the other parts, after the dissolution of the structure, we shall not depart from what is probable” (73).

The logic here is consistent and leads to Macrina’s conclusion “that this Hades also which has just been mentioned is not intended to signify a place with that name. The Scripture must be teaching us that it is some invisible and incorporeal condition of life, in which the soul lives.” The parable, then, is in part about the continuity between Lazarus’s soul on earth and his soul in the afterlife. Macrina says of this continuity, “The soul of Lazarus . . . is occupied with its present circumstances and does not turn toward anything which it has left behind. The rich man still sticks to the fleshly life as if with bird-lime which he has not thoroughly cleaned off even when he has ceased from life” (75). Hades, then, is a quality of the soul that begins on earth and continues after death as a characteristic of the soul’s condition in eternity.

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Catharine Roth, the translator, notes that this section of On the Soul and the Resurrection “is modeled on a passage in Plato’s Phaedo (81 A-D), where Socrates speaks of souls which are contaminated by attachment to bodily pleasures and cannot escape to the invisible divine world after death. Macrina,
The significance of this interpretation of Hades is especially seen in the conclusion of *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, where Gregory returns to the subject and emphasizes that Hades should not be imagined as physically affecting the soul. The language here is focused upon the notion of bodies; Macrina states, “I do not say this because a bodily difference will appear at the resurrection in those who have lived in virtue or wickedness, as if we thought that the one would be imperfect in body, but the other would have a perfect body” (120). No, the bodies are the same, according to Macrina, although there is difference in their respective bodies in relation to “their experience of pleasure and pain” (120). Nevertheless, this difference is not discerned with respect to bodies, whether on earth or in the afterlife. Specifically, Hades does not afflict or hurt the body: “bodies which grow again from the sowing are said to by the apostle to have their perfection in incorruptibility, glory, honor, and power; but if these qualities are diminished, it does not mean that the body which has grown suffers any physical mutilation” (121). Therefore, Hades is an important concept in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, but its importance has nothing to do with physical punishment or literal torment; again, it is not a location of the soul (73). Instead, Hades reflects the quality or state of one’s soul, beginning on earth and continuing in the resurrection to eternal life.

To summarize, whereas death is one boundary on the map of the soul’s journey into God, so Hades is another point on the map of the soul’s journey. Unlike death, Hades cannot be measured as a single moment in time or as a literal location; its boundary is much more ambiguous than death’s.

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however, replaces the word ‘body’ with ‘flesh’ in the Pauline sense of sinful human nature (body and soul)” (75).
In the dialogue with Macrina, Gregory seems to acknowledge that some people might take issue with Macrina’s words about the soul because of their citation of Hades in the Gospel (69). Therefore, Gregory knew that the interpretation of Hades in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* was debatable. Nonetheless, Gregory emphasizes at times that the doctrine of resurrection and hence the status of the soul should be based upon scripture, not philosophical reasoning alone (50; 58). Indeed, scripture is described (in the words of Macrina) as “the canon and rule of all our doctrine” (50). However, Gregory’s interpretation of Hades is based upon a method that focuses upon the spiritual meaning of scripture, and it is possible that this spiritual meaning both complements and (arguably) contradicts the literal details of a given passage. Although enclosed as the canon, the scriptures still provide much room for the kind of spiritual interpretations that are found throughout Gregory of Nyssa’s writings in general and *On the Soul and the Resurrection* in particular.

Desiring God’s Beauty

As is the case in Gregory’s *Life of Moses*, the theme of desire figures prominently in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. When directed by the virtue of self-control and focused by the light of reason, desire leads the soul and the senses to the divine presence. Gregory writes that when reason leads impulses do not lead to evil, “but fear would produce obedience in us, anger courage, cowardice caution, and the desiring impulse would mediate to us the divine and immortal pleasure” (57). Gregory specifically relates desire with pleasure and notes that when pleasures are directed by reason they

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104 Gregory in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* describes reason as “the distinctive property of our nature,” making humans unlike “irrational creatures” (71). Nonetheless, it is possible for humans to ignore reason and act irrationally and to become “turned into beasts by the force of these passions” (58).
become “divine and immortal pleasures.” Gregory does not, however, specify what these pleasures are. The pleasures are simply in part the divine presence itself: “we are led to God by desire” (77).

But why is God desirable? Gregory emphasizes that it is God’s beauty that draws the soul and the senses, writing that God is a kind of “Nature” that “needs none of these things which are thought of as good, being Itself the fullness of good things, and because It is not beauty by participation of some beauty, but is Itself the nature of the beautiful (whatever the mind may assume the beautiful to be) . . .” (78-79). Gregory emphasizes the beauty of God again in the conclusion of this chapter, “The Purification of the Soul,” writing that “the divine life which is beautiful by nature and from its nature is lovingly disposed towards the beautiful” (81).

In highly paradoxical language, Gregory comes to describe the fulfillment of desire with the image of the end of hope and memory, writing, “Since, then, the soul becomes godlike . . . when it has passed beyond desire it has entered into that towards which it was previously being raised by desire, it no longer gives any place in itself either to hope or to memory” (79). This is the image of desiring finally reaching its end in the fulfillment rather than absence or more longing; longing or desire is in part characterized by hope, which is no longer necessary when desire is fulfilled. The soul finally reaches its “goal” (80), which is God.

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105 It is interesting to question whether this image of the fulfillment of desire contradicts or complements the theme of endless desire for the endlessness of God in Life of Moses, where Gregory writes, “This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied” (II, 239).
Nevertheless, there is no limit to God’s beauty. Gregory writes, “There is no limit to the operation of love, since the beautiful has no limit, so that love might cease with the limit of the beautiful” (81). Rowan Williams summarizes Gregory’s logic, writing, “The action of love has no boundary because the beautiful or good itself has no boundary: it is its nature to be loved and so it cannot ever be loved enough. Thus the purged soul moves Godwards, without impediment, eternally.”

To summarize, Gregory’s language about desire’s fulfillment and the boundlessness of God’s beauty is not inconsistent, but it is paradoxical. The soul, from one point of view, has only one ultimate desire: for God. Therefore, the soul can finally rest there with God, without recourse to memory or hope. Nevertheless, there is a distinction between God’s nature and human nature; God’s nature is endless beauty and boundless love. To whatever degree the soul and the senses participate in eternity, they are enabled to do so because the soul and the senses are fulfilled by God’s nature; the soul and the senses, then, are not absorbed into God.

When the soul is fulfilled by God’s nature, the soul itself is beautified. Gregory emphasizes that certain impulses such as anger and fear become attached to the soul from the outside “because no such mark appears on the archetypal beauty” (55). Later he writes that human nature “at the resurrection will spring up again in the archetypal beauty” (119). Furthermore, even the body in the resurrection is restored and specifically transformed into a more beautiful state; Gregory writes that the resurrection body will be “woven again from the same elements, not indeed with its present coarse and heavy

107 Gregory’s description of the soul’s fulfillment – rather than its absorption – is also consistent with Rowan Williams’ interpretation of Life of Moses in his The Wound of Knowledge when he writes, “Gregory leaves no room for any ‘absorption mysticism’” (63).
texture, but with the thread respun into something subtler and lighter, so that the beloved body may be with you and be restored to you again in better and even more lovable beauty” (88). If the body is resurrected as “something subtler and lighter,” this raises the question of how much consistency there is between the earthly body and the eternal or resurrected body. This question of consistency between the “two” bodies relates to what perhaps should be termed Gregory’s distinction between kataphatic and apophatic knowledge.108

Two contemporary, Anglican theologians have raised the question of gender in relation to the soul and the body in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Rowan Williams writes, “Gregory clearly sees the soul as essentially without gender, acquiring sexual differentiation only because of God’s pre-vision of the Fall.”109 Sarah Coakley emphasizes that in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* Gregory takes the part of the passions and Macrina takes the part of rational asceticism.110 Coakley concludes, “the ‘submission’ to which Gregory gives his body is a submission of ‘desire’ in which gender binaries are curiously upended, and the self at its deepest level transformed and empowered by the divine.”111 All of this emphasizes that the interpreter needs to be very careful in making specific assumptions about what Gregory literally means by the terms ‘desire’ and ‘beauty.’ These terms, as is the case with so many terms within the entire book, should not be literalized so as to reflect only earthly (or cultural) depictions. Creation and life are capable of only limited analogies with eternity and the soul’s

108 See below for the section entitled, “Apohatic ‘Knowledge’ of the Resurrection: ‘something subtler and lighter.’”
110 Coakley, Powers, 165.
111 Coakley, Powers, 167.
journey into God; thus, knowledge is limited and includes both apophatic and kataphatic dimensions.

Apophatic ‘Knowledge’ of the Resurrection: “something subtler and lighter”

In a significant passage on the resurrection, Gregory writes that the resurrected body will be unlike the present body because it will be “respun into something subtler and lighter, so that the beloved body may be with you and be restored to you again in better and even more lovable beauty” (88). Gregory’s distinction between the earthly body and the resurrected body highlights the distinction between kataphatic and apophatic knowledge. Clearly, elements of Gregory’s theology in general and in On the Soul and the Resurrection are kataphatic, using a broad, rich range of images to describe the soul’s relationship with God; here the image of “the beloved body” is an example.

Nevertheless, Gregory emphasizes that there is only so much that can be said or thought about the deepest mysteries of the faith; the most he can write is that the resurrection body will be analogous to “something subtler and lighter.”

Gregory’s use of analogy adds a critical dimension to Gregory’s theology of the resurrection. Many – if not all – of the images of the Christian faith and the spiritual life should not be ‘literalized,’ and neither should earthly life be accepted as the way ‘life’ will always be. Gregory cites the example of important bodily and material necessities, writing, “there are many things in which we participate, such as time, air, place, food and drink, clothing, sun, lamplight, and many other necessities of life, of which none is God. The blessedness which we await, however, does not need any of these . . . .” (86). This

112 For a succinct summary of the distinction between the kataphatic and apophatic in the history of theology and spirituality, see Julia Gatta’s The Pastoral Art of the English Mystics (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 91-95. Gatta highlights Gregory of Nyssa as an important figure in the development of apophatic prayer and theology.
passage exemplifies apophatic knowledge of the resurrection; it is essentially counsel from Gregory that it is necessary to abandon certain images of what is necessary on earth when the resurrection and eternity are being described or imagined.

Gregory’s emphasis upon the difference between the earthly body and the resurrected body reaches a crescendo in the final chapter, “The Soul and the Resurrection.” Here Gregory adds to the category of earthly necessities that will be unnecessary in the resurrection, earthly necessities that are “irrational” (114). He lists in this category “sexual intercourse, conception, childbearing, dirt, lactation, nourishment, evacuation, gradual growth to maturity, the prime of life, old age, disease, and death” (114). Gregory goes on to write, “For if bodies with their changeable nature become shriveled or robust, wasted or plump, or any other shape, what does this have to do with that life, which is separated from the changing and transitory course of this life?” (115). Gregory’s understanding of the soul and the resurrection leads to a critique of the ‘necessary’ and to questioning of the permanence of certain aspects of the senses in relation to the soul. Thus, the most that Gregory can do is describe what the resurrection body will not be or what it will not necessarily include.

It must be kept in mind, however, that Gregory’s critique of earthly necessities stands alongside his insistence that these necessities are truly necessary within earthly life; again, the soul is united to the senses, unable to transcend them. Indeed, Rowan Williams has written that this is one of Gregory’s unique contributions to theology: “The soul’s growth in tandem with the body’s thus recapitulates the history of the material-animal creation as a whole – life-giving energy gradually coming to free
consciousness.” Thus, to summarize, Gregory holds in tension the soul’s real
dependence upon material and bodily necessities (creation) with the soul’s apophatic
knowledge of what is actually necessary for the resurrected body.

Furthermore, Gregory’s critique of necessary life is rooted in his belief in the reality of
evil. Evil affects creative life, and thus part of the purpose of resurrection is to rid evil
from the body and creation. Gregory attempts to define evil, writing, “But nothing is
outside It, except evil only, which (paradoxical though this may be), has its being in non-
being; for there is no other origin of evil but the deprivation of being” (79). Thus, evil is
known only in relationship with what is good.

In what is perhaps a part of his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:28, Gregory writes,
“He who becomes all will also be in all. In this the apostle seems to me to teach the
complete annihilation of evil” (87). This passage is typical of many others that describe
God overcoming evil within the body and creation. The problem at times with bodily and
material necessities is that they are affected by evil.

The reality of evil is related to another dimension of Gregory’s interpretation of the
fire of Hades; it purifies all human persons, including the believer. Gregory writes in the
final sentence of the book,

So when such things are cleansed and purified away by the treatment through fire,
each of the better qualities will enter in their place: incorruptibility, life, honor,
 grace, glory, power, and whatever else of this kind we recognize in God Himself
and in His image, which is our human nature (121).

Gregory is able to go only a little beyond his earlier description of what the resurrection
of the soul is not; nonetheless, his theology of the soul and the resurrection depends upon
both kataphatic and apophatic knowledge.

113 Williams, “Macrina’s Deathbed,” 240.
It is this emphasis upon the kataphatic, then, that leads Gregory to question overly literal depictions of the resurrection. What kind of body is the resurrection body? The resurrection body is not like the earthly one, but nonetheless recognizable as a body because it is the restoration of human nature. In the resurrection, then, there is a tension between continuity and discontinuity; specifically, the resurrection body is the continuation of a restored human nature but the resurrection body is discontinuous in the sense that it does not include all that was necessary for the soul’s existence on earth. Returning to Gregory’s image, the resurrected body is “something subtler and lighter” (88).
Chapter Five

Turned into the Dark Image of God

Through a profusion of metaphors and rich imagery, Gregory of Nyssa’s works of spiritual theology describe a God who both creates and completes human desire. God’s fulfillment of human desire reaches a high point when human beings are transformed into the divine image, that is, when they become what they see of God in Christ. For Gregory, the theme of beauty is intrinsic to this transformation. God, who is both the source of beauty and true beauty in and of itself, elicits human desire for the beautiful. To be human is to desire the beauty of God. As human beings reach the vision of God as true beauty, human beings are transformed progressively into the image or likeness of the divine beauty.

For Gregory, the image of God is a paradoxical image because it includes both light and darkness, the known and the unknown. Urban Holmes writes in *A History of Christian Spirituality* about the vision of God in Gregory, “For the first time the image of darkness takes on real meaning. God is utterly ineffable and so is present in the darkness of humanity’s mind.”114 *Life of Moses* is the classic example of the importance of darkness for Gregory.

Image, then, is a complex idea for Gregory and should not be reduced to what is literally seen or known about God. Furthermore, Rowan Williams in *The Wound of Knowledge* notes the significant place that Gregory creates for history and biography as the context of the spiritual life: the *eikon* of Christ takes shape within human history and time. For Williams, Patristic theology in general and Gregory in particular represent a

breakthrough of a theological recognition and affirmation of the role of history in shaping what it means to be human.

From Paul to Gregory of Nyssa: 2 Corinthians 3:18

From one point of view, Gregory of Nyssa’s spiritual theology is a logical, extended development of Paul’s theological vision as summarized in 2 Corinthians 3:18. This verse is, of course, much more then a summary of Paul’s theological vision; it is a part of a discourse between Paul and a particular church at Corinth. This observation in and of itself is a crucial reminder that for Paul theology and life in Christ are inseparable; indeed, his second letter is addressed to an actual church, not an idealized or abstract church. Furthermore, it is the case that for Paul theology and spirituality are inseparable. For example, Romans 8:26-27 is a classic illustration that Paul cannot describe the Spirit without simultaneously describing the saints’ life of prayer. Patristic theologians in general and Gregory of Nyssa in particular build upon these connections: theology and prayer, vision and actual life are united. 2 Corinthians 3:18 also needs to be interpreted in light of Paul’s theme that the church is the Body of Christ.\textsuperscript{115} Because the church is the Body of Christ, there remains an actual and visible \textit{eikon} of Christ in the world.

For Gregory, Paul’s use of the Greek terms \textit{metamorphao} and \textit{eikon} in 2 Corinthians 3:18 is highly significant. Paul writes in this verse, “\textit{ἡμεῖς δὲ πάντες ἀνακεκαλυμμένοι προσώπῃ τὴν δόξαν κυρίου κατοπτριζόμενοι τὴν αὐτήν εἰκόνα μεταμορφοῦμεθα ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν καθάπερ ἀπὸ κυρίου πνεύματος.”\textsuperscript{116} The Greek term \textit{eikon} has an important place in the New Testament. \textit{A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament}

\textsuperscript{115} See especially I Corinthians 12:12-31.
*and Other Early Christian Literature* cites three different definitions of the term and cites passages from Paul to illustrate two of the definitions. The second definition cites I Corinthians 11:7, 2 Corinthians 4:4, Colossians 1:15, and I Corinthians 15:49 as illustrations of one meaning of the term *eikon*, “that which has the same form as something else.” Furthermore, the third definition cites Romans 1:23, Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Hebrews 10:1, and Colossians 3:10 as illustrations of another layer of meaning in the term *eikon*, “that which represents something else in terms of basic form and features.” Thus, *eikon* is an important Greek term for Paul, and it is in part from Paul that Gregory of Nyssa comes to emphasize the importance of the vision of the image of God in the spiritual life.

In defining *metamorphao*, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* cites 2 Corinthians 3:18 as one of two biblical citations (Romans 12:2 being the other) in which this Greek verb can be defined as “to change inwardly in fundamental character or condition, be changed, be transformed.” In light of 2 Corinthians 3:18, “Christians progressively take on the perfection of Jesus Christ through the Spirit’s operation.” In 2 Corinthians 3:18, then, the Church is transformed progressively via the Spirit into the *eikon* of Jesus Christ, and thus the Church becomes the *eikon*, too.

In what is a possible allusion to 2 Corinthians 3:18, Gregory writes in *On Virginity* that the Holy Spirit raises a person’s soul to the heavens, thus making it possible for “the man to find that which is alone worth loving, and to become as beautiful as the Beauty

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which he has touched and entered, and to be made as bright and luminous himself in the
communion of real Light."

Although 2 Corinthians is not cited in this passage, Gregory’s understanding of transformation here is consistent with and possibly based upon Paul’s words for a very similar transformation in the eikon of Christ. Gregory

describes the eikon in this passage from On Virginity as “real Light.” Thus, eikon here is not literally described as Christ, but as light. Furthermore, this passage from On Virginity is not unique; indeed, the passage is consistent with many other passages from the treatise that describe the divine image as light. The spiritual man, then, becomes “bright and
luminous” like the divine image.

Nevertheless, the eikon of Christ should not be reduced to a literal image or to visual representation alone. The apophatic dimension of the eikon for Gregory of Nyssa needs to be explored as well, especially since this apophatic dimension affects the spiritual life. Again, Gregory emphasizes that darkness – in addition to light – is a significant aspect of the divine image.

In a similar vein, Gregory’s Commentary on the Song of Songs also demonstrates the importance of the transformation of the human into the divine. Martin Laird in his essay “The Fountain of His Lips: Desire and Divine Union in Gregory of Nyssa’s Homilies on the Song of Songs” observes that Gregory establishes a pattern by which the bride is united with the bridegroom and transformed into his likeness. Laird writes, “When the bridegroom kisses the bride with the fountain of his lips, she herself becomes a fountain. When the arrow of divine love wounds her, she herself becomes an arrow, shot forth even

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121 Gregory of Nyssa, Virginity, 356.
122 Furthermore, light and beauty are closely connected in On Virginity.
123 See below: “The Apophatic Dimension of the Eikon of Christ.”
while at rest in the arms of the beloved."¹²⁴ Martin’s observation reveals the dynamism involved in Gregory’s theme of union: the bride is not only united with the groom, but is transformed into the image of the groom as well. Thus, the bride is transformed into the image she desires.

Commenting upon this very theme of transformation, Richard Norris in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* summarizes, “The human project, then, is restoration of the divine image, the return of humanity, intelligible and perceptible, to its original identity.”¹²⁵ Transformation of the human into the divine image is actually restoration, of course, because humanity was created in the divine image according to the Bible in general and the book of Genesis in particular. Thus, Gregory of Nyssa links the Incarnation of Jesus Christ with creation in general.

Related to the theme of transformation into the divine image, Richard Norris in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* also notes that the significance of the image of a mirror in Gregory’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Norris writes that Gregory’s Commentary on the Song of Songs certainly takes into account 2 Corinthians 3:18.¹²⁶ Thus, the image of a mirror is important for Gregory; Norris writes,

This metaphor of the mirror is frequent, needless to say, in the *Homilies*, and when examined closely it conveys one or two essential elements in Gregory’s understanding of the image idea. For one thing, of course, it indicates that the image, while a reproduction of its original, does not normally count as another instance of its original. An image reproduces its original *in another medium*, such as in the form of a reflection on the surface of glass or in that of a portrait painted on wood or canvas. In the case of αὐθεντικός that God summoned into existence (Gen 1:26-27), the image takes form in a created and mutable nature and not that of uncreated Deity. Further, and just as important, the human mirror conveys an image of its original only and when it is ‘looking to’ its original.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Norris, *Gregory*, xxiv.
¹²⁶ Norris, *Gregory*, xxiv.
¹²⁷ Norris, *Gregory*, xxiv.
Norris’ words here are significant not only in terms of highlighting the theme of restoration of the divine image in relation to the metaphor of image, but even more so in terms of describing the manner of this restoration. Humanity is transformed into the image of the divine, but this transformation is not literal; that is, there remains a separation between divine nature and human nature. Nature (and thus human history and context) is not obliterated in the process.128

Gregory’s *On the Soul and the Resurrection* also illustrates the theme of transformation with dynamism and richness. Gregory writes that human nature “at the resurrection will spring up again in the archetypal beauty.”129 The connection between beauty and light is seen in a similar passage in which Gregory attempts to describe the resurrection body, writing that it will be recreated “from the same elements, not indeed with its present coarse and heavy texture, but with the thread respun into something subtler and lighter, so that the beloved body may be with you and be restored to you again in better and even more lovable beauty.”130 Both of these passages are representative of the whole of *On Soul and the Resurrection*. The unique contribution of *On the Soul and the Resurrection* in light of all of Gregory’s writings is that it is his attempt to describe resurrection – not only the spiritual life of humanity – as a *post mortem* continuation of human transformation into the divine image of light and beauty. Resurrection as transformation into the divine image is, in one sense, continuous with the spiritual life in general.

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128 The importance of nature and history for Gregory is also highlighted and discussed in detail by Rowan Williams in *The Wound of Knowledge*. See below: “The Importance of History and Biography: Rowan Williams’ Observation.”


Gregory’s *Life of Moses* is also consistent with this pattern: humanity is progressively transformed into the divine image through virtue and ascent into spiritual darkness. Although darkness becomes the dominant ‘image’ for the soul’s journey into God’s presence, the journey remains a gradual transformation into the divine image. Gregory writes in a passage that is typical of many others in *Life of Moses*, “This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more.” As with his other works, Gregory does not literally refer to 2 Corinthians 3:18, but Gregory’s logic and imagery are consistent with Paul’s verse. The *eikon* (God, not Christ) is infinitely desirable.

As humanity desires the image of God, humanity is simultaneously transformed into the divine image; thus, *Life of Moses* is consistent with the whole of 2 Corinthians 3:18. For example, Gregory writes in an important passage near the end of the book,

For he who has truly come to be in the image of God and who has in no way turned aside from the divine character bears in himself the distinguishing marks and shows in all things his conformity to the archetype; he beautifies his own soul with what is incorruptible, unchangeable, and shares in no evil at all.

Beauty here is linked with desire and visibility; the divine *eikon*, then, affects the one who sees it. The effect is so profound that certain human beings become iconic (like God). Gregory describes Moses as a “pattern of beauty” that is to be copied and imitated by the one who seeks virtue.

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The Apophatic Dimension of the *Eikon* of Christ

Nevertheless, the divine *eikon* is described as a kind of darkness. Light and beauty are not the only characteristics of God. As the soul progresses, darkness – perhaps even more so than light – becomes a sign that God’s presence is near. The mind’s lack of clarity also becomes another dimension or part of the transformation of a person into the divine image.

Gregory’s *Life of Moses* is the classic text and example of his apophatic spiritual theology. Literally, the soul, in imitation of Moses, proceeds up the mountain only to find that darkness – rather than light – is the time of encounter with the divine. For all of his emphasis upon rich imagery and light, Gregory concludes in *Life of Moses*, “The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind.”

This passage, found in a section titled “The Mountain of Divine Knowledge,” is typical of the book. Darkness is a greater kind of knowledge than light when the soul ascends into God’s presence.

In the section entitled “Darkness,” Gregory describes the reason darkness is a climax: “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.” The darkness, then, is a theological darkness and not necessarily a literal darkness. Darkness is in part Gregory’s way of emphasizing that knowledge of God is on one level completely unlike ordinary knowledge. Thus, the darkness emphasizes God’s transcendence, as when Gregory writes, “Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says,

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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.

As is so often the case with Gregory, he uses paradoxical language to describe the darkness as "luminous." The "luminous darkness" on the one hand emphasizes God's transcendence of sense perception; on the other hand, this term communicates that the darkness remains nonetheless a unique form of vision.

Gregory's Commentary on the Song of Songs is not only characterized by rich language and sexual imagery, but it also contains a similar emphasis upon the importance of apophatic knowledge of God. Regarding this point, Mark McIntosh writes in Mystical Theology about Gregory's Commentary on the Song of Songs:

Danielou has catalogued the various ways in which Gregory of Nyssa depicts this experience of God's infinity: darkening of the intelligence, images of inebriation, vertigo, dizziness – all point to "the soul's complete confusion in the presence of a reality for which there is no common measure".

The union of lover and beloved, as a symbol of the divine and human union in Christ, reaches such an ineffable climax that Gregory can only describe this union through a range of metaphors emphasizing human confusion and delight in the presence of a mystery. McIntosh concludes succinctly regarding apophatic knowledge in the Commentary on the Song of Songs, "So in Gregory's view, a sense of unknowing and unclarity are the vital hallmarks of authentic knowledge of God."

One of the most important passages in On the Soul and the Resurrection is a description of apophatic knowledge of the resurrection body. Gregory writes,

In the same manner the human nature also, when it abandons to death all the properties which it acquired through the state of subjection to passion (I mean

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137 Gregory of Nyssa, Life, II, 163.
138 McIntosh, Mystical, 201.
139 McIntosh, Mystical, 201.
dishonor, corruption, weakness, differences of age), does not abandon itself. Instead, as if ripening into an ear, it changes into incorruptibility, glory, honor, power, and every kind of perfection.¹⁴⁰

This passage is typical of the entire work in that Gregory often emphasizes that the nature of the resurrection body is largely unknown; that is, the resurrection body of eternity will in some significant ways differ from the natural body of earth. Therefore, apophatic knowledge in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* serves a practical purpose, because it helps Gregory to warn believers against both too literal depictions of the resurrection body and too simplistic assumptions that the resurrection body will be simply a kind of eternal continuation of the earthly body.

With regard to the resurrection, then, apophatic knowledge instills humility and restraint as necessary spiritual gifts that support faith in the doctrine of the resurrection. In this sense, apophatic knowledge relates to God’s nature; it also relates to the limitation of human knowledge in general and knowledge of the details of eternal life in particular.

*On Virginity* also emphasizes apophatic knowledge. As is the case with *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, apophatic knowledge is necessary for two reasons: the nature of God’s presence and the limitations of human knowledge in general. Gregory describes the nature of God with several different images, but he stresses two images: God is “true Beauty” and “real Light.”¹⁴¹ However, Gregory emphasizes that these two images for God – as well as all images for God – need to be balanced by apophatic knowledge. Among the many examples of apophatic knowledge found in *On Virginity*, Gregory writes that God’s beauty is “invisible” and God’s nature is “simple, immaterial,

formless.”¹⁴² Gregory, then, is careful to balance his own rich imagery for God with an equal insistence upon God’s transcendence. God’s beauty and light are not synonymous with human beauty and natural light, according to Gregory.

Yet apophatic language is necessary for a second reason. The human mind struggles to comprehend divine reality; it also struggles to comprehend reality in general. Gregory writes, “But the penetrating and scientific mind will not trust to the eyes alone the task of taking the measure of reality; it will not stop at appearances, nor count that which is not seen amongst unrealities.”¹⁴³ Physical appearance – especially the physical appearance of a person, Gregory emphasizes¹⁴⁴ – communicates only a fraction of what can be known spiritually. Thus, apophatic knowledge in On Virginity also serves a practical purpose, allowing Gregory to advise his readers to use restraint when viewing objects and people and allowing him to encourage a greater awareness that a clear vision of reality needs to be informed by both physical and spiritual perspectives.

In summary, apophatic knowledge is highly significant for Gregory. Paul’s language of the eikon in 2 Corinthians 3:18, then, is developed by Gregory. For Gregory, the eikon of Christ includes light and darkness; thus, human knowledge needs to include these two different but complementary sources of information: the kataphatic and the apophatic. Furthermore, apophatic knowledge stems both from knowledge of God (who is transcendent) and from the limitations of human knowing in general. Thus, apophatic knowledge is a form of human knowledge in general. Gregory understands that human knowledge of any kind needs to be balanced by the awareness of its limitations in terms of vision and conceptions. There is more to reality than meets the eye, and there is more

¹⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, Virginity, 355.
¹⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa, Virginity, 355.
¹⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, Virginity, 355.
to reality than can be put into words. In this sense, Gregory’s spiritual theology contains a highly developed epistemology.  

Mark McIntosh in *Mystical Theology* notes that apophatic knowledge is a necessary element in truly human life; he summarizes,

What is crucial to note here is that in this apophatic tradition there is absolutely no sense in which a full divine presence diminishes or subverts the fully authentic humanity of the individual. Quite the reverse. The ever-fuller intimacy of the divine presence to the soul draws the soul beyond the usual limits, stretches it to the fullest and highest extent of human existence.

Thus, McIntosh notes the complex way in which for Gregory the darkening of the mind (or the apophatic way) is entry even deeper into Christ’s humanity (and humanity in general); the apophatic, then, is a dimension of ‘ordinary’ humanity, rather than its diminution or denial.

The Importance of History and Biography: Rowan Williams’ Observation

Gregory’s spiritual theology, however, is much more than a commentary on 2 Corinthians 3:18. Additionally, Gregory’s emphasis that humanity is transformed into the divine image represents a highly developed theological and spiritual anthropalogy.

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145 Related to Gregory’s epistemology and his emphasis on the apophatic, Sarah Coakley makes a significant point in *Powers and Submissions* regarding Gregory’s trinitarian language and human language in general, writing, “A strongly apophatic sensibility attends any talk of the ‘essence’ of God. This point is reiterated constantly even in the more philosophic and apologetic writings we have so far been covering. But if we turn now to the fascinating, and correlated, account of the effects of trinitarian incorporation in Gregory’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, we find a wealth of discussions of the dark ‘incomprehensibility’ of the divine nature. It is as well to remember that the whole life-work of ‘ascent’ in Gregory culminates in noetic darkness, as did Moses’ ascent of Mt. Sinai, and we cannot afford to ignore this epistemological complication when considering Gregory’s account of the Trinity. Again, it should give us pause when pronouncing on the effectiveness, or otherwise, of particular dominating models for the Trinity. In the *Song* it is the haunting image of the ‘hand of the bridegroom’, reaching out to draw us into darkness, that reminds us of the deep impossibility of circumscribing the divine ‘essence’ in intellectual terms: ‘My beloved has put his hand through the hole of the door.’ Human nature is not able to contain the infinite, unbounded nature” (122).

146 McIntosh, *Mystical*, 205.
Gregory is reworking philosophical assumptions about human development in light of theology and the spiritual life.

Specifically, Rowan Williams in *Wound of Knowledge* views Gregory's spiritual theology as a profound revision of aspects of Greek anthropology. Williams writes, “To see, as Gregory does, the nature of humanity as characterized by longing is itself an important statement about humanity.”¹⁴⁷ In particular, *On Virginity, Commentary on the Song of Songs*, *Life of Moses*, and *On the Soul and the Resurrection* emphasize desire as a significant characteristic of human life. The range and confusion of human desire also reveal the potential conflict between desire for God and desire for worldly acquisitions. Gregory emphasizes the potential conflict between desire for God and desire for sensual pleasure alone in *On Virginity*.

Although writing about Gregory's work in general, Williams' point about Gregory's image of human nature is related to the potential conflict between human desires. Williams writes, “Human nature is seen as essentially restless, precarious, mobile and variegated, because of its orientation towards a reality outside itself.”¹⁴⁸ Williams' rich language describes the complex interaction between human nature and divine nature.

Williams notes that Gregory's theme of desire is related to his use of the term image or *eikon* (in the original Greek), writing,

Put this side by side with the familiar Greek Christian distinction between 'image' and 'likeness' of God in humanity, the possibility and the actuality of communion with God, and it is very clear that a consistent and powerful understanding of humanity emerges from the thought of the Greek Fathers.¹⁴⁹

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Williams here is writing about the Patristic authors in general and Gregory of Nyssa in particular. Gregory is a major contributor to the theme within Patristic spiritual theology that human desire is realized and fulfilled in communion with God, and that this union transforms the human into the likeness of the divine.

History, therefore, is recognized as the context of the spiritual life. Williams writes, “The movement of history and of biography is made possible and meaningful by its reference to God who meets us in history, yet extends beyond it – is always, so to speak, ahead of it.” In other words, the spiritual life is not an abstraction; it is discerned alongside the ‘natural’ dimensions of humanity. To summarize, the spiritual and natural dimensions of human life are distinguishable but inseparable. Thus, discernment is a vitally important virtue.

The importance of history for Gregory is the background for his implicit use of Paul’s language in 2 Corinthians 3:18. For Gregory the transformation of humanity into the dark image of God takes place within human history. A Christ-like eikon emerges, but this eikon is not an abstraction or an idealized image because it is shaped within the material world and time. In Rowan Williams’ language, the eikon is witnessed in the context of biography.

150 Williams, Wound, 66.
151 Williams’ emphasis here upon the role of history and time in the spiritual life is consistent with his emphasis in On Christian Theology upon both the role of history within the scriptures and the role of the interpreter’s own history (see especially pages 52-53). Furthermore, Williams also notes in On Christian Theology that both the sacraments and apophatic prayer should be viewed in light of history, writing, “We do not encounter God in the displacement of the world we live in, the suspension of our bodily and historical nature. There is indeed a sense in which we meet God in emptiness and silence, in the void of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, in the darkening of sense and spirit in prayer; but we should not allow the weighty and important language of ‘God at work in our nothingness’ to deceive us into thinking that Good Friday is not history or that the soul in the night of contemplation ceases to be bound up in its material creaturehood. God acts in emptiness by bringing resurrection and transforming union, not by lifting us to ‘another world’ (207). See Rowan Williams, On Christian Theology (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).
In light of Gregory’s view of the connection between history and God’s presence within time, Williams concludes, “Here if anywhere are the foundations for a Christian account both of history and of human individuality. This is Christianity’s major revision of the philosophical assumptions of Greek antiquity.”153 Human anthropology is, then, redefined in light of spiritual theology. With Gregory, a particular picture of humanity comes into focus, and this picture is the image of God within history.

153 Williams, Wound, 66.
Conclusion

Trinitarian Language and the Use of Analogy

Although Gregory’s *On Virginity*, *Life of Moses*, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, and *On the Soul and the Resurrection* are not purely dogmatic works, all four books demonstrate Gregory’s important place within Patristic theology. Each of these works displays Gregory’s use of a vast array of images and descriptions for the spiritual life. Taken as a whole, they reveal Gregory’s emphasis upon the range and potential of analogy as a form of theological language. Human language must make use of a dizzying array of analogies drawn from creation because the spiritual life is such that it can and must be described in countless different ways. This is one of the great paradoxes of Patristic theology in general and Gregory of Nyssa in particular: doctrine both limits the Church’s language and sets it free to explore via analogy the hidden depths of God’s being.

All four books also demonstrate Gregory’s appreciation of spiritual practice. The spiritual life is much more than the development of language for God; language actually grows and flowers in tandem with sustained spiritual practices. On the one hand, Gregory of Nyssa as a bishop and a theologian made significant contributions to the victory of Nicene orthodoxy over the forms of Arianism. On the other hand, as Williams notes in *The Wound of Knowledge*, Gregory and his brother Basil of Caesarea, “the authors of the major replies to Eunomius, were both deeply involved with the monastic movement, and in their work we may see again the close connection between

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154 Danielou notes Gregory’s presence at the Council of Constantinople in 381 in his “Introduction” to *From Glory to Glory*, writing, “The Council, in which Gregory played such an important role, was to result in a complete victory for the ideas for which Basil and Gregory had fought both on the theological and the ecclesiastical level” (6).
theological positions and forms of Christian life."155 One significant example of this close connection between theology and practice is Gregory’s *On Virginity*, a rich, detailed description of both the differences and the similarities of celibacy and marriage. Another important example of this connection is Gregory’s *Life of Moses*, which is apparently written in response to Ceasarius’s request for guidance in the life of virtue.156 Theology for Gregory, then, is not only a discourse upon the nature of God; theology is also reflection upon actual practices that communicate something about God’s will and purpose. Theology is to be practiced and prayed in a variety of ways.

In order to emphasize that humanity cannot comprehend completely the spiritual life and the divine nature, Gregory uses the analogy of darkness to describe the context for the soul’s journey into the presence of God. In the darkness of God’s presence, the soul ceases to imagine or represent God as an object. Thus, the darkness serves to emphasize both God’s transcendence and the limitations of human imagination and language. Gregory’s analogy of darkness is also consistent with his insistence that no one analogy is capable of completely revealing the nature of God. Because the darkness reveals that knowledge of God is incomplete, language for God and analogies are never perfect. Thus, in addition to a time for silence and the abandonment of images (the apophatic), there is also the potential for discovery of more analogies for the spiritual life. In this sense, Gregory’s emphasis upon darkness complements – rather than contradicts – his equal emphasis upon a range of analogies and images drawn from creation for the spiritual life, not the least of which is his understanding that erotic desire is a reflection of spiritual desire.

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Gregory of Nyssa’s spiritual theology sets the stage for important developments in the history of theology. Perhaps most importantly, Augustine’s writings in the fifth-century need to be read in light of a conversation that Gregory began. Furthermore, in the East, Gregory Palamas, the fourteenth-century monk and archbishop of Thessalonika, recovers some of the important themes from Gregory, including the image of darkness. In the eighteenth-century, John Wesley retrieves Gregory of Nyssa as an important source for his understanding of perfection and sanctification. Finally, in the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century, Anglican spiritual theology recovers Gregory of Nyssa as a significant resource, especially with regard to the vexing question of desire in the contemporary world.

Trinitarian Language and the Use of Analogy: A Paradox

In what is a succinct summary of the Trinitarian language of the Cappadocians in general and Gregory of Nyssa in particular, Mark Mcintosh writes in *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology*:

All we are permitted to say, in their view, is that God is one, unitary, and that this divine life exists as the never-ending communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We may squabble over the best terminology to employ for oneness (*ousia*, essence, substance, etc.) and for the relationality of that divine life (Persons in relation, hypostases, subsistences, *prosopsia*, etc.), but we have to recall that we are really just constructing a grammar for talking about the ineffable: for trying to say something about what God alone can say of Godself in Christ and the Spirit. And that means that if we are not simply and tediously to repeat various formulae (one essence, three Persons), we have to allow God to draw us contemplatively into the interplay of divine life.

There is, then, within Gregory’s spiritual theology a creative balance between precision


with regard to language for the Trinity and humility with regard to the range of meaning that may be drawn from his analogies for the spiritual life.

This balance is absolutely necessary because of the nature of God, who is indescribable. McIntosh expresses God’s transcendence with the creative image that theology is the attempt “to say something about what God alone can say of Godself in Christ and the Spirit.” Trinitarian language, then, is first and foremost God’s communication through his Word in the power of the Spirit. In other words, Trinitarian language itself depends upon a stark distinction between divine communication and human communication: God alone communicates God’s self. The great image for this is the Incarnation, God’s Word spoken intimately in the form of Jesus’ life. In this sense, doctrinal (or creedal) language is best understood as setting the boundaries around the various ways in which the Church will continue thinking about and worshipping the Triune God. The Church’s language is limited or defined by Trinitarian language. Furthermore, doctrinal language for the Trinity should not be categorized as analogical or metaphorical. Because only God can communicate God’s self, Trinitarian language is spoken by God in the sense that the language describes divine persons (not simply ideas or propositions). Again, the image for this divine communication in human terms is the Word made flesh. In other words, Trinitarian language is God’s communication to humanity, not merely humanity’s communication about God.

Nevertheless, a paradox emerges within Patristic theology: doctrinal language guarantees the ongoing development of religious discourse rather than its end. If God is beyond language and divine communication is the starting point, human language on its own is never able to settle once and for all in a final description of the divine life. In this
way, the doctrinal tradition creates boundaries for the Church’s language for God so that her members are able to explore the height, depth, and breadth of life and reality in union with God. This exploration takes place over time; thus, for Gregory both the role of history and the idea of a discernable biography play a decisive role in spiritual theology. From a contemporary view of the Spirit’s mission in the Church and in creation, it is important to add that this exploration also takes place in a variety of cultures and geographical settings.\(^{159}\) Returning to the importance of Paul’s imagery in 2 Corinthians 3:18, Gregory describes an actual transformation of humanity into the eikon of Christ in a variety of ways and contexts.\(^{160}\)

Therefore, Trinitarian language as developed by Patristic theologians attempted to balance the precision of doctrine with the creativity of human descriptions of the spiritual life. Williams in *On Christian Theology* makes a similar point, writing,

> What the early Church condemned as heresy was commonly a tidy version of its language, in which the losses were adjudged too severe for comfort – or rather (since ‘comfort’ can’t be quite the right word here), in which the losses were adjudged to distort or to limit the range of reference of religious speech.\(^{161}\)

The precision of doctrinal language is such that it, paradoxically, safeguards a range of creative interpretation with regard to future interpretations of the language. Yes, the Trinity is first and foremost God’s self-communication, but Trinitarian language actually

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\(^{159}\) Robert Hughes in *Beloved Dust* develops this point with a summary regarding the Spirit’s mission across cultures and creation: “At Pentecost, the Spirit rests on the newly forming ecclesial body of the Word/Wisdom, and the superfluous, gratuitous surprise is that this new body under the renewed covenant contains the unclean, the gentiles, thus making it a missionary society from the beginning. Throughout the remaining time, the Spirit continues to rest on that body but also nourishes it and all its individual members by resting on the sacramental body, as the source of all sacramental grace. This takes place as the Spirit pursues her own mission of consecrating the entire cosmic *pleroma* in its perfect fulfillment as the sum of all individual fulfillments and more, resolving the ambiguities of life and history in the fullness of God’s perfect commonwealth of justice, peace, and love” (48).

\(^{160}\) Gregory’s *On Virginity* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection* are key texts in this regard, because they display what might be seen as Gregory’s pastoral sensibility. In both texts, he cites many examples of the way in which context (and basic human emotion) affects a person’s view of God in Christ.

\(^{161}\) Williams, *Theology*, xii-xiii.
makes possible an expansion of human communication. By acknowledging that language is incapable of capturing God, doctrine guarantees that the human attempt to describe God will never end. The endlessness of human communication is the result of God’s nature, which is ineffable. Thus, knowledge of God’s transcendence is expressed through apophatic ‘knowledge.’ However, God’s transcendence also reinforces the sense that there is no final description or analogy for God, thereby opening theology to a range of potential analogies for the spiritual life. Again, Gregory manages to balance the exactitude of Trinitarian language alongside a profusion of analogies and images for life in God.

It is important to supplement Williams’ words about religious speech with equal emphasis upon spiritual practice, especially when the subject is Gregory of Nyssa. In addition to rich language and imagery, Gregory of Nyssa shows a remarkable appreciation for a range of practices which are capable of communicating something of the divine life. For example, Gregory’s treatise On Virginity emphasizes both the contradictions and the similarities between two different spiritual practices: celibacy and marriage, virginity and sexual union. Although celibacy and marriage are two very different means of life, they are means to the same end: “spiritual union” with God.\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, Virginity, 366.}\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, Virginity, 353.} Gregory writes that the goal is to become a “God-lover” rather than a “Pleasure-lover.” God, then, is both the source and the telos of all human desire. In summary, Gregory appreciates that both of these ‘opposites’ are dependent ultimately upon union with God for fulfillment, meaning, and purpose.
Furthermore, *On Virginity* is Gregory's treatise on spiritual vision in general: "But the penetrating and scientific mind will not trust to eyes alone the task of taking the measure of reality; it will not stop at appearances, not count that which is not seen amongst unrealities."\(^\text{164}\) Just as celibacy and marriage are dependent upon spiritual union with God, so, too, humanity's vision of reality needs to be informed by spiritual perception. In this sense, Gregory counsels the cultivation of desire for the spiritual meaning hidden within all physical appearances, whether the appearance of one's spouse or the appearance any material object. In summary, erotic desire is one of Gregory's favorite analogies for spiritual desire and vision.

*Life of Moses* is also consistent with Gregory's appreciation of the range of spiritual practices and analogies for the spiritual life. At the book's conclusion, Gregory addresses Caesarius, whose request for guidance in the virtuous life apparently led Gregory to write this book, and encourages him to imitate Moses: "it is time for you, noble friend, to look to that example and, by transferring to your own life what is contemplated through spiritual interpretation of the things spoken literally, to be known by God and to become his friend."\(^\text{165}\) Gregory understands that the spiritual life can be transferred and developed from one location or person to another person in a different place; the spiritual life is also transferred from the scriptures to the new context of the reader or interpreter. This understanding, of course, relates to Gregory's method of scriptural interpretation, which emphasizes not the literal details of the scriptures but their spiritual sense. He summarizes his method of interpretation with regard to Moses and other biblical characters, "Those who emulate their lives, however, cannot experience the identical

\(^{164}\) Gregory of Nyssa, *Virginity*, 355.

literal events.”

Unlike literal events in the scriptures, spiritual meaning drawn from the scriptures can be appropriated in a variety of new contexts and times. Accordingly, human language and spiritual practices will change and develop over time, even though the goal never changes: spiritual union with the Triune God. Gregory also emphasizes in Life of Moses that because God is unlimited there is therefore no limit to human desire for God; the journey into God’s presence is eternal.

Gregory also indicates that there is another, perhaps more mundane reason why human language and spiritual practice will develop over time. Gregory observes that human nature is constantly changing: “Everyone knows that anything placed in a world of change never remains the same but is always passing from one state to another, the alteration always bringing about something better or worse.” As human nature changes, so, too, does human language and custom. Related to his emphasis upon change, Gregory also understands that humanity is to a significant degree free to choose and develop. He writes, “We are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be, whether male or female, moulding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice.” Therefore, human beings are free to develop language in order to describe new contexts and conditions in addition to the need to explore the hidden depths of union with God. Gregory makes a similar point in On the Soul and the Resurrection when he writes that

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166 Gregory of Nyssa, Life, II, 49.
167 Gregory of Nyssa, Life, II, 239.
168 Gregory of Nyssa, Life, II, 2.
169 Gregory of Nyssa, Life, II, 3.
"it is characteristic of the physical body to be continuously altered from what it is and to be always changing into something different."\textsuperscript{170}

Furthermore, for Gregory doctrinal language becomes a kind of lens through which creation is viewed and vice-versa: creation itself provides a range of imperfect analogies through which the believer may ‘view’ the divine life. It is Gregory’s understanding of (and even revelry in) analogy that leads him to explore image upon image for the divine life. In what is possibly his clearest description of this approach, Gregory writes in \textit{Homilies} about the use of analogy, “But starting from certain traces and sparks, as it were, our words aim at the unknown, and from what we can grasp we make conjectures by a kind of analogy about the ungraspable.”\textsuperscript{171} These analogies are discovered within the breadth of the physical world: “the wonders visible in the universe give material for the theological terms by which we call God wise, powerful, good, holy, blessed, eternal, judge, savior and so forth.”\textsuperscript{172} Gregory’s approach to analogy here is typical of his other writings, and it explains why there is such an exhilarating range of analogies within his spiritual theology. Indeed, Gregory moves from one analogy to another at a remarkable pace, perhaps in part to emphasize that there is no single analogy that perfectly describes the spiritual life.

Gregory’s use of diverse sources for analogy is also seen in his \textit{On the Soul and the Resurrection}. Here Gregory emphasizes pagan knowledge, contemporary medical views, and basic human emotion as sources that potentially illuminate the nuances and depth of

\textsuperscript{170} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{On the Soul}, 118.  
\textsuperscript{171} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Homilies}, I:35.  
\textsuperscript{172} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Homilies}, I:35.
faith in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life.\textsuperscript{173} Furthermore, Macrina also notes that when a person observes “the cosmos in ourselves, we have found a good place to start conjecturing about what is hidden from what appears. By ‘hidden’ I mean that which escapes the observation of the senses because in itself it can be known only by the intellect and not by sight.”\textsuperscript{174} Although the cosmos does not limit the spiritual, the cosmos can illuminate the spiritual analogously.

Nevertheless, literally hanging over Gregory’s rich imagery and spiritual practice is a cloud of darkness. Although \textit{On the Soul and the Resurrection}, \textit{Homilies on the Song of Songs}, and \textit{On Virginity} all contain significant examples of apohatic ‘knowledge,’ \textit{Life of Moses} is the \textit{locus classicus} in terms of Gregory’s use of darkness as an analogy for the spiritual life. Here Gregory emphasizes, through a range of images, that darkness is the ultimate setting of God’s presence. For example, Gregory writes in a significant passage, “Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{175} In the darkness of God’s presence, images are useless. Apohatic ‘seeing’ is for Gregory the greatest form of knowledge in the spiritual life. It is also important to note that Gregory writes here that the divine essence is “unattainable” for humanity and for “every intelligent creature.” In this sense, the apohatic is not simply a form of spiritual knowledge; rather, the apohatic is a level

\textsuperscript{173} Catharine Roth in her “Introduction” to \textit{On the Soul and the Resurrection} summarizes Gregory’s approach to philosophy as follows, “In the fourth century AD, Christianity emerged from the catacombs and took its place among the spiritual and intellectual forces of the world. As the new faith spread outside its original Semitic milieu, its adherents had to come to terms with Greek ways of thinking. Some, like Tertullian, rejected pagan philosophy: ‘What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’ Others attempted to reconcile the accepted world-view of their day with the Christian revelation. Among these was Gregory of Nyssa.” See Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{On the Soul}, 7.

\textsuperscript{174} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{On the Soul}, 35.

\textsuperscript{175} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{Life}, II, 163.
of knowledge within creation itself. Again, creation itself cannot exhaust God’s nature or the spiritual life. This emphasis upon the continuum between what is true within the spiritual life and what is true within creation is typical of Gregory’s entire spiritual theology. Gregory’s spiritual theology has little room for any kind of dualism between the doctrine or spiritual practice and the physical world; both are the context for God’s action.\textsuperscript{176}

As for the relationship between the kataphatic and the apophatic, it would be simplistic to place one in competition with the other. Gregory balances both approaches, thereby highlighting that the spiritual life necessarily includes light and darkness, analogy and silence. It is this balance that makes Gregory’s spiritual theology so rich and difficult to categorize. Gregory moves from one visual image to another, all the while painstakingly reminding his audience that there is a spiritual realm that remains hidden and dark. This balance between light and darkness relates to Gregory’s balance between the precision of Trinitarian language with the broad range of human analogies that illuminate the spiritual life. In summary, humanity should never assume it has arrived at a stopping point with regard to the description of the spiritual life and its practices. Desire for spiritual vision and union with God never ends, thereby freeing language and spiritual practice to develop and deepen over time and throughout eternity.

An Addendum: From Gregory of Nyssa to Anglican Spiritual Theology

Many of Gregory of Nyssa’s themes and images from his spiritual theology are highlighted and developed in some significant ways in the history of theology. In one of

\textsuperscript{176} Ward in \textit{Cities of God} has noted this continuum with regard to the fact that there is limited explicit discussion of the Eucharist in Gregory of Nyssa’s works. Ward wonders if for Gregory “the world is a eucharistic offering?” Ward concludes, “Christ as the bread of life feeds our rational beings that we might continue to discern and desire God in all things.”
the most important ways, Augustine can be seen as the theological successor of Gregory of Nyssa. Specifically, Norris notes Gregory’s anagogical interpretation of scripture “is not inconsistent with Augustine’s opinion that exegesis must be ruled by the church’s faith (i.e., its baptismal faith, summed up in what is now called ‘creed’) and by the double love commandment.” Furthermore, Augustine’s recognition in his Confessions of the place of the erotic in relation to God is not inconsistent with Gregory’s emphasis upon erotic desire, although it must be noted that the two differ in significant ways with regard to the expression of desire. Book X of the Confessions is an especially rich, moving description of God as the ultimate desire of humanity. Williams also notes two other connections between Gregory and Augustine. First, like Gregory, Augustine understands that humanity is fulfilled (or “at home”) only with God. Second, Augustine’s emphasis upon virtue and specifically a life of charity is reminiscent of Gregory’s emphasis upon virtue.

In the East, it is important to note Gregory Palamas’ recovery of Gregory of Nyssa. Hughes in Beloved Dust writes that Palamas retrieves Gregory’s analogy of darkness as a counter-balance to his emphasis upon light in the spiritual life and the Eastern Church’s emphasis upon the Transfiguration. Williams in The Wound of Knowledge also notes the importance of Gregory as a source for Palamas, although he questions some of Palamas’s interpretations of him.

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177 Norris, Gregory, 1.
178 Coakley in Powers and Submissions notes one important difference here, observing about Gregory that “nowhere – and how interestingly contrastive is this with Augustine – does he agonize with guilt or fear about the sexual act itself” (162).
179 Williams, Wound, 80.
180 Williams, Wound, 85.
181 Hughes, Beloved, 261.
182 Williams, Wound, 64-65.
Albert C. Outler notes that Gregory of Nyssa is an important resource for John Wesley, especially with regard to Wesley’s understanding of sanctification and perfection.\(^{183}\) Holmes writes in *A History of Christian Spirituality* about Wesley, “He had a deep commitment to justification by grace through faith, but his belief in the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit lay well within the tradition of classical Christian spirituality. Salvation for Wesley was both ‘instantaneous and gradual.’”\(^{184}\) This latter emphasis upon the gradual nature of sanctification came in part from his reading of Gregory.\(^{185}\)

Wesley’s dependence upon Gregory as a resource is a precursor to later Anglican interpretations of Gregory. In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, the study of Gregory of Nyssa undergoes a revival. A large number of Anglican theologians – especially Holmes, Williams, Coakley, McIntosh, Norris, Hughes, and Ward – retrieve Gregory of Nyssa as significant resource for spiritual theology.\(^{186}\) All these theologians note significant ways in which Gregory of Nyssa’ analogies (especially his analogy of desire) resonate with a contemporary world in which questions about desire, beauty, bodies, and gender are abundant.\(^{187}\) Gregory of Nyssa, then, emerges as a

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\(^{184}\) Holmes, *History*, 141.

\(^{185}\) Hughes in *Beloved Dust* summarizes the connection between Gregory and Wesley, “As the great Wesley scholar Albert Outler points out, Wesley’s own view of perfection was shaped by Gregory of Nyssa, who clearly taught that, for the Christian, perfection is the journey itself and not a state to be achieved, a notion we have seen embodied in the analogy of the seed or egg of God” (125).

\(^{186}\) All these Anglican theologians, of course, are secondary sources for this thesis, “‘A Guide for the More Fleshy Minded’: Gregory of Nyssa on Erotic and Spiritual Desire.”

\(^{187}\) For example, Urban Holmes in *Spirituality for Ministry*, referring to Gregory of Nyssa’s theology of desire, notes the superficiality of some American depictions of the human body, “Human sexuality is teleological; it has a goal and that goal is union with God. It is only to minds inured to the banal, adolescent pap of the American fascination with breasts, vulva, phallus, and anus that could think that *eros* is satisfied by a mutual orgasm. In most of the recounting of sexual exploits in our contemporary literature the inability of any act of sexual intercourse to capture the bliss of togetherness it anticipates is ignored. The sadness that follows coitus is, if you will, an eschatological sign of which poets and philosophers have known for centuries. Its absence from this culture’s infatuation with vivid descriptions of sexual conquest...
creative interlocutor for anyone involved in reflection upon desire as a Christian spiritual practice.

is more than regrettable; it is a sign of our vapidity.” See Urban Holmes, *Spirituality for Ministry* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), 92.
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